

**THE MATTER OF IDENTITY: DIGITAL MEDIA, TELEVISION, AND  
EMBODIED DIFFERENCE**

by

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My dissertation develops a corporeal theory of media networks. Mobilizing insights from reception studies, critical identity studies, and materialist theories of digital media, I draw out how the material lives of bodies matter in the digital age. Scholars have begun attending to the physical stuff that grounds contemporary media: data centers, cables, metals and plastics. I build on this work, extending its interest in materiality while critiquing its tendency to sever technology from the people who use it. From touch screens that can't feel cold fingers to webcams that don't see dark skin, breakdowns in human-machine relations remind us that media interface with particular bodies. However, discussions of digital media too often equate the material with the technological, imagining that user embodiment is irrelevant or one-size-fits-all (and patterned on straight white men). Critiquing this tendency to universalize embodiment, my dissertation works towards a conception of digital materiality that makes space for differentiated bodies.

My first chapter develops a theory of corporeal networks and reads Black TV viewers in 1960s Jackson, MS as a pre-digital corporeal network. This history lays the groundwork for chapters two, three, and four, which explore how contemporary TV audiences use digital networks for political ends. In chapters on Black Lives Matter activists, Latino transmedia storytelling collectives, and communities of queer female TV fans, I develop a methodology for tracing the entanglements of people, images, and technologies in digital networks. Each of my chapters analyzes a television show or news broadcast in tandem with its surround: the platforms

that distribute and enable response to it, the people who shape its meaning through commentary, the embodied communities and movements that emerge in its wake. In so doing, I argue that we need to move beyond blanket assumptions of audience activity or passivity. Emerging audience practices demand careful analysis of where and how responses to media reach the threshold of political action.

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## PREFACE

My parents once told me to do anything except go to law school. This is probably not quite what they had in mind, but still, I followed directions. My thanks go first and foremost to them: for teaching me to enjoy words, for making sure I was always surrounded by them, for taking me to the movies so many weekends because there is nothing else to do in a two-stoplight town in North Carolina. For a long time I liked books, TV, and movies better than the ‘real’ world, and I’m grateful I got to live in them until I figured out how to live outside them, too. To the rest of my family: I’m sorry that this isn’t the novel I promised (although that would’ve involved lesbians, so I probably wouldn’t have let you read it, anyway).

I owe much to the educational spaces I’ve had the fortune to inhabit, from Choate to Duke to the University of Pittsburgh, and to the various mentors who have guided me through them. Corina Stan shepherd me through my first sustained research project and taught me that criticism can be an act of care. Mark Hansen guided me toward graduate school in the humanities when everyone I knew was going into consulting, and Robyn Weigman introduced me to queer theory while teaching a truly transformative class that is still the best pedagogical model I’ve ever seen. At Pitt, I’m grateful for all of the people who have made generous space for me in their busy lives. Thanks in particular to my committee, who have seen this project through a number of stumbling blocks and crises in faith. Jinying and Brent: you’ve been

generous, thoughtful readers and asked productively terrifying questions. Jen: you've made my work better in ways both general and granular, reminding me of the long arc of media history and making sure my possessives all make sense. Thanks most of all to my chair, Jane, who has supported this project since before I really knew what it was about. My dissertation has several different origin stories but one of them begins in Jane's TV Studies class, where I learned how to study mainstream media with care and rigor. Jane: you've pressed on my ideas when they needed it and given me space to decide what kind of scholar I want to be, and I am so, so grateful for both of those things.

I would not have finished this without the support of so many others in the English Department and the Film and Media Studies Program. Kuhu, Julie, Sonia, Jess, Noel, and Katie have been co-travelers in the strange adventure that is graduate school, and I'm grateful for their company. Annette, Tyler, Robert, Mark, Cory, and Jean have offered wisdom, guidance, and humor. Kerry Banazek left deep impressions on this project; sometimes I think she knows it better than I do. She has sharpened my thinking, my sentences, and my taste in beer, and thanks to her I know that sometimes the best thing you can do is go take a walk. And, finally, Harlin Lee reminded me that there's life beyond the Cathedral at just the right moment. To imagined futures and beyond.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION: DIGITAL MEDIA'S MARKED BODIES

During a 2015 episode of *Saturday Night Live*, host Donald Trump begins a sketch by declaring that he will not be in it. Seated in an armchair facing the camera, he tells the audience that he has been too busy to rehearse for the scene that follows and so cannot join the cast on stage. This fact will not keep him from contributing, however: “Since I can’t do it and be in it, I’ll do the next best thing. I’ll live-tweet it.” He holds up a smartphone as he speaks, shaking it for emphasis, and concludes with an invitation to sit back, relax, and “enjoy my tweets” (“Donald Trump”).

A cut then takes us to the sketch itself. Taran Killam and Cecily Strong play an American couple honeymooning in Rome; they are eating at a restaurant run by Kate McKinnon and Kenan Thompson in the roles of married-but-feuding Italians. The premise is barely established before Trump’s intervention begins. In a barrage of tweets, he proclaims his disdain for the sketch and everyone in it: “This sketch is not funny. @TaranKillam is a dumb loser” is followed by “Here’s my impression of Kate McKinnon: ‘I’m a low-class slob’” and then “An extremely credible source just told me that Kenan Thompson’s birth certificate is a fraud.” There are fifteen tweets over the course of the four-minute sketch; each appears onscreen as text at the bottom of the frame, visible to viewers but not to the sketch’s performers. The studio audience reacts to Trump’s comments, laughing and gasping as Killam, Strong, McKinnon, and Thompson look around the space of the stage as though trying to locate the source of these reactions. As the tweets accumulate the cast progressively break from their roles, whispering to each other as they

try to guess what Trump is saying and how mean it is. Eventually the honeymoon premise collapses entirely. Leslie Jones walks onstage as herself with her phone in hand, telling everyone they have to see the hilarious things Trump has written about them as a final tweet appears at the bottom of the screen: “Thanks Leslie. And I love the blacks” (“Donald Trump”).

There are a number of things worth remarking upon here, beginning with the appearance of a candidate for the nation’s highest political office as SNL host during an active campaign. What interests me about this sketch in particular, however, is its formulation of the relationship between onscreen images and viewer commentary. The sketch consistently directs attention away from diegetic events and toward a viewer’s response to them. This shift in focus is not simply an acknowledgement of the audience watching at home as the sketch unfolds live; rather, it points to the power of particular viewers to shape the meaning and impact of public images through interaction with them. Trump’s tweets are elevated to (or above) the level of diegetic action: the sketch’s prologue focuses attention on them, superimposition brings them into the frame, and Jones’ sketch-ending appearance gives them narrative pride of place. Thus, while we might expect the honeymoon scene to be the center of attention, it is instead an excuse for Trump-as-viewer to say things, to make his own points through his consumption of it.

The SNL sketch speaks to both Trump’s particular power as a media consumer and to wider trends associated with digital culture. His status as a public figure (then Republican presidential candidate, later president of the United States) lends weight to his digital writings: when he makes proclamations about North Korea on social media, there are reverberations at the level of international politics. And, by 2015, he already had an established history of prolific and emphatic tweeting. The sketch’s impact derives in part from the fact that Trump is a known tweeter whose tweets have consequences.

At the same time, the sketch has a broader resonance, one that speaks to the evolving relationship between media objects and their consumers in the age of networked digital media. If Trump has a uniquely influential platform as a viewer, he is not the only one with the ability to comment on media and see that commentary achieve real-world effects. Today's audiences produce as they consume: acts of reception give rise to comments on social networks like Twitter and Facebook, communities organized around opinions or affective orientations, and social movements that champion or contest a particular kind of content. Networked digital culture consequently allows audiences to speak and sometimes make themselves heard; it also inaugurates a new (or newly visible) intimacy between reception communities and political movements.

Yet, for those of us who are not president of the United States, the circulation of any given response to media is not guaranteed. While the digital age is often hailed as the dawn of a many-to-many communication system, digitally mediated communication often fails to reach a significant audience. If you write something on Twitter about SNL, it is possible that no one will see it and likely that only a few people will care about what you have said. With digital media, then, as John Durham Peters puts it, we "are back to the age-old modes of some-to-some, one-to-few, and even one-to-none" (5) communication. Thus, the question arises: how do we make sense of a media environment in which some but not most responses to media achieve real-world political effects? For those of us who are not public figures, what separates habitual engagements with media from those that attain consequentiality? If all moments of viewer activity matter in the sense that they shape an individual's being in the world, when and how do certain acts come to matter publicly, at a larger scale?

These questions motivate my dissertation. A central tenet of cultural studies is the idea that engagement with mainstream media is more complex than a program imposing ideology on a passive viewer. However, while there is a consensus that reception matters, our critical vocabulary for specifying how it matters and where it matters most urgently remains underdeveloped. Despite increasing skepticism about the digital's transformative powers, there is still a tendency to attach the politics of consumption to media form – and to elevate recent forms associated with advanced technology. If media can empower audiences, we assume that empowerment happens uniquely through the internet (or whatever new medium comes after it). As Trump's SNL appearance makes clear, though, such equations mask a number of complications. The analytic separation of media forms is misleading, for audiences move through expansive multimedia environments in their interactions with a given object: much like Trump, television viewers use digital platforms to speak about and circulate pieces of the programs they watch. Digital communities thus organize around images spread through broadcast forms. Consumption also works differently depending on who you are and the environments (lived and mediated) that surround you. Consequently, we need to move beyond blanket proclamations of audience activity or passivity and develop ways of accounting for the political import of concrete, particular acts of media consumption.

My project charts one way forward. Rather than presuming that politics derive from medium or technical infrastructure, I look to moments when reception builds real-world communities that make a political difference. Centering particular audience practices, I argue, helps us see the importance of embodiment: bodies influence both the texture of response to media objects and the scale of that response's circulation. In other words, activating an embodied

community is one way for viewer commentary to gather political and rhetorical momentum, moving from a few people out into a wider public.

Following N. Katherine Hayles, I invoke embodiment as a movement away from generalized abstractions of “the body” and toward a contextual and historical account of the varied lived situations in which bodies matter.<sup>1</sup> As Elizabeth Grosz writes, “there is no body as such; there are only *bodies*” (19). Whereas ‘the body’ can seem outside time and space, an immutable fact of biology, embodiment is connected to the social, historical, and technological regimes that inflect their meaning and function. Embodiment serves as a name for “how particular subjects live and experience being a body in specific, concrete ways” (Wegenstein 20).

Conceiving of bodies in this way allows me to investigate audience activity’s interactions with larger media ecologies. Audience activity both takes shape within and has the potential to transform material, embodied landscapes. In emphasizing the material landscapes surrounding productive consumption, I bring audience studies together with two strains of thought with which it does not always engage: emerging approaches to digital materiality (platform, circulation, and infrastructure studies) and established humanistic traditions centered on embodied difference (queer, feminist, and critical race theory).

In addition to advancing reception studies, then, my project also extends recent interest in the materiality of digital media. Scholars have begun attending to the physical stuff that grounds

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<sup>1</sup> There are many such appeals to “the body” in film and media studies, even in work ostensibly interested in politics and difference (e.g. Barker, Mark Hansen, Marks). Phenomenological and affective readings of visual media have difficulty reconciling the importance of the body with the fact that any given reading is grounded in a scholar’s particular embodied position. As Katharina Lindner writes: “contemporary work on cinema, embodiment, and affect could benefit from a more explicit acknowledgement of the significance of embodied and ‘lived’ difference, of differences in affective experiences and memories, of ways of being-in-the-world and therefore perceiving the world. We need to account more efficiently for the ways in which cinema ‘touches’ and ‘moves’ us differently.” This concern is not restricted to cinema. Whether encountered on film, television, or mobile screens, moving images touch and move us differently, and our theoretical models need to make room for such differences. Without presuming schematic correlation, my project asks how differentiated bodies intersect with the diversity of experiences media provoke.



contemporary media: data centers, cables, metals and plastics. I build on this work, furthering its interest in materiality while critiquing its tendency to sever machines from the people who use them. I argue that digital networks are not only material but also *corporeal* – there are always consequentially embodied communities around and behind online structures we imagine to be simply technical. Each of my chapters analyzes a particular corporeal network, tracing how a community of people united by lived experience makes space for itself online, creating and activating possibilities that are assumed to inhere in the technical structure of digital platforms. My three main case studies are the community of queer female TV fans that built the popular website Autostraddle.com, the Cincinnati Black Lives Matter activists who agitated for the release of police bodycam video after the shooting of Sam DuBose, and the Latino transmedia storytelling collective behind Hulu show and public health project *East Los High*. In working through these cases, I insist that differentiated bodies are as important as technological infrastructures in theorizing media's materiality.

This dissertation is interested primarily in reception communities that align themselves with progressive politics, but I begin here, with our current President, to make clear that this is a broad phenomenon not restricted to one political party. Many diversely positioned groups articulate platforms through responses to media, which makes revising how we understand audiences a particularly urgent project. But first, some background is in order. This introduction lays out the scholarly terrain in which my project intervenes, giving a sense of how divisions between bodily and technological materiality arose in digital studies and articulating why looking at audiences can help bring them back together. I first trace the origins and persistence of disembodied digitality, a narrative in which digital media are seen as liberating users from bodily life and from the modes of discrimination that derive from it. Next, I work through media

studies' material turn, which attempts to move beyond the imagination of contemporary media as immaterial; however, I show how this vision of the material is often narrowly focused on technology at the expense of bodies. I then turn to reception studies, suggesting that practices of consumption can usefully direct our attention to differentiated bodies. I close with a chapter outline.

## **1.1 UTOPIA? NO, THE INTERNET: THE ORIGINS OF DISEMBODIED DIGITALITY**

During the 1997 Super Bowl, telecommunications company MCI aired a commercial for its newest product: internet service. Broadcast during the most-watched event on American television, this commercial stands as an early attempt at selling an unfamiliar medium to a broad public. Only eighteen percent of Americans had household internet access at this point, and networked communication tended to be imagined as a business or special-interest commodity (U.S Census Bureau). Thus, this commercial comes before there was an entrenched vision of what digital media could offer the average person; MCI has to sell the internet as an *idea* in addition to its particular in-home service. And the way it goes about selling the internet offers a window into one of the most enduring fantasies attached to digital technology, that of disembodied empowerment.

The commercial begins with a proclamation: “people here communicate mind to mind.” Note the immediate dismissal of embodied existence, the suggestion that minds are all we need. Over close-ups of laptop screens and blinking cursors, the ad goes on to specify all of the ways in which mind-to-mind communication improves upon older forms of interaction: “There is no

race. There are no genders. There is no age. There are no infirmities.” Each declarative statement is both spoken aloud and typed on a computer screen; the commercial cuts mid-sentence between images of embodied human speakers and white typed text on a black background. The human bodies in question are marked by identity categories: we see African Americans as the commercial proclaims freedom from race, and a young white woman signs as “there are no infirmities” plays in the audio track (MCI). Through juxtaposition, the commercial presents a stark contrast between the visible differentiation of physical bodies and the visual uniformity of digital text. The implication is that computers free us from the unnecessary baggage of corporeality, making way for a clearer, purer form of communication where we can all speak to each other as equals.

This commercial is part of a broader discursive trend sometimes referred to as digital dematerialization: digital technologies are assumed to solve problems that spring from material existence by inaugurating a new, separate, and better virtual world. I approach the larger narrative through MCI’s ad because it makes explicit what is implicit in many related visions of a digital future: dematerialization is valuable because it frees us from bodies. In online space, the commercial proclaims, there is no race, there is no gender, there is no age or infirmity. Here the internet’s virtual world is appealing precisely because our bodies and the social and cultural systems that assign differential value to them cease to matter. In this narrative, digital technologies empower by annihilating bodily difference – by replacing clumsy, marked bodies with freewheeling minds. Important here is the purely negative conceptualization of embodiment: having a body is always and only a limitation, never a productive force in human life or communicative practice.

Ideas about the internet thus take shape in opposition to materiality in general but to embodiment in particular. In this early, utopian imagining, we might say that marked, differentiated bodies are digital media's real enemy. I make this point because, while embodiment and materiality are related concepts, they are by no means identical. I can invoke bodies without considering the histories, systems, and physical environments that shape the lives of bodies in the world. As Sara Ahmed writes, many appeals to embodiment fail to offer "substantive analysis of how 'bodies' come to be lived through being differentiated from other bodies" (41) – they fail to consider what we might call the materiality of bodies, presuming that all bodies matter in more or less the same way. The converse is true as well. I can invoke materiality without attending to embodiment, focusing on the technical construction of machines while ignoring the human bodies with which they interface. Consequently, it is important to recognize that digital dematerialization implicates both embodiment and materiality: it is a movement away from both of them, though it may emphasize one over the other in a given manifestation.

This conceptual slippage is related to the fuzziness of the term "digital" itself. Most definitions begin with the zeros and ones of binary code, but a wide array of technologies and forms answer to the name digital media: the computer, the internet, hypertext, virtual and augmented reality, digital images and video, video games, smartphones and mobile media, web 2.0, social media, search engines, online databases and archives. And, in the decades that we have been writing about digital forms, the primary referent has already shifted several times: when an anticipated technology fails to materialize, another soon arises, and we map established terms imperfectly onto whatever comes next.

In fact, the digital dematerialization narrative does not actually originate with the internet. Consider Michael Heim writing about virtual reality in 1993: “The cybernaut seated before us, strapped into sensory-input devices, appears to be, and is indeed, lost to this world. Suspended in computer space, the cybernaut leaves the prison of the body and emerges in the world of digital sensation” (88). Note how similar this phrasing sounds to the MCI commercial from a few years later: the body is a prison, and only through the digital world can we escape it. This is no accident for, as Ted Friedman has documented, many of the metaphors we use to make sense of the internet originated in the VR craze of the late ‘80s and early ‘90s. It is here that the idea of “happy neoplatonic bodiliness” (Peters 277, *Marvelous Clouds*) takes root in relation to digital technology: VR was marketed through a fantasy of using media to “construct personal realities free from the determination of body-based (“real”) identities” (Balsamo 123). When the VR bubble bursts and networked communication attains widespread usage, the rhetoric of disembodied empowerment attaches to the internet: we go from being awash in 3D worlds of digital sensation to communicating mind to mind through digital text.

As the centerpiece of digital revolution shifts from virtual reality to the internet, the digital imaginary also shifts, becoming even more immaterial and disembodied. Where VR enthusiasts talked about virtual bodies through which you could fashion a new and different self, there is not even a virtual body in MCI’s vision of the internet. This is a movement from user control over embodiment – which grants the body status as a meaningful if transformable part of human experience – to a complete denial of it. We become Cartesian intellects completely severed from bodies. While the specifics of digital dematerialization narratives mutate, then, the foundational antipathy toward bodies grows even more entrenched.

The idea of digital disembodiment is of course just that: a fantasy that masks the reality of computing's physical requirements. Accessing the internet through a computer does not make embodied, material life irrelevant. In using that computer, I still depend on my fingers to input information and commands via the exertion of force; I am still aware of the pain in my back if I sit hunched over my laptop for too long without getting up to move around. And computation is rarely if ever an experience of seamless empowerment: things break, commands fail, and, as Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Alexander Galloway point out, the internet's architecture restricts what users can do even when we are not consciously aware of it. The projection of unlimited, bodiless user agency masks all the material connections that tie the internet to things in our world – from the infrastructures and hardware that make computing possible to the enormous amounts of energy required to power them to the interactions between machines and human bodies involved in the use of digital things. That is, the promised user experience of the internet as a separate virtual space comes to signal the digital's essential difference from the physical world.

One might think that this is all that needs to be said about digital disembodiment: it is a myth, and now that we have debunked it we can move on to other concerns. That an idea is a fantasy does not make it insignificant, however. The dreams attached to technology matter even if they are never realized, for their shape and texture provide insight into the social and cultural environments surrounding a given object. As Carolyn Marvin writes, fantasies:

help us determine what "consciousness" was in a particular age, what thoughts were possible, and what thoughts could not be entertained yet or anymore. The point frequently has been made that private dreams are systematic in content and impulse. Dreams and fantasies created, exchanged, and reworked in the public forum are systematic as well. They develop their own traditions in the conversation society has with

itself about what it is and ought to be...They reflect conditions people know and live in, and real social stakes. (7-8)

Public, shared fantasies about technology are for Marvin as important as actually existing technological media. I follow her in this, and in the belief that media history is “never more or less than the history of [media’s] uses, which always lead us away from them to the social practices and conflicts they illuminate” (Marvin 8). The inextricability of technology and human life means that the place of a new machine is negotiated through imagination as well as engineering: what we see when we look at a computer always has to do with things beyond the computer’s technological capabilities.

I would add that foundational myths about a technology have a lasting influence on the way we think and write about it in scholarly spheres. Even if we argue against a narrative like digital dematerialization, we tend to do so on some of the terms set out by the opposition. Some premises slide through unnoticed even as others attract intense critical scrutiny. In the case of digital media, as we will see in the following section, critique focuses on materiality at the expense of embodiment. As people begin to argue that the digital has a material life, the kind of materiality they attribute to it often reinforces its separation from bodies.

## **1.2 THE MATERIAL TURN: MACHINES WITHOUT BODIES**

Two decades after MCI’s Super Bowl ad, we think about the internet in different terms. Part of this is simply that utopian fantasies are easier before a medium becomes integrated into the fabric of daily life: now that we use digital media to schedule meetings it is harder to sustain visions of it as radically transformative or liberatory. But, it is also that the prevailing winds of

digital scholarship are shifting. Media studies is in the midst of a material turn. From work on platforms (Gillespie, Burgess), file formats (Sterne), and patterns of circulation (Gries, Hawk) to studies of hardware (Parikka, Zielinski) and infrastructure (Hu; Parks and Staroselski), a number of approaches are coalescing around the idea that digital media are material objects. If, much like the MCI commercial, the first wave of work on digital media emphasized its radical newness, there is now an emerging consensus that digital objects and technologies move consequentially through our world rather than creating a separate virtual one.

However, the specter of digital disembodiment never entirely left us. To get at why, this section unpacks the work and influence of one of the material turn's major figures: German media philosopher Friedrich Kittler. I argue that a foundational emphasis on technical materiality allows Kittler and thinkers following in his wake to sidestep questions of identity and embodiment even as they emphasize digital media's physical existence. My analysis focuses on Kittler's 1995 essay "There is no software," for it clearly articulates the intervention Kittler wants to make into the study of media and his philosophy's relationship to human life.

The essay's title stakes out its polemic claim: software does not exist. Through this provocation, Kittler intends to shift media studies' priorities from software to hardware - away from universalizable sets of instructions unattached to their execution in a particular machine and toward the physical substrate that he sees as a necessary part of computation. He traces the overvaluation of code back to Alan Turing's idea of the universal machine: "Universal Turing machines, when fed the instructions of any other machine, can imitate it effectively. Thus, precisely because eventual differences between hardware implementations do not count anymore, the so-called Church-Turing hypothesis...has had the effect of duplicating the implosion of hardware by an explosion of software" (148, "No software"). Since Turing, we



have been focused on the wrong thing: we have thought too much about computing languages and not enough about the actual computers that shape whether and how those languages function.

This is a problem for Kittler because software does not exist in itself: “software does not exist as a machine-independent faculty” (151, “No software”). For him, the popular and academic tendency to focus on the “virtual” aspects of computation (code, interface, algorithms) obscures their dependence on a physical, material foundation. He writes: “All code operations, despite such metaphoric faculties as call or return, come down to absolutely local string manipulations, that is, I am afraid, *to signifiers of voltage differences*” (150, “No software,” emphasis original). However sophisticated software becomes, you need a machine made out of the right substances arranged in the right way before you can run any sort of program. Note the emphasis on material hardware here, the desire to look through code to get to the base level of physical, mechanical existence.

When Kittler proclaims that software is inseparable from hardware, he is not theorizing their interdependence but positioning software as a pretender to hardware’s rightful throne: “there are good grounds to assume the indispensability and, consequently, the priority of hardware in general” (152, “No software”). Software is for Kittler an obscurantist name for functionality built into machines. Consequently, we should dispense with it and focus on hardware, which is where all the real, material stuff happens. This is a notable departure from the imaginary of seamless, immaterial connectivity outlined in the previous section. Kittler not only recognizes the importance of the device you use to access the internet, the ways its physical construction shape possibility. He elevates it to the most important consideration for media theory.

Kittler is thus a proponent of a materialist vision of digital media. Note, however, that the conception of materiality Kittler puts forth here is a narrow one. Only the most intractably material elements of media qualify: processors, microchips, wires, voltage differences. He explicitly denies that software has a material existence, and seems reluctant to grant it existence at all: “there would be no software if computer systems were not surrounded by an environment of everyday languages” (150, “No software”). This proclamation is key, I think, because it suggests Kittler’s problem with software derives from its proximity to human experience. Software is too bound up in the interface between machines and humans, too preoccupied with translating technical phenomena into a form built that the average person can perceive and engage with. Kittler wants materiality to be insulated from human involvement, a question of the machine in itself, outside of social and cultural life. When Kittler does acknowledge people, they are routed through technology. He mentions inventors and, in a discussion of the gramophone, quotes a Rilke passage that reads the brain as hardware: “the coronal suture of the skull” is played for feelings in the way that a grooved record is played for sound (Kittler 40, *Gramophone Film Typewriter*).

Kittler gives us, then, “a media studies without people”; he is “Mr. Anti-Cultural Studies” (Peters 5, “Introduction”). Kittler’s antipathy toward people – his reading of them through technological materiality – has differential effects in terms of gender, race, and other identity categories. To focus “on the machine” means only allowing in people whose embodiment can be bracketed: not women, not people of color, not anyone whose body reads as particular and so as visible. Kittler thus encodes into the study of digital materiality a “great men invent things” paradigm of human mattering - one that inaugurates an enduring suspicion of other approaches to relations between people and technology.

While Kittler contests the immateriality of digital media, then, he reinforces their equation with disembodiment. And the way Kittler imagines materiality – as a physical property of machines and nothing else – has a significant influence on subsequent theorizations. Media archeology picks up on his emphasis on the machine in itself: “In focusing on machines and signals, media archaeologists often bracket out not only the people with which, but also the environments *within* which, those media interact” (Mattern xvii). And, more broadly, the study of digital materiality picks up the tendency to locate materiality in a single layer of media culture. In order to argue for attention to hardware, Kittler declares software insufficiently material. This move repeats over and over in digital studies: X is not really where materiality lives; Y is where we should be looking.

Consider one recent approach motivated by materialist impulses: platform studies. The MIT Press launched a book series under the name in 2009, and editors Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost describe platform studies as a new field focused on the systems underlying computing. They continue:

Platforms have been around for decades, right under our video games and digital art. Those studying new media are now starting to dig down to the level of code to learn more about how computers are used in culture, but there have been few attempts to go deeper, to the metal — to look at the base hardware and software systems that are the foundation of computational expression. (*Platform Studies*)

Implicit in this description is a claim about the relative value of objects and methodologies: existing work is not looking at the right things in the right ways, for it does not fully commit to excavating the foundations of media culture. The deepest levels of media systems escape scholarly attention, for materialist strains of media theory have failed to be materialist enough.

An argument for platform studies consequently doubles as a critique of other ways of conceiving media's matter.

The website's visualization of media studies methodologies (Figure 1) makes explicit the layers of media culture and the need to choose between them. The graphic places platforms at the bottom: the base that makes possible all the other level of media's functioning (*Platform Studies*). Now that Montfort and Bogost have turned our attention to them, platforms should take their rightful place as the center of media studies' investigations of materiality. Perhaps more significant, though, is the fact that layers are positioned as diverging choices with their own dedicated methodologies. In this schema, it becomes difficult to consider interactions between layers, to conceive of media's materiality as a set of interlocking, interdependent levels. Scholars must pledge their allegiance to a given layer, an orientation that encourages ignorance of – even outright hostility to – those who prioritize some other understanding of materiality.

Layer	Methodology
Reception/Operation	Reception Studies, Psychoanalysis
Interface	Studies of the Interface, Remediation
Form/Function	Ludology, Narratology, Cybertext Studies
Code	Code Studies, Software Studies, Code Aesthetics
Platform	Platform Studies

**Figure 1.** Montfort and Bogost's layers of materiality.

One might wonder: why does this matter? What is at stake in whether scholars conceive materiality across layers? It seems to me that a narrow focus on one kind of materiality causes schisms between people with diverging investments, and specifically between people who focus on technology and people who focus on bodies. One example of the resulting fallout is Christopher Kelty's *Two Bits*, a history of the Free Software movement in which careful attention to the materiality of information infrastructures does not lead to a similarly careful consideration of bodily materiality. In fact, Kelty places them in opposition, suggesting that those who call for attention to race, class, and sex are compromising more pressing political imperatives:

one cannot solve the problem of pernicious, invisible forms of inequality unless one first solves the problem of ensuring a certain kind of structural publicity...Gender certainly influences who gets heard within Free Software, for example, but it is a mistake to focus on this inequality at the expense of the larger, more threatening form of political failure that Free Software addresses. And I think there are plenty of geeks—man, woman, and animal—who share this sentiment. (312)

For Kelty, gender inequality is a comparatively little, second-order problem, and any thinking person (or animal) should recognize that we can only deal with it once we have fixed the bigger issues. The internet's structural features demand our attention now, and going off on tangents about identity categories plays into the hands of the corporations and governments trying to enclose online freedom. Politics becomes an either/or question: either you can talk about identity and bodies or you can do real, important work, for they are diverging if not mutually exclusive endeavors.

What we see here is the persistence of disembodied digitality despite the move to a more materialist frame. While Kelty engages with information infrastructures, he sees them as essentially separate from “smaller,” “less threatening” inequalities that attend racial and gendered categorization. And this is not an isolated incident: while Kelty is more forthright than most in his dismissal of identity, the move he makes is a commonplace one. Even in avowedly materialist work, differentiated bodies are often set aside from the core of digital culture. Consequently, though scholars have begun attending to the physical stuff that grounds digital media, the way we imagine materiality continues to be influenced by past thinking that separates technology from the people who use it.

This is a problem because the separation of technological materiality and bodily materiality is a false one. From touch screens that can’t feel cold fingers to audio recorders that can’t hear women’s voices (Gitelman), breakdowns in human-machine relations remind us that media interface with particular bodies. Technologies of mediation presume certain kinds of corporeality on the part of their users. The way those parameters get set – the way machine-body interfaces are imagined – inflect who gets to use a given technology and how successful they will be. As an example, consider the history of relations between imaging technologies and skin color. While the film industry representationally aligned itself with whiteness (*Birth of the Nation*, the first blockbuster hit, gave us Klansmen as cinematic heroes), color film also chemically encoded white skin as a norm. “Shirley cards” – reference cards used for color balancing – presented white women in colorful dresses as the image that needed to be properly rendered (Roth). This choice of norm influenced the chemical makeup of film stock, producing film that was much better at capturing light skin than dark. This pattern repeats with digital photography, with web cameras, with biometric databases now used in policing: all were

designed with white people in mind, and so their functionality diminishes in encounters with other skin tones. The transition from analogue to digital does not solve anything in itself as long as the people designing image capture devices still privilege whiteness as the default.

It is a fact of mediation that technology interacts with differentiated bodies. So, how to we get to a conception of media materiality that credits identity and embodiment? The good news is that techno-centric visions of the material are not the only ones on offer. Feminist technology studies (Barad, Haraway, Suchman), critical technoculture studies (Brock, Nakamura, Noble), and histories of technology attentive to gender, race, and class (Everett, Banks, Light, Hicks) all reveal in different ways the inseparability of human and technological embodiment. My project shares the premise that the separation of bodies from machines is not a natural or inevitable theoretical development; is a thing people enact, some with purpose and some without, and a thing to which we can forge alternatives.

My project suggests that one powerful, timely alternative comes from thinking materiality through one body of work that has historically credited the role of bodies in mediation: reception studies. While reception resides in the top layer of Bogost and Montfort's diagram – the least material, the one the farthest from platforms – I argue that looking to audiences is instructive in working toward a multi-layered materiality. Processes of consumption move people and images through media environments, demonstrating the entanglement of bodies, hardware, software, and discursive production.

### 1.3 AUDIENCE STUDIES: FROM PROGRAMS TO PRACTICES

The relationship between media objects and media audiences is a longstanding scholarly preoccupation. If the dominant approach emphasizes what the former do to the latter – how technologies and texts position people – there is also a thriving body of work that asks instead what people do with media as active receivers. Audience, reception, and most recently fan studies insist on the variety and consequentiality of viewer engagements with media, highlighting the meaning humans bring to media objects through their own practices of reading and writing. To get at both why this perspective is useful and where existing formulations of it fall short, I focus on the work of John Fiske, one of the audience studies' foundational figures.

Fiske's 1987 monograph *Television Culture* has a simple premise: audiences participate in the construction of television's meaning. That is, television does not come to its viewers as a stable, finished commodity; it is rather a repository for a number of potential meanings that become realized (or not) through individual viewers' "active participation in that sense-making process which we call 'culture'" (19). Fiske is here reacting against the tendency to dismiss mass media audiences as "cultural dupes" (Hall), drawing together British cultural studies' theories of encoding and decoding with data from many studies in the then-new area of audience ethnography. For him, audience ethnography is useful because it offers insight into what real people do with cultural objects:

Its value for us lies in its shift of emphasis away from the textual and ideological construction of the subject to socially and historically situated people. It reminds us that actual people in actual situations watch and enjoy actual programs. It acknowledges the differences between people despite their social construction, and pluralizes the meanings



and pleasures they find in television. It thus contradicts theories that stress the singularity of television's meanings and its reading subjects. (63)

There is an important shift here in the conceptualization of audience: from textual subject – a theoretical entity whose behaviors and politics derives from how a program positions viewers – and toward “socially and historically situated people” who have agency in excess of a program's control. Critiques often cast Fiske's work as a utopian valorization of the audience's power to resist cultural hegemony (Benkler, Seiter et al.), but it is important to note that he never claims that all audience activity works towards progressive ends. Rather, he wants to open up space for resistance in relation to objects that seem regressive; he wants us to recognize that we cannot look only at a television program and know in advance everything people will do with it.

Fiske's focus on actual audiences does not necessarily come at the expense of other sites of media analysis. There is in his work an incipient interest in multi-level analysis, in opening up a new site of critical investigation without tossing out all previous ones. Consider this opening articulation of his project: “The book will focus on the problem of how the textuality of television is made meaningful and pleasurable by its variously situated viewers, though it will also consider the relationship between this cultural dimension and television's status as a commodity in a capitalist economy” (Fiske 1). There is an emphasis on viewers, but also on the relationship between their reading practices and the more commonly considered aspects of media culture. Because his strongest intervention is about the status of audiences, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that his work – and reception studies more broadly – does not actually begin and end with them. The “also” is important here: audience and also technology, audience and also industry, audience and also formal construction. Embedded in his work, then, is a desire to discuss media and politics in ways that move across various sites of analysis – various layers of

materiality – rather than forcing a choice among them. Though the particulars of the audience formations I study differ from Fiske’s, I carry forward this “also” and the sense of multi-level interaction it gestures toward.

There are limitations to Fiske’s position as well, and I focus on two of them as a way to articulate the value of a materialist study of media and embodiment. The first has to do with when and how viewer activity has political value. Fiske is not unambiguously optimistic on the subject: he writes that audience participation can act as “motor of hegemony” or be “oppositional to the homogenizing force of ideology.” The determining factor here is a viewer’s material social location. For those aligned with dominant ideology – straight, white, well-off men – pleasure is “conforming and reactionary,” but for “those whose accommodation to the system is less complete” – women, children, ethnic and sexual minorities – “an essential component of pleasure must be an evasion, or at least a negotiation, of dominant ideological practice, the ability to shake oneself free from its constraints” (Fiske 236). There is an interest in the materiality of bodies here, but Fiske ends up with an oddly schematic account of what makes political difference: all viewers feel empowered by their control over TV, and that empowerment is political by default for all of those at odds with normativity – it “produces a self-esteem in the subordinate that at least makes resistance or subversion possible” (234). Fiske’s earlier discussions of audiences suggest that we cannot reduce people to their social construction, but that is what he does here: if you are in a minoritized social position, that is the only relevant thing about you. There is no space to interrogate differences in reception within a category of people, or to consider how audience activity might matter beyond individual pleasure and self-esteem.

Second, Fiske's interest in the media environments surrounding programs is similarly instructive but unsatisfying. Riffing on Raymond Williams' concept of flow, he writes:

Meanings are not confined by producers' boundaries between programs, but are part of the 'flow' of television as experienced by its audiences. Neither is the television text confined by the boundaries of its medium: reading and talking about television are part of the process of making a text out of it and are determinants of what text is actually made. So, too, is our experience of other cultural media—books, films, newspapers, songs, and so on. (15)

We get a sense here of the rich multimedia ecologies surrounding television programs; analyzing audience activity thus means tracing practices of consumption through intertextual networks within and beyond the boundaries of a medium. At the same time, there is still a preoccupation with "the text:" television programs inhabit an expansive universe, but they are still the center of our universe. Fiske signals this when he says that the "the way [television] is incorporated into the daily routine of its audiences" is of interest to him, but only "to a lesser extent" (13). While he puts forth an intertextual and audience-centric vision of a program's mattering, he is still ultimately thinking about meaning, politics, and matter through televisual texts.

I highlight these emphases in Fiske because they continue to influence the most recent incarnation of work on audiences: fan studies. An emerging field united by an interest in affective relations between audiences and texts, fan studies enacts a number of valuable interventions: turning attention to the complexity and vitality of fan-made media, centering the social and communal aspects of engagement with media, and making space for scholars to acknowledge their own feelings toward their objects of study. At the same time, fan studies can reinforce a number of limiting assumptions about audiences and how we should approach them.

For example, in the introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, Melissa Click and Suzanne Scott argue for the idea of fandom as “an inherently politicized space” in which “marginalized voices speak back to media culture” (2-3). While there are dissenting voices (Sandvoss), the claim that fandom is political by definition is an often repeated one that echoes Fiske’s emphasis on marginalized identity: politics is a matter of position rather than action. An unfortunate side effect of this idea is the sidelining of discussions about the varying levels on which and degrees to which audience engagement can achieve political consequence. In other words, we are so committed to talking about how all fans are active and transformative that we do not have time to consider when and how fan activity comes to matter beyond the boundaries of a fandom – how, for example, reception communities intersect with political movements. In what is perhaps a corollary narrowness to media theory’s focus on the machine in itself, fan studies’ emphasis on fandom as transformative in itself can cause it to bracket the material environments in which people, images, and technologies interact.

This point brings me to the second Fiskean echo: the continuing emphasis on programs. Fan studies tends to imagine the coupling of a program and its audience as the default unit of study. Scholars speak of a show’s fandom or, when larger trends are considered, things like “science fiction fandom” or “soap opera fandom” (Baym). Genre designations that signal similarities between programs become a way of grouping fan activities. This is not in itself a problem, but it does direct attention away from the kinds of audience activity that move meaningfully across generic boundaries. We don’t tend to think of, say, broadcast news viewers as fans in the same way we do viewers of a prime-time drama, but that does not mean they have no similarities. And, if we begin from generic groupings, we are unlikely to see and appreciate them. We are also unlikely to see and appreciate the ways that media objects and responses to

them move consequentially through the world. A focus on programs turns politics into a question of textual transformation: do viewers exert control over the meanings and pleasures of this program? Do they make its story world their own? What falls out of the frame here is the interface between story worlds and lived experience – and the fact that, especially in the digital age, responses to media can themselves build new objects and environments. That is, audience activities can matter outside the designated space of a fandom.

For this reason, I follow scholars like S. Elizabeth Bird, who asks what the collapse of audience studies into fan studies obscures. Where she is most interested in the forms of reception that read as passive or unproductive in contrast to fandom’s activity, my question is a slightly different one: When and how does audience activity leave spaces of reception? When and how does it come to matter on other levels of media culture? My approach trades a program-centric conception of audiences for one focused on practices: my interest is in “what people are doing (or could be doing) *in relation to media*, rather than the traditional approaches concerned with either what media (texts, technologies or industrial structures) are doing to people or what people ‘do with’ media as active receivers” (Roig et al 91). This shift in pronoun – from “doing with” to “doing in relation to” opens up the space of consideration, allowing for more expansive analysis of how reception takes shape within and works to create digital environments.

#### **1.4      BRAIDING THREADS: TOWARD AN EMBODIED, MULTI-LEVEL MATERIALITY**

My project brings together the material turn’s interest in digital matter with audience studies’ insistence on the vitality of encounters between people and media objects. Through this union, I

suggest, we get a more satisfying account of materiality, embodiment, and technology than that available through either in isolation.

My methodology stresses the environmental nature of contemporary media formations. Many scholars are already pointing to the fundamentally new dynamics between producers and consumers brought about by networked social media. However, our dominant critical and methodological models fail to do justice to reception's movement across time and space: we tend to imagine reception through the relationship between a spectator and an image, or a program and its audience at a given moment in time. This project seeks to develop a new model attuned to emerging audience practices that happen over time, across locations, and involve many different people. It asks: what becomes visible when we imagine a community as unit of reception studies analysis? What do groups of people build over time through collective engagements with media? How do bodies intervene in the formation and sustenance of collectivities?

Each of my chapters analyzes a television show or news broadcast in tandem with its surround: the platforms that distribute and enable response to it, the people who shape its meaning through commentary, the embodied communities and movements that emerge in its wake. Digital media allow viewers not only to find other people who are watching the same things they are, but also to see and comment on others' responses to that shared media object. Consequently, this project is interested in how iterated everyday acts of media consumption accumulate over time. My focus is thus less on the "everyday" aspects of media consumption in themselves than on how the everyday scales up to become exceptional.

The audience practices I consider are all in some way consequential beyond the interpretation of a bounded television program: even when they involve discussion of textual meaning, they also do something else that has real-world consequences for an embodied

community. These practices intervene in information infrastructures, contest oppressive patterns of managing minority bodies, and produce images, stories and objects that circulate on scales comparable to their initiating program. Through looking at them, I argue, we can better understand the way politics and media consumption intertwine in contemporary media environments. Instead of proclaiming the digital is transformative in itself, we can get at the texture of the difference digital technologies make.

My first chapter, “Participation and Protest: the History of Productive Consumption,” places contemporary audience formations in historical context. Pushing back against the often-heard claim that digital technology uniquely empowers users, this chapter looks to the history of pre-digital engagement with television to separate viewer activity from viewer productivity. I suggest that our discussions of digital media and politics often confuse these two modes of engagement, presuming that active/passive is the only meaningful distinction in categorizing media consumption. Working through two sets of early broadcast images – 1950s children’s program *Winky Dink and You* and 1960s local news in Jackson, MS – I establish different criteria for understanding audience formations. *Activity* refers to modes of engagement that matter on an individual level, while *productivity* involves collective, public action aimed at ends beyond negotiating a program’s textual meaning. I then position Black TV viewers in 1960s Jackson, MS as a pre-digital corporeal network: a community organized around a particular experience of marked corporeality that sustains and circulates practices of media consumption. Through contestation of a local channel’s racist programming, these viewers produced both activist communities and legal reform at the national level. Thus, I argue, today’s digital networks have important historical predecessors; by attending to them we can better understand when and how user activity reaches the threshold of political action. This history lays the groundwork for

chapters two, three, and four which explore how contemporary TV audiences use digital networks for political ends.

Chapter two, “After Representation: *The L Word* Fandom as Community Infrastructure,” explores the relationship between networked media consumption and online infrastructures. We tend to assume that reception and operation derive from but have little influence on “deeper” levels of media formations like code and platforms. This chapter argues against such an assumption, documenting how iterated, public acts of reception can develop into infrastructure over time. I make this argument by analyzing the fandom of Showtime series *The L Word* (2004-9), the first American series to bring queer female community to the small screen. I here trace the ways dispersed digital talk about lesbian representation moves between message boards, fan sites, personal blogs, and podcasts, drawing together a queer female corporeal network that moves between on- and offline spaces. This network soon becomes less about *The L Word* than about queer female community in general; its members found Autostraddle.com, a popular website and center of queer female sociality. Through tracing out this shift, I show the value of an expansive, non-program-centric conception of reception and demonstrate the entanglement of bodies, digital technologies, TV images. Digital networks here help to inaugurate queer female community at an unprecedented scale, but they do not do so in themselves: queer female cyberspace had to be built, and relationships forged through television were essential to its building.

Chapter three, “The Ultimate Witness: #BlackLivesMatter, Broadcast News, and the Body Camera,” draws out the role reception plays in networked digital activism. While there is a rich body of work on media activism, it often focuses on a single technology and places video capture as the decisive moment for political intervention. This chapter explores a media



environment that implicates a number of technologies of capture and circulation: the police body camera, Twitter, television, YouTube. My analysis focuses on the set of body camera recordings depicting the fatal encounter between University of Cincinnati police officer Ray Tensing and city resident Samuel DuBose. By tracing this video's entrance into the public sphere and contestations over its meaning, I draw out the insufficiency of claims that video footage "speaks for itself:" far from being an impartial witness, the body camera and the images it captures articulate racialized relationships between bodies. Its images can still serve anti-racist politics, however, and this chapter documents how #BlackLivesMatter activists use public interpretation of bodycam footage in service of a protest movement. In so doing, it identifies links between audience productivity and activism. Centering reception practices allows me to trace how images and responses to them move through diverse media spaces – and to suggest that activism lies in part in getting images from one media environment into another, more public one.

My final chapter, "Streaming Pedagogy: *East Los High* and Transmedia Education," investigates how producers design media to mobilize corporeal networks. In a post-cable landscape marked by niche marketing, a number of creators court minority demographics, producing content whose images and storylines seek to reflect the lived experience of people other than straight white men. Creators are also beginning to cultivate viewer engagement: audience activity is now a question of design in addition to a grassroots practice. This chapter explores the intersection of these two trends, looking to Hulu's *East Los High* as an example of emerging industry strategies for activating minority audiences and channeling their activity towards particular ends. Both a teen telenovela and an online public health project, *East Los High* seeks to move viewers into educational spaces as it moves them through a transmedia story world. Rejecting the idea that audience response is valuable only when it constitutes resistance,

this chapter explores both the benefits and limitations of corporate-designed viewer engagement. It also brings together considerations of gender, sexuality, and race, suggesting the necessity of an intersectional lens in approaching audience formations. *East Los High* may enact better material conditions for life for a minority community, but it better serves some members of that community than others.

## 2.0 PARTICIPATION AND PROTEST: THE HISTORY OF PRODUCTIVE CONSUMPTION

“The people formerly known as the audience are those who *were* on the receiving end of a media system that ran one way, in a broadcasting pattern, with high entry fees and a few firms competing to speak very loudly while the rest of the population listened in isolation from one another— and who *today* are not in a situation like that *at all*.”

(Jay Rosen, “The People Formerly Known as the Audience,” emphasis original)

“And for seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, for working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game, TIME’s Person of the Year for 2006 is you.”

(Lev Grossman, “You—Yes, You—Are TIME’s Person of the Year”)

Around 2006, the year Rosen and Grossman were writing, the no-longer-completely-new medium of the Internet underwent a rebranding. Packaged as “web 2.0,” this next stage in the Internet’s development translated for many into the dawning of a new media culture – one offering unprecedented power to media audiences. As Grossman puts it, the average person “[seizes] the reins of global media”; in Rosen’s words, “formerly atomized listeners...connect with each other and gain the means to speak—to the world.” In this narrative, digital networks allow people who used to consume culture to become its producers. Now, with digital media, audiences do not have to content themselves with reading and watching: they can speak back to what they see and hear, transforming a one-way media system into a multi-directional communication free-for-all.

This mid-2000s surge of digital enthusiasm echoes the earlier utopian fantasies discussed in my introduction. Dreams of technological empowerment return with a twist, now centering on digital media’s ability to activate formerly passive mass media audiences. Instead of

inaugurating a radically new media environment, digital media here promise to curb the power imbalances of our existing one. They offer low-barrier to entry means of media production, so that audiences can now tweet, blog, and podcast about everything from sports to news to primetime dramas. Thus, as Elisabeth Bird writes, “convergent media have been hailed as creating a ‘cultural shift’, which has realigned the roles of audiences and producers in profoundly new ways” (503). I explore contemporary audience/producer relations in later chapters, but here I focus on a different part of our narrative about cultural shift: “convergent media” and how often we equate it with the digital. Understood as the coming together of different media forms, convergence has no necessary link to the Internet or digital media. At least in theory, it makes sense to speak of convergence between radio and television in the 1940s, or between text and image in newspapers of the nineteenth century. In practice, though, convergence tends to be located in the present day, as a property exclusive to digital media environments.

This slippage, I argue, is part of what causes us to assume audience empowerment and progressive politics in digital media. In this chapter, I trace out how convergence became linked to the digital and excavate the historical audience productivity hidden behind their association. I argue that imagining convergence as essentially contemporary mistakes industry branding for truth and compromises our ability to understand media history. Such a move reduces the complexity of technology’s past and posits single, isolated media forms where we today recognize interrelation. Because audience response is most visible in the relations between media, this leads us to see passivity in TV’s analogue viewers and imagine contemporary audience practices as a radical break with the past. The result is a feedback loop of digital exceptionality, wherein we cannot see continuities between contemporary and historical reception cultures because we do not know how to look for them. In foregrounding continuity, I

highlight the embodied dimensions of media networks past and present and place them as a vital, overlooked factor in digital politics. Particular embodied communities develop practices around particular media objects, and so technological structure can never be the whole story.

I am not suggesting that there is nothing new about digital technologies, that the audience practices emerging around them are exactly the same as what came before. Their difference is of too fine a grain to be captured by binaristic oppositions, however: many things answer to the name “digital media,” and we gain little understanding in setting them against the similarly capacious category of television. In working toward a more nuanced consideration of audience response and its evolution, this chapter pursues the following questions: what has media convergence looked like historically, and what roles has television played within it? What pre-digital audience practices become visible when we view television as part of a larger media network, and how do these practices forecast TV’s contemporary reception cultures? How does particular broadcast content activate relations around television, and what other technologies does it recruit into the production and circulation of audience response? When does (and doesn’t) audience activity intersect with politics?

In working through these questions, I first review the concept of convergence and its various deployments, showing how its association with digital networks came to be. Looking to two earlier periods of television’s existence, I then demonstrate that TV has a long history of intersection with other media. This history makes necessary attention to pre-digital technological interrelation and, more specifically, to audiences’ use of other media forms in responding to and mobilizing around television. I focus on 1950s experimental children’s programming and 1960s local television in Jackson, MS; both demonstrate how television provokes viewers to respond through modes of communication like drawing, printing, and telephony. In attending to them, I

lay the groundwork for my later discussions of contemporary audience practices, which are a change in degree but not always a change in kind.

Here and throughout this dissertation I am interested in intersections between audience response and embodiment, difference, and collectivity. Thus, I read ‘50s kids’ shows and ‘60s local TV with an eye to who they address, the kind of response they solicit, and whether that response enters public circulation. In thinking about users of digital technologies, we sometimes assume that participation is in itself a political good: the more audiences become active, the blurrier the lines between producers and consumers, the closer we are to a democratic society (Benkler). It is increasingly clear, however, that many steps intervene between participation in media and progressive politics. The digital is as variable in its politics as every other medium, and so blanket proclamations about its tendency toward democratization obscure as much as they reveal. Turning to broadcast – a form that has been with us long enough no one thinks it is transformative in itself – consequently helps to clarify the kind of questions we should be asking of audience activity and the range of actions subsumed under that umbrella term. My two categories of program offer very different articulations of consumer productivity – the power to make things through the consumption of media – and in working through them I work towards criteria for evaluating the politics of audience response. These are questions bound up in medium but not reducible to it, so I argue for an approach that considers technological form, program content, and embodied viewer response together.

As with any historical project, my access to materials is partial. Some children’s programming from the 1950s survives – *Winky Dink and You*, my central example, has seen several rounds of restoration and repackaging for sale – but much is preserved only in brief clips or textual mentions. The same is true of 1960s local television, and so I am sometimes dependent

on writing about TV content where programs themselves have disappeared from the archive. Thus, I draw on newspaper clippings, legal documents, and existing scholarship as records of both historical television content and audience response to it. This is of course an incomplete picture, but the partiality of an archive does not invalidate its insights. Before wading into this archive, however, it is necessary to work through the meanings and history of convergence.

## **2.1 CONVERGENCE TALK**

We all have some sense of what the verb “converge” entails: two or more things, previously distinct, come from different directions to meet. Their meeting can be physical or intellectual – a mass of people assembling in a town square, a board reaching compromise on a fractious issue – but there is always a sense of movement leading to togetherness. Convergence thus describes union that happens through a state change, a coming together of interests or entities once separate.

In specific reference to media, convergence enters industry and academic lexicons alongside the rise of digital technologies. Its exact relation to the digital is contested, however, and scholars have approached media interrelation from many different viewpoints, characterizing it as everything from industry distribution scheme to audience reception practice to the telos of digitality itself. The term’s capaciousness has led some to dismiss it entirely: A. Michael Noll declares that, “by attempting to be everything, convergence is nothing more than a hyped illusion” (12). His frustration is understandable, but it seems to me that we cannot dismiss a concept with such clear, continued resonance in media studies. More and more work assumes that we inhabit the age of convergent media – that convergence names something vital about

how media work now. Thus, my goal in this section is to work through what we mean when we make such claims, to untangle the various conceptual threads woven into convergence. I pay particular attention to when and how it intersects with the digital, for – contrary to what we might imagine today – its earliest invocations imagined digital technology as only a small player in game of technological interrelation. Attending to the history of convergence’s uses thus makes room for reading convergence in media history, a task I take up in the rest of this chapter.

At the heart of my discussion is Henry Jenkins’ *Convergence Culture*, a 2006 monograph and continuing gravitational center of thought about convergence and audiences. Many have critiqued Jenkins – for downplaying digital platforms’ role in structuring participation (Gillespie, van Dijck), for being overly optimistic about digital politics (Couldry), for focusing exclusively on educated white men (Driscoll and Gregg, Ouellette and Wilson) – but there has been less attention to the way *Convergence Culture* consolidates convergence as a particularly digital phenomenon. Though Jenkins gestures toward previous considerations of technological interrelation, he paves the way for a collapse of their historical and theoretical specificity: in his wake, we lose sight of the context that produced his conception of convergence as well as the conceptual threads it served as intervention against. Thus, what follows is less a critique of Jenkins than an inquiry into the lineage that produced him, the different deployments of convergence that paved the way for his.

I sketch three general trends to the term’s usage: convergence as industry, teleology, and reception. I approach each of them through a central theorist, and assemble them into a rough chronology. In each case, I attend to the following questions: what is the subject of or motive force behind convergence? What changes does convergence bring about, and why are they seen as important? What is convergence’s temporality – is it a projected future, an ongoing



transformation, or a finished process? This should not be confused with a complete history of convergence's movements through academic and popular discourses, an accounting that would take up much more space than I have here. Rather, I want to separate out the prominent threads of its meaning and the diverging claims they make about human, technological, and industrial actors.

### **2.1.1 Thread 1: Convergence as Industry Distribution**

Convergence first appears in media scholarship in discussions of the broadcasting industry. Paradigmatic here is Ithiel de Sola Pool's 1983 monograph *Technologies of Freedom*, which theorizes the concept in the context of corporate media structures and their regulation. Pool argues that, in the United States, communication had been subject to a tripartite system of regulation: one set of rules for print, another for broadcast media, and a third for "common carry" forms like telephony (2). At the time of his writing, a process Pool calls "convergence of modes" is upsetting media's historical three-way division: improvements in technology allow media infrastructures to transmit multiple kinds of media through one physical system, causing the regulatory separation of print, broadcast, and telephony to break down. Thus, convergence forces reconsideration of communication's oversight. And, because visibly technological media seem to require more governmental interference, Pool worries about what new rules will emerge: "When wires, radio waves, satellites, and computers became major vehicles of discourse, regulation [seems] a technical necessity" (1). His goal, then, is to imagine how the United States can transition to convergent communications without compromising freedom of speech and informational diversity.

In the context of such a project, convergence assumes an explicitly industrial character. Consider Pool's definition of the term: "A process called the 'convergence of modes' is blurring the lines between media, even between point-to-point communications, such as the post, telephone, and telegraph, and mass communications, such as the press, radio, and television. A single physical means—be it wires, cables, or airwaves—may carry services that in the past were provided in separate ways." (23) Technology figures prominently here, but it is technology wedded to industry practice. Pool does not speak of media in the abstract, as a realm set apart from economic, social, and regulatory forces. Rather, he thinks in terms of services and carriers, and so convergence is a process that becomes visible in how companies make and serve media to the public. This orientation means that, in 1983, convergence is underway but incomplete: industry has bundled some services together, but their interrelation is not yet fully institutionalized.

Pool's industry emphasis is visible in the language he uses and the sources he draws from. He quotes CBS chairman William W. Paley on the "convergence of delivery mechanisms," a "vast revolution in 'electronification'" that is drawing disparate media together (1), and then articulates his own points in notably similar terms: "the convergence of modes of delivery is bringing the press, journals, and books into the electronic world" (6). We might expect him to say digital here, but it's worth remembering that, before the 1990s, new media were often synonymous with electronic media. 1983 was before the widespread adoption of the PC or the graphical user interface: the computer was not yet a device for the display of images, moving or still. Thus, while digital technologies existed, they did not immediately augur a visible mediatic regime change: the television still seemed like the media form of the future to many (and especially to those in the TV business).

Pool does tie convergence explicitly to computation when talking about concrete technical details. Consider this description of how binary transforms media transmission:

large complicated patterns representing text, voice, or pictures can be manipulated by computer with far more flexibility than was possible with paper or earlier electrical but analog records. Such digital records can be preserved in electronic memories, converted in format, and transmitted instantaneously to remote destinations. Thus all sorts of communications processes that in the past were handled in unique and cumbersome nonelectronic ways may now be mimicked in digital code. (27-8)

There is some ambiguity in vocabulary here, for digital and electronic often seem to be synonyms: it's revealing, for example, that "nonelectronic" is the descriptor Pool chooses for earlier, medium-specific regimes of communication. At the same time, Pool credits the computer with greater flexibility than "paper or earlier electrical but analog records," identifying "digital code" and its capacity for simulation as a marker of transformative difference. He thus occupies a transitional moment in media theory, able to see the potentials of digital technology but not yet imagining digitality as umbrella term for the cultural shifts he is describing. I highlight this vocabulary precisely because it sounds strange today – because "digital" is so entrenched as the catch-all name for contemporary media. In returning to Pool's originary theory of convergence, it becomes clear that our association of digitality with media interrelations is itself a historical phenomenon, the product of particular patterns of thought rather than immutable or essential. As we will see in the next section, these patterns begin to take hold in the 1990s, with the rise of "the digital" as umbrella term.

### **2.1.2 Thread 2: Convergence as Digital Teleology**

The computer becomes a consumer device in the 1990s, transforming from specialized tool into more familiar machine that might be used for work, school, and play. Here digital begins to mean something bigger than a technical notation involving ones and zeros, joining together with nouns like “culture” and “revolution” to form descriptions of a broad social-technological paradigm. As Nicholas Negroponte writes in 1996, “Computing is not about computers anymore. It is about living” (6). In this period, the concept of convergence undergoes a parallel shift, from an electronic phenomenon utilizing digital code to an essentially digital, computer-based coming together. Negroponte is among those who enact this change in thought, a computer scientist and academic who also wrote about digital culture for the general public. Though he does not explicitly use the word convergence, he is consistently concerned with technological interrelation, and his work informs its subsequent theorizations. For these reasons, it is worth delving into his vision of how technologies come together.

For Negroponte, technological interrelation happens within the domain of digital technology. He argues that “there is no TV-set industry in the future” for future-TVs will be computers (47) – the television will disappear into a digital regime, for the computer can absorb and simulate all of its medium-specific functions. Key here is the shift from separate media forms to the computer’s multivalent digital bits, which can be embodied in several different kinds of media experience. A digital weather forecast thus might look something like this:

Instead of broadcasting the weatherman and his proverbial maps and charts, think of sending a computer model of the weather. These bits arrive in your computer-TV and then you, at the receiving end, implicitly or explicitly use local computing intelligence to

transform them into a voice report, a printed map, or an animated cartoon with your favorite Disney character. (55)

Note how many times Negroponte references the computer here: it takes on a heroic power to transcend media form, containing within itself all previous media (or at least their simulation). This is a significant expansion in what is understood as digital technology – not just a mode of transmission, but also consumer devices that receive and visualize broadcast signals. Whereas binary code was a minor technical feature in Pool's larger electronic system, it transforms everything it touches for Negroponte.

This account is essentially projective: it forecasts a future based on very recent technological changes, changes whose ramifications have not yet fully solidified. Note that we don't yet have a widely-used weather forecast like the one Negroponte describes (and that we certainly didn't in the 1990s). There is nonetheless a conviction to the futures he forecasts: they have not yet materialized, but they are somehow already inevitable. Inscribed in digital bits themselves is a break with past media forms, a telos that points society toward greater technological interrelation regardless of what media corporations or human users actually do with them. Thus, while Negroponte mentions people and industries, he is really concerned with technological essence, the meaning inscribed in the medium. And he sees in the computer an umbrella device that will bring together all media forms.

At this point, it becomes difficult to imagine convergence as anything other than contemporary. The problem is a slippage between kinds of coming together, between digitalization's ability to bring diverse media into the same technical environment and technological interrelation more broadly. It begins to seem as though the former is the only instantiation of the latter – that convergence is a medium-specific quality of contemporary digital

environments, for it is only in them that many media forms become embodied in computer-readable code. Uniformity is not a precondition for relation, however: media do not have to be the same kind of thing to interact meaningfully with each other. Keeping this in mind, I turn now to a third understanding of convergence that shifts emphasis from media form to reception practices.

### **2.1.3 Thread 3: Convergence as Reception Practice**

In 2006, Henry Jenkins' *Convergence Culture* reinvigorated academic attention to media interrelation. Here Jenkins mentions the usual players in discussions of convergence – industry and digital technology – but he positions a new agent as central to media's coming together: the audience. Consider his influential definition of the term: “By convergence, I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want” (2). Practices come to the fore here as much as products – flow, cooperation, and migration may be characteristic of digital culture, but there is no necessary link between them and a particular type of technology, for convergence is a thing media consumers do. Jenkins declares outright that people, not devices, are the most important thing: “Convergence does not occur through media appliances, however sophisticated they may become. Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others” (3). Though the scale of convergence becomes slippery here – it happens within single individuals, but also through collective sociality – there is a clear, consistent emphasis on media practices.

Where Negroponte's convergence is future-oriented, referencing a digital world imaginable but not yet in existence, convergence-as-practice is temporally and technologically agnostic: at least in theory, we might find it in media of the past. The "in theory" disclaimer is important, for most considerations of media convergence center on digital culture. Jenkins himself grounds his theory in digital fan cultures, a choice that suggests the most important technological convergence happens at the seam between older media and the Internet. Thus, even a definition that speaks of broader mediated coming-together takes the digital as implicit context.

There are benefits to focusing on digital media as site of convergence, particularly at the time Jenkins wrote *Convergence Culture*. In a 2014 article, he positions the monograph as "a corrective to the excesses of 'digital revolution' rhetoric" (270) that was prevalent in the 1990s and early 2000s. Writers like Negroponte, George Gilder, and John Perry Barlow cast digital media as a radical, liberatory break with what came before – a technoutopian imagination that has since fallen out of favor – and so identifying points of continuity between it and older media forms was an urgent task for Jenkins in 2006. Because of *Convergence Culture*'s widespread influence, however, its account of convergence has become a dominant one; its emphasis on digital objects has defined convergence's terrain. Thus, despite an orientation toward interrelation very different from the previous section's medium-specific theorist, Jenkins work ends up reinforcing links between digitality and convergence. The imaginative horizon of convergence continues to be digital technology, and digital technology continues to seem unique precisely in its ability foster technological interrelation.

This happens in part because, like Pool and Negroponte, Jenkins constructs a narrative of cultural shift. Consider this passage, where Jenkins summarizes his argument and its relation to existing scholarship:

I will argue here against the idea that convergence should be understood primarily as a technological process bringing together multiple media functions within the same devices. Instead, convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content (3).

The content of this argument is different from those I considered above – convergence is here centered on consumer behavior rather than industry distribution or technological progress – but its form is similar. That is, while Jenkins disagrees about the specifics of what convergence is, he agrees with Pool and Negroponte that convergence constitutes a “cultural shift,” a breaking away from how media have historically functioned.

That all of these theorists talk about cultural shift raises questions about the nature and temporality of media change. Given that Pool identifies convergence in 1983, thirty-two years before Jenkins quotes his definition of it, when should we locate this shift in culture? 1980? 1990? 2000? What “cultural shift” means, who it affects, and what gets to participate in it varies radically over the time period in which people invoke convergence.

Thus, it seems to me that we need to reframe how we think about convergence and media history. The first step is recognizing that media convergence has a history – that, as Staiger and Hack suggest, perhaps “print, movies, radio, television, and new media should never have been thought of as separate histories” (ix). More substantively, we need to acknowledge the complexity of the past: changes do not arrive all at once, in a single decisive moment you can pinpoint on a timeline. As Lisa Gitelman writes, the introduction of a new medium “is never entirely revolutionary” (6) – there are always points of continuity as well as rupture. This chapter is interested in those points of continuity, in the historical moments when reception moves across media in ways that forecast contemporary developments. In excavating them, I mobilize Jenkins’



conception of convergence-as-reception-practice but expand it beyond a present-day, digital context. Contemporary audiences can move between media with unprecedented ease and industry support but they are not the first ever to make such moves. Attending to the history of mediated audience activity can sharpen our understanding of its contemporary contours, and particularly its relation to politics. In working toward that understanding, the remaining sections document episodes from TV's convergent past.

## 2.2 PLAYING TV, ACTIVATING CHILDREN

Our first stop comes in the 1950s, the decade television saw rapid uptake in American homes. Alongside its adoption came concerns about the influence this new, domestic medium might have on families and particularly on children. The earliest broadcasting regulatory code – 1951's Code of Practices for Television Broadcasters – stresses the medium's "responsibility toward children," emphasizing that content should reflect TV's "home audience" and so be suitable for "children and adults of all ages" (NARTB). Popular magazines of the time also reflect worry about TV's impact on young viewers; imagined dangers included physical, mental, and sexual stunting, the arresting of proper adolescent development on all fronts (Spigel 116). Consequently, early children's programming often sought to mitigate fears by guiding kids toward active, productive citizenship.

A number of 1950s programs participate in this trend. I focus here on *Winky Dink and You* (CBS, 1953-1957) for two reasons: it makes clear the connection between audience productivity and convergence, and it demonstrates that television cannot be reduced to a single, medium-specific mode of audience engagement. *Winky Dink's* formal innovations encourage

viewers to become players of a televisual game: they are invited to draw on the TV screen and so complete the partial images the show provides. In asking viewers to join in on the performance, the show both shares in a wider trend toward productive viewing and enacts a unique transformation of the televisual apparatus – one that, as we will see below, has significant resonance with today’s interactive media.

To clarify how this works, it is useful to spend some working through the show itself. *Winky Dink* follows the exploits of animated character Winky and host Jack Barry, who mediates between Winky’s cartoon environments and the live-action world. Since the show also emphasizes viewer action, there are three levels involved in its unfolding: Winky’s cartoon play-spaces, Barry’s studio set, and the TV screen in viewers’ living rooms.

Each episode models the show’s preferred mode of engagement. In an early episode, for example, we open on Barry in a medium close-up, framed so that only his head and shoulders are visible against the blank back wall of his studio. He is shot head-on as he draws a smiley face and the channel logo (TVDB) on a pane of transparent glass in front of him. For viewers at home, this glass is visually inseparable from the television screen. Thus, Barry appears to physically inhabit the TV set’s interior and draw directly on its glass from the inside. Initially absorbed in his drawing, Barry then notices the camera, and speaks to it in a direct address: “Oh hi there, boys and girls. I’ve just been drawing here on my magic window, which is what you’re going to do in a while, too.” His words position viewers as equal contributors to *Winky Dink and You*, authors capable of influencing onscreen images in just the same way as Barry is now. The conversational address often associated with television here takes on a tactile character, so that touch – in addition to speech – becomes an imagined link between the on-screen world and the space of reception.

As Barry addresses the camera, a flash of light emanates from off-screen space; a child's voice yells, "Hold it!" and Barry's assured monologue stumbles. "What in the world is going on around here," he exclaims as the flashes continue, and then a dissolve takes us to the cartoon Winky depicted on a TV screen. At first this screen fills the whole of the shot, its borders collapsing into those of the viewer's TV set; then the camera pulls back so that both Winky and Barry appear in the frame, the former within the set the latter standing beside it. The TV screen is here a permeable barrier. Winky and Barry hold a conversation across it, and we find out that the flashes distracting Barry came from Winky's camera – he has taken up photography this episode, and is charging five cents for "pictures took." This permeability resonates with but extends beyond TV's actual technological capabilities: a set does transmit light and sound, though transmission here becomes two-way, so that Barry's actions in physical space are available for perception in Winky's televisual world. Objects also pass between them. Barry hands Winky a nickel and the coin then appears, animated, in Winky's hand. The show uses Winky and Barry's interactions to model its understanding of TV/audience interactions: the screen becomes an interface, less dividing line between real and mediated worlds than the site at which they rub up against each other. The television, of course, does not actually become a touchscreen, but the imagination of reactivity is significant in itself. It makes the show into a kind of proto-videogame, a reading supported by the fact that Barry refers to the drawing sequences as "playing Winky Dink."

Before we enter the first of these sequences, the show walks viewers through how they should prepare to complete the partial images it offers up. Barry announces that we're going to visit "a special friend" – Helen from Philadelphia, PA, who is shown in her living room. Helen waves and opens up her "Winky Dink Kit," a mail-order peripheral that includes a plastic sheet

or “magic window” to protect the television screen, “magic” crayons, and an eraser. As Barry narrates her activities, Helen enacts a material reworking of the television apparatus: the plastic sheet is rubbed to generate static electricity, fitted against the screen, and smoothed into place. This is necessary to make the screen receptive to iterated drawing – different scenes call for different additions, and so to play *Winky Dink* you need to be able to make, modify, and erase images with ease. With the sheet in place, Helen (and other viewers at home who have their own kits) can use the crayons to add to the images appearing onscreen, “helping” Winky in his adventures. Thus, *Winky Dink and You* begins with the TV set’s transformation into playable surface – from one-way receiver of meaning into co-production with the potential to be authored from either side.

With that transformation enacted, we are ready to play *Winky Dink*. We find out that Winky’s camera does not quite capture everything that it should, and that he needs the viewer’s help to complete the photographs he has taken of his family members. This is a common framing for the interactive segments: the image presented to viewers is incomplete in some way, and only through their magic crayons can it become whole. This game begins with Barry introducing Winky’s family album, which then expands to fill the whole frame, signaling the beginning of a segment designed for play. The album opens to reveal three portraits in sequence. Barry converses with each of them, his voice providing continuity and instruction though he is no longer visible, and each tells Barry how unhappy they are about what Winky’s camera has left out. (In keeping with the show’s imagination of general pictorial liveliness, these are portraits that can talk.) The portraits ask for the addition of particular things. Cousin Slim wants a red carnation in his buttonhole and a nose to smell it with, Aunt Martha wants eyebrows and her pearl necklace, and Captain Muscleman wants a pipe (and for Aunt Martha’s pearls to be taken

off of him – since the televised image changes while the magic window stays in place, a drawn object moves between scenes until it is erased).

The temporality is striking in this segment. Its timing is predicated upon viewer participation, so unless you are at the screen drawing it feels incredibly slow. Diegetic action stops completely as Barry invites children to “come up to the magic window and get comfortable.” Small pieces of the portraits move – Cousin Slim’s bowtie twirls, and Aunt Martha’s eyes shift back and forth – but otherwise the frame is still for almost three minutes, a stable background against which viewers can make their own additions. Sound is more dynamic than image here, as Barry and the family members talk to each other and the kids at home about the pictures’ missing elements. The ongoing conversation circles around the viewer’s acts of drawing, however, reinforcing the centrality of audience productivity. Cousin Slim asks children to draw his nose “cute as a button”, and then says, “no, no, don’t draw a button”; Barry invites the viewers to draw Aunt Martha “any sort of eyebrows you think she should have – use your imagination.” The audiovisual environment is a continual prompt for tactile viewer participation, and Barry explicitly thanks those viewers who have Winky Dink kits: that possession and the authorial possibility it confers makes possible interaction with the show, the productive touch necessary to complete its partial image.

The necessity of viewer action becomes even more apparent in a subsequent game involving a car. This time, Barry physically guides the audience in drawing, for the instructions aren’t verbal but tactile. After mentioning that the story he wants to tell involves a red car named Edgar, he invites children to come to the “magic window” with a red crayon and holds up his finger so that he appears to touch the inside of the television screen. He then traces the outline of a car, providing blueprints for the viewer to follow with her crayon. Here the screen serves as

tactile interface, the site where Barry's traceless motions take on consistency and color through the crayon's touch. Assuming the viewer follows instructions, she's left with a red car in the middle of the screen exactly to the show's specifications, the protagonist of the story about to be told.

With the car drawn, Barry asks the children at home for the magic word ("winko"), which serves as transition into game space. Edgar's animated world takes over the whole of the screen, and Barry begins to tell his story:

And here we are at Edgar's garage. Edgar the Auto should've been the happiest auto in the world. He had the roundest wheels, the shiniest body, and the loudest horn of any automobile in the world. But he wasn't happy. He wanted to travel faster than any auto had ever gone before. So he started his motor and chugged out of the drive. Oh! We forgot to open the garage door for Edgar. He continued across the road, knocking over a telegraph pole that was in his way, but it still wasn't fast enough for him. He thought that maybe if he had roller skates he thought he would be able to go faster.

As Barry talks, the image moves so that the drawn car appears to be traveling through space. Details fill out the edges of the broadcast image – the garage door Edgar plows through, the telegraph pole he knocks down – but it has a blank center: again, it depends on viewer action to become complete. Without a drawn car, the frame feels empty and the image as a whole does not cohere. Timing is again predicated upon drawing: at Barry's mention of roller skates, the image stills and children are to draw the accessory Edgar the car requests. This pattern repeats as Edgar continues his pursuit of absolute speed, and Barry asks the viewer to draw a boat, a propeller, and then to erase parts of what they have drawn to lower Edgar's weight. Over a third of this 30-minute episode is devoted to children at home drawing, so *Winky Dink* does not work without the

viewer's contributions.

### 2.3 MEDIUM, PARTICULARITY, POLITICS

Now that we have worked through the mechanics of *Winky Dink*'s invitation to action, the question remains: what is its significance? Most basically, the show reminds us that rhetorics of consumer empowerment did not begin with millennial digital technology. The idea of audience participation is built into *Winky Dink*, and was a part of its initial publicity campaign. For example, one 1953 ad in *Sponsor* proclaims, "You've never seen so much real audience participation!" It goes on to detail that *Winky Dink* "captures the *active* [emphasis original] attention of children and glad approval of parents," and credits audience involvement as key to this success: "this is the secret: the audience is a part of the program in a way wholly new to broadcasting. It is a performance that goes on as much in the home as in the studio. It's playing a game, it's living a show, it's all enjoyment" (Advertisement for *Winky Dink*). Here and in subsequent ad campaigns, *Winky Dink*'s packaging consistently downplays what happens in the studios, instead emphasizing consumer agency – the power of people at home to determine the shape of the show.

For this reason, scholars often place *Winky Dink* as an early example of interactive media that forecasts later digital trends. James Roman sees the show as early broadcast "precedent" for "a palate of interactive programming on television and the internet" (222), and Esther Leslie reads it through the lens of touch screens, arguing that the locus of mediated tactility has moved from television to computer. Some makers of web-based media even look to *Winky Dink* for narrative inspiration, as when Smith, Stewart, and Turner use the show as a design blueprint,

turning its story patterns into an interactive cartoon. In this sort of account, the program's value revolves around its power to foreshadow: it becomes interesting because of what happens later, because media culture has trended toward interactivity. There is also a tendency to valorize the show, reading contemporary participatory media as progressive – think back to my opening epigraphs, which link participation and democracy – and thus locating *Winky Dink* as a trailblazer for audience empowerment.

*Winky Dink*, of course, does not actually give audiences power over its broadcast image. It prompts action through touch, but is not reactive to viewer input: though Barry tells the audience “it's up to you to make [Edgar] go faster,” that's not actually true. The show presumes a certain range of responses – in the case of Aunt Martha, eyebrows and pearls – and has no recourse if the viewer strays from them. Aunt Martha will thank the children at home in exactly the same words and intonation if they draw her a unibrow. The same is true of Edgar: his story will proceed unchanged if someone draws a giraffe instead of a car, if children try to sabotage his quest for speed by drawing a ball and chain instead of roller skates. You do not have to follow directions, but there is no real effect if you don't –at least on the level of the image itself. The show's progress is inevitable, but narrative sense is not, and there are some portions where semantic meaning is inaccessible without playing along: one segment reveals a secret password only if you trace over lines displayed at different times, forming a word that otherwise never itself appears on screen. In other words, participation can make a significant difference to viewer experience even if it doesn't change the show's unfolding. The question is thus: is this kind of participation valuable?

Lynn Spigel's answer is no. She reminds us of the dissonance between participatory children's programs and the broader one-way structure of televisual media: adults might want



their kids to watch actively, but they continued to be passive receptors of television themselves. 1950s children's television is thus for Spigel "a Band-Aid cure for the deeper political and economic demands of commercial broadcasting's one-way communication structure" (121) – something that looks nice on the surface but ultimately reinforces deeper systemic problems. It thus allows adults to imagine themselves "[protecting] their young from the undemocratic aspects of their one-way commercial broadcast system, even while they accepted that system as the dominant forum for communication" (121). She is even more critical of *Winky Dink* itself, which she connects to the rise of '50s consumerist culture. The show's continual hawking of the Winky Dink Kit, she suggests, took "consumer logic to its extreme by making the program completely dependent upon the product it advertised." Thus, it capitalized off of parents' fears about television-induced passivity, literally selling them a solution (Spigel 125).

Spigel's doubts are instructive here, for they foreshadow contemporary concerns about digital fan labor's cooptation and exploitation. However, I disagree with Spigel's conclusion that broadcasting's one-way communication structure is the root of the problem. In her reading, participatory children's programming fails because of scale: because it is the exception rather than the rule, because all of television does not function the way it does, these programs are an ineffectual Band-Aid rather than representatives of meaningful change. Implicit is the assumption that we would be better off if participation could be built into how television functions: what we need is not different content, but a different media form built around a different political economy. This is the kind of thinking undergirding liberatory narratives of digital culture, which place the internet as remedy to television, the two-way form that can save us from one-way, passifying mass culture. As Wendy Chun and Alexander Galloway point out, however, the Internet instantiates its own methods of control. Thus we are left awaiting another

media form that can save us or – the route this dissertation takes – reframing how we think about media and politics.

To begin, we need to stop imagining that media form determines politics in a clear, decisive, or uncomplicated way. As *Winky Dink* suggests, particular content can activate relations (technical and human) around a medium that exceed its general usage: certain TV shows can provoke practices that are not part of television's baseline operation. It matters that *Winky Dink* was broadcast on television, but the fact that it appeared on television is not the only thing worth noting about it: drawing, writing, and erasing also become part of its functioning. Hence if the medium is the message, as Marshall McLuhan so famously claimed, it a message modulated by content. *Winky Dink* asks viewers to adopt practices that place its images with a larger multimedia environment: it consequently points to the way that technological possibilities intersect with industry products and reception practices. In subsequent chapters, I bring this contextual notion of technology to bear on contemporary digital networks.

There are questions *Winky Dink* does not help us answer, however. It provides little insight into the role of differentiated bodies in audience response or the mechanisms by which responses become public. Its address is to a generalized child viewer, alone in their living room or sharing crayons with a small group of friends. While *Winky Dink* solicits response, then, the productivity of its viewers stays in private, domestic space. To work through how embodied communities can generate collective responses, we need to look elsewhere. As we will see in the next section, this, too, is not a new thing. There is a history of mobilization around television, particularly when its content intersects with embodied particularity.

## 2.4 JACKSON, MS: CIVIL RIGHTS AND MONITORING TV

In March 1964, a group of people in Jackson, Mississippi met in a house to watch television. Though they gathered in the usual site of television consumption, their habits were not those of typical viewers. They were distributed around many TV sets, rented from a nearby college's AV department, all tuned to local station WLBT. They made audio recordings of broadcast content and took down constant notes, keeping "a written, minute-by-minute log of every program, commercial, and announcement". Black visibility figured heavily in their note-taking: for every televised segment they recorded the on-screen presence or absence of African-Americans, any mention of race relations, and the tenor of coverage black individuals and issues received (Lobsenz 31). Viewers worked in this way in shifts for one week (March 1-7) with the explicit goal of political intervention. Reverend Everett C. Parker, the architect of the study and communications officer for the United Church of Christ, hoped that detailed, viewer-produced programming logs would prove the discriminatory practices of WLBT and so provoke the Federal Communications Commission's intervention. This, then, is audience activity joined with activism: viewers incorporate the tools of documentation (tape recorders, charts, pen and paper) into TV consumption in hopes of forcing it to change its ways.

The dangers of this kind of activity were high. Civil rights activist Medgar Evers had been assassinated in Jackson less than a year before after challenging local segregationist media, and monitors feared quite literally for their lives. They took according precautions: "The volunteers took care to park their cars inconspicuously, and they... [prepared] diversionary "stories" to satisfy the curiosity of inquisitive neighborhood children" (Classen 61). Though this was a highly organized operation, no records were kept beyond the monitoring documents and Parker made sure not to know the identities of his monitors. As he reflects in a 1990 interview:

“I...never once learned the last name of any one of them, so that in case I was put in a position of having to reveal who did the monitoring, I could honestly say that I did not know the names of the monitors. This anonymity, of course, was to protect them from reprisals from the power structure of Jackson.” (Horwitz 328)

After a number of years and several court proceedings, WLBT was ultimately forced to change its ways. The Court of Appeals revoked WLBT’s license to broadcast in 1969, and the station passed into majority-minority ownership – into the hands of the demographic it had so underserved. This is a well-known episode from media history: scholars tend to view Jackson through the lens of regulation, and so to imagine it as a precedent-setting example with diminishing relevance to the contemporary, deregulated world. Allison Perlman places the legal challenges to WLBT as the blueprint for “minority rights” advocacy for years to come: the National Organization for Women, the National Hispanic Media Coalition, and even the conservative Parents Television Council all adopted tactics pioneered in Jackson in their own attempts to shape television through regulatory means (48). With the Telecommunications Act of 1996, however, the modes of legal reform pioneered in the WLBT case cease to be a viable option. Jackson activists are thus era-defining, but confined to an era that has ended.

What is less discussed – what I explore here – is the role of audience activity in organizing and undergirding official legal challenges to WLBT. I build on Steven Classen’s observation that Jackson activists “embodied...a creative resistance to the binaristic logic of the historical consumer/producer divide” (192). In other words, Jackson’s TV viewers were not only active, but they used their activity to build infrastructures for political intervention. Reverend Parker’s monitoring study is one example, but there are also myriad other acts of productive consumption that pave the way for this overtly politicized intervention. In attending to them here,

I draw out how viewer activity accumulates over time before reaching the threshold of political intelligibility. This approach makes clear Jackson activists' relevance to contemporary media environments: Jackson is useful, I argue, because it allows us to think through how collectives scale up – how identity-based communities mobilize around the media that make claims on them.

## **2.5 RACE, THE SOUTH, AND THE SMALL SCREEN**

Before getting into the details of audience activity, some background on television in Jackson is necessary. Much scholarship presumes that TV as medium produces national coherence: we tend to think of audiences throughout the US as having access to the same TV offerings, give or take local news and community programming. And yet, especially in TV's early years, there are important place-based variations to who gets to watch television and what kinds of programming is made available to them.

One structural fact is significant here: programming from national networks comes to viewers through local affiliate stations. That is, a network like ABC does not have the ability to send one signal across the entire country, so it makes content available nationwide through partnerships with regional stations like WCVB (Boston) and WTAE-TV (Pittsburgh). These local stations consequently have an important role in television transmission, one that in TV's early years extended beyond simply picking up the feed from their network and airing it with no alterations. Jackson's WLBT, for example, had a primary affiliation with NBC and secondary access to ABC, and so could choose which feed to air when (or to air syndicated programming instead of either of them). The result was an authorial agency at the local level – an authorial

agency that, as Classen documents, was invested in white supremacy and the “consistent omission of integrationist or black perspectives” (50).

Jackson stations had a particularly fraught relationship with New-York based networks, which they (and the segregationist power structures they were tied to) viewed as outsiders who did not understand how the South worked or what was in its best interests. In the same way that Jackson’s conservative whites saw federally mandated integration as “Yankee meddling in southern affairs” (Johnston xviii), WLBT management saw themselves as heroic rebels pushing back against the civil rights agenda imposed on them by northern activists. Hence WLBT launched a multi-pronged attack against what station manager Fred Beard called “negro propaganda” (Classen 43), wielding its power to shape broadcast images in service of white supremacy.

In terms of news coverage, WLBT worked to keep civil rights activism and anti-black violence from reaching Jackson audiences. Thus, when a WLBT news crew filmed police-instigated violence during a local Woolworth lunch counter sit-in, the station sent the footage to NBC for a national news segment but refused to air it in Jackson. A local event thus got coverage across the rest of the United States, but, thanks to WLBT’s intercession, not in the area where it happened. When news of school integration or black perspectives could not be ignored, the station made clear their own sentiments with hostile introductory commentary: “What you are about to see is an example of biased, managed, northern news. Be sure to stay tuned at 7:25 to hear your local newscast” (Horwitz 324). For example, when President Eisenhower addressed the nation after sending troops to Little Rock to reinforce integration, WLBT “switched its daily opening broadcast from the national anthem to ‘Dixie,’ with the announcer urging viewers ‘to join the Citizens Council,’” a Jackson white supremacist organization (Johnston 387).

Interruptions attributed to “technical difficulties” also kept Jackson residents from seeing black people on screen, particularly in articulate, sympathetic portrayals. As a local activist testified during an FCC hearing: “Once when the black then-civil rights lawyer, Thurgood Marshall, was interviewed by the Today show, the station refused to carry it, broadcasting instead a notice to viewers on a blank screen, reading ‘Sorry, cable trouble’” (Johnston 388). Writing to NBC in praise of their documentary *The American Revolution of 1963*, the president of Tougaloo College noted a similar moment:

parts of the documentary — specifically those providing vivid images of recent white-on-black violence in Jackson — had been curiously interrupted and omitted by WLBT. During the moments dealing with local reaction and aggression, a “technical difficulties” sign appeared on screen, blocking audio and video at the precise moments the piece “hit home” (Classen 53).

WLBT also chose not to carry primetime programming that featured black stars: during 1956 and 1957, it avoiding NBC-produced *The Nat King Cole Show*, instead airing ABC programs or content from syndication (Classen 108). Its original programming evinced anti-blackness as well, as local news and talk shows consistently promoted segregationist views and deprived black individuals of courtesy titles, referring to them instead as “niggers” and “nigras” (Classen 132). Thus, by refusing to cover violence against African Americans in their own news segments, blacking out national programs and special events during the moments black people were to appear onscreen, and producing aggressively segregationist original programming, WLBT created a televisual environment openly hostile to blackness.

This stance was not unique to one station, but, as Fischer and Lowenstein suggest, characteristic of a general pattern throughout the South. Many local stations below the Mason-

Dixon line saw network television as a markedly northern endeavor, a reading entrenched by the fledgling TV industry's associations with New York and the fact that most TV stations established before the 1948 licensing freeze were located in northern states. When the FCC began granting new broadcast licenses again in 1952, southern cities like Jackson could finally enter into the television business, but they did so on a terrain largely constructed by those they viewed as Yankee outsiders. Many stations across the South imagined it necessary to revise the Northern perspectives coming in through broadcast programming, to filter content through the lens of white supremacy. In Jackson alone, CBS affiliate WJTV was accused of all the same discriminatory practices that ultimately led to the revoking of WLBT's license. The choice to attack WLBT was a strategic one. A history of complaints against it – brought by the NAACP, local citizens, and even NBC – had already brought its practices to the FCC's attention. Thus, though its anti-blackness is the best documented in this period, we should not assume it is exceptional.

## **2.6 BLACK APPEARANCE, BLACK COMMUNITY**

Black viewers in the 1950s and '60s faced an overwhelmingly white, often hostile broadcast environment. Still, despite the stations' best efforts, WLBT and WJTV could not excise all traces of blackness from Jackson television. Randall Pinkston, a Jackson resident who would become WLBT's first black anchor, remembers black nonappearance as a televisual norm punctuated by occasional exceptions. He has no recollection of "a particular moment of realizing that no people of color were on TV," but the moments when blackness did make it onto the screen stick out in his memory: "I do remember my family and I being very excited whenever someone black did



appear on TV” (Mills 10). These were usually bit parts, side-characters who played into race-based stereotypes, but they nonetheless held a visceral power for viewers used to complete invisibility.

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Barbara Barber and Jeanne Middleton, two longtime Jackson residents, share their recollections of what would happen whenever a black person appeared on TV:

Barber: Whatever he was doing, no matter what—if he was acting a fool, as gramps would say—we would get on the phone and say, “turn on channel three.”

Middleton: We’d call somebody. We’d yell and say, “Come watch TV.”

Barber: “There’s a black person on.”

Middleton: And the whole house would stop...

Barber: To go watch TV. (Classen 151)

Note that black appearance compels attention: the whole house would stop, as Middleton puts it, so that everyone could witness a person of color on the television screen. This account speaks to

the power of representation – of witnessing a particular, marked body enter the space of mediation – but it also suggests the need to go beyond representation as a paradigm for considering minority images. There is an importantly collective thrust to the kind of watching happening here, for it is not enough to simply turn on the television and tune in yourself. You also need to circulate knowledge of black appearance, calling friends on the phone and family members by voice, so that anyone who might see themselves in this image would have the chance to watch it.

A person of color appearing on screen thus had a particular affective resonance that opened outward: it asked to be transmitted to other black people, to move through the local community. At the time, forty percent of Jackson citizens were African-American; black visibility was thus not a niche concern, something of interest to only a few isolated individuals. It was rather a community issue, and viewers responded to television in communal ways. Hence Jackson residents remember television viewing as a both collective and social: brief moments of black visibility provoked conversations and invitations to watch that spiraled outward through networks of association. One important implication here is that patterns of consumption build on and reinforce existing community infrastructure. Reception is not a question of the coupling of a viewer and a show isolated from the outside world. Productive consumption takes shape in relation to the particulars of lived and mediated contexts; it reinforces established networks of human interaction and, with enough time and repetition, can transform the material environments through which media move.

In Jackson, this transformation happens through iterated, public acts of productive consumption. While initial conversations about black appearance tended to be private and traceless, discussions of television developed into public criticism of racist mass media practices.

White segregationists controlled the major print news sources in Jackson, but black activists launched several smaller newspapers to combat mainstream omission and denigration of black perspectives. Jackson physician Aaron Shirley recalls launching civil rights paper *The Citizens Appeal* as “a result of my being displeased with the media and the way it was treating things” and *The Mississippi Free Press* devoted significant coverage in 1962 and 1963 to specific anti-black programming on WLBT and WJTV (Classen 146). Conversations laid the groundwork for written description of and commentary on televisual practices, which themselves laid the groundwork for official legal contestations of WLBT.

Thus, when Parker launched his monitoring project in 1964, he capitalized on existing local traditions of contesting TV content, which black viewers had been watching and criticizing for years before. As Shirley puts it:

There were complaints aimed at one of the other stations even before the United Church of Christ. I’ve actually forgotten what it was. In some of our opinions, WJTV was even worse than WLBT in its programming biases. So it didn’t take the United Church of Christ to convince us that things weren’t the way they should have been...It’s not as if Everett Parker made us aware that we were unhappy. [laughter] But that was a resource that came. (Classen 146-7)

The official legal complaints against WLBT were a resource-rich intensification of already existing sentiment, indebted to and growing out of prior community-based organization. Consequently, its political impact is made possible by the slow sedimentation of acts of productive consumption.

This history of active television consumption is important for two reasons. First, Jackson’s communal viewing patterns serve as an important corrective to idea that TV viewers

were isolated until digital technology united them. Remember Jay Rosen's characterization of broadcasting: a pattern "with high entry fees and a few firms competing to speak very loudly while the rest of the population listened in isolation from one another." Jackson's TV audiences listened, but they did so in profoundly connected ways. Television prompted them to reinforce and develop social bonds rather than atomizing them into passive, isolated individuals. Digital audience connectivity is the newest iteration of collective watching practices that stretch back to television's inception. Second, Jackson residents' forms of viewing were profoundly productive. They used television to build things: community relations, daily newspapers, and even the groundwork for a federal court case against WLBT. The history of media convergence becomes important here, for the productivity of Jackson's viewers is visible less in television content itself than in the media forms drafted into response to it. In patterns of telephone usage, which enabled person-to-person communication about black televisual appearance; in the daily press, which helped to form and circulate a black counterpublic critical of white-owned media; in the tools used to monitor WLBT in March of 1964, which weaponized viewer activity in terms visible to regulatory bodies; in all of these ways, television's imbrication in a larger mediated environment allows for response to and protest of it.

## **2.7 PARTICIPATION, PROTEST, AND THE SPECTRUM OF VIEWER ACTIVITY**

Jackson makes for a portrait of viewer activity very different from *Winky Dink*: there, the program (and by extension the CBS network) solicited particular kinds of action from viewers, seeking to channel money and attention into predetermined grooves. In other words, *Winky Dink*'s images invite cooperation, participation on terms laid out by corporate actors. There is of

course always some distance between the reception practices imagined by a media object and the activities that actually coalesce around it – *Winky Dink* was canceled in part because many children drew directly on screen, ruining expensive new TVs – but that does not change the fact of the show’s invitation. It imagines viewer action as an outgrowth of corporate and network desires, something to be harnessed and profited from rather than discouraged. The viewer action in Jackson, in contrast, takes shape in antagonistic relation to local networks. It begins with a community of viewers – local African Americans – WLBT wants to be inactive: invisible in televisual images, barred from speaking on local talk shows, dismissed from the record in official FCC proceedings. Their activities consequently read as threat to the network (and to white supremacy in general), which wants to keep African Americans from responding to television and particularly from circulating their responses through newspapers and church meetings and telephone calls. Response becomes a threat here because it is articulated as both marked and collective – as something other than the individualized, universal viewer abstracted away from all embodied difference.

The tension between viewer activity as participation and protest extends beyond the medium’s first few decades. In recent years, participation comes to the fore of industry’s imagination of viewers, who are often now also hailed as users, people plugged into online platforms where they might write about, share, and remix media products. The specter of action as threat remains, however; viewers and viewing communities continue to perform in ways that exceed and challenge industry desires, to take invitations to action and run away with them. In turning toward these contemporary media environments, I caution against the neat separation of participation and protest: it is not that the former is exploitative and the latter liberatory, for agency is always more complex than that. The case of Jackson is instructive here, for even when

response to television cost some people their lives, it was never single heroic viewers standing up to all of corporate media. Rather, black viewers were provisionally allied with other players with the media landscape (NBC, the FCC, and even individual Hollywood actors sympathetic to their cause) against the discriminatory practices of WLBT.

Jackson also serves as a reminder that the politics of a medium always intersect with agents beyond the medium itself. Embodied and geographic landscapes matter, as do the particular images a medium puts into circulation. Materialist approaches to digital forms sometimes emphasize infrastructure at the expense of image. For example, in arguing for attention to storage infrastructures, Matthew Kirschenbaum suggests that scholars have overvalued the “digital event on the screen” (4). I share Kirschenbaum’s desire to account for elements of contemporary media environments that elude visualization on screens, but it seems to me that we cannot discount the continuing importance of the images appearing on them. Rather than discarding semiotic and formal registers in the pursuit of media materiality, we should instead interrogate the co-constitution of image and infrastructure. My next chapter takes up this task, documenting how a community organized around televisual images built queer female cyberspace.

### 3.0 AFTER REPRESENTATION: *THE L WORD* FANDOM AS COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE

Towards the end of *The L Word*'s pilot, Alice and Dana leave a bar together and go back to Alice's place. Both have failed in picking someone up, but their activity for the evening has to do with sex: charting it rather than having it. There is a white board in Alice's living room, and on it she is making a map of LA lesbians' sexual interconnection, wherein individual women are points and sexual encounters the lines that join them together. Connection is uneven in distribution: there are central "hubs" (Iothario Shane) and outlying points (inexperienced Dana), so that while hierarchy is not rigid or imposed from above some points have more influence than others. When Alice puts the chart online, trading analogue board for digital site, it takes on a life of its own: lesbians begin to add themselves to it without any prompting, sketching a self-generated, collective sexual cartography. It soon grows into a de facto database of known queer women, so that when Dana falls for a cute chef of indeterminate orientation Alice's first move is to search for her on the chart.

From its very beginning, then, *TLW* is concerned with the relationship between lesbian community and mediation.<sup>2</sup> This relationship operates on a number of levels, the most obvious

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<sup>2</sup> I use this concept in the sense of Sarah Kember and Johanna Zylinska, as "a key trope for understanding our being in, and becoming with, the technological world" (xv). Where the term media conjures discrete objects separable from and set off against human existence, mediation foregrounds the instability of distinctions between a human "us" and a technological "them," focusing instead on the ways we live in and through technology.

being that the show is a media representation of queer women. As Eve Sedgwick puts it, here the “sense of the lesbian individual, isolated or coupled, scandalous, scrutinised [sic], staggering under her representational burden, gives way to the vastly livelier potential of a lesbian ecology” (xxi). Where most shows limit themselves to one or two lesbian characters as they intersect with a larger straight world, *TLW*’s world is itself lesbian; female queerness is default setting rather than momentary aberration. Additionally, through Alice’s chart, the show dramatizes the processes through which media help to constitute and make visible lesbian community. The chart’s going online makes insider knowledge – who’s slept with who – accessible to an indefinite public; the visibility it confers is not always welcome, as is clear in Shane’s discomfort with how the chart quantifies and archives her sex life. And this visibility has its blind spots: the chart defines identity through sexual acts, extending membership in lesbian community on the basis of having fucked someone in the lesbian community. Hence Dana’s chef is not on the chart though she is gay, highlighting the perennial distance between representation and “reality.”

Most relevant to my purposes, however, is *TLW*’s linking of lesbian community to the Internet. Striking here are parallels between the chart’s map of lesbian sexuality and the Internet’s structure as communications medium: both involve a networked, many-to-many configuration that is not equivalent to complete decentralization, a situation importantly different from broadcasting’s top-down, one-to-many model but still caught up in relations of power. Thus, it is no coincidence that Alice puts her map of lesbian life online, and that it thrives once transposed into this medium: implicit in the chart is a structural intimacy between lesbian community and the Internet, which forms this chapter’s point of departure. I want to take seriously the connections it draws between lesbian bodies and a supposedly disembodied digital medium, which point me toward the following questions: How does the Internet accommodate lesbian



bodies, and what is the relationship between on- and off-line practices of lesbian community? How do televisual objects like *TLW* organize digital lesbian community? What role does time play here, and how do mediated lesbian spaces develop and change over it?

I start with *TLW* because it is in many ways a beginning: the first quality drama about lesbians, broadcast during the first years of increasingly participatory television, which established some of the first online social spaces for lesbians.<sup>3</sup> The pilot aired in January 2004, a month before *Facebook*'s launch and well before *Grindr*'s (2009), when queer presence online was restricted to mailing lists, chatrooms like *Gay.com*, and certain sections of *Myspace*. Though there were some spaces designed explicitly for queer women (see Bryson, Correll, Rak), most targeted gay men, catering to lesbians incidentally or as afterthought. Queer female cyberspace as it exists today emerged alongside and often through *TLW*, as women gathered together online to discuss and critique it and then stayed together even after its run. Digital spaces for queer women did not spring spontaneously into existence; they had to be made, and I argue here that *TLW* fandom was essential to their making.

In making this claim, I use *Autostraddle* ([autostraddle.com](http://autostraddle.com)) as a case study. Arguably the most-visited Web site for queer women worldwide, *Autostraddle* gets over a million unique views per month and over 3 million total; to put that in perspective, the United States' best-selling lesbian magazine (*Curve*) lists its readership at less than a fifth of the site's monthly total.<sup>4</sup> Independently owned in a landscape where all other major queer web portals are run by

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<sup>3</sup> The trend toward Internet-enabled social TV viewing in the early to mid 2000s is well documented: see Nussbaum; Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*; and van Zoonen. The absolute novelty of participatory TV is arguable (see Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* on pre-digital participatory culture) but its practices of public commentary became more widespread and more visible in this period.

<sup>4</sup> I say arguably because it is difficult to get exact information about page views and relative popularity. *Autostraddle* claims to be the most visited lesbian website, and it is at least among the top three (alongside *AfterEllen* and *SheWired*). *Autostraddle* claims to be the most visited lesbian website, and Alexa Internet's audience analytics support that claim as of October 2015. Other Internet analysis firms switch up their positioning, placing

established media conglomerates, *Autostraddle* describes itself as “an intelligent, hilarious & provocative voice and a progressively feminist online community for a new generation of kickass lesbian, bisexual & otherwise inclined ladies (and their friends).”

What *Autostraddle*’s “About” page occludes is the debt it owes to *TLW* fandom. The site grew out of *TLW*’s online community, and its major players honed their skills at content production and community management through roles they played in fan spaces. That this history of development disappears behind an apparently atemporal surface is characteristic of the Internet in general and queer online space in particular: as Ben Aslinger points out, “the ephemerality of the web as a medium and the historical silences that render writing queer political, social, and cultural histories so difficult” can make it seem like the queer web has no history (114). Part of my project here is to make visible that past, for it shapes queer online sociality’s present even when it goes unnoticed. With reference to *Autostraddle*, that means tracing out *TLW*’s shift from gravitational center of community to infrastructure invisibly undergirding online lesbian spaces. Using the site as a case study, I demonstrate how *TLW* serves as initial node for the organization of digital lesbian community and then drops off the radar even as the spaces it made possible continue to thrive. My intervention is thus twofold: a plea for history where the web tends to be cast as eternally present medium, and an assertion of fandom’s inseparability from the larger landscape of queer female life online.

A number of other online lesbian spaces owe their existence to *TLW*, and other histories could be written around them. The best known is AfterEllen.com, where *TLW* drew together a

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*AfterEllen* or *SheWired* as the most visited by a narrow margin. Given that all these web analytics companies produce their data by scaling up a small sample size, some imprecision is inherent to their methods and so it is hard to determine an uncontroversial victor. I can say with certainty, however, that *Autostraddle* is among the three most popular online destinations for queer women worldwide, and so exists at a scale worthy of study even if it is not definitively the largest.

community before it aired. In September 2002, *AfterEllen* creator Sarah Warn began writing about *Showtime*'s upcoming lesbian ensemble drama (then titled *Earthlings*) on her website. *AfterEllen* was at the time a weekend project Warn ran alone, dedicated to "Reviews and Commentary on the Representation of Lesbians and Bisexual Women in Entertainment and the Media," as its tagline read in that year. Response to the first *TLW* article ("Will 'Earthlings' be the Lesbian 'Queer as Folk'?") was overwhelming, and as *AfterEllen* continued reporting on it the site's reading public exploded. Warn brought on other contributors, and the site's success eventually drew attention from major media conglomerates: Viacom acquired it in 2006, and then Evolve Media took the reins in 2014. Thus, *AfterEllen* is, in Warn's words, a business "built on the lesbian community's interest in *The L Word*" (2).

I focus on *Autostraddle* rather than *AfterEllen* for two reasons. The first is that *AfterEllen*'s link to *TLW* has already received substantive scholarly attention: in discussing *AfterEllen*'s practices of film criticism, Maria San Filippo notes the "symbiotic" relationship between show and site (131-2). The second, more substantive reason is that centering *Autostraddle* allows for a different view of queer female fandom's economies.

*AfterEllen*'s 2006 acquisition tends to be read as a moment of corporate takeover, when capitalist logics of monetization intrude upon fan and community spaces. Such an account is not wrong, but it is also not the only story: centering *Autostraddle* allows me to attend to the entrepreneurial desires of fans themselves, nuancing the opposition between fans' authentic, community-oriented activities and corporations' exploitative, money-driven ones.

My project draws on fan studies' insights and vocabulary, though I am conscious of its tendency to overlook LGBT women and their cultures.<sup>5</sup> Henry Jenkins' work was essential to establishing fan culture as legitimate object of scholarly inquiry, and most studies of online fandom owe a debt to *Convergence Culture*, which pioneered thinking digital spaces in tandem with the televisual objects they are often organized around. As Jenkins himself acknowledges, however, the people he studies are "disproportionately white, male, middle class, and college educated" (*Convergence Culture* 23); the prevalent models of fandom – as a low-stakes form of association, as separate from identity work, as anchored in a single TV show – grow out of this demographic's particular way of engaging with media objects. They do not necessarily translate to queer women, who lack both identity reinforcement from mainstream culture, which Jenkins' subjects constantly receive, and the embodied sexual spaces that many position as key to the cultural lives of gay men (Dean, Delaney, Warner). There is abundant reason to think that queer women's investment in media is the opposite of low stakes. Part of my project is thus to work through the tensions inherent in uniting queer women and fandom, and to explore whether "fan" is the right name for the people who came together around *TLW*.

This chapter moves through three sections and a brief conclusion. The first is a consideration of previous scholarly work about *TLW* and fandom, through which I articulate the context and contribution of my project. The second and third trace two of *Autostraddle*'s key players (Laneia and Riese) on their respective trajectories through *TLW* fan spaces, drawing on

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<sup>5</sup> Note, for example, that "queer" appears most frequently in fan studies in relation to straight women's investment in romantic relations between ostensibly straight male characters – see Lothian et al, "Yearning Void and Infinite Potential": Online Slash Fandom as Queer Female Space" for one manifestation of this trend. I am not suggesting that there is no such thing as queer sensibility, or that straight women cannot cultivate it through their relation to straight male TV characters. However, I am wary that the specificity of lesbian engagement with media objects can disappear behind a championing of context-independent queer reading. We need to be able to talk about both mediated practices attending queer identity and queering as a media practice, and to recognize that they are often not the same thing.

their own published accounts of this time and on archived fan sites. My analysis is centered in three web spaces: *Autostraddle* itself, predecessor blog *The Road Best Straddled* (where Riese wrote *TLW* recaps), and *The Planet Podcast* blog and forum (where Laneia was a moderator). In concluding, I then examine *Autostraddle*'s design to argue for a recalibration of how we talk about fan productivity.

In terms of methodology, I draw only on publicly accessible materials with significant online circulation. Riese and Laneia are both public figures, and have discussed their lives and fan activities extensively on *Autostraddle* and their own blogs; their disclosures – which I analyze throughout this chapter – are already subject to wider reading than academic discussion will expose them to.<sup>6</sup> I use the names they write under in referencing them, which are abbreviations but not pseudonyms, and provide links to all digital sources I reference. Thus, although my project shares certain values with ethnographic work – an investment in thick description and the lived reality of a particular social group (Geertz) – I am not here doing ethnography as traditionally understood.<sup>7</sup> Rather, my interest lies in documenting the architecture of an emerging lesbian space through collecting and analyzing publicly accessible digital traces.

Getting at these traces requires uncovering the histories of digital artifacts, histories that are generally difficult to access. As Meghan Ankerson points out, it is “far easier to find an example of a film from 1924 than a website from 1994” (384). While digital media are sometimes imagined as solving problems of storage and memory, they introduce their own

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<sup>6</sup> This is one reason I focus on the two of them though many people were involved in *Autostraddle*'s formation.

<sup>7</sup> My project is closer to Internet-inflected versions of ethnographic practice like netnography (Kozinets) or trace ethnography (Geiger and Ribes). That I am a periodic reader of *Autostraddle* and have participated in lesbian fan spaces (though not those of *TLW*) provides motivation for and insight into this project, but no barriers of access prevent others from finding the materials I work with here.

unique archival problems (Chun, “Enduring Ephemeral”). Archiving is particularly difficult with websites, whose technical structure resists historical investigation: “Unlike any other permanent media, a website may destroy its predecessor regularly and procedurally each time it is updated” (Schneider and Foot 115). Long histories of writing, rewriting, and overwriting thus disappear behind the apparently atemporal surface a site presents to its public.

In researching the origins of a queer digital community now a decade old, I wanted to get behind *Autostraddle*’s surface. Archive.org’s Wayback Machine is an important tool here, for it archives the appearance of websites at particular dates, allowing visual access to expired web domains and earlier iterations of contemporary sites. There are limitations to its utility, however. The Wayback Machine imagines the website as unit of online history: you input a URL, and you can browse through the various iterations of it the Wayback Machine has saved over time. Since much of what is interesting about *Autostraddle* happened before its consolidation at a stable web address, the Wayback Machine’s approach could not get me everything I wanted. Consequently, I used it to the extent that I could, but I also spent a lot of time searching through forums, blog posts, and comments sections without its help, reconstructing interactions that moved across websites and through other media forms. This experience serves as a reminder that we cannot let the most visible tools dictate our research agendas, for their design puts forth particular imaginings of what history looks like and whose histories are the most important.

The archival materials I work with are neither complete nor impartial: Riese and Laneia’s writings are bound up in the work of self-promotion, of attracting a readership to *Autostraddle* and putting forward a particular account of its emergence. Others who participated in *The L Word* fan spaces might dispute their characterizations, and in fact some do: in response to a post by Riese about *Autostraddle*’s history, one user comments, “this blog post is entirely too

inaccurate (and too self-congratulatory) to call itself ‘an oral history’ of anything” (ar1ana). That a record is disputable does not compromise its value, however. I do not take Riese and Laneia’s writings as unvarnished truth, but they still provide an important window into the emergence and transformation of lesbian cyberspace.

### 3.1 ONLINE WITH *THE L WORD*

Alice’s chart resurfaces in the first episode of *TLW*’s season 4 (“Legend in the Making”), where it becomes a driving narrative force. As the online network continues to expand, Alice discovers a hub even more trafficked than Shane; she makes it her purpose to track down this elusive, sexually prolific presence known only as Papi. Before the story arc gets going, however, comes a curious conversation about the chart – now branded “OurChart” – between Alice, Jenny and Helena. Jenny mentions having taken out an ad on it for her new book, prompting this exchange:

Helena: “How does it work, this chart of yours? I mean, I’ve never actually been on it.”

Jenny: “You’ve never been on *OurChart*?”

Alice: “What?”

Jenny: “Oh my god it’s so much fun, you don’t know what you’re missing.”

Alice: “Yeah, it’s like a social networking site.”

Jenny: “For lesbians.”

After Helena reveals her ignorance, close-ups on Jenny and Alice underscore their shock: from words to eyebrows to intonation, everything about them conveys disbelieving consternation – how could anyone not be on *OurChart*? They proceed to walk Helena through the site’s basics in what feels like an infomercial, complete with lingering pans over the computer screen so that the

viewer can see *OurChart*'s interface and learn how to manipulate it, too. That it initially comes up in the context of an ad reinforces the feeling that we as viewers are being sold something, that what the show wants is for us to buy in now.

This sequence feels like an infomercial because it is. Just before this episode's airing, Showtime launched a real-life version of *OurChart* (OurChart.com), which its press release describes as follows:

OurChart's premise is inspired by one of the central story lines in "The L Word": a wall-sized, handwritten white-board "chart" designed to keep track of the various connections, especially the myriad hookups and heartbreaks among the show's many characters. OurChart.com will build a network of women into a real "Chart" in a unique and useful manner to allow users to connect their interests, hobbies, and communities and, if they choose, their love lives (quoted in Bernard, "OurChart.com").

Though Showtime foregrounds similarity here, differences between *OurChart*'s in-show and online iterations are immediately apparent. Note the divergent orientations toward sex itself: sex was the be-all end-all of connection in the former, whereas the latter considers any sort of commonality ("interests, hobbies, and communities") grounds for linkage. The infomercial sequence attempts to massage this difference, for here Alice places non-sexual forms of connection as secondary functionality that – within *TLW*'s diegetic world – grew out of user practice: "lesbians being lesbians they start logging on and talking about themselves and you know," causing the site to expand away from its original hookup map. In real life, however, the



hookup map never fully materializes, pointing to the difficulties of translating a fictional social network for lesbians into an actual, functional one.<sup>8</sup>

When scholars consider *TLW* and online lesbian sociality, *OurChart* is usually where they turn. Kelly Kessler articulates the reasons for its prominence as follows:

sites with overt links to Showtime were not the only or likely even the most frequently visited lesbian-targeted sites on the web...however, the textual, mechanical, and aesthetic choices and interactions on Showtime's sites speak more directly to the possible economic and ideological underpinnings at the heart of media corporations' drive to capitalize on convergence. (Kessler 126)

What *OurChart* uniquely reveals, in other words, is the intertwining of fan activity and capitalist imperative: the site stands as testament to Showtime's desire to profit off of fan labor, and analyzing it brings to light the means by which media corporations exploit and channel fan productivity toward commercially valuable ends. As Kessler argues, then, corporate design of fan spaces reveals the narrative of fandom as free play (Bryson; Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*) to be a myth: rather than enabling democratic, user-driven activity, *OurChart* produces "an utterly predictable and restrictive vision of the lesbian target market, while simultaneously usurping the supposed freedom associated with the increase in online fan activity" (Kessler 128).

Kessler's is in many ways a valuable perspective – it is important to consider the costs of increasing lesbian visibility in mainstream media (Villarejo) as well as who gets left out of visibility's embrace. However, such an approach obscures what *TLW* viewers actually build

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<sup>8</sup> Other difficulties include the desire for privacy and the necessity for hookup listings to be consensual, which Alice also addresses in the explanatory monologue: "So here's me, and then that's my whole constellation, and I slept with Gabby Deveau, so I want to add her to my constellation. So I submit her name and the webmaster will email her saying, you know, 'Alice Piezecki has added your name to *OurChart* and would like to put you on her hookups page. And if she gives permission, then she has the choice of starting her own constellation.'" This process is significantly different from how the chart seemed to work in season one, when Shane would have vetoed any presence on it if she had had the choice but was nonetheless its most visible hub.

through fan activities, how they interact with and move between *OurChart* and other *TLW*-based online spaces. Kessler acknowledges that her study focuses on Showtime's "privileged discourse" (127); it cannot answer the question of how consequential that discourse is or whether it has meaningful impact on lesbian cyberspace as a whole. That a corporation wants to channel fan activity does not mean that it succeeds in doing so, for agency lies in both production and consumption. Writing of *TLW* viewing parties, Candace Moore notes that "the fan public both links themselves to the fiction (by their very presence) and surprisingly resists it (by exhibiting critically distanced or even disinterested forms of attention) (130)." Such resistance does not negate Showtime's structuring influence, but rather suggests that "the outcome of mediations between capital and fan laborers is far from a foregone conclusion" (Russo 109). In other words, we need to take into account what fans actually do in the context of corporate media structures rather than assuming blanket resistance or blanket assimilation.

My goal, then, is to shift attention from corporations to people, from centralized structures to marginal fan activities. With *TLW*, that means contextualizing *OurChart* in a broader landscape of online queer sociality. *OurChart*'s particular functions and failures as lesbian social space are well documented (Kessler, Moore, Russo). Instead of retreading that ground, I want to point to what both Showtime's presentation of *OurChart* and scholarly treatment of it obscure: it was only part of a larger online constellation of lesbian sociality around *TLW* that began developing before the site's launch (at the end of 2006) and continued after Showtime abruptly shut it down (at the end of 2008). While Showtime's press materials cast *OurChart* as the "first lesbian social network" and academic work tends to accept this positioning, there was already at its inception a vibrant – if dispersed – community of queer women talking about *TLW* and themselves online. *OurChart* was unique in its legitimated,

branded connection to the series (*TLW*'s showrunner and stars were among its founders) but even at its most popular was never the entirety of digital lesbian social space. I argue that you cannot separate *OurChart* from its context, for emergent, fan-based networks of digital lesbian sociality are prerequisite to *OurChart*'s existence: such spaces had to be already proven viable for Showtime to invest in creating one. That *OurChart* drew both contributors and users from other *TLW* sites supports such a claim, as does the fact that these same people went on to participate in related ventures (like *Autostraddle*) after its demise. Thus, a narrow focus on Showtime's site – as unique, as isolated, as singularity – fails to account for the traffic between commercial and independent digital lesbian spaces, and grants corporate web platforms a primacy they did not in fact hold.

In placing *OurChart* back in context, I hope to give a richer sense of *TLW*'s role in the wider topography of queer female cyberspace – the way fans coalesced around it in a variety of online venues, many of which they themselves built. I do not have room here to detail all such spaces, and so I focus on the trajectories of two individuals: Laneia and Riese, driving forces behind *Autostraddle*. Both contributed content to *OurChart*, but both also entered *TLW* fandom through other, unofficial websites where they continued to play roles even as they participated in Showtime ventures. My hope is that analyzing their paths will clarify *Autostraddle*'s particular history, as well as point toward the more general forces at play in the formation of queer online space.

### 3.2 LANEIA AND *THE PLANET PODCAST*

Laneia first encounters *TLW* in 2005; at the time, she is married to a man, raising a son, and a new subscriber to Showtime. Hence she has the channel on as she is doing work around the house, where she happens upon a marathon of *TLW* season 2 without immediately realizing what she is watching:

And then it was Shane and Cherie [having sex] and I did that thing where you look around the room to make sure no one's seeing you, even though no one else is in the room, and I shut the door even though there was no reason to and sat on the edge of the bed and changed the channel, like I was never ever going to watch that seriously, I was not. And then I changed it back. And the next day I realized Google's full potential. (Riese, "How 'L Word'")

The breathless, rushed feel to this narration ("And...and...and") suggests that this was a moment of importance, but also one that Laneia could not immediately process in its entirety. Thus Google comes into play the next day, when she uses her computer for private research and viewing, taking advantage of the way search engines organize and make accessible online information. Engaging with *TLW* is here as much about going online as it is watching TV; it is a combination of mediated experiences, linked to technological milieu rather than any one individual medium. And the multiplicity of mediation becomes more pronounced when Laneia enters into the fan community: her initial foray is through *The Planet Podcast*, the highest rated *L Word* podcast, which she finds because she has just gotten an iPod and becomes "obsessed with podcasts, because you could listen to them while you cleaned the house" (Riese, "How 'L Word'"). As she listens and grows more invested, she also becomes a commenter on *The Planet*

*Podcast*'s blog, developing relationships with the podcasters and other listeners enabled by the Blogger platform's investment in sociality.

In Laneia's encounter with *TLW*, then, all of the following are in play: television as point of initial affective contact, window onto a (lesbian) world; computer as means of deepening that contact; iPod as mode of inhabiting a lesbian world even while going about the business of daily life; commenting as way of turning one-way contact reciprocal. Experience of *TLW*, then, cannot be encapsulated in a single mediated encounter (or even a two-fold one like television plus computer); viewers' ability to make a world around the series and come together in it derives from many different technologies working together – from the media ecology attending *TLW*'s airing.

I want to focus now on *The Planet Podcast* and Laneia's relationship to it, for it provides a useful contrast to *OurChart*'s corporate orientation. The podcast comes from KC and Elka, two *TLW* viewers from Albuquerque, New Mexico, who describe their motivation for making it as follows during their first episode:

All over the country today, people are going to L Word premiere parties. People who live in real cities, like Phoenix, Los Angeles, New York. There's probably somewhere in Oklahoma that's doing it but no, podunk Albuquerque has no premiere parties. We put up a post on Craigslist: come to our L Word premiere watching party, it'll be fun. But nobody – one straight girl, but you can't have an L Word party with one straight girl. So, we decided to make an L Word fan podcast. Maybe somebody else out there is missing all the premiere night parties as well (Elka and KC, "The Preview Show").

Podcasting is here a gesture towards lesbian community in an environment without a local, geographically-based one: KC and Elka take the steps that enable social viewing in "real cities"

– opening their home to others for a premiere party – but get no response in Albuquerque. Thus, the podcast is initially figured as response to lack, an attempt at conjuring mediated community where there is no readily available embodied one. Significant here is how spur-of-the-moment their decision to start podcasting feels: this is not a project KC and Elka labored over for months before it got off the ground, but rather an event roughly on the same scale of investment as throwing a party in one’s home. That KC and Elka can transition with relative ease from viewers of *TLW* to makers of their own fan media brings to mind the eroding distinction between media consumption and production so often considered characteristic of digital technology (Benkler, Manovich, Ritzer and Jurgenson).

The podcast inspires further cycles of consumption-into-production in its listeners. At each episode’s end, KC and Elka invite response, listing a phone number, blog address, and email account for anyone who wants to “be part of the chart where we make a connection with our listeners” (Elka and KC, “The Preview Show”); note the attempt to foster an online version of *TLW*’s diegetic chart years before *OurChart* would launch. Listeners do respond, Laneia among them, commenting on the blog to interact with KC and Elka and also, importantly, with each other. Laneia suggests that this many-to-many (or at least several-to-several) interaction was key to the growth of a community around the podcast:

The thing was that we — the commenters on the blog — weren’t getting enough of each other via the comments, and the majority of the comments started to be us talking to each other and playing off each other and FLIRTING, god whatever. So we started blogs of our own so we could, I don’t know, be *more*? Like more of ourselves in this space. And a few of us would record ourselves doing whatever — telling a story usually — and upload it to our blogs. (Riese, “How “L Word””)

Again we see a progression from consumption to production: commenters want to be together with an intensity that exceeds the Planet blog's established spaces of reception, and so they begin to build their own venues for interacting. Note Laneia's repetition of "more" – "be *more*," "more of ourselves," - which suggests a desire to forge greater contact with other commenters over a shorter period of time. Laneia, for example, starts blogging under the name "Green," and eventually makes a personal podcast with a fellow commenter; through it she becomes visible in the fan community in her own right. Important here is that the conversations developing out of *The Planet Podcast* are not necessarily about *TLW* or the podcast: it (like *TLW* itself) serves as a nodal point bringing together many queer women, who use the community spaces it enables to express their own interests and desires – sometimes their interests and desires in each other.

It is hard to say exactly how large *The Planet Podcast* community comes to be. The episodes and blog no longer exist accessibly, and translating number of comments or page views into community members is an inexact science at the best of times. (To give ballpark numbers: podcast episodes have hundreds of comments and at least one Planet forum thread has 30,000 views.) We can say, at least, that the community outgrows a Blogger comment section: KC and Elka create a members' forum as a space that – as they describe in an April 2006 blog post – "focuses more on Kelkians" (as their commenters were called) and "less on Kelka" (KC and Elka themselves) ("Where you at"). This is an explicit shift in emphasis, from the podcast itself as media object to a user-driven lesbian social space. They ask Laneia to be a forum moderator because of her visible presence in the community; as we will see in the following section, here her story intersects with Riese's.

Before I move on to that section, however, I want to address the relationship between online community and its embodied counterpart. The two are often opposed, and it can be

tempting to see the former as a weaker form of connection, as less meaningful because it originates in mediation. I want to push back against this line of thought, which depends on two faulty assumptions: first, that each act of mediation represents a loss in the vitality of experience, a dampening or cheapening of sensation, and second, that we can separate mediated life from an originary state of unmediated connection. As Mary Gray argues, the possibilities media make available for LGBT people “are always interlocking with the material conditions of their lives” (164). *The Planet Podcast* community is for its members less escape from the world than an extension of it, part of the fabric of everyday life. And, though it begins in a TV show and coalesces through a podcast that community materializes in real-world gatherings; the first, “Kelka Pride,” attracts 92 women from all over the country to KC and Elka’s hometown for Pride.<sup>9</sup> This is not so different from KC and Elka’s original plan to have people over to their house, though at a scale and intensity far greater than a viewing party could achieve.

### 3.3 RIESE, RECAPING, AND THE ENTREPRENURIAL IMPULSE

Riese’s trajectory through lesbian cyberspace begins similarly, with a televised *TLW* encounter and subsequent Internet research:

Before *The L Word*, I’d never seen lesbians who looked and talked like me and my friends....As a slut who’d been told all her life that lesbians were girls who “couldn’t get a man,” I found the character of Shane so revolutionary and empowering. She had this

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<sup>9</sup> *Autostraddle* continues this tradition of meet-ups, organizing brunches, barbeques, and pride events across the US and to a lesser extent around the world. The site tends to announce a particular day or week as designated for meet-ups, and then members of its community take it upon themselves to organize a particular event in their city, which *Autostraddle* then helps to publicize.



ego and strength that came from *not* wanting men, and *really* wanting women. I fell in love and googled her to death, which eventually brought me to *The L Word Online*, because they were big into Shane. (Riese, “How ‘L Word’”)

Again, we see an initial affective connection that Google routes into fan space.<sup>10</sup> *The L Word Online* (thelwordonline.com) is an unofficial but popular *TLW* fan site that, as Riese suggests, developed out of love for Shane and Kate Moennig, the actress behind her: its two founders, “Slicey” and “Oz,” began tracking *TLW* as soon as Moennig was cast, at first feeding information to established magazines and sites and eventually creating *TLW Online* as their own platform for information dissemination. As a site rather than a blog, *TLW Online* places less emphasis on commenting and reciprocal sociality: it provides links to social spaces, including *The Planet Podcast* blog, *OurChart*, and *MySpace*, but itself operates on a several-to-many, content provider model.

Through *TLW Online*, Riese finds KC and Elka and related *TLW*-derived media. Unlike Laneia, she has offline friends to enjoy the show with, but they do not satisfy the depth of her interest in the show: “I talked to a lot of people about it, and still my own inner life with it was so much bigger than theirs.” Mediated community thus offers something “real life” doesn’t: a deeper and more intense relationship to *TLW*, and the ability to form lesbian worlds around it. Where Laneia was happy to participate in someone else’s community, Riese becomes active in fandom to build her own: “I saw the internet [sic] as a place for advancing my career as a writer...and so it was never about casual conversations about things I liked, it was always

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that Riese speaks in the language of representation here: *TLW*’s images of lesbians look like her and her friends, and so open up the possibility for her that she herself could be queer. That *TLW* resonates with her as a representation does not, of course, invalidate the many representational critiques launched against it; it rather points to the impossibility of perfect images, and the necessity to approach historically marginalized demographics’ interaction with media through other (or additional) critical lenses. In tracking *TLW*’s relation to online lesbian world building, I offer one such alternative here.

deliberate and ‘on-brand’” (Riese, “How ‘L Word’”). Thus, where Laneia is a pseudonymous and largely behind-the-scenes presence, Riese works to establish her online self visibly and as a brand, a node around which people would gather rather than one of many gathered into some other community. In service of this goal and inspired by KC and Elka, among others, she herself begins to recap *TLW* as an offshoot of her established personal blog.

In hearing recap, it is easy to imagine summary: a rote recitation of events that recalls to mind what happened during a show but offers little additional value. As Mark Andrejevic has noted, however, the practice of recapping television involves criticism and interpretation, often with the addition of humor: “Within this context, the show is no longer the final product but rather the raw material to which value is added by the labor—some paid, some free—of recappers” (2008, 32). This is the tradition of recapping Riese enters into, and from her first recap she foregrounds the value she adds: her own stories, pictures, and reactions, which arise in response to *TLW* but are not reducible to it. It is worth reproducing that first recap’s opening at length to demonstrate its functioning:

KC and Elka of the "Planet Cast" do such an amazing weekly L Word round-up recap podcast that I can't even begin to compete (AfterEllen has it's own fantastic recap as well) so I'm gonna do something a little different with mine. Oh also--I have learned a lot about making fun of television from the *Americas Next Top Model* recapper, four-four. So I must also thank him. Also I'd like to thank God and my mother.

So, because I know I will never be KC and Elka, or FourFour, or ScribeGirl or whatever, ~~I'm just going to post all the photos of breasts and tell you how good their breasts are~~ [sic]. I'm going to track my bisexuality over the course of the program. (Riese, “Where Do I Begin”)

First, Riese works through a lineage of established recappers – KC and Elka, *AfterEllen*’s ScribeGrrl (whose name she misspells), and *Television Without Pity*’s FourFour – and then she asserts her difference from them. They already do such a good job analyzing *TLW* and working through its significance that she is not trying to compete; instead, she makes herself into a character to be tracked alongside those from *TLW*. Recappers are always to a certain extent present in their writings – their accounts of the show are filtered through their own particular interests and experiences – but Riese takes this a step further: she presents herself as a mediated object, who readers might attach to in the same way viewers do the women of *TLW*. Thus, she narrates not just on-screen events but herself as event, which manifests as a playful tracking of her own position on the Kinsey scale with illustrative infographics. Later in this episode, for example, Shane’s new haircut so offends Riese that her Kinsey position drops to an “exclusively heterosexual” zero.

And other people from Riese’s life get drawn into the recap as well. An in-show argument between Bette and Tina provokes the following free-associative ramble: “Haviland won’t even say that word (“cunt”) out loud, and I say it all the time, but her and I are still great friends. See? Friends. And we’re not in therapy. At least not together. I kinda like Tina’s look this episode though. Hmm...[sic]” (Riese, “Where Do I Begin”). As the episodes progress, Riese begins incorporating pictures of herself and the people she watches *TLW* with and reporting their reactions as well; she ends up producing a whole cast of characters that her readers “watch” watching the show. She also makes clear her growing disappointment with the series, which spurs her to deal less and less with its actual content. Consider the opening to her recap of 4.11, “Literary License to Kill”: “Okay. I’d like a literary license to kill the writer of this show. Arguably, that’s sort of what I do here anyway, right? To make it through this week, I must

imagine that I'm not, in fact, re-capping a tv show episode. Rather, I'm using the characters and 'storylines' of a teevee [sic] show as a starting point for my hot comedy" (Riese, "Literary License to Kill"). Though framed as a counterfactual imagination, it seems to me that this is exactly what is happening here: *TLW* is a starting point, something Riese uses but ultimately wants to move beyond. Such movement is already present in these recaps, as the comments on them make clear: readers spend more time talking about Riese and her humor than they do the show, and a number declare that they read for her stories and comments though they no longer view *TLW* at all. This trend away from *TLW* and toward viewer-generated content becomes even more entrenched with time, as we will see in the following section.

In December 2006, Riese emails KC and Elka asking if they want to trade links (a common practice of reciprocal sociality at the time, wherein each party gains exposure to the other's audience). They agree, and also give Riese permission to post a link to her recaps on the Planet Boards: Laneia's domain. When Laneia encounters Riese's post, her instinct as moderator is to delete it, as it speaks in the language of self-promotion rather than accepted fannish lexicons. This interaction dramatizes the tension between fan productivity and economic productivity: Riese comes across as too entrepreneurial, too interested in profit where she should be the enjoyment of mediated objects. The economic dimensions of fan activities tend to be read as an outside imposition by media industry – as companies like Showtime exploiting fans' free play – a narrative to which Riese's desire to both be a fan enjoying *TLW* and parlay her fan activity into an actual paying job someday stands as an important corrective. My goal in tracing both Laneia and Riese's fan activities is not to set up a morally inflected binary between them – Laneia as the good, community-oriented fan and Riese the bad, money-driven imposter – but rather to make clear the range of orientations fandom encompasses. I would argue, in fact, that

the combination of entrepreneurial investment and community orientation is key to establishing and sustaining *Autostraddle*.

After Riese and Laneia's initial encounter, they continue to interact through online spaces. Laneia begins reading Riese's *TLW* recaps, and when Riese posts a link to her personal blog in one of those recaps Laneia starts reading and commenting there, too. They become friends, and through 2007 and 2008 their online worlds intersect with many of the people who would later be involved in *Autostraddle*. A number of them, writes Riese, were "blog commenters who lived in the area and so gradually one by one we kept making plans to meet in real life." Note again the difficulty of separating fandom from "real life," online friends from the offline world. During this time, Riese is also imagining ways to bring together the various online pursuits she was engaged in. An initial idea is "All Our Powers Combined," a "landing page for our favorite queer bloggers" that would centralize and formalize the online community formed through *TLW* but that was moving beyond it (Riese, "How 'L Word'"). By 2008, her imagining shifts to an online magazine, and she recruits Laneia and others to help her build it.

In the midst of all this *OurChart* comes into play. Given that it has received the lion's share of critical attention about *TLW* and online lesbian sociality, I will not spend much time on its particular features here. Suffice it to say that when Ilene Chaiken and her team went looking for content providers outside *TLW* cast, she found her way to Laneia and Riese through people they had gotten to know in the fan community: Riese was one of *OurChart*'s first "guestbian" columnists, and soon after Laneia became a paid member of the site's writing team. Thus, while *TLW* viewers did inhabit *OurChart* during its two years of functionality, their community was never contained within or reducible to it. As the next section will make clear, the queer female sociality that coalesced around *TLW* would outlive and outgrow the show itself.

### 3.4 *AUTOSTRADDLE: FANDOM AND BEYOND*

*Autostraddle* launched in 2009, as *TLW*'s sixth and final season was airing. One of its earliest posts, "What is Autostraddle 1.0," gives the following self-description: "Something **new**. Girlier than Queerty and gayer than Jezebel, Autostraddle aims to address all things terrible/AWESOME with a quick, queer and intellectual attitude. We're particularly passionate about independent movies and music, books, theater, visual art, cyberculture and sex as well as queer theory, social justice, feminism and GLBT rights." While *Autostraddle* articulates itself in relation to entertainment media, *TLW* is nowhere to be seen: television in general does not even make it onto the list of things *Autostraddle* is passionate about. Further down the page, under the subheading "Why Now?", the series does get a mention:

I [Riese] [sic] have been wanting to do this for a long time — and though I've made serious steps towards very similar ideas with other ambitious visionaries over the past two years, this is when it's finally come together. For one, I don't want to lose the strong online community we've built around The L Word. It was a bad show anyhow. We're all here, let's do something good. (Riese, "What is Autostraddle")

*TLW*, in other words, provided an opportunity: an initial rallying point that helped queer women find each other and jump-started conversation between them. The things these women build as a result – relationships, communities, web spaces such as *Autostraddle* – are not, however, primarily about the show.

Today, *Autostraddle* betrays no link at all to *TLW*. Though its original layout gave a prominent place to "The L Word Archives," the current menu offers no means of specifically accessing *TLW* content. There is a submenu dedicated to television, but the shows it lists are ongoing or more recent: *Pretty Little Liars*, *Orange is the New Black*, *Faking It*, *Transparent*,

*Glee*, *Orphan Black*, *The Fosters*, *American Horror Story*, *Bomb Girls*, and *The Real L Word*. That final entry – a reality TV offshoot of *TLW* – is the sole implicit reference to the show so important to *Autostraddle*'s founding. The site's blog-style design also contributes to *TLW*'s forgetting: the most recent posts go at the top of the page, relegating past content to archives accessible only through a targeted search. *Autostraddle* is thus clearly not a *TLW* fansite, for you could spend hours clicking through it before encountering any reference to the show.

So, to return to the question of naming: does *Autostraddle* count as fandom? In his seminal *Fan Cultures*, Matt Hills cautions against the impulse to search for fandom's "rigorous definition," which flattens the contextual nature of fan activity in service of producing manageable objects of study. He does give the following, however, as something of a working definition: "What different 'performances' of fandom share...is a sense of contesting cultural norms. To claim the identity of a 'fan' remains, in some sense, to claim an 'improper' identity, a cultural identity based on one's commitment to something as seemingly unimportant and 'trivial' as a film or TV series" (xx-xxi, *Fan Cultures*). One way of approaching my question, then, would be to ask whether the viewers of *TLW* who built *Autostraddle* claim an identity based in *TLW*. The only response possible here is the eternally unsatisfying "yes and no:" yes in that *TLW* initiates viewers into particular mediated identity formations, and no in that those identity formations find their anchor in lesbianism, bisexuality, and queerness as much as the show.

Fandom is of course never only or exclusively about a show. Study after study highlights the importance of sociality to fan experience, the pleasures people derive from discussing, critiquing, and interpreting their favorite objects together. In one of the first studies of online fandom, Nancy Baym emphasizes the tendency of fan groups to stray beyond their initial topic as they develop into communities. Analyzing the r.a.t.s. Usenet newsgroup for soap opera fans, she

notes how members chat about major and minor events from their own lives alongside analysis of soaps, signaling messages that are social digressions with TAN (for tangent) in the subject line. As Baym argues, “The fact that tangents are marked explicitly in the subject lines indicates that some people do not want to partake in r.a.t.s. when it goes beyond the soap. Although the establishment of the TAN genre sanctions a space for purely social chat, its marking also marginalizes it as outside the group’s primary arena” (140).

With *TLW* fandom, social tangents are not marginalized in this way. When Laneia and Riese put more and more of themselves into their fan presences, no one chastises them for straying too far from the primary arena of *TLW*. In describing the relationship she and queer women had to *TLW*, Riese writes: “We’d built whole worlds around this show!” (“How ‘L Word’”). Those worlds – the communities and connections forged with other queer women – are the point, and so the show itself becomes tangential. The formation of queer female community was a main thrust of *TLW* fandom, and that community remains its lasting legacy. And while *Autostraddle* may be an exceptional case – an unusually wide-ranging product of fan activity, which has cultural impact on the scale of *TLW* itself – the increasingly wide circulation of fan culture makes it necessary for us to rethink its boundaries and definitions. Exceptional cases are proliferating as the Internet makes fan works easier to access and circulate: consider Twilight-fanfiction-turned-bestseller *50 Shades of Grey*, or the success of Harry Potter parody *A Very Potter Musical*, which launched Darren Criss into a mainstream television career.

Thus, we need to nuance models that approach audience productivity through the lens of fandom. More specifically, we should be wary of assuming that fan or audience activity is separable from corporate economies. In the digital age, it is harder to separate corporate and grassroots media spaces than we might want. *Autostraddle* is a proudly independent site, but it is



made possible by fan networks that coalesced around a premium cable show and many of its founders were also at one point contributors to the corporate-financed blog *OurChart*.

We should also avoid approaching audience activity exclusively through a central program text. The recent turn to questions of fan labor (De Kosnik; Stanfill and Condis) is an important one, but it tends to focus on the small scale: fan videos, fan fiction, or other objects that one or several people make over a relatively short period of time. Fandom's productivity is visible here, but as *Autostraddle* makes clear, it also happens at other scales and over longer durations. Scholars are good at talking about how fans inhabit and expand the world of a show, the individual and communal creativity involved in remaking stories to one's own ends. We have less vocabulary for worlds built around a show that then outgrow it. I am not arguing here that *Autostraddle* is somehow better or more valuable than more commonly considered fan works, but it is a different beast, and its difference pushes us to think about where we draw fandom's limits. More specifically, it asks us to consider fan productivity as it intersects with structure: not just the individual projects undertaken by specific artists or writers, but also the way they build up and take on life of their own.

The interrelation of technology and embodiment is clear in the way *Autostraddle* builds up from *TLW* fan activities. Attending to the corporeal network subtending *Autostraddle* unearths insights you unavailable through a strictly technical analysis. Someone could look at *Autostraddle* as a website and say: "this is made possible by web 2.0's participatory ethos and the availability of user-friendly blogging technologies. These things make it possible for people underrepresented in mainstream media to find alternate venues for expression and organization." This account is not wrong, but it is incomplete. For instance, it is missing the fact that that technology matters differently to different groups of people. Queer female community certainly

preceded the internet, but digital space enabled its expansion into unprecedented scale and geographic reach. Being able to Google “The L Word” and find your way to other queer women was particularly valuable for a demographic with few dedicated cultural spaces and long-standing struggles with invisibility and erasure. The political impact of this digital network is inseparable from the embodied context within which it takes shape. With a narrow focus on technology, you also lose sight of the fact that *Autostraddle* is not just about the digital. The site is very much indebted to “older” forms of media like television, and to the way people and ideas circulate through multiple mediated spaces. Without centering people, then, you miss the practices that shape how digital networks become meaningful in a particular time and place and in relation to particular bodies.

My next chapter further develops a corporeal notion of digital networks. It turns to the police body camera, a device that restages politicized fantasies about digital disembodiment even as it foregrounds the interface between human bodies and technologies of vision. Through this case study, I show how a corporeal conception of networks can help us to understand the fraught dynamics surrounding video captured by body cameras. While these videos seem to speak for themselves, providing an unassailable record of past events, what they say is dependent on embodied contexts.

#### **4.0 THE ULTIMATE WITNESS: #BLACKLIVESMATTER, BROADCAST NEWS, AND THE BODY CAMERA**

"I don't think pictures have any truth-value. I'm always mystified when people talk about the truth and falsity of pictures. Correct me if I'm wrong here, but truth is something that arises out of the relationship between language and the world. If I look at a picture alone, it tells me nothing...Put a caption at the bottom of one of them, that changes everything."

(Errol Morris, "The Anti-Post-Modern Post-Modernist")

"Witnesses, human or mechanical, are notoriously contradictory and inarticulate."

(John Durham Peters, "Witnessing," 710)

In 2015, Atlanta company Utility Incorporated released an on-body video camera called "BodyWorn: The Ultimate Witness." Designed and marketed for use by law enforcement, BodyWorn boasts features that go beyond the now-standard video capture: automatic recording, cloud-based video storage and transfer, algorithmic image redaction, and an integrated clothing line that stabilizes and standardizes camera mounting. Each of these features, Utility suggests, makes BodyWorn into "the smartest police body camera in the world" (Utility, Inc.) – not just the next step in policing's technical evolution but a "breakthrough" that solves all existing problems with technological witness.

As this formulation suggests, BodyWorn's advertising materials are not just selling a product; they also serve as a catalogue of anxieties about existing body cameras' failure to capture the definitive record of an event. This double function is not a surprise, for promoting a product by constructing a problem only it can solve is a mainstay of advertising rhetoric. Because BodyWorn's publicity materials play up the failures of existing body cameras, however,

they offer a useful counterpoint to celebratory narratives about video technology and police accountability. Indeed, the product's digital brochure points us toward all the ways in which police video doesn't work – the ways it falls short of effective testimony.

The brochure's first description of BodyWorn plays up its intervention into a surveillance landscape riddled with blemishes: "BodyWorn™ overcomes shortcomings of existing police body cameras, such as the body camera falling off or getting stolen, camera pointing in the wrong direction, relying on the officer to remember to turn it on before an incident, and having to manually dock it back at the station at the end of the shift to offload video" (Utility, Inc.). Before we know anything about this product's particular features, body cameras in general emerge as a category marked by error, in which human-machine interfacing is anything but seamless. Cameras fail for a litany of reasons: because they are insufficiently secured to human bodies, because footage becomes corrupted over the course of a shift, because users fail to turn them on through forgetfulness or purposeful neglect (as in the case of Chicago, where a 2015 probe revealed that eighty percent of dash cams do not record properly due to "operator error or in some cases intentional destruction" (Konkol and Biasco)).

Each of BodyWorn's features consequently comes into focus as a remedy to a particular existing problem. For example, automatic recording – the first feature discussed in depth – is pitched as a technology that "does the work [of initiating recording] so that police officers can focus on policing, not making videos" (Utility, Inc.). Depending on local law enforcement policies, an agency can configure BodyWorn devices to begin recording in response to a number of triggers: a signal sent from central dispatch, entry into a geographically designated high-crime area, biometric information like elevated heartrate, officer actions that signal an impending event (like opening a car door and taking out a gun). Each of these sensory capabilities offer a means

of automating the choice to record video, a way around the troubling reliance on officers to initiate recordings that might be used against them.

At the same time, however, officer choice continues to exercise control. A Bluetooth remote gives officers the ability to “manually start, stop, or mute recording” (Utility, Inc.); if an elevated heartrate turns the BodyWorn on, the officer wearing it can always turn it off. Thus, while BodyWorn makes gestures toward independent, automated video recording, it ultimately reinforces the interdependence of police officers and the recording technologies meant to guarantee their accountability. The ultimate witness, then, is one tied physically and informationally to law enforcement perspectives.

This alliance is implicit even in the features that seem to distance BodyWorn from conscious officer choice. Consider the geographic action zones that direct cameras to record within a specified high-crime area: what gets designated as “high crime” is often the product of racializing modes of vision and histories of law enforcement practice that disproportionately target people of color (see, for example, the Department of Justice probe into the policing of Ferguson, MO). Thus, BodyWorn has the potential to reinforce racial categorization, mapping people through its mapping of place. Even the biometric sensor that begins recording when an officer’s heartrate elevates effectively valorizes a law enforcement perspective over all others: by making an officer’s subjective experience of fear the metric by which an event is designated significant, BodyWorn channels subsequent attention to that event through the officer’s embodied position. BodyWorn tunes recording and retelling to an officer’s embodied subjectivity, making it easier for viewers (and juries) to subsequently inhabit and understand law enforcement narratives of how events happen.

A device pitched as the ultimate witness thus provides no escape from problematics of embodiment, subjectivity, and positionality. Regardless of Utility's advertising rhetoric, this failure is not a question of insufficient technological development, a defect researchers will solve with the next generation of products. Technologies of recording will always be embedded in networks of people, infrastructures, and institutions that shape their functioning. Cameras designed for and worn by police will always have a certain intimate connection with law enforcement. This is not in itself a failure, but problems arise when we forget that connection – when we imagine that the body camera is an objective witness that provides access to past events free from the vagaries of human subjectivity.

This chapter seeks to reconnect body camera footage to the actual bodies involved in its capture, circulation, and reception. As the name “body camera” suggests, corporeal articulation is a fundamental part of how this technology works: the device itself and the footage it captures take shape in relation to many differently located bodies, from the officer who wears it to the people it surveils to the dispersed online audiences who viscerally consume its most violent and spectacular images. Regardless of how technologically advanced body cameras become – how many smart features they adopt – this basic fact will not change. Consequently, we cannot depend on the forward march of technological progress to free us from reliance on bodies and their partial, situated perspectives. Indeed, BodyWorn's biometric capabilities suggest that the drive animating body cameras' further development is less distance from embodiment than becoming one with the physical rhythms of those who wear them.

And yet, discussions of body cameras often focus on the camera at the expense of the body. Claims abound that its footage “speaks for itself” – that all we need to know about a violent, contentious event is the moving image record a bodycam produces, for this technology

resolves conflicting narratives into the truth of what really happened (or at least it will once we get the technology right). After a grand jury failed to indict Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson for the death of Michael Brown, Brown's family made this device centerpiece of their post-trial statement:

We are profoundly disappointed that the killer of our child will not face the consequence of his actions. While we understand that many others share our pain, we ask that you channel your frustration in ways that will make a positive change. We need to work together to fix the system that allowed this to happen. Join with us in our campaign to ensure that every police officer working the streets in this country wears a body camera.

(Volante)

The body camera here promises to curb an out-of-control system, to dissuade most cops from using excessive force and provide definitive testimony against those few who persist. It emerges as a solution to the problem of human witnesses, who lie, speak partial truths, and can be undermined by questioning their credibility. With the body camera, we have a mechanical witness everyone can trust; we just have to look at its recordings to know what happened.

This conception of the body camera as witness seeps into corners both activist and establishment. It informs former President Obama's seventy-five-million-dollar initiative to equip officers with cameras, the Black Lives Matter movement's criminal justice platform, and the widespread adoption of bodycams by law enforcement. While some police unions object to on-officer cameras, police departments from Denver to Miami Beach to Washington DC announced plans to launch or extend their own body camera programs in the wake of Brown's death, and a *Time* article from the day after the grand jury decision dubbed bodycam adoption

“the one battle Michael Brown’s family will win” (Sanburn). Police body cameras are solidifying into a common-sense solution: of course we need more of them, of course they will help.

I do not dispute the potential utility of body cameras. However, I am wary of the rhetoric of witness because it turns attention away from the embodied encounters involved in the production and reception of bodycam footage. If we accept that cameras produce an impartial record of events, exhaustive scrutiny of the captured image becomes the privileged vehicle for truth-seeking. Our attention is focused on the content of recorded images, which will reveal the same truth to anyone who attends to it with sufficient care. The problem is that people rarely agree on the significance of a particular bodycam video: from the courtroom to the comments section, divergences of interpretation suggest that meaning is not just there in footage waiting to be found, but rather emerges through material, situated encounters between image and viewer. In other words, the consumption of bodycam footage is productive. Viewers do not just extract meaning, but contribute to it through how they see and describe what they are seeing.

This chapter turns attention to the corporeal networks that underlie spectacularly visible bodycam videos. I aim to recover the embodied contexts and practices that disappear when we imagine footage as speaking for itself – to interrogate not just the content of a video but also how it is framed, made public, and made to mean. To be clear, I am not suggesting we should dismiss body camera footage. Rather, I suggest that a better accounting of its function and politics becomes possible when we approach its images as material objects that move through time and space in relation to differentiated bodies. What I am arguing for, then, is a shift in orientation: from “what does this footage say?” to “how does this footage come to speak?” This means paying attention to the people and platforms that make certain images available for public consumption, and recognizing that the majority of bodycam footage never becomes public at all.



I suggest that body cameras do not actually resolve the problem of competing narratives; rather, they project that problem into the realm of reception. Where competing claims once emerged from particular human witnesses, they now arise through the embodied practices of interpretation that make moving images into definite meaning. Thus, body camera recordings may testify to something, but how they speak and what they say is the result of complex social processes that involve many actors beyond the camera itself. In turning attention to them – and specifically to the active, productive intervention of bodycam footage’s viewers – I hope to move beyond technological solutionism, or the imagination that technology will solve problems in itself. As Marie Hicks writes, “technologically determinist solutions ...always use the raw material of the status quo and therefore often fail to bring about meaningful change” (17). Technology serves progressive ends only if people consciously and continually aim it toward them. Activist communities like those gathered under the name Black Lives Matter organize around and interpret body camera footage; where it intervenes into racist modes of seeing, we should credit them as much as the camera itself.

I ground my discussions in one much-circulated set of bodycam recordings: those depicting the fatal encounter between University of Cincinnati police officer Ray Tensing and city resident Samuel DuBose. On July 19, 2015, Tensing shot DuBose in the head during what started as a routine traffic stop. Tensing is white, 25 years old, and has since been fired from the University police force; DuBose was black, 43 years old, and died instantly when he was shot. Tensing’s body camera captured their encounter in its entirety, and the video record it produced became the centerpiece of protests, news and social media coverage, and subsequent legal proceedings. This recording has been credited with securing Tensing’s indictment for murder, a step toward accountability unusual in charges related to the use of on-the-job force. After

Tensing was indicted but before his trial, the Cincinnati community celebrated this case as an example of the justice system functioning like it should. Hamilton County Prosecutor Joe Deters positioned the bodycam video as the key piece of evidence: “If we didn’t have that body camera video, what would we have? We’d have nothing” (LaFleur). DuBose’s family members saw the video as a sign that justice would be served, and city officials used it as justification for the expansion of local body camera programs (Noble and Law). Thus, the bodycam video was held up as a paradigmatic example of the power of technological witness, a record that would resolve all questions about the shooting.

The presence of a video record did not translate into a conviction, however. Tensing’s trial ended in a hung jury: even after discarding the capital charge of murder, the jury could not come to a unanimous verdict. In a June 2017 retrial, the jury split again; the prosecutor’s office decided against pursuing further legal action at this point, fearing that another trial would only produce another hung jury.<sup>11</sup> In announcing the decision not to retry, Prosecutor Deters said: “there are two visions of what’s going on in this country. It’s heartbreaking” (Noble). The invocation of two competing visions reminds us that this video does not simply or easily speak for itself. When brought into a courtroom, it provoked irresolvable conflicts of interpretation; its images repeatedly failed to testify to the same thing for all jury members. Echoing previous cases dating back to Rodney King, Tensing’s trials thus stage the failure of the body camera’s

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<sup>11</sup> There is still a possibility that the Department of Justice will bring racial prejudice charges against Tensing at some point in the future. A federal case could consider evidence of racial bias, including “racial statements” Tensing made via text message and the fact that he was wearing a confederate flag t-shirt underneath his uniform the day he shot DuBose (Johnson). This evidence was excluded in previous trials: a judge ruled that it could not be presented to the jury. Juries were thus instructed to approach the Dubose-Tensing footage solely through the lens of whether Tensing could reasonably fear for his life, bracketing any racist assumptions or modes of seeing Tensing brought to the encounter.

evidentiary function, pointing toward the need for an embodied, contextual perspective on bodycam footage.<sup>12</sup>

The DuBose-Tensing video foregrounds questions like: How does the consumption of bodycam footage also involve producing a reading of it, locking down its meaning into a single, stable form? How do readings become entrenched, so apparently obvious that we assume they inhere in an image? What role does embodied difference play in the interpretive lenses we bring to video footage, in the way we draw meaning out of it? And, finally, what potentials for anti-racist politics lie in practices of collective reading and contestation? As these questions suggest, I aim to shift attention away from the body camera as a thing in itself: a technology somehow outside or above institutions, infrastructure, reception contexts, and patterns of circulation. By tracing this video's entrance into the public sphere and contestations over its meaning, I draw out both the ambiguous, unfinished nature of police videos and the ways activism develops around them. In so doing, I identify when and how audience activity becomes activism.

This chapter also furthers the dissertation's broader arguments about the productivity of media consumption. Whereas chapter three focused on a phenomenon that grows out of fan culture – a location many scholars use to explore how audiences make things in relation to media – chapter four extends ideas of reception's productivity and embodied basis to a different realm:

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<sup>12</sup> While the recording technologies at play in the Rodney King case are different, it stands as an important signpost for contemporary debates about video evidence centered on body cameras. On March 3, 1991, white Los Angeles Police Department officers arrested and brutally beat African-American taxi driver Rodney King. A bystander – George Holliday – recorded a portion of the beating with his camcorder. The resulting video became a media sensation, replayed over and over again on news broadcasts. It was also the primary evidence in court proceedings against the LAPD officers, who were charged with the use of excessive force and were ultimately acquitted. Scholars have written extensively about the video's failure to secure a guilty verdict and the racist reading practices that translate the beating of a black body into black aggression (Alexander, Crenshaw and Peller, Feldman). Given the failure of this video to speak for itself, Judith Butler argues for the importance of reading practices: "if the field of the visible is racially contested terrain, then it will be politically imperative to read such videos aggressively, to repeat and publicize such readings, if only to further an antiracist hegemony over the visual field" (17). I share her emphasis on the productivity of reading, and this chapter investigates how networked digital media can be used to repeat and publicize antiracist readings.

broadcast news, which tends to imagine its viewers as receivers of information rather than active participants. In making this move, I show that productive consumption is a more general feature of contemporary media environments than discussions based in fan culture might lead us to believe: you do not have to love a media object to make things through your encounters with it. In fact, some of the most powerful and productive attachments to media spring from images that make negative claims on a certain kind of body, that forge visceral resonances other than attraction.

This chapter begins by contextualizing law enforcement use of body cameras within longer histories of technologized information management. I show that this supposedly revolutionary technology involves as much continuity as difference – continuity that can consolidate racialized modes of seeing as easily as contest them. The chapter then turns toward the DuBose-Tensing case, first tracing the video’s slow, fraught entry into public circulation and then attending to inarticulacies in the footage itself. A final section draws out how viewers translate ambiguous footage into definite meaning. Here, I show how meanings assembled through productive consumption are projected into the image itself; I also make clear that our need to conceive the camera as a disembodied witness hinders political mobilization around it.

#### **4.1 POLICE SURVEILLANCE HISTORY**

Before we get into the DuBose-Tensing footage, allow me a detour through the technological history that shapes the body camera’s deployment. Narratives circulating around this device often play up its high-tech newness; BodyWorn’s promotional materials work in this vein, emphasizing cutting-edge technological development and the unprecedented features it makes

available. Yet it is worth remembering that body cameras designed for police have been around long enough for companies to develop second and third generations of their products. This is not some hypothetical invention, but a device that has already been implemented in many police departments around the country and beyond it. And its adoption takes shape within longer histories: that of institutionalized video surveillance, and, longer still, the tradition of police work as information management.

As Kevin Haggerty writes, “police are information workers, concerned with collecting, analyzing, and communicating a diverse array of intelligence within and outside of the police’s formal institutional boundaries” (235). In writing a history of police surveillance, he begins with “low tech” forms of information gathering like snitching and undercover work. When new technologies from DNA analysis to networked data collection enter policing’s repertoire, they extend the capabilities of police but do not break away from the basic mandate of information collection – or from discriminatory histories embedded in police practice. Haggerty makes the point that law enforcement investigations are as much about processing as detection: “the police do not so much detect crime, but deploy assorted measures that selectively draw attention to the behaviors of certain categories and classes of people that ~~could be~~—depending upon a host of contextual factors—processed as crimes” (236). This is not to say that no people break laws, that crimes are conjured by out of thin air by law enforcement. However, the translation of an action into a prosecutable crime is mediated by many things, including beliefs about who looks like a criminal and where crime is expected to happen. Thus, surveillance technologies like the body camera are deployed in targeted ways, focused with particular intensity on certain categories of people.

In the United States, African-Americans have been and continue to be targets of the state's gaze. Simone Brown has documented the historical imbrication of slavery and surveillance, arguing that we must attend to this history to understand contemporary technologized state-sanctioned looking. She writes: "rather than seeing race as something inaugurated by new technologies, such as automated facial recognition or unmanned autonomous vehicles (or drones), to see it as ongoing is to insist that we factor in how racism and antiblackness undergird and sustain the intersecting surveillances of our present order" (8-9). For her, the white gaze trained on the black body is a staple of American history: from census categories that define and stabilize blackness to lantern laws that require slaves to carry candles after dark, the state "[encodes] white supremacy, as well as black luminosity, in law" (56). Across time and through many technologies, black bodies emerge as objects to be managed by white vision, things that need to be made visible and watched carefully for the safety of the nation. When body cameras enter into police practice, they inherit this lineage: even if they have the capacity to surveil everyone equally, they tend to be trained on black bodies. The question is thus: how do body cameras enter into surveillance's already racialized domain? Do they make available new modes of vision or consolidate established ones?

In understanding how context shapes the body camera's usage, it is instructive to look at another technology of vision deployed in policing: closed-circuit television. While CCTV has now been in use for decades, it shares a lineage with body cameras: many of the same hopes currently pinned on wearable cameras once attached to it as well. It, too, seemed to offer unprecedented access to the past; it, too, seemed poised to mechanize seeing and memory and so free us from reliance on human witnesses. And yet, the actual value of CCTV footage in the fight

against crime – and against abuses of power perpetrated in the name of that fight – remains contested.

The earliest CCTV systems used in policing did not actually belong to the state. Before governments invested in large-scale public surveillance, establishments like schools, banks, and stores installed their own surveillance cameras as part of in-house security systems. These CCTV systems were privately owned, but could become drafted into law enforcement practice if they happened to capture a crime and if their owner was willing to share the footage. One paradigmatic example here is the 1993 case of James Bulger, a two-year old abducted from a shopping mall and then murdered near Liverpool, England. The mall's CCTV cameras captured his abduction, and footage from them was broadcast on national television in the hope that someone in the audience would be able to identify the perpetrators. The gambit worked: a viewer recognized one of the kidnappers and called in, leading to a successful arrest and a conviction for murder. This case is considered a catalyst for Britain's "introduction of open-street CCTV surveillance cameras during the early 1990s," and other countries follow the pattern of investing in public surveillance systems after private ones prove their utility (McCahill 247). In this way, video surveillance moves from private, interior phenomenon to a state-sanctioned feature of public space.

There are several things worth remarking upon here – several ways in which the Bulger case might guide our thinking about body cameras. The first has to do with the circulation of surveillance footage: note that images of Bulger's abduction had to appear on television in order to prompt the perpetrator's identification. They had to move through a national distribution infrastructure to become effective: they needed to be exposed to a large audience for the right person had to encounter them and then act upon that encounter. Thus, while the moment of

capture is important, patterns of circulation and active reception are also key to thinking about police video and its function.

Second, this case points to the complexities of calling surveillance footage useful. While CCTV technology did aid in the capture of Bulger's murderers, it did not keep his death from happening. In other words, video surveillance aided in the prosecution of a crime but not in its prevention. This distinction slips out of focus in subsequent large-scale adoption of surveillance cameras, which play up their power to prevent crime. The event propelling government investment in video surveillance – the supposed success story – thus itself fails to deliver on the promises advocates attach to CCTV. The inadequacies of a technological surveillance system do not dampen enthusiasm about it, but rather “are taken as a sign that more resources are needed” (Mathiesen 231). Existing shortcomings of CCTV become the impetus for further investment and development; any failings are cast as temporary and attributed to insufficient coverage. And, by 2000, coverage explodes in Britain and around the world.

CCTV is now a taken-for-granted part of public space. As Clive Norris writes, it is “the international crime prevention “success” story of the new Millennium, set to penetrate every major city, in every country, on every continent” (254). As the scare quotes around “success” suggest, Norris is skeptical about the actual utility of video surveillance, which has been subject to few systematic evaluations and almost none that evidence its value as a crime deterrent.<sup>13</sup> CCTV is consequently what Shoshanna Magnet calls a “politically successful policy failure,” wherein “success is defined primarily in terms of whether the technology *appears* to be keeping us safer rather than by marked or measurable improvements in our security” (18). Body cameras are poised to fall into a similar trap, as calls for investment in them often sidestep precise goals

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<sup>13</sup> The major exception is garages, where surveillance cameras do correlate with markedly lower crime rates (Gill and Spriggs).



for their implementation and metrics by which we might evaluate them. Remember that Cincinnati officials read Tensing's mere indictment as sign of this technology's efficacy, conflating the decision to take Tensing to court with actual police accountability. That body cameras seem to be following the pattern of CCTV points to the need to interrogate the systems surrounding high-tech tools rather than assuming the next generation of cameras will get things right.

Finally, the Bulger case points to the intertwining of public and private in surveillance video. We might assume that this is a thing of the past, that governmental investment in CCTV and body cameras mean that private companies no longer intercede. Even with systems paid for with federal funds, however, movement into the public sector is rarely complete. Always-on surveillance cameras generate huge quantities of footage, and law enforcement agencies often do not have the capacity to manage its monitoring and storage internally. Thus, outside labor often shores up the gaps, from hired monitoring staff to the commercial algorithms and evidence management systems that replace them today. Law enforcement also continues to procure video and other data from outside sources: "the United States...has seen large commercial data brokers such as ChoicePoint prospectively formatting the vast amounts of data they collect on individual American citizens (but also citizens in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico) and selling it to American law enforcement agencies" (Haggerty 239). Video surveillance past and present occupies a conflicted nexus of public and private, animated by diverse and sometimes contradictory interests.

Writing of Google Earth, Lisa Parks describes how the mixture of public and private tends to further corporate goals. She analyzes the FCCInfo layer – an overlay that superimposes broadcast infrastructure sites on Google Earth's general maps – as an example of public data's

transformation into private intellectual property: the locations of licensed broadcast facilities become “restructured as a layer by a private third party (Mertz, etc) and can only be accessed and viewed on a privately owned yet publicly accessible Web-based platform (Google Earth), which is composited from geospatial data that has been acquired by satellites historically subsidized by taxpayers” (13). While there are different entities in play with surveillance video, the parallel movement between federal and corporate domains suggests we cannot easily ascribe publicness to it – a reading borne out by the difficulty people outside law enforcement often have in accessing footage. Thus, it is important not to conflate surveillance that happens in public space with public access or publicly owned and operated technology.

To sum up, the history of video surveillance points me toward the following in relation to body cameras: the importance of circulation and audience response, the contested meaning of their success, and their imbrication in public and private institutions.

There are some aspects of contemporary media environments that alter the historical relationships between video and surveillance, chief among them the proliferation of video production tools outside the realm of law enforcement. As governments are investing in video technology, it also becomes integrated into consumer devices like smartphones and tablets. In addition to being captured by state surveillance cameras, then, the average person on the street now has the ability to turn video recording technology back on law enforcement agents – and to circulate resulting footage. This leads to what Andrew Goldsmith calls policing’s new visibility:

The new constellation of video-sharing and social-networking technologies and related social practices...has produced a substantial shift in the way policing is staged. The police are no longer the only actors, nor do they control all elements of stage production. There is simultaneously more participation in the staging (through the production of

unofficial recordings/readings/accounts) of policing events, as well as a larger and more heterogeneous audience for those staging's. (Goldsmith 917)

Goldsmith sees democratizing potential in ubiquitous, multi-directional surveillance: bystanders and victims of police violence can now capture law enforcement agents on their own cameras, loosening the police's stranglehold on authoritative accounts of the past.

Digital surveillance thus emerges as an uncertain ally, a tool of the police and a method of policing law enforcement's own excesses. In such an environment, there can be no generalizing proclamations about what the digital does, for no politics follow inevitably from media put to such divergent uses. What we need is grounded consideration of particular cases, for attention to the complexity of particular footage's life in the world in the only way beyond binaries that place the digital as either liberatory or catastrophic. Toward this end, I turn now to the DuBose-Tensing encounter and its bodycam capture.

## **4.2 BECOMING PUBLIC**

In an American media landscape saturated with videos of white police killing unarmed black men, the Tensing-DuBose footage is notable for the roundabout path it takes to public consumption. Hamilton County Prosecutor Joe Deters held the video for 10 days after the shooting, releasing it only once he had completed his investigation and a Grand Jury returned an indictment for murder. There is consequently a week and a half where people are speaking about and speculating on the footage without public access to it, a period of time that highlights the stakes of institutional control over police video. Most states, Ohio included, classify police surveillance video as public record, a legal designation that conjures ideas of free circulation and

widespread access. In practice, things are rarely this simple, for police departments store and manage bodycam footage and tend not to release it unless something exceptional happens. Even in the case of officer involved killings, video records can take years to reach the public or never become public at all.<sup>14</sup>

Coverage of Tensing's bodycam video helps us think through the mechanisms of becoming public. Before its release, the footage emerges as a site of contestation, with police, city officials, protestors, and the press all trying to influence its movement through the world – to restrict, expand, or direct its circulation. By working through how this video comes to enter networked digital spaces, I revise accounts of contemporary media environments that presume the easy, immediate circulation of video content.

Scholars often emphasize digital networks' ability to serve as an alternative public sphere, a way to circulate information and assemble collectives without depending on established media institutions (Castells, Lievrouw, Wolfson). The power of social media, then, tends to be linked to its status as an alternative platform that imposes fewer normative limitations on the kind of content that can become public through it. Where television and newspapers have a vested interest in ignoring certain kinds of stories – those not deemed 'newsworthy,' those that stray too far from public discourse's racial and gender orthodoxies – Twitter and Facebook allow people to publish whatever they want. Consequently, they facilitate the spread of content and perspectives suppressed in mainstream media. Twitter has been seen in particular as a black counterpublic (Graham and Smith), a discursive space whose material and social construction encourages black participation (Brock).

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<sup>14</sup> The Freedom of Information Act exempts law enforcement from having to publicly disclose records under a number of circumstances, and state laws often follow suit. For a detailed discussion, see Pagliarella.

Scott Richmond connects this vein of theorizing to moving image media, suggesting that the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter serves as network infrastructure for distributing videos of police violence.<sup>15</sup> Through it, he suggests, people can circulate videos and organize around them in ways not dependent on broadcast news to disseminate information. Richmond consequently sees the hashtag as a way to circumvent institutions of white legitimization. Instead of depending on news coverage – which, as we saw in chapter one, has a long history of racist practices ranging from the framing of stories to their outright suppression – #BlackLivesMatter uses grassroots community organization as a vehicle to bring videos to a large audience. Thus, social media’s decentralization makes possible the sharing and narrativizing of videos outside of anti-black institutional bias. The stories that emerge around and through hashtagged videos are less compromised by whiteness’ monopoly over traditional media industries and so work to a different, potentially liberatory political effect.

Building on Richmond’s conceptualization of #BlackLivesMatter as infrastructure, Elizabeth Reich positions the movement as a “coterminous call to collective action and networked collectivity” that offers novel possibilities for civil rights activism. BLM networks are distinct because of “their temporal-spatial dimension, existing in the simultaneously suspended and incomplete time of the internet, and their form of networked collectivity, which is always in the process of becoming and reconstituting itself, and always opposed to the atomized, individualistic subject” (Reich). For Reich, BLM inaugurates a collectivist, black-woman-

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<sup>15</sup> Important to note here is the difference between the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter and the larger social movement is related to that hashtag but exists beyond it. I claim no insight into the lived experience of blackness or of state violence, which scholars like Jared Sexton and Roderick Ferguson describe so vitally. Rather, I am exploring the relationship between #BlackLivesMatter and media technology, the role networked activist communities play in video’s journey to evidence.

centered form of activism and a new mode of social-technical being that takes hashtags from the internet into the physical, embodied world.

I follow Richmond and Reich in seeing political potential in digital networks, but it seems to me that they are too quick to position the hashtag as remedy to anti-black institutions. Their theorizations are so conceptual that, though they invoke concepts like infrastructure, there is no sense of how an infrastructure gets built or who is involved in its architecture and maintenance. For example, Richmond presumes that if a video exists it will automatically be available for posting and circulation via hashtags. The network is for Richmond a curiously abstract thing, folded into videos of police violence at a formal level. That is, he positions “being networked” as a feature of bodycam, dashcam, and mobile phone videos in a way analogous to depth of field: something that inheres in the image rather than a description of how it circulates. The result is a conception of these videos as always already connected to networks, which makes it difficult to interrogate how they actually enter into and move through online spaces. Contra Richmond, I want to suggest that reaching the status of “networked” is an achievement, and one that many videos of police violence never attain.

To get at why this matters – why I am arguing for concrete attention to how objects inhabit networks – I turn to coverage of the Tensing-DuBose case. The first reports of the shooting surface the day that it happens, though they are noticeably preliminary, without names and with few details about the event. For example, local channel WCPO posts this write-up on its website on July 19 under the headline “Police: UC Officer shot driver dead during traffic stop”:

A University of Cincinnati police officer had initiated a traffic stop, according to University Police Chief Jason Goodrich. During the traffic stop, a shot was fired and the driver was killed, he said. Hamilton County Coroner Lakshmi Sammarco said the

deceased driver had been a black man in his 30s or early 40s. The officer suffered minor injuries. (WCPO Staff)

This text appears below a picture of the cordoned-off street where the shooting happened; a half dozen law enforcement vehicles occupy the street, and several officers are visible in the distance conversing among themselves. Notice the prominence of the police both visually and narratively. They are what we see, and they are also the conduit for information: even at this early moment, WCPO tells the story as a police chief reports it, reminding us that what becomes public here is law enforcement's account of how this event happened. This perspectival filter is important, for later the injuries sustained by Tensing become a contested point.

Over the next few days, DuBose and Tensing are named and more exact circumstances emerge: DuBose was pulled over for a missing front license tag, a struggle over his car door prompted the fatal shot, and a body camera recorded everything. The resulting video footage is not released, however, and Tensing makes no statements to the press. At a July 20 press conference, Cincinnati police communicate that the officers involved are invoking “an option in their contract that allows them 48 hours before making statements about the incident” (Swartsell). In the face of law enforcement silence, community members begin to raise questions about why Tensing was policing outside university territory and how the encounter escalated into the realm of deadly force. Reactions from those who knew DuBose also appear at this point: on July 21, WCPO coverage includes quotes from friends and family characterizing him as “fragile” and “frail,” too sick to mount the kind of attack on an officer that might provoke the use of deadly force.

At this point, one set of video recordings does circulate through news broadcasts – though not the bodycam footage that later draws so much attention. Cincinnati resident John Ray

was walking nearby when the shooting happened, and he began recording its aftermath with his mobile device and then with a camcorder. He posted the resulting videos to his YouTube channel JRay513Tv on July 19, and by the 21<sup>st</sup> they had been folded into WCPO's online coverage and nightly news broadcasts.

Though these videos were taken soon relatively soon after the shooting – one documents the paramedics' arrival, for example – they provide little information about the event itself and drop out of news narratives once people begin speaking about Tensing's bodycam. Thus, they make clear important divergences between police video and citizen smartphone video. The latter can simply be posted online by whoever recorded it, while the former is subject to institutional control and can be held on law enforcement servers for an indeterminate period of time. And, while both may move through digital networks, bodycam video occupies a privileged location in virtue of its institutional backing. Because it is physically attached to police officers, the bodycam is more likely to be in recording position at the moment of a violent encounter between law enforcement and police. Even if potential citizen journalists are in the area, there is no guarantee they will have devices at the ready when they are most needed. Additionally, because bodycam footage is routed through law enforcement infrastructures, it has a particular institutional heft: in the eyes of government bodies, it is automatically the most trustworthy record.

I make this distinction because scholars often collapse these recordings together into a single category (Richmond) or attach particular political potential to first-person mobile video. Alessia Richardson, for example, places the cell phone as prosthetic eye for the poor man of color, a tool with which he can “protect himself from news narratives that may try to frame his untimely demise incorrectly” (10). As we see with the DuBose shooting, however, bystanders



and victims are not always able to record episodes of police violence. There will inevitably be times when bodycam footage is all that there is, and so we should attend to it as a distinct entity with potential (but no guarantee) for anti-racist use.

As Ray's videos and details of the DuBose-Tensing encounter circulate, the story begins to garner attention in national news media and on social networks. On July 22 DuBose is the top trending topic on Facebook, and his name proliferates as a Twitter hashtag, alone and in conjunction with #BlackLivesMatter and the names of other victims of police violence. DuBose becomes incorporated into a broader lineage of black Americans killed by the police: his death came three months after those of Walter Scott and Freddie Gray, and within a week of Sandra Bland's demise in police custody. Protests and rallies begin to form, spreading from small gatherings of a few dozen who personally knew DuBose into larger activist networks already primed by previous incidents of police killing black citizens.

From July 22 onward, the bodycam recording itself becomes a focal point of news coverage. By this point, the prosecutor's office has confirmed its existence and relevance but refuses to release it. Without this video record, the police account of DuBose's shooting is the only one available, and as the days pass the local community becomes increasingly dissatisfied with its meager details and with the presentation of DuBose as violent instigator. The video is seen behind closed doors by certain city officials, and their reactions to it begin to come out in the press: Police Chief Jeffrey Blackwell says "the video is not good"; City Manager Harry Black says, "It's not a good situation. It's a tragic situation, someone has died that did not necessarily need to die" (Baker). Thus, the news alternately reports reactions of people who have seen the video and demands for access by those who have not, a series of speakings that frame the footage's meaning even before it enters public space. News organizations also enter into the

action themselves: WCPO posts an editorial calling for the video's immediate release, and joins with other news stations to sue for access to it.

Even before it is publicly available, then, the bodycam video emerges as a site of contestation and interpretation. A WCPO video segment – played on TV news and then posted online – gives a sense of the shape and stakes of these pre-release debates. Reporter Jordan Vilines reports from outside the prosecutor's office, introducing an audio interview where prosecutor Deters articulates his reasons for holding the video: its potential to compromise ongoing Grand Jury proceedings if released and his belief it is not subject to Ohio's public records law. We hear Deters voice say, "Everybody wants to have the answer. Instant gratification right now. But it does in fact affect investigations. That's just the reality of a criminal investigation, and I'm not going to change because the media sued me or there's a protest outside." As he speaks, footage of the street where Tensing killed Dubose (including several seconds from John Ray's YouTube videos) is intercut with scenes of protest from around Cincinnati; Black Lives Matter appears on signs and clothing, and protesters can at times be heard chanting it though their voices are subordinated to Deters'.

Several things are worth pointing out here. First, protestors translate digital hashtag into material practice through their embodied invocations of #BlackLivesMatter. As Paulo Gerbaudo suggests, contemporary activism is not a question of choosing between online or offline realms: cyberspace is not some ethereal escape separate from the real work of organizing, where 'slactivists' pretend social engagement while they sit detached in front of a computer all day. Rather, as we see here, digital spaces help to choreograph how protests assemble in physical ones. These #BlackLivesMatter protesters embody the movement between digital platforms and

community spaces – between “tweets” and “streets”, as Gerbaudo puts it – literally wearing on their bodies a digital call to arms.

Second, note the provisional allegiance of news organizations and protestors in their desire to see the video made public. While televisual reporting often downplays black perspectives (even in this clip, the protestors’ voices are awarded less space and volume than Deters’), it is not always or inevitably on the same side of an issue as law enforcement. Thus, it is a mistake to assume binary oppositions between broadcast media and social media, press reporting and protest movements.

Finally, consider what is being protested here – where the divergence between activists and city officials is sharpest. The protest is about DuBose’s death, of course, but it is also about the public’s right to know: the right to view evidence and decide for yourself what it means instead of accepting the state’s interpretation. “Release the body cam footage now,” reads one sign. “We want answers now,” says another. The repeated invocation of this moment, *now*, stands in stark contrast to prosecutor Deters’ plea for everyone to wait until court procedures are done, to hold on until some indefinite future. “We’re trying to deliver justice,” he says, suggesting that justice comes to the public as a finished product, a thing they can see and participate in only after all the consequential decisions have already been made. Cincinnati’s protests bring this logic itself under attack, asserting that so major a piece of evidence – as Deters dubs the video – cannot be entrusted to the state alone.

This clip makes clear: part of what is at stake in Black Lives Matter is black audiences’ right to engage with and interpret media objects. The justice system cannot just tell black communities what they see when they look at a video: Black Lives Matter insists that lived, embodied experience shapes how we see, and that predominately white institutions cannot have a

monopoly on translating images into meaning. Black communities must be able to see for themselves and speak back to meanings derived from anti-blackness.

### 4.3 THE EMBODIED CAMERA

Deters releases the footage from Tensing's bodycam on July 29, ten days after the shooting itself. He does so through a press conference, a highly managed environment wherein he speaks at length about what the video shows before he actually presents it for view. In these opening remarks, Deters proclaims, "This is, without question, a murder" (Kaufman). He presents the video as an object that speaks loudly and clearly to everyone watching it – and that speaks to everyone in the same way. That this is not what happens, that two juries split over irresolvable differences in its interpretation, suggests that there are important ambiguities and inarticulacies in the video itself. In this section, I work through them and connect them to the bodies involved in the footage's production.

Given my emphasis on circulation, one might expect me to sideline discussion of bodycamera images entirely. As I outlined in chapter one, however, my goal is not to deny the importance of images' form but rather connect form to images' movements through the world. This section looks to how bodies structure the formal space of surveillance, establishing the visual terrain that viewers later translate into meaning. As Jennifer Malkowski writes, "*How* death is documented matters, and viewers can evaluate the ethics of each instance by examining the circumstances and attitude of its recording—often implied in the material itself, through cinematography" (20). Though form does not determine a media object's political destiny, it can guide viewers toward some modes of interpretation while discouraging others.

The first thing to note is the absence of a single, authoritative version of Tensing's bodycam footage. Pieces of it have been released, formatted, and circulated in various ways. It appears in broadcast news and social media posts, on the websites of print periodicals and TV channels. It appears as looping GIFs, minute-long excerpts, and tryptich videos (where it is placed alongside footage from other officers' bodycams). Each version of Tensing's bodycam's footage enacts a slightly different framing of the event: it makes available more or less footage before the moment of shooting, presenting more or less contextual information to supplement what is captured through Tensing's bodycam. For the sake of this analysis, I draw on a twenty-eight-minute iteration of this footage that YouTube user Nevada Cop Block posted under the name "Full Unedited Body Cam Video of Sam Dubose Murder by Officer Ray Tensing." I have no way of authenticating whether this video is in fact unedited, but it is the longest version I have found online and it appears to be the full video Deters released during his press conference.

This video begins in Tensing's patrol car well before he shoots DuBose. He is parked at the side of a road; the camera looks forward at a canted angle, capturing the car's dashboard and steering wheel and the traffic that passes in the distance in front of it. There is no sound in these first few moments, a fact that reminds us body cameras are not simply on or off: they can record variable degrees of information depending on how they are configured. Tensing's, it seems, generally records image but not sound during his shifts; something has to be designated as significant – a switch has to be flipped – in order for it to produce a sonic record to go with its visuals.

After a few seconds, something attracts Tensing's attention and he leans over to key information into his car's data terminal. His body's motion sets the camera in motion, and as he begins to type his hands enter the frame. His left arm looms large and uncomfortably close in the

bodycam's field of vision: it appears to sprout from the camera itself, making clear the physical connection between the camera and its wearer. This image reminds us that bodycams emerge in part through a need to be *closer* – to see more and better, in greater detail and proximity than the vantage points offered by older forms of video surveillance. The mounted surveillance camera watches from the distance of a room's corner, and the dashboard camera offers a forward-pointed gaze that moves only when its vehicle does. These cameras can be far from where the action is, their gaze foiled by someone who is facing the wrong way or hiding behind an obstruction. Body cameras trade wide-angle capture for a mobile, embodied close-up.

Tensing puts his car in gear, pulling onto the road and beginning to drive. The image straightens up, presumably as Tensing sits up, and his hands occasionally appear in the frame as he turns the steering wheel. Important to note here is that while we can read Tensing's actions in the camera's movement, we can't actually see his body as a whole. Worn on an officer's chest, belt, or shoulder, a body camera's gaze aligns with that of the person it is attached to: it sees along the same vectors as its officer, which means that it records the bodies and actions of those a policeman interacts with while generally hiding his body from view. Consequently, we can read Tensing's movement in the image but we cannot see him. Body cameras thus construct a space of surveillance that takes police bodies as anchor, as point of origin rather than object to be surveilled. This technology makes available for vision (and for subsequent interpretation) a notably incomplete picture: one where the policeman's body is by default offscreen, present only in corporeal traces of footage's production. A voice is sometimes recorded and limbs sometimes appear, but through the bodycam we see as the policeman rather than seeing him. Consequently, police bodies escape the visual scrutiny to which their victims are subject. Viewers cannot

examine Tensing's face for any trace of aggression or debate whether the bend of his head suggests fear or rage.

The body camera's positioning resonates with other visual forms that ground narrative in a particular embodied perspective: a filmic point of view shot, a first-person shooter video game. Like these technologies of vision, the body camera filters the images it presents through a subject position – that of its wearer. It invites viewers to inhabit the police officer's perspective, which encourages affective incorporation in a similar vein: seeing as the policeman can lead to feeling as the policeman, doubly privileging his account of an altercation.

Around the thirty second mark, Tensing turns on sound recording. His hand approaches the bodycam and briefly covers its lens; as the image comes back into focus, we hear Tensing reporting an incipient traffic stop: "9233 traffic stop. I'll be on Thill Street, just off of Vine." Tensing and a female dispatcher converse, clarifying the details of where the stop will happen, as Tensing slows his car. Because the bodycam is attached to his chest, its vantage point is too low to capture the vehicle Tensing is pulling over: the steering wheel and dashboard occupy most of the frame, and we only catch glimpses of what is happening on the road beyond them. Thus, while we can hear Tensing say that the car ahead of him is slowing down we cannot actually see it. This is a significant divergence from filmic point-of-view: though we see through Tensing's body, we do not have access to everything he sees. That we learn information from his narration unavailable through the image reminds us of the distance between spectatorial and embodied vision: even the body camera's proximity to the body does not capture everything we might want to know, and so we are left wondering what Tensing saw when he decided to pull DuBose over, whether racial profiling prompted this stop. In other words, the visual cues that prompted

Tensing to initiate this ultimately fatal policing encounter remain outside the bodycam's capacity to capture.

After the car comes to a halt ("on Rice Street, just off of Thill," Tensing's voice tells us), Tensing reports its license plate and number of occupants (one) and then gets out of his own vehicle to approach it. The image swings wildly as Tensing stands, road and trees and a yellow fire hydrant swirling through our field of vision. As we will see again soon, the body camera responds to its wearer's movement but can be compromised through that responsivity: images captured in moments of sudden or jarring motion degrade into an indistinguishable blur.

"Hey, how's it going man?" Tensing says as he approaches, initiating contact with DuBose. DuBose responds in kind ("Hey, how's it going?") and Tensing identifies himself as an officer with the University of Cincinnati police. He then asks if DuBose has a license; DuBose responds in the affirmative but does not produce identification, asking instead what prompted the stop: "What happened? What's the problem?"

At this point, Tensing has reached DuBose's car, and the camera settles into the view it will occupy for much of their conversation. The left side of the frame shows the road and the side of the car, and DuBose is barely visible in the top right corner. The part of this scene Tensing is most concerned with, then – the person he is likely fixing his eyes on – collapses into a tiny portion of the frame. And, because this bodycam's recording apparatus makes for an image sharper in the center than at the edges, DuBose does not fully resolve into an identifiable figure: his left hand is visible and discernable, but his torso, head, and right side are out of the frame or out of focus. We can see a little of DuBose but not all of him, and that partial absence makes us aware of all we are not seeing, perhaps even encourages us to feel as though DuBose is hiding something. Thus, I would argue that the formal composition of this shot – and of many



body camera shots like it – makes the victim of police violence seem more suspicious and less knowable than human vision would.

As the conversation continues, Tensing reveals that he stopped DuBose for a missing front license plate.<sup>16</sup> DuBose claims that he has it in the glove compartment, and his right hand is visible opening the compartment and rummaging through it. Tensing tells DuBose he does not need to reach for the plate in this moment, again asks for a license, and then asks for a bottle on the floor, which DuBose hands to him. The image moves slightly throughout this exchange as Tensing leans down to better hear DuBose and reaches in to take the bottle (which appears to contain gin).

Tensing continues to ask DuBose for a license, and his voice suggests increasing agitation. He tells DuBose, “Be straight up with me. Are you suspended?” DuBose maintains that he has a license, though he doesn’t have it with him, and continues to ask for the reason Tensing pulled him over. At the 3:10 mark in the video, Tensing tells DuBose to take off his seatbelt as he opens DuBose’s door. Tensing’s hands are visible at the top left and bottom right of the frame, and he is very close to the car now: its interior occupies almost all of the image, a significant change from only a few seconds before. DuBose tries to close the door with his hand, protesting “I didn’t even do nothing,” and at this point things become difficult to decipher. Over the course of the next five seconds, DuBose starts the car, Tensing’s arm enters it as he yells “stop,” Tensing fires his gun into DuBose’s head, and the car accelerates into a crash further down the street. In the aftermath, with the body camera still recording, Tensing will claim that the car dragged him forward before he shot, that he feared DuBose would run him over.

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<sup>16</sup> A front license plate is not required in many states, including those that share borders with Ohio (Indiana and Kentucky). In Ohio, its absence is a minor offence, and in the wake of DuBose’s death lawmakers introduced a bill to make it something that could not be used to justify an initial traffic stop.

I have already mentioned the bodycam's difficulties resolving motion, and they return with a vengeance here. The more Tensing moves the less readable the image becomes, so as he becomes involved bodily the camera ceases to provide any useful visual evidence. Consequently, the moment when the stakes of clear, accurate testimony are highest – the moment Tensing shoots his gun – is also that in which the image becomes most indecipherable.

There are several different reasons behind the wildness of this image. The first has to do with how the camera interfaces with its wearer's body: since body cameras are clipped onto a uniform, they have little support when an officer engages in full-body movement. Consider, in contrast, the full-body stabilizing apparatus and regimes of bodily cultivation a Steadicam operator brings to a motion shot, features that work to make the captured image fluid and decipherable. A body camera comes with none of this, so that when an officer runs it literally bounces up and down on their chest; the image becomes overwhelmed by this seismic up and down motion. Also in play here is the need to record in a way that leads to manageable file sizes, which constrains both the detail possible in bodycam images and the frame rate at which they are captured. What we see in the climactic moments of this video is motion blur: an apparent streaking in the image that happens because the scene being recorded changes drastically during a single exposure, during the capture of single frame. Significantly, this is not a question of playback speed. We cannot slow the video down or proceed through it frame by frame to extract truth from it: blurriness is a feature of each individual frame. Between Tensing's movement behind the camera and DuBose's movement in front of it, the bodycam can capture only a blur.

In this moment, the body camera's inability to witness is at once technical, institutional, and situational. Better technology like the kind offered by BodyWorn might help to a certain extent: this newer device might capture higher quality video less susceptible to motion blur, and

the associated clothing line might soften the reverberations of an officer's embodied actions. However, video quality also responds to the storage capacity law enforcement has available at the institutional level, the training regimes attending body cameras' deployment, and the particular practices of individual officers who wear them. Assuming for a moment that one could improve all these things simultaneously, it seems to me that body cameras would still have major limitations as witnesses. I mentioned above that this technology resonates with filmic point of view shots: it both recalls but subtly departs from the framings cinema teaches spectators to expect. Because the bodycam's vantage point is lower and to the side, from the left portion of the chest rather than matching an eye line, action captured by a body camera looks wilder and more chaotic than it would through someone's eyes. The lower positioning tends to make any action recorded – any action undertaken by the person an officer is interacting with – feel closer, larger, and more aggressive than it would from an actual eye line shot. Viewers are consequently invited to inhabit encounters involving police violence through a position that is corporeally aligned with the perpetrating officer and that emphasizes sensory overload.

To judge a police officer responsible for deadly on-the-job force, a jury must fail to see a reasonable impetus for that force. I want to suggest that the form of body cam video makes it easier to understand and forgive the exercise of force. Body camera vision thus not only departs from familiar cinematic modes of seeing; it does so in ways that play up the sensory overload of high-motion moments and frame those stopped by police as always already suspicious. Perhaps this plays into the disconnect between video that seems to show unwarranted violence and a general failure to secure convictions – its form undermines its content, which leads to reasonable doubt. Even if we could have a technically perfect capture of reality, then, how body cameras document death might still tip the scales toward an officer's acquittal.

At this point, it might seem as though we should give up on police body cameras entirely. There is an undeniable intimacy between police and this kind of camera: their proximity is physical (as cameras are strapped to officers' torsos and footage is stored in station's basements) and also institutional (as departments have legal control over footage). I am not arguing that police video is an inherently bad thing, or that it holds no value for anti-racist politics; rather, I suggest that activism should be aware of its biases, approaching it as a useful but potentially hostile witness. That is, we must move beyond the assumption that body cameras will have an effect in and of themselves and attend to how their videos are deployed and interpreted.

#### **4.4 MAKING IMAGE INTO MEANING**

So, how do people make sense of bodycam footage that is inarticulate at certain key moments? The comments on the DuBose-Tensing video on YouTube provide some insight here, for they demonstrate individual acts of productive consumption: people read and produce descriptions of the video that are then visible to later viewers. There are hundreds of comments on this iteration of the DuBose-Tensing video; for the sake of space, I focus on two characterized by divergent modes of interpretation. Taken together, these two comments stage the failure of bodycam footage to speak for itself, and so help us understand how mutually exclusive meanings get drawn out of the same image.

Here are two readings of the video that make claims about how the Tensing-DuBose encounter turned violent:

It's clear that when the officer begins to struggle with Sam, he panics, and threatens the pleasantly mannered gentleman with a drawn weapon. Sam is clearly avoiding a rough

treatment, when the officer decided to shoot the unarmed civilian in the head. The car accelerates away due to the trauma that Sam's body is reacting to, after having been shot. The officer then starts treading out a story to his fellow officers about saving his own life from this man who would have run him over! I'm appalled! (Josepg Sweeden)

When a slow-mo video is watched (Try "The Case for Ray Tensing"), it is obvious that Sam Dubose reached out with his left hand and pressed Tensing's left arm against the steering wheel at the precise moment that he took off. We cannot see Tensing's arm at that point and it could have very well been inside one of the openings in the steering wheel as he was attempting to reach the car keys. As Tensing's arm is released and Dubose steers the car to the left to avoid hitting the car parked in front of him, Tensing is knocked off balance and grabs onto the seat belt to avoid being sucked under the car and run over by the rear left tire. Tensing is dragged about 7 feet and screams at Dubose to stop twice before he fires the shot in an attempt to stop Dubose from dragging him down the street...Tensing falls off the car approximately 30 to 35 feet past the original traffic stop. The movement is not clear on the body cam footage because the car and Tensing (body cam) are moving together, however, paying careful attention to landmarks at varying points during the event verify that Tensing was indeed dragged before the shot was fired. (InspectorBSDetector)

These two understandings of the shooting derive from the same audiovisual material, but they are in many ways antithetical. In the first, Tensing's panic provokes him to shoot DuBose without justification; in the second, Tensing reacts with understandable violence when faced with a threat to his own life. Taken together, they demonstrate how individuals bring racialized

interpretive apparatuses to bear on a media object and then project what they see into the object itself.

Note how many times these commenters point toward the video itself, suggesting that others should be able to see in it what they do. Josepg Sweeden begins with “It’s clear,” and InspectorBSDetector claims “it is obvious;” in these comments and throughout the others made on the video’s YouTube page, commenters continually direct their readers to pore over details of the footage even as they make claims that exceed what is visible in it. One paradigmatic example here is InspectorBSDetector’s final sentence, which discusses how the user came to the conclusion the car was dragging Tensing: “The movement is not clear on the body cam footage because the car and Tensing (body cam) are moving together, however, paying careful attention to landmarks at varying points during the event verify that Tensing was indeed dragged before the shot was fired.” Though it speaks with authority and conviction, this claim makes little sense. InspectorBSDetector acknowledges that the bodycam footage does not clearly show what is happening, and then doubles down on the ability to extract meaning from it anyway through “paying careful attention.”

This contradiction suggests to me that, while the commenter may be paying attention, attention is not directed toward the video itself. Or, perhaps better, it suggests that the video is inseparable from the embodied habits of seeing and interpretation brought to bear on it. Preexisting narratives – from “police target black men” to “all black men are criminals” – fill in the gaps created by footage’s inarticulacies, and often do so seamlessly, so that viewers are not aware of what they bring to encounters with it. For InspectorBSDetector, in other words, DuBose’s guilt is there in the video: the commenter does not know how to see in any other way.

This blindness comes in part from entrenched narratives about visual evidence speaking for itself. In the case of bodycam footage, to acknowledge your contributions as a viewer is to admit that you're doing something wrong, that you're failing somehow. Because this kind of image is supposed to speak for itself, any reference to viewer agency becomes an admission of bias and subjectivity, a failure to be objective in the way that the justice system presumes you have to be. Even as bodycam videos attest to the impossibility of consumption freed from embodiment, then, they require that no one speaks of bodies. The result is paralysis, an image that says different things to different people who then have no vocabulary in which to articulate those differences or the reasons behind them. From commenters to juries, the viewers of bodycam videos can only point the image over and over, voicing an endless refrain of "how can you not see?"

In such an environment, media activism cannot be restricted to the capture of video. While more video records captured by more people do provide valuable raw material for activist causes, citizen video can be hijacked as it circulates or fail to reach an audience at all. And, conversely, videos produced through hegemonic systems can be bent to progressive causes as they move through the world. Much of the work of political intervention consequently happens in relation to already existing video – through the collective interpretation and contestation of images that already exist. Thus, as Elisa Adami writes, "not only producing, but also looking at an image is a form of action, whose ethos and consequences might be highly political" (81). Viewing images does something in itself, particular when acts of viewing spawn interpretations that move from individuals and into collectives, recruiting others into their way of seeing.

This is, it seems to me, part of what Black Lives Matters accomplishes as a hashtag and as a network of people. Founders Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza characterize

the movement as follows: “When we say Black Lives Matter, we are broadening the conversation around state violence to include all of the ways in which Black people are intentionally left powerless at the hands of the state” (“About”). In relation to police violence, broadening the conversation includes not only making video documentation but also teaching the world how to see it. In the DuBose-Tensing case, this happens both before the video is released and after it enters into circulation: activists promote particular modes of seeing, but they also insist on their own right to view even before they know what the bodycam video looks like. Not only can audience activity be activism, then, but audiences can rally around media objects before their content is known, shaping the way they enter public circulation.

#### **4.5 MULTI-LEVEL MATERIALITY**

In this chapter, I have tried to convey the multi-level mattering of body camera videos. Production, circulation, and reception all matter to the meaning and politics of police video. And bodies intervene at each of these levels, from the police bodies that direct the camera’s vision to the bodies on the streets that ensure videos become public to the embodied habits of viewing brought to bear in reception. You cannot look at any single moment in a video’s life cycle and get a sufficiently full picture, for what happens in each layer affects the others. For example, the corporeal dynamics at play during capture can help to explain the disjunctures that arise during reception. Consequently, we need to credit not only the multi-level function of body camera videos but also the interconnection of its levels.

Courtroom instructions that privilege the video in itself make one kind of mistake, isolating the images in themselves. Conceptions of activism that consider only networked



structure or first person cell phone video make a different but related one. Both these moves elevate a particular aspect of video's life in the world at the expense of understanding the environments in which they become meaningful – and the multiple sites at which bodies intervene.

Bodycamera makers recognize and design for media's multi-level life in the world. Think back to the advertising materials for the newest generation of BodyWorn: The Ultimate Witness. The ads emphasize its automation of capture and circulation: it initiates recording when an officer enters designated high crime areas, and automatically sends secured files to police databases and the prosecutor's office. These are interventions that seek to manage how video moves through the world, who gets to see it and how they interact with it. My next chapter centers the design of media environments, asking how producers imagine media's multi-level functioning. Media makers are beginning to conceive of their creations less as bounded, medium-specific objects than as cross-platform experiences. In what follows, I explore how these expansive worlds can invite particular modes of embodied audience response.

## **5.0     STREAMING PEDAGOGY: *EAST LOS HIGH* AND TRANSMEDIA EDUCATION**

In 2015, the Nielsen Company – the entity that measures television audiences and produces program ratings – launched a new system for quantifying popularity. Traditional Nielsen ratings estimate a program’s number of viewers; the higher the viewer total the better the rating, with some preference given to demographics advertisers deem valuable (like the 18-49 age bracket). Social Content Ratings, as the new system is called, establish different criteria. What matters here is not the total quantity of viewers, but rather the number of “interactions” a show inspires on social media like Twitter and Facebook. Social Ratings thus measure the depth and breadth of viewer engagement, rating shows on how well they translate viewing into public online discussions. Nielsen now publishes a weekly Top 10 and a daily Top 5 of programs garnering the greatest online buzz; it also sells “engagement tools” and “advertising solutions” to help programs maximize and monetize their ranking (*Nielsen Social*).

Social Ratings suggest an emerging consensus about the value of viewer engagement. While they do not completely replace measurements of eyeballs-on-the-screen, they do institutionalize an alternative vision of televisual success: having a show with a huge audience is valuable, but so too is having an active, productive online following. An engaged fan base is becoming recognized as a commodity – something to be sought and sold – and so media industries are increasingly cultivating active, productive viewers. In other words, audience

activity is not just a grassroots phenomenon located in the time and space of reception. It is also a design feature that production teams routinely and purposefully build into media objects. For those who make television and digital content, then, part of the work of production is figuring out ways to provoke audience engagement and mobilize it toward particular desired ends.

There is a hierarchy of value to audience engagements: producers want audiences to be engaged and productive in the right ways. Social Ratings give us some insight into what this means, for it is significant that Nielsen chooses to measure social media posts on a select set of platforms. People engage with television in all sorts of other online venues, from message boards to Tumblr tags to fanfiction communities, and the selection of Twitter and Facebook is just that: a conscious choice that speaks to industry understandings of what audience productivity should look like.

Twitter and Facebook posts are attractive to Nielsen because they represent the kind of viewer activity that furthers corporate goals. If someone posts about a show on social media, they generate free publicity, potentially recruiting new viewers from their online network and reminding lapsed ones that this is a show worth catching up on. Twitter and Facebook users are also easy to track and easy to package for advertisers: the platforms collect and sell demographic data, allowing shows to discover who tends to engage with which programs and launch targeted advertising campaigns. And, since Facebook and Twitter are public platforms on which people often use their real names, sexually explicit forms of fan production tend to happen elsewhere. In all of these ways, then, Social Ratings are a snapshot of what the industry wants audiences to be: quantifiable, manageable, money-making.

When shows cultivate engagement, they consequently perform a double action, channeling audiences toward certain paths and erecting obstacles to others. For this reason, the

engineering of audience activity can seem creepy if not outright nefarious, a way for media conglomerates to exert control over and extract profit from all aspects of consumers' engagement with entertainment. Writing in this vein, Marc Andrejevic argues that corporate-engineered audience activity "[diverts] the threat of activism into the productive activity of marketing and market research" (40). Corporate architectures can also have particular antagonism toward modes of engagement that foreground bodies. According to Louisa Stein: "as corporate media producers modify notions of the fan and fandom to meet their needs, gender and sexuality become central points of conflict, affecting whom commercial media producers will address and acknowledge as their audiences" (11). The embrace of audience productivity can work to produce a "cleaned-up," male-coded vision of engagement, making fandom less hospitable to difference (whether sexual, racial, or otherwise). When programs and platforms attempt to manage viewer productivity, then, they are often trying to push viewers away from the messier, less professional habits that lead scholars to think of fandom as a space of queer and feminist expression (Busse, Lothan, and Reid).

At the same time, however, corporate designs are not reducible to pure exploitation and negativity. We can critique the branding of everything, but we should not dismiss everything that happens in relation to branding. Melanie Kohnen has argued for attention to the complexity of branded diversity on television, which, while motivated by corporate interests, still "constitutes an important contribution to the representation of intersectional identities" (89). This chapter makes a similar argument about TV's designing of audience productivity: while it may be driven by economic imperatives, the mobilization of viewing publics works toward other ends as well – and sometimes toward real, material benefits for minority communities. Using the example of *East Los High* (Hulu, 2013-present), a teen telenovela that is also a sex education initiative, this

chapter analyzes how shows can channel viewer participation toward viewer education. Moving beyond the idea that audience participation should be a bottom-up phenomenon – that something is inevitably lost when production teams direct and monetize it – I argue for the potential of design features that channel audience response from the top down.

This chapter centers questions of producer-audience relations that have surfaced at the margins of earlier chapters. We have already encountered some examples of designing for productive consumption: *Winky Dink and You* asks its viewers to play along at home by drawing on the TV screen, and *The L Word*'s fourth season seeks to channel viewers into online social network *OurChart*. In both these cases, the composition of on-screen images reflects the mode of engagement they hope to inspire. *Winky Dink*'s scenes are often empty in at the center and detailed around the edges, providing a canvas upon which viewers can draw; *The L Word* models the kind of engagement it desires, with characters walking viewers through how you access *OurChart* on a computer and what you do once you are there. There are notable limitations to these shows' imaginations of audience engagement, however. *The L Word* was not thinking about online sociality when it began airing, and *OurChart* launched only after viewers had created their own grassroots communities organized around the show. And, while *Winky Dink* is invested in viewer activity from its inception, the products of that activity remain individualized and restricted to domestic space; they are not channeled toward any larger purpose.

On the whole, then, my previous chapters have dealt with viewer movements and communities that develop in opposition to or in excess of corporate designs. One might imagine that that is where the real political potential lies, that corporate enclosure of digital spaces makes large-scale, materially beneficial productive consumption harder to come by. I want to avoid this kind of thinking, and instead position the design of viewer engagement as one more sight for

political intervention, one more arena that can be turned to variable purposes. Media industries have noticed the power and value of productive consumption, and they are unlikely to stop trying to exert control over it. So, instead of bemoaning this fact, this final chapter looks at the ways in which it can be meaningful.<sup>17</sup>

My case study is *East Los High*, a Hulu original production that straddles the line between teen soap opera and educational programming and so articulates its value in terms of what viewers learn. Made in consultation with educational and activist groups, it is aimed at Latino youth who primarily consume English-language media and has storylines about a variety of issues this population might face, from domestic abuse to unplanned pregnancy to coming out in a hostile environment. Each issue-based storyline has links to additional, non-diegetic content; the composition of the show and its transmedial environment encourages viewers to translate narrative events into real-world interventions. *ELH* is the product of a Latino cast and crew, and in it we see producers trying to channel audience activity in ways that make life better for a community to which they belong. Consequently, the show connects viewer engagement to real world stakes, seeking to channel affective investment in characters and storylines into the uptake of healthier sexual habits among minority viewers. This, then, is a public health and education project that mobilizes audience engagement toward the betterment of material conditions for life.

In analyzing it, my guiding questions include: what role does transmediation play in *ELH*'s management of its audience? If the show imagines its consumers as both TV viewers and website users, how does it articulate the relation between streaming and ancillary content? What

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<sup>17</sup> I follow a media industries approach that emphasizes “the relative power and autonomy of individual agents to express divergent political perspectives, creative visions, and cultural attitudes within larger institutional structures” (Holt and Perren 3). In the diverse landscape of post-network television, the assumption of a monolithic culture industry is particularly ill-suited to capture the diversity of perspectives and politics that production teams put forward through series.

role does Hulu play in *ELH*'s online ecosystem as a digital platform? What are the benefits and limitations to *ELH*'s union of entertainment and education?

I begin by contextualizing the television industry's embrace of audience activity within a wider trend toward transmediation. Next, I detail the production history of *ELH*, using publicity materials and interviews with cast and crew to analyze the particular vision of transmedia audience engagement embedded in it. The remainder of the chapter turns to the show's treatment of queer female sexuality; it analyzes how queer characters and storylines move between the show's main narrative and supporting online spaces. *ELH*'s transmedia environment, I suggest, functions as a blueprint for translating onscreen images into off-screen life: it positions character arcs as models viewers should learn from and mobilize toward embodied interventions into their own sexual practices. A final section grapples with the limitations of *ELH*'s medical model, which positions gender identity and sexual orientation as "issues" to be solved.

## **5.1 TRANSMEDIATION AS DESIGN AND EXPERIENCE**

Embedded in Nielsen's Social Ratings is a tacit acknowledgement: television is not just about what happens on the TV set, for digital platforms, computers, and mobile devices inflect a program's success or failure. This understanding of television dovetails with an ongoing trend toward transmediation, or the shift from single media objects in single media forms to expansive multimedia environments. Before the rise of digital technology, each film or television program tended to introduce its own distinct diegetic world audiences accessed through a single media apparatus and inhabited only for the space of its run. There were, of course, some exceptions: sequels and spinoffs would return beloved characters and settings to the screen, and franchises

might develop a world around James Bond or Indiana Jones through a number of films, books, and television shows. On the whole, however, media industries tended to imagine any given property as complete in itself – a stand-alone story that presumed no prior knowledge of or exposure to its fictional world, which audiences would leave as soon as that story ended.

In recent years, however, scholars have identified a seismic shift in the imagination of how stories should work. Transmediation involves two major departures from paradigmatic modes of media creation. First, there is a movement from single media objects to media ecosystems: instead of pitching a contained story that takes place within the bounds of a single medium, stories are imagined as environmental, extending across interlocking formats, objects, and locations. Second, there is a temporal expansiveness to transmedia: it encourages extended dwelling inside the world of a story, for whenever one narrative arc ends there is always the hint of another on the horizon. Since there is always more world to be explored, more narrative pathways to be elaborated, transmedia endlessly defers endings. Consider the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which stretches across dozens of films, television shows, streaming properties, and digital shorts. Each film ends with a post-credit scene that hints at a new narrative arc: any closure provided by a film's conclusion is thus a temporary pause rather than a permanent end. For example, in *Black Panther* (2018, Ryan Coogler), the post-credit scene shows an interaction between Shuri (a central character in *Black Panther*) and Bucky Barnes (a character from the larger Marvel world last seen in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016, Anthony and Joe Russo)). Their appearance together connects *Black Panther*'s self-contained storyline to larger, ongoing ones, setting the stage for the upcoming *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018, Anthony and Joe Russo).

A number of factors influence the shift toward transmediation. The increasing consolidation of media companies makes it easier for a single corporation to coordinate a product



over multiple media forms; digital technology smooths the sharing of aesthetic features across media, simplifying the translation of an asset from film to game to online environment; consumers have become accustomed to engaging with many kinds of media at once, from second screen TV-viewing to interacting with multimedia web spaces.

For all of these reasons, media are now often designed and experienced as multimedia environments rather than single-medium entities. Note that I say both designed and experienced: a central tension in scholarly discussions of transmediation involves the relationship between transmedia storytelling (an industry strategy for multi-platform story distribution) and transmedia consumption (an audience practice involving movement across or between different media spaces). Theorists often collapse them together, assuming that storytelling determines consumption – that we can deduce a particular kind of audience engagement on the basis of narrative construction. I do not deny the interrelation of storytelling structures and audience habits, but it seems to me that a narrow focus on narrative reduces transmedia consumption to intellectual puzzle-solving, a conception at odds with the visceral heterogeneity of actual engagement with media. In working through theories of transmediation here, my goal is to untangle storytelling from consumption; in doing so, I advance a notion of transmedia environments that makes space for embodied difference.

The privileging of narrative begins with Henry Jenkins' influential work on transmedia storytelling. Consider this passage from *Convergence Culture*: "Transmedia storytelling is the art of world making. To fully experience any fictional world, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience" (Jenkins 21). In

this formulation, transmedia narratives position consumers as scavengers, agents who must move through many different media sites in pursuit of the juiciest pieces of the story. The work of engagement here involves continually extracting new information and fitting it together with what is already known. Note that this is a vision of engagement dependent on narrative construction. Jenkins alternates between transmedia as a way of telling stories and transmedia as a set of audience practices which are assumed to logically proceed from the narrative expansiveness of story worlds.

This same privileging of narrative – and mapping of audience behaviors onto it – reoccurs in work on transmedia television. Writing of *Lost*, Jason Mittell argues that “ludic narrative logic and transmedia storytelling promote forensic fandom by encouraging research, collaboration, analysis, and interpretation.” (277) Because *Lost*’s narrative construction positions the show as a puzzle, audiences engage with it as an enigma to be cracked, a mystery to be made sense of. Mittell’s term for this mode of engagement – “forensic fandom” – refers to the tendency of complex programming to “create magnets for engagement, drawing viewers into the storyworlds and urging them to drill down to discover more” (288).

Mittell positions his own work as a departure from Jenkins’s, an expansion of what transmedia engagement can mean. Where Jenkins imagines “balanced” transmedia ecosystems wherein any object can serve as point of entry, Mittell analyzes “unbalanced” systems focused on a central television text and expanded through ancillary content; where Jenkins places transmedia navigation as horizontal movement, Mittell speaks of vertical penetration toward deeper layers of meaning (290). However, it seems to me that both of them participate in the same intellectualization of audience engagement, which separates the world of the story from embodied contexts of reception. For Mittell, Jenkins, and story-centric transmedia theories more

broadly, engagement is based on the processing of information rather than affective connection or embodied resonance. In both of their accounts, stories function as an escape, an alternate world, rather than a space with embodied consequences for this one. Scholars working in this vein speak of “making sense” of the story, of collectively bringing to light obscure facts about its world or elaborating its mythology. However, the goal of a story is not always to make sense; the engagement a transmedia environment asks for is not always intellectual. To imagine that transmediation is only about the pooling of intelligence enacts a kind of mind-body dualism, stripping away the visceral and the corporeal from audience practices.

Consequently, I approach transmedia as environments rather than story worlds. This revision allows me to investigate transmedia elements that do non-narrative work, that do things beyond adding pieces to a story. Scholars have already begun to explore the extra-narrative elements of transmediation, from distribution (Evans) to reenactment (Aldred, Hills) to promotion (Jonathan Gray). Mittell has argued for a rigorous theoretical separation between narrative and non-narrative transmedia elements: “we need to avoid confusing general transmedia extensions with the more particular mode of transmedia storytelling” (293). I would argue the opposite: we need to stop treating the storytelling aspects of transmedia as something separate from larger media environments that give shape and meaning to those stories. Taxonomies have their value, but they also have limitations. In this case, breaking a transmedia phenomenon down into functional parts can obscure embodied forms of engagement, playing into industry discourses that sever media consumption from bodily particularity.

When media corporations begin pursuing engagement through transmediation and other strategies, they have a vested interest in abstracting their audiences away from bodies. Fandom has a long history of pathologizing association with excessive investment (Jenson). Before the

recent wave of fandom mainstreaming, to be a fan was to feel too much for a media object – too intimately, too corporeally, with excessive emotion. In turning fans toward profitable pursuits, media industries consequently play down the bodily aspects of engagement with media, seeking to present a cleaned-up (desexualized, male-gendered) model of media engagement (Stein). Consequently, transmedia narrative designs work to discourage some kinds of involvement as they encourage others: they have a disciplining function, restricting audience behaviors even as they open up avenues for creative involvement. And, as Suzanne Scott points out, transmediation tends to place particular restrictions on queer and female practices of narrative elaboration, discouraging the modes of engagement intimately tied to embodiment (32).

One way to contest industry idealizations of audiences is pointing to the actual productive practices that rise up in opposition to or in excess of corporate designs. This is what I have attempted to do in previous chapters. Another possibility – the possibility I explore here – is to focus on the examples of industry designs that make meaningful space for embodied difference. Transmediation is now ubiquitous, and with its proliferation comes diverging corporate articulations of what it should look like and what goals it should serve. In this environment, *East Los High* is significant precisely because its transmedia environment foregrounds bodily involvement. With *ELH*, marked, differentiated bodies are central to the stories unfolding onscreen and to the ways in which audiences are asked to engage with them. The show favors bodily orientations over narrative extensions: transmediation here bridges the distance between onscreen representations and offscreen bodies, encouraging audiences to translate diegetic events into material interventions into their own lives. Instead of drawing audiences further and further into a separate world, then, *ELH* uses its world to stage and shape minority sexual practices.

## 5.2 THE MAKING OF *EAST LOS HIGH*

*ELH*'s embodied vision of transmediation derives in part from its distinctive origins: it is the product of cooperation between nonprofit organizations, Hollywood production companies, and academic researchers. Thus, while it tends to be referred to as a Hulu original, Hulu is far from the only entity that has a hand in shaping *ELH* as a creative and pedagogical project. By sketching the history of the show's development, this section makes visible the many agents involved in *ELH*'s journey from idea to product and the distinctive account of transmedia engagement that emerges from their intersection.

*ELH* begins with Population Media Center, a Vermont-based nonprofit that produces serial dramas in order to inspire social change. As their website puts it: "Soap operas, it turns out, can change the world." PMC has a particular focus gender equity, and so the ways in which it hopes to change the world orbit around women's rights and reproductive education. Through producing programming for radio, television, and online distribution, the organization aims to "broaden the behavioral choices available to the audience," helping people make healthier choices in their own lives. Soap operas are PMC's chosen vehicles for several reasons: their ability to foster intense emotional investment on the part of audiences, the extended temporal duration that audiences spend with characters, the resulting potential to model character development over the course of years. Through serial soaps, in other words, PMC can present not just climactic moments but also their fallout, demonstrating the relationship between a character's negotiation of health decisions and their subsequent circumstances. Each program includes "positive," "negative," and "transitional" characters that present diverging approaches to an issue and subsequently face "realistic" consequences. The hope is that audiences will watch and choose positive habits for themselves, reflecting on and internalizing the alignment of certain

behaviors with happy results. In addition to programming, PMC also runs events facilitating dialogue about the issues its serials foreground; these events guide viewers into the kind of pedagogical engagement PMC hopes its programming inspires (*Population Media Center – Acting for Change*).

This model of social change through storytelling has roots in the Latin American tradition of entertainment-education. Pioneered by Miguel Sabido, an executive who worked for Mexican network Televisa during the 1970s, entertainment-education television couples message-based narratives with blueprints that teach viewers how to apply said messages to their own lives. For example, Sabido's telenovela "Ven Conmigo" ("Come With Me," 1975) included a storyline about an elderly man learning to read through a government-sponsored adult literacy program; a post-episode epilogue then directed viewers to a center where they could get their own free literacy booklets and enroll in the program. After the show's broadcast, there was a noticeable spike in participation in the literacy initiative: "250,000 people showed up the next day to get their copies, and enrolment in the government programme increased nine-fold over the course of a year" (Hegarty). Thus, what distinguishes Sabido's strategy is the explicit inclusion of instructions that bridge the gap between onscreen stories and off-screen life. Many entertainment programs would like to impart messages of some sort to their viewers, but here narratives become a "how to" guide: extra-diegetic resources like epilogues offer viewers avenues to apply the lessons embedded in storylines.

PMC calls their approach an "updated" version of the Sabido method, one based on the same underlying principles but adapted to contemporary media markets. Scholars have shown the potential of edutainment programming (Nariman, Singhal and Rogers), but there is much that can complicate PMC's neat articulation of social-change-through-soap-operas. The translation of

fictional stories to real world behaviors is not easy or automatic, beginning with the fact that people do not always like or identify with the characters who make the best decisions. Even if a program presents someone as a hero, I may find her boring or preachy; I may prefer the character who makes relentlessly bad decisions even if I want to make better ones in my own life. And you and I may have drastically diverging reactions to the same program: there is so much idiosyncrasy to reception that no serial drama – however well-crafted – can get all of its audience onto the same page.

PMC attempts to mitigate this problem by constructing “culturally specific” shows that target a specific subset of possible viewers. Before producing a show, it researches the major health and gender concerns and existent media infrastructures in a given region, and then plans a particular mediated intervention focused on a central issue and geared toward a specific population. In Sierra Leone, for example, PMC produced HIV-focused radio drama *Saliwansai* (“Puppet On A String,” 2012-14); in Ethiopia, *Sibrat* (“Trauma,” 2009-10) focused on female genital mutilation and gender-based violence. While PMC provides the funding and initial motive force for a show, it turns over the actual work of production to teams who live in the region of consumption. Each show consequently takes shape in relation to embodied landscapes with their own unique social, medical, legal, linguistic, and technological dimensions. Local teams encode PMC messaging in language and references familiar to its intended audience, fitting a show into the material context of those it hopes to move to action.

This process produces *East Los High*. Upon receiving a donation earmarked for a U.S. project, a PMC team led by Vice President of Communication and Programs Katie Elmore Mota begins conducting research and identifies Latina teen pregnancy as worthy focal issue – a public health concern ripe for “innovative and culturally sensitive health promotion approaches” (Wang

and Singhal 1002). In a 2007 study quoted on the PMC website, fifty percent of U.S. Latinas reported becoming pregnant before age twenty; a more recent survey puts the number at one in three, still 1.5 times the national average (National Campaign). Despite the high percentages, few pregnancy prevention programs are geared explicitly toward Latinx demographics – a gap PMC decides to fill.

At this point, the question becomes what kind of media object to make. Because there is a limited U.S. audience for radio serials, PMC settles on an audiovisual drama made for digital distribution. Mota describes the reasoning behind this choice as follows: “Latino audiences...were actually early adopters of new media and so they were watching it cross platform more than anybody. So we were like, we want to be where our audience is.” (“A Perfect Marriage”). *ELH* was consequently conceived and produced as digital television, a serial meant to be watched on computers and mobile devices and engaged through multiple platforms. The choice of media format derives in part from existing viewing practices of PMC’s target audience: engaging young U.S. Latinas begins with understanding and catering to their media consumption habits. It also reflects the limitations of the show’s budget, as PMC did not have sufficient resources to make something suitable for network television.

With focal issue, media format, and target audience identified, Mota puts together a team to create the show. She recruits Latino LA-based producers Carlos Portugal and Kathleen Bedoya to serve as showrunners, a move that expresses PMC’s general philosophy of cultural specificity: because the organization wants to reach Latino-American viewers, it hires Latino-American creators. As Bedoya recalls, “The task that Carlos and I were given was to create a very entertaining show for US Latinos that addressed certain issues affecting the community” (“Entertainment + Education”).



Once Portugal and Bedoya take the helm, they bring a media industry perspective to the project, viewing it first and foremost as a show that should be entertaining. Portugal has spoken of his initial hesitance to participate in educational programming, for so much of it fails at delivering a satisfying dramatic experience. He remembers watching afterschool specials when he was a teenager and laughing at their stilted treatment of serious issues: “they were so corny! They were so on the nose” (Portugal). *ELH* was attractive to him precisely because it did not have to look like that; “there were no rules,” which freed the production team to “write great stories and not even talk about anything educational for the first few episodes” (Portugal interview). Rather than blunt educational instrument, he viewed *East Los High* as an opportunity to create a show “about Latinos in the United States,” something anchored in the lived experiences of members of his community rather than stuffy educational mandates.

There is a shift here from the language of education to that of representation, one that extends beyond Portugal’s individual conception of the project. Mota speaks in similar terms of the show’s evolution: preliminary research found that “53% of Latina girls were pregnant by the age of 20, and so we said, let’s focus there. And then as we kind of started looking at this demographic, we realized this was also a highly underserved demographic in terms of content” (“Entertainment + Education”). The desire to serve underrepresented audiences comes to the fore as the show develops, for at the time of its production there is very little programming geared toward English-speaking Latinos, educational or otherwise. Mota stays on as an executive producer; she leaves PMC and founds Wise Entertainment, a company “dedicated to developing, creating, and producing TV content and films...by women, for women and underserved, underrepresented audiences,” a project for which *ELH* serves as “proof of concept” (Wise Entertainment). When *ELH* premieres, the attending wave of publicity emphasizes its status as a

representational first: the first English-language show with an all Latino cast, the first American program to invest so heavily in bringing Latino lives to the screen. (citation)

This does not mean that the show's educational goals disappear, however, and the show's writing process makes clear its balance of pedagogy and entertainment. Portugal serves as *ELH*'s head writer, and he assembles an all Latinx writing staff. His storytelling philosophy emphasizes authenticity: "The one rule I have in the writers' room is: if you're going to pitch something, don't let it be from a show or film you've seen...I want our writers to pitch from their own lives. When it's something real, that's when we get a good story. There are a lot of stories you see in the show that are conversations I've lived through." (Portugal). Here and elsewhere, the makers of *ELH* emphasize the resonances between the world of their story and the world they live in; their embodied experiences ground its storylines, which are positioned in opposition to the stereotypical tropes that circulate through media generally. The scripting process also reflects this orientation: writer Evangeline Ordaz "involved over 200 young people from the target Hispanic areas to look at scripts, form focus groups and even act as background extras," and the show incorporates their feedback (Block). *ELH* is consequently an exercise in geo-ethnic storytelling – a media product designed to be "relevant to particular ethnic groups within the context of a geographically bound community" (Ramasubramanian 335).

Conversations that Portugal and the writers have lived through are not the only thing that makes it into *ELH* episodes, however. Through PMC, the series partners with a number of advocacy organizations like Planned Parenthood, the Los Angeles Women's Center, and Break the Cycle, all of which consult on scripts to make sure the shows' portrayal of sexual health lines up with professional advising. Portugal's desire for authenticity and PMC's commitment to education sometimes work at cross purposes. For example, when *ELH*'s writers work through a

scene in which a high schooler talks to a counselor about her boyfriend's physical abuse, the desire to write things a teen would actually say conflicts with the dialogue proscribed by partner health organizations. These organizations want the show's language to match what a professional counselor might say, an exchange that does not feel true to the writers' experience of young Latino conversational habits. Says writer Charo Toledo: "it's a real challenge — kids these days are constantly faced with adult situations. And yet they still express themselves as kids — and you have to keep that in mind so that when they watch the show, they don't feel like they're in a classroom." The show does not want to make viewers feel like they are in a classroom, but PMC is deeply invested in doing educational work. And, in this instance, education wins out: the full supplied exchange stays in despite the fact that it might come across as preachy (Villareal). Behind the scenes of the show, then, there is a complex interplay between philosophies of authentic representation and minority education — a foundational tension that never finds full resolution.

Portugal initially conceptualizes *ELH* as a web series of ninety episodes, with each lasting six to seven minutes. As scripting progresses, he revises it into a televisual format of twenty-four episodes each made for a half-hour slot: "we felt the stories were so compelling that they needed a bigger canvas" (Portugal). The show begins shooting with this format in mind, and film on location in East Los Angeles (a geographical marker referred to in "East Los High"), a heavily Latino area. The entire first season is shot and edited before there is a distributor in place; it is only at this point — when the full first season is finished — that Hulu enters the picture. As Portugal and Bedoya shop *ELH* around to networks, Hulu expresses interest, and *ELH* premieres in the summer of 2013 as a "Hulu exclusive," a designation that speaks to Hulu's ownership of exclusive distribution rights but not creative control. In other words, Hulu provides

the platform through which viewers access *ELH* but does not influence its content in any significant way.

This changes going into the second season. *ELH*'s initial season performs well on Hulu, consistently ranking as the most viewed show among Latinos and in the top five overall. Hulu decides to invest in the show at this point, and *ELH* becomes a Hulu original (a designation speaking to financial support and oversight during production) from its second season onwards. Thus, while *ELH* ends up a Hulu property, many things disappear under its branded association with the streaming platform: its origins in the nonprofit sector, the transnational edutainment lineage that gives rise to it, and, most relevant to my purposes, the vision of transmediation that it embodies.

### **5.3 CHARACTER-DRIVEN TRANSMEDIATION**

In an interview about entertainment-education, Portugal suggests that the key to *ELH*'s impact is getting audiences to fall in love with characters: “once you fall in love with the characters, you’ll follow them anywhere” (“Entertainment + Education”). The phrase he uses here is telling: “following characters anywhere” places character-audience relations at the heart of *ELH*'s pedagogical strategy – which is also simultaneously a transmedia strategy. Audiences learn by following characters across platforms, into pedagogical spaces outside the show's central narratives. The series is explicitly imagined as a transmedia product, and alongside it PMC publishes a theory of transmedia storytelling and audience engagement. This document provides

insight into the goals behind *ELH*'s multiplatform world, putting forward a vision of transmediation informed by but distinct from the academic theories discussed above.<sup>18</sup>

PMC begins with the following justification of transmediation: "In mature media markets, particularly when aiming to reach youth and young adults, it's necessary to reach the audience in more than one arena. They consume and are subjected to media and messages almost continuously and must be engaged repeatedly to develop an understanding of, and eventually a relationship with, the drama" ("What is Transmedia"). This description draws vocabulary from academic and mainstream industry discourse; it speaks of fostering audience engagement and using multiplatform exposure to draw audiences deeper into the world of a drama. However, there is a distinctive focus on the transmission of messages that derives from the history of entertainment-education undergirding PMC. Consequently, the relationships PMC and *ELH* want to establish through transmediation are not set apart from the "real" world; they are interventions into it.

Transmediation works to "[make] fictional stories more real by allowing audiences to engage with characters and storylines in different formats" ("What is Transmedia"). Notice the centrality of characters here. Instead of new storylines, *ELH*'s transmedia extensions offer proliferating ways to interact with each character and the issue they embody. For example, Vanessa, a character who contracts HIV during the first season, has a vlog called "Hi-V: the Most Positive Show on the Web" in which she details her own process of learning to live with her status and offering information about HIV resources. In one episode, she answers viewer

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<sup>18</sup> Henry Jenkins' work is a particular touchstone for PMC and the *ELH* crew. *ELH* sent Jenkins a video of star Gabriel Chavarria reading this passage from *Convergence Culture*: "Welcome to the convergence culture, where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways." As Chavarria reads, #EastLosHenry appears at the bottom of the frame, a hashtag modeled after those *ELH* uses for online discussion about its characters. The suggestion is that Jenkins' contribution to the project is on the same scale as that of its cast, that his work makes it possible as a production (Jenkins, "ELH Pays Tribute").

questions, responding directly to viewers and to the concerns that grow out of their lived experience. When asked “Where did you learn so much about HIV?”, Vanessa talks about the value of information, and then directs viewers to both local healthcare resources (AltaMed, a Los Angeles health care provider geared toward Latino and multi-ethnic communities) and those for audiences nationwide (Sex Etc, sex-ed site managed by teens for teens) (“You’ve Got V-Mail”).

PMC highlights transmedia’s ability to foster the “deepening of the bonds and creating of peerlike relationships between the audience and characters,” which “strengthens the influence of the drama’s positive role models” and so “[drives] greater behavior change” (“What is Transmedia”). When PMC speaks of deeper engagement, they consequently mean more sustained emotional investment in characters from diegetic narratives. Vanessa speaks to viewers in the conversational address typical of vlogging, adding in details about her day, the kind of things friends catching up might tell each other. *ELH*’s plot is largely irrelevant, however. It matters that we know the basic fact that of Vanessa’s HIV status, but her vlogs offer no hidden references to decipher, foreshadowings of future narrative twists, or clues about the show’s deeper mythology. *ELH* is definitively not a puzzle to be solved, and engagement with it means engagement with its characters as avatars for health and relationship issues.

Similar web series exist for other *ELH* character-issue pairings: “Eddie and Sofia Get Loud” centers undocumented immigration, “Ceci’s Vlog” single parenthood, “On the Couch with Camila” familial abuse, and “Out with Jocelyn and Daysi” being queer and Latino. Each one extends the storyline of a character once involved in the show’s central narrative, but it does so in a way that offers emotional follow-up and channels viewers toward educational resources. The goal of transmediation is to influence audience behaviors, a process driven by affective investment in and identification with characters from the show. *ELH*’s characters serve as avatars

for issues like sexual orientation, teen pregnancy, and HIV status, and through them audiences can access real-world resources for navigating their lives. *ELH*'s transmedia extensions even sometimes directly facilitate interactions between audience members and health professionals: when viewers asked advice from characters through social media, "staff managing these online profiles worked with the appropriate experts to guide the viewers to open up healthy conversations and access nearby counseling services, all while remaining in character." ("What is Transmedia")

To sum up, then, *ELH*'s transmediation works to a very different effect than versions of transmedia based on narrative extension across multiple platforms. The narrative may be distributed here, but multi-platform content serves as a way to deepen audience relationships with characters and to use those relationships toward educational ends. Characters facilitate the multi-platform dissemination of information – information ideally made more memorable and palatable by the fact that audiences are already invested in this character. Instead of boundless exploration of a storyworld, we have a focus on characters and character-audience relationships.

## **5.4 EMBODYING QUEER SEXUALITY**

To get at how these character-driven trajectories work – how *ELH* moves viewers from the central streaming text to ancillary content and educational platforms – it is worth examining *ELH*'s treatment of one issue in depth. My choice is queer sexuality, for it resonates with the dissertation's broader concerns and it also makes clear both the potentials and shortcomings of *ELH*'s transmedia production practices. Since *ELH*'s initial imagining grew out of pregnancy prevention, queer identities and queer sexual practices are something of a secondary concern.

The series' first season makes no mention of them, and they only enter *ELH*'s world when it becomes a Hulu original, gaining access to a bigger budget and more expansive production resources. The second season reflects a similarly expanded pedagogical range, introducing new characters and through them new issues, including queer sexuality. This topic takes up prominent space in season two's promotional trailers and narrative arc, and episode eight, "I Ain't No Victim," centers on coming out.

*ELH* explores queerness through two main characters: Camila (captain of the dance team the Bomb Squad and resident bad girl) and Jocelyn (her studious, activist best friend). They have sex in the season premiere; the progression of their relationship and the fallout from it is a major narrative thread throughout the season, reaching an apex in episode eight, "I Ain't No Victim," which deals with Jocelyn's coming out. Interestingly, Jocelyn is the sole vehicle for queer pedagogical engagement; it is only through her – and not through Camila – that *ELH* hopes to engage LGBTQ viewers and route them to helpful resources.

Both Camila and Jocelyn are new to the show with the second season, and their introductions provide some insight into their divergent positionings. We meet Camila as she's having sex with an older man in his car when she should be getting ready for a dance competition. She is framed in a close-up that emphasizes her face and chest, positioned as an object of sexual enjoyment for both the man beneath her and the viewer looking in through computer or phone. Her active enjoyment of sex is clear – right up until a call from the man's wife reveals that he is married. At this point, Camila gets angry: "You lying asshole," she says, "What kind of girl you think I am?" "The kind who screws a guy in a parking lot," the man replies, providing a quick synopsis of Camila's role in the narrative. She is the girl who has sex happily and often, often without thinking through its ramifications. Upon hearing this, Camila



shoves the man out of the car and drives off with it, leaving him to lie on the concrete complaining about the bitch who took his phone and ride.

This introduction frames Camila as a combative presence whose promiscuous sexuality negatively affects her life. Camila arrives late at the dance competition, and her team gives a lackluster performance that gets blamed on her. Says one of her teammates: “Maybe we could’ve had a chance if our captain would stop blowing rehearsals instead of guys.” At the same time, Camila is not unsympathetic, and much of the season’s action is filtered through her point of view. For example, after the Bomb Squad loses, Camila gets into a fight with the captain from the winning team and is then arrested for stealing the married man’s car. She could easily be painted as a villain here because of her actions, but the narrative context always mitigates her offenses, making her mistakes understandable if not completely letting her off the hook. She only reacts with violence after the opposing team’s captain comes into her space and insults her mother; she only steals the car after she finds out her sexual partner is married and has been lying to her. Camila’s offenses are consequently reactive: she may escalate situations, but she does not initiate conflict out of nowhere.

Her visual framing also makes clear her own conflicted feelings about her actions. Her face is prominent throughout this episode, and in crowd scenes the camera tends to follow her, providing access to her facial and corporeal expressions via close-up. For instance, the fight and arrest take place in a crowded locker room; there are many people the camera could focus on here, from the other Bomb Squad members to the opposing team to the police who enter in pursuit of Camila. Out of all these possibilities she is the consistent focal point, and when she separates herself from the rest of the scene (entering a bathroom stall to flush the other captain’s ripped-out hair down the toilet) the camera chooses to follow her. While the other characters mill

around outside, a close-up focuses audience attention on Camila, letting us see her initial triumph at besting a rival give way to the realization that this will have consequences, that she should have thought this through. We are invited to imagine her interiority, to read remorse into her and hope for her rehabilitation. She holds pride of place visually and narratively, so all of her actions have enough space and context to read as understandable.

Jocelyn, in contrast, is an unambiguously “positive” character with a more peripheral role. She first appears at school, in a classroom, during an educational sequence focused on teen pregnancy. Ceci (a central character from the first season) stands at the front of the room as a guest speaker, here to educate the next crop of high school students about how she dealt with having an unplanned child as a teenage mother. The scene is designed to impart information, with the onscreen audience of students standing in for off-screen viewers. The diegetic students do not sit silently and absorb information, however, but rather push back against the idea of being educated, joking around and trying to draw Ceci off topic with insults. Camila, for example, responds to Ceci’s narration of living in a women’s shelter after getting kicked out of her house with rolled eyes and a snarky comment: “Must’ve been an upgrade.” The comment draws laughs from the other students but does not actually hijack the lesson. Ceci engages with Camila, agreeing that shelters are an upgrade over living on the streets, and then uses Camila’s disruption to emphasize her main point: you should always use protection when you have sex.

The lesson here proceeds around and through the adversarial relationship between speaker and audience. The show here makes space for learning but also for resistance to it, allowing viewers modes of engagement that are neither the docile reception of information nor complete dissociation from the show. In other words, you can resent education (as Camila does) even while you learn something.

Jocelyn slips into the classroom during Ceci's lesson, taking the seat beside Camila and initiating a conversation with her after it ends. Camila complains about the forced education by questionable role models, and Jocelyn pushes back: "You know you're insulting me, right? These life skills classes are part of my campaign to improve sex ed here." Jocelyn goes on to insist that talking about this kind of stuff is important – that sex education is an important part of any teenager's well-being – and Camila softens her complaints, giving in with a conciliatory "you're right." In this scene, *ELH* models its understanding of how information dissemination works: the best educators are not outsiders and institutions but friends and peers, who can inspire learning without framing everything as a didactic lesson.

Though this scene is Jocelyn's introduction, it is not really about her. We encounter Jocelyn through a pedagogical situation she has made possible but is not visibly connected to; we only learn of her role in it after the fact, when she and Camila begin talking. And, where Camila is the clear focal point of her first scene, Jocelyn here shares her space, framed against Camila's shoulder or hair or sharing a two-shot as they walk down the hall. Jocelyn consequently comes into focus as a facilitator of relationships, someone whose significance is routed through other people and whose actions often happen off-screen.

This dynamic holds for much of the narrative exploring queer sexuality. To give a sense of its progression: when Camila and Jocelyn smoke pot together in the series premiere, Camila takes off her own shirt, asking Jocelyn to help with her "stuck" bra. She kisses Jocelyn and they have sex, which they continue doing until Jocelyn expresses real feelings to Camila, who just wants to have fun. At this point their arcs split: Jocelyn goes on an independent journey of self-discovery, connecting with other queer Latinas at a poetry competition, while Camila hooks up with Jocelyn's brother Nick. Camila then outs Jocelyn at school during a fight, causing problems

for Jocelyn with classmates and her conservative grandparents. They continue to fight until the return of Camila's abusive father at the end of the season prompts their reconciliation as friends.

As should be clear from even this brief sketch, Camila is the driving force in their relationship, the player with the most sexual and narrative agency. However, Jocelyn is the one the show uses to delve into issues of queer identity; through her, the show invites viewers to interrogate their own identifications and directs them to resources for coming out. Jocelyn takes on this role in part because she identifies as gay whereas Camila avoids making any kind of identification. This is the main conflict in Camila and Jocelyn's relationship: where Jocelyn wants there to be meaning and identity, Camila just wants to enjoy having sex. Their disparate expectations come to a head midway through the second season, when Jocelyn publicly performs a poem declaring her love for Camila and asking for reciprocation. Camila leaves unhappily, leading to the following exchange:

Camila: "We messed around. It felt good, that's it."

Jocelyn: "Is that all it was for you? Messing around? Because for me it's a lot more."

Camila: "Yeah, I can see that. You just announced it to the whole world."

Jocelyn: "I love you, and I'm not afraid to admit that."

Camila: "Fine. Be a lesbian. But don't try to make me one."

Though they both like having sex with women, Camila and Jocelyn embody two very different orientations toward the relationship between sexual practice and self-definition. Through Camila, *ELH* makes spaces for same-sex physical intimacy that does not solidify into identity: she never characterizes her involvement with Jocelyn as a mistake or professes that she got no enjoyment out of it, but she also does not want to be defined as a person on the basis of it. When she tells

Jocelyn not to try to make her into a lesbian, she is rejecting the translation of sexual practice into sexuality – and the assumption that there is only one way of being a woman who likes woman. She acknowledges Jocelyn’s feelings as real and valid, but refuses their projection onto her. Camila’s investments in queer sex are thus detached from expectations of monogamous coupledness (something that also tends to be true of her heterosexual attachments).

Jocelyn, on the other hand, is the vehicle for a coming-out story. Her character hits on common signifiers of lesbianism: she has liked Camila for years, wants a committed relationship, and pursues other women when it becomes clear she won’t find that with Camila. She also explicitly identifies herself as gay: when Camila outs her, Jocelyn claims gayness as an aspect of her identity and weathers the resulting fallout from classmates and her conservative grandparents. She thus serves as the show’s entry into exploring resources for coming out safely, the means by which viewers can learn about how to be gay and when it’s safe to communicate it to others – a topic that, as we’ll see in the following section, *ELH*’s transmedia environment encourages viewers to take from the show and into their own lives.

*ELH* presents two women united by a sexual relationship, one who identifies as gay and the other who rejects any identification. In terms of queer representation, there is arguably admirable nuance here, as the combination of Camila and Jocelyn gestures toward the range of experiences queerness encompasses, making it impossible to imagine there is a single, stable expression of queer female sexuality. However, the fact that Camila has much more screen-time and much greater audience exposure complicates such a reading. After the initial arc dedicated to queer sexuality, it becomes an unstable diegetic presence: Jocelyn is less present, dropping off the title sequence’s list of main characters, and to Camila’s ongoing storylines center on other issues (familial abuse and abortion). There are occasional nods to queerness – Camila and

Jocelyn sleep together in the season three premiere, Jocelyn introduces genderqueer character Daysi during a life-skills class mid-season three, and Jocelyn kisses Camila goodbye mid-season four as she leaves to go to New York University – but these are momentary aberrations in a landscape of generalized heterosexuality. Camila has no relationship to queerness when she is not actively having sex with Jocelyn, and while Jocelyn has a strong, identitarian commitment to non-normative sexuality, she is barely present to make it known. Queerness appears only when it is narratively expedient, when a same-sex encounter drives interpersonal drama or when the show wants to teach viewers about non-normative sexual identities.

Initial sustained engagement with queerness thus gives way to elliptical invocations of it. This is the pattern the show follows for issue-based narratives generally: a central narrative arc serves as introduction to the topic at hand, a particular plot event becomes a pedagogical jumping off point, and, once the main arc has ended, call-backs periodically remind the audience that this is a significant issue. Queer sexuality does not fit easily into this structure, however, for it is not a health “issue” in the way that *ELH*’s other narrative topics are. Being queer is not something you get tested for and treat according to predictable guidelines until it is resolved, and so it at times feels shoehorned into *ELH*’s formula in ways that make the show’s images less than fully satisfying.

Television has a history of representing queer women in ways that maximize spectacle and minimize meaning, and *ELH* resonates with televisual trends that limit the duration and centrality of queer female representations. In the mid-2000s, there was sweeps week lesbianism, wherein a series regular would kiss a queer guest character, reaffirm her straightness, and the actual queer character would never to be heard from again (Heffernan); more recently, dozens of queer female characters have met sudden, violent deaths on television, again putting a premature

end to their time on the small screen (Riese, “Dead Lesbian”). In both of these narrative patterns, programs get to have the visual highlight of a girl-on-girl kiss or sexual encounter while insulating the core of the show from consistent engagement with queer sexuality. *ELH*’s transmediation works to a similar effect, providing space for queer characters but reinforcing their peripheral status.

The difference is that queer characters do not disappear entirely when they leave *ELH*’s central narratives. They go online. Transmediation precludes any conclusive judgements about the representational successes of *ELH*’s queer images, for these images aren’t meant to stand on their own. They are designed to be part of a larger, multi-platform media environment that wants to move viewers from the show to peripheral educational content. *ELH* ultimately wants its viewers to learn things, and its representational elisions can help serve this goal, provoking audiences into online engagement as they seek to fill in the gaps left by the show. In fact, the online environment houses the show is explicitly constructed to move people from viewing to doing – in the case of queer sexuality, to model the coming out process through Jocelyn and help LGBTQ viewers come out themselves.

## 5.5 COMING OUT AS YOU

Though all *ELH* episodes are available through Hulu’s streaming interface, the show also has an independent website ([eastloshigh.com](http://eastloshigh.com)) designed to activate its pedagogical potentials. This activation happens in several ways, the first of which involves drawing viewers deeper into issue-based exclusive content that extends storylines begun in the show. [EastLosHigh.com](http://EastLosHigh.com)’s top menu contains the following clickable page links: “About ELH,” “Episodes,” “Exclusives,”

“Cast & Crew,” “Talk,” and “Take Action.” “Exclusives” takes users to the character-based web series mentioned above, each of which follows one or two characters through in-depth exploration of the issue they embody; these web series refer to events portrayed in the show but offer details and perspectives not available in *ELH* itself.

“Out with Jocelyn and Daysi” is the queer-centric offering (it has a rainbow-tinted title screen), and it traces the fallout from Jocelyn’s relationship with Camila as she begins to date someone new. The intimation of this new relationship begins in the show: in “From Witch to Bitch,” the fifth episode of season three, there is a one-scene flirtation between Jocelyn and Daysi that establishes their interest in each other before they largely disappear from the show. “Out with Jocelyn and Daysi” picks up on this dangling narrative thread, chronicling their developing relationship and using it to address topics relevant to queerness (the psychological fallout from being closeted, what it means for queer women to have safe sex). Each “episode” is brief – between two and three minutes – and shot simply from a single camera angle; though they reference other characters like Camila and Jocelyn’s grandparents, only Jocelyn and Daysi appear in the web series. It consequently represents a scaled-down, niche-audience continuation of queerness after its main narrative arc has ended.

“Out with Jocelyn and Daysi” provides queer content in between Jocelyn’s increasingly sporadic in-show appearances. It does not fill in all the gaps, however – we never see Jocelyn and Daysi’s relationship end, so there is no real explanation for why she returns to kiss Camila when she leaves for New York in season four. Consequently, it is clear that narrative coherence is not *ELH*’s primary interest. These are character-issue extensions before they are plot extensions; they play into audiences’ desire to see more of established characters and mobilize it



toward issue-specific educational goals. Still, this mode of transmediation-as-gap-filling does not stray too far from mainstream understandings of the process.

The more significant expression of *ELH*'s transmedia philosophy comes in the "Take Action" tab, where *ELH* emphasizes the intimate connection between its images and viewer action. Unlike the other menu choices, "Take Action" is surrounded by a bright orange box; this visual emphasis draws the user's eye, making clear that this is the most important tab, this is something you should definitely click on. When clicked, the "Take Action" tab reveals a database presentation of all of the issues that *ELH* engages with (Figure 11), from voting rights to teen parenting to dating violence. Clicking on any of them reveals a list of resources geared toward that topic that combine educational and activist opportunities. For example, the LGBTQ portal includes the following links: the GSA Network, the It Gets Better Project, and the Trevor Project, all of which offer both ways to get help for yourself and ways to get involved to help other people. Through the GSA Network, you can find an existing Gay-Straight Alliance near you, and you can also find a guide that talks you through starting your own. When *ELH* invites you to take action, then, it invokes both self-directed and community-oriented interventions.

There are further invitations to action accompanying individual episodes. You can watch all of *ELH*'s four seasons through eastloshigh.com, a situation unusual for shows bearing Hulu's imprimatur: most of the platform's originals have no independent online presence, and the few that do provide ancillary content but not access to the programming itself. For example, *The Doozers*, a spinoff of *Fraggle Rock* produced by the Jim Henson company, has an affiliated website containing online games and video extras but directs people to watch the show itself on Hulu. Things work differently for *ELH*, which makes all of its four seasons available at through eastloshigh.com. The website is not completely separate from Hulu – it uses the Hulu video

player (complete with commercials that help to drive Hulu's advertising revenue) – but it does embed that player within a different layout. To get at why this is significant, I want to detour through Hulu's streaming platform and the modes of engagement it makes available to viewers. You can watch *ELH* through hulu.com, and comparing its presentation there and on eastloshigh.com makes clear the website's deviations from the emerging norms of television streaming. A joint venture financed by The Walt Disney Company, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox, Comcast, and Time Warner Cable – the same media conglomerates that own networks like ABC, NBC, and Fox – Hulu is a platform intimately tied to television. Scholars have positioned it as the television industry's response to digital piracy: by hosting higher quality, ad-supported streaming of television programs immediately after their broadcast, networks hoped to use Hulu to recapture viewers who had been accessing shows on YouTube and illegal streaming sites (Kompare, Newman). In the eight years since its launch, Hulu has evolved beyond its initial positioning as network television's dedicated digital streaming platform. It now offers streaming services for viewers outside the United States, a content library geared toward Spanish-speaking viewers (Hulu Latino), and subscription add-ons with premium content from cable channels like Showtime; it also develops its own original serial programming for digital distribution, including a much-publicized adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Despite these additions, Hulu continues to serve as a major hub of online TV viewing, and its interface reflects its role as a database for housing television.<sup>19</sup> As David Chamberlain writes, “television interfaces have become gateways to the content we desire, enabling individualized viewing patterns and subtly reformatting our televisual experiences along vectors

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<sup>19</sup> I'm speaking here of Hulu's interface as it appears when accessed on a computer (and, specifically, on my MacBook via Chrome). Hulu can also be accessed in a number of other ways: through smart TV sets, Apple TV, Roku, gaming consoles, and mobile phones. The interface shifts depending on the device used to access it, presenting a slightly different appearance and set of choices in each case.

of customization and control” (85). Interfaces like Hulu’s do not simply provide access to existing programs; they reframe and reshape the experience of them. And on Hulu, *ELH* is reframed and reshaped through an extended ecosystem of related videos.

Like digital video repositories more broadly, Hulu ensures that you never encounter a video in isolation (Treske). When you finish watching something, there are always suggestions about what you might watch next, “algorithmically determined constellations of supposedly related material” (Monteiro 30). If you are watching a serial program, the first suggestion Hulu makes is to continue on to the subsequent episode: the interface encourages binge watching, for as soon as you reach the last scene of one episode, a timer counts down for less than a minute before the next begins playing automatically. Unless you intervene, then, you will be swept along on the narrative tide, sliding from one episode into the next.

In case you would rather watch something else, Hulu also presents several categories of related content that become visible if you scroll down. With *ELH*, the chosen categories are other episodes of *ELH*, trailers and bonus content, episodes from similar shows, and Hulu originals. The similar shows section includes episodes from *Empire*, *Pretty Little Liars*, *Mistresses*, and *Devious Maids*, which provides insight into the category designations Hulu has assigned to *ELH*: soapy melodrama, teen orientation, prominent characters of color. Hulu wants to pull viewers of this show toward other content they may enjoy, and so presents options that bear similarities in content it has deemed relevant.

On Hulu, then, *ELH* becomes part of a system that privileges seamless navigation between episodes of a program and from one program to the next. It is positioned as interchangeable with other programs that share its metadata: it becomes one option in Hulu’s sea of televisual content, one more entry in its ever-growing database. *ELH*’s educational mission

largely drops out of the picture here, for “pedagogical aspirations” is not a keyword Hulu recognizes or allows users to navigate through. Traces of the show’s educational goals do surface in the trailers and bonus content section, where cast and crew talk about the making of the show. A minute-long video extra titled “A Perfect Marriage” speaks of the synergy between Hulu as a distribution platform and *ELH* as a show that hopes to engage Latino viewers, hinting that *ELH* has goals beyond the average Hulu original. “Entertainment + Education” makes explicit the show’s pedagogical impulse, describing its origins as a pregnancy prevention project and the interweaving of messages with high-school drama. Interestingly, cast and crew suggest here that the lessons happen through the writing, in the diegetic interactions between characters and the material involvement they inspire in viewers. They consequently downplay the transmedia engagement that elsewhere emerges as key to *ELH*’s pedagogy, implying that all you need to do to reap the show’s informational benefits is watch. You could easily watch the whole show on Hulu without seeing these two videos; even if you do find your way to them, they make no mention of the pedagogical transmedia environment that exists around it at [eastloshigh.com](http://eastloshigh.com).

There are some gestures toward transmediation built into Hulu’s platform interface, though they tend to emphasize the horizontal spread of video content rather than embodied engagement. Buttons just below the video player offer opportunities to share what you are watching with your online network: you can share via Facebook, Twitter, or email, and Facebook comments are integrated into the display so that if you scroll down to the page’s bottom you can read others’ reactions to it. This is greater social media integration than other digital distribution platforms tend to offer: while Netflix makes available comments and ratings, they come exclusively from other Netflix users and so position the platform as a sealed universe. However, Hulu’s attempts do not always inspire significant user engagement: *ELH*’s first

episode, “This Year’s Winter King and Queen,” has two Facebook likes and zero comments. Hulu’s gestures toward viewer engagement consequently read like afterthoughts, secondary to the platform’s main purpose. The website’s layout bears this hierarchy out as well: unless I resize the page or scroll down, the only thing visible beyond the player itself is the top menu, which offers categories of video content (TV, movies, kids, Latino). It is easy to view things on Hulu without noticing its avenues for sharing and commenting, without imagining that you are meant to do anything beyond watch. The overall effect of Hulu’s presentation is to make the show blend in with other televisual content: it positions *ELH* as a series much like other series, something viewers engage in their usual way before moving on to the next recommend program.

The series’ website enacts a notably different presentation of *ELH*, and with it comes a different imagination of viewer engagement. The overall page architecture is visually similar: like on Hulu, the video player dominates the page with a top menu above and supplementary content below, content that is fully revealed only by scrolling down. Again like Hulu, there are buttons for sharing individual episodes on social media below the player and embedded into the playing interface itself; the player is actually Hulu’s own proprietary video program. The content on the page is significantly different from that appearing on Hulu, however, beginning with the fact that everything on eastloshigh.com is about *East Los High* the series and the lessons viewers are meant to draw from it. This might seem like an obvious point, but it is an important one: where Hulu wants *ELH* to blend into a sea of televisual content, the website emphasizes the show’s singularity and individuality.

The website also presents each episode as a distinct entity. Towards this end, there is no automatic movement between episodes. The website provides links for previous and subsequent episodes underneath the video player, but it requires user input to move from one episode to the

next. The modes of navigation offered thus diverge from Hulu, as the website encourages users to dwell on each episode and its themes instead of speeding through several in one sitting. Whereas Hulu's related content looks more or less the same for all *ELH* episodes, the website embeds each in its own distinct informational milieu that offers resources tailored to its narrative content. The links offered here are also predominately textual: if Hulu presents sets of related videos, eastloshigh.com offers text-based articles and resources that resonate with the episode's themes. An episode with a prominent domestic abuse storyline might link to articles on how to recognize emotional abuse and where to seek help if you are in an abusive relationship; another that deals with HIV status links to articles on questions to ask when you go to a clinic. These linked articles come from partner health organizations, and clicking on them takes users into explicitly educational spaces. There are also non-text widgets that perform similar functions, like a clinic-finder that allows users to locate the Planned Parenthood location nearest them and set up an appointment.

This is not a database style of presentation that smooths movement between modular content units. Website users are instead encouraged to spend time with the show, to sit with each individual episode after they watch and reflect upon its relationship to their own embodied habits. Each episode has a unique invitation to action accompanying it, tailored to specific events that take place in its narrative unfolding. The website consequently works to mobilize and activate the show's images, translating diegetic events into real-world situations and guiding users through how they might navigate them.

For example, "I Ain't No Victim" (season two, episode eight), both dramatizes coming out and offers resources that walk viewers through how to come out themselves. In the episode's diegetic narrative, Jocelyn encounters with both the perils and benefits of going public with your

sexual identity. After Camila outs her, she faces several different kinds of backlash: schoolmates taunt her in the bathroom, and her grandfather reacts with stunned hostility, saying that there are no *maricones* in his family. However, Jocelyn also finds support and community, and an exchange with school principal Mrs. Alvarez reinforces that coming out is ultimately a good thing for her:

Jocelyn:                    “I’m not sorry I did it.”

Mrs. Alvarez:            “And you shouldn’t be. It’s ok to be who you are.”

Jocelyn:                    “Right now it feels really lonely.”

Mrs. Alvarez:            “I felt that way too, when I came out.”

Mrs. Alvarez then tells Jocelyn about the LGBTQ resources that exist in the school and beyond it, a pedagogical impulse also taken up in the episode’s web page.

Below the episode video are links and resources related to queer identity and coming out. First comes a pair of articles: “Coming Out as You! – a pocket sized resource to help you come out!” from The Trevor Project, and “Help and information on coming out and making safe spaces at school” from Sex Etc. Both draw connections between the show’s images and real-world experiences of queer sexuality, moving viewers from watching a storyline about coming out into resources for coming out themselves. The Sex Etc. page offers help locating, utilizing and creating LGBT spaces within the school system, and the Coming Out as You booklet provides a step-by-step guide to coming out safely. It walks individuals through processes of identification and disclosure: questions prompt reflection on the terms that best describe your identity; identification of local safe spaces and allies that will support you; selection of a time, place, and person to come out to first; and imagination of both good and bad possible reactions.

There is also a widget that links to TrevorSpace, “a social networking site for LGBTQ youth ages 13 through 24 and their friends and allies.” The website consequently uses Jocelyn’s storyline as a way to help young viewers find each other and connect with other LGBTQ kids in their area; it purposefully translates shared viewing into community in a way similar to the grassroots organization that happened around *The L Word*.

Thus, Jocelyn’s storyline comes equipped with a blueprint for taking its lessons off of the screen and into embodied practice. After watching Jocelyn come out, viewers can translate the lessons learned from her experience into action by means of the links the website provides. Where Sabido’s soap operas included televised epilogues, then, here instructions are embedded in the transmedia environment surrounding *ELH*.

## **5.6 ASSESSEMENT AND THE LIMITS OF QUANTIFICATION**

The team behind *ELH* imagined it as an experiment whose impact should be carefully tested. Communications scholars have been tracking its effects since its release, using data gathered from eastloshigh.com and surveys of Latinx viewers to judge its success as a pregnancy prevention measure (Wang and Singhal, Sachdev). Consequently, we can say with some confidence that the show was effective in certain ways. For example, StayTeen.org’s website traffic doubled on the day of *ELH*’s release, and twenty-two percent of the people who used Planned Parenthood’s find-a-clinic widget during the run of *ELH*’s first season accessed it through eastloshigh.com (*Population Media Center - Acting for Change*). Thus, there is empirical data showing that *ELH* succeeded in some of its goals – specifically in channeling viewers toward educational and health organizations related to pregnancy.



Combined with the series' popularity on Hulu, these numbers suggest that there is a future to the kind of entertainment-education *ELH* represents and to the embodied vision of transmediation that comes with it. I want to end on a cautionary note, however, for though there is much I find valuable in *ELH* there is also a commitment to quantifiable results embedded in it. The show wants not only to produce change but for that change to be measurable. This constrains the kind of work the show can do. There is a giant institutional apparatus dedicated to tracking and measuring birth; pregnancy is something that has been declared worthy of oversight on the national level and so there is much data available about it. However, we should be wary of substituting the things that are measurable for the things that are important. It is significant that there has been no reporting about *ELH*'s success or failure at helping LGBTQ people through coming out. This would be a difficult thing to measure, beginning with the problems inherent in identifying a closeted queer population and magnified by the fact that coming out is not a discrete event you do once and finish. *ELH*'s desire to produce measurable results consequently brings with it certain baggage, especially in a nation where the next census will include no questions about sexual orientation or gender identity. So, even as I take *ELH* as a powerful example of production and design practices that accommodate bodily particularity, I keep in mind this question: what kinds of political work are by definition immeasurable, and what kind of media might help to accomplish them?

## 6.0 CONCLUSION: THREE THESES FOR THE FUTURE OF MEDIA STUDIES

The winter 2018 issue of *Cinema Journal* offers a number of short essays on “The C and M in SCMS” – the “cinema” and “media” in the Society for Cinema and Media Studies. These essays mark a transitional moment in the life the journal, which will soon follow SCMS in adding “media” to its title: from *Cinema Journal* to the *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*. The “and media” addition is both descriptive and normative. It signals a recognition that objects other than film exert meaningful gravity on the shape of our field; it also stands as an invitation to submit work centered on those objects to the field’s premiere journal. As someone whose work is much more about media than it is film, I welcome this change and parallel ones spreading through many institutions historically grounded in the study of film, including the graduate program at the University of Pittsburgh. We, too, are adding media. Though I applied to the Film Studies program, I will graduate from the program in Film and Media Studies. Thus, if “film” once named a shared object of study (though, importantly, never without its discontents), there are proliferating cracks in its hegemony. The essays in *Cinema Journal* offer understandings of the changes rippling through film and media studies and give recommendations looking toward the future of the field: new areas of inquiry to open up, old ones to hold on to, ways to sharpen critical tools dulled by the passage of time. In the spirit of this section, I end with my own theses for the future of media studies. They are necessarily brief and sketchy, but they begin to do the work of extrapolating out from this project toward future lines of inquiry.

## 6.1 BEYOND TECHNOLOGICAL FORM: MEDIA LIVE IN MULTIMEDIA ENVIRONMENTS

A discipline called film studies is by definition organized around a single technological form. While it may expand outward in moments – inviting television or video games into the fold – it is premised upon the unique historical, theoretical, and political importance of film as a technologically-defined medium.<sup>20</sup> A discipline called media studies need not share this organizing principle. As Lucas Hildebrand points out, many of us now work on objects that are not per se film:

Rick Altman recalled that in its early days, cinema studies comprised scholars from a range of disciplines, training, and methods whose common project was unified by its object: cinema, which, before home video, was defined by a comparatively limited set of texts. In contrast, at the present moment, cinema and media studies might be considered a coherent discipline, while our media objects and platforms proliferate (Hildebrand 115)

This shift in object of study is not just a matter of switching out one for another: we have not as a discipline moved from film to television, for example. Rather, as the use of “proliferate” suggests, there are many more kinds of media at play in contemporary scholarship. Jennifer Malkowski reminds us that, since SCMS added its “M” in 2002, “many media *forms*—not just

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<sup>20</sup> This is particularly apparent in the shape of film studies curricula. At the University of Pittsburgh, the desire for a shared set of filmic references shapes our classes at the undergraduate and graduate levels. In required graduate classes in Film History and Theory, you encounter certain filmic figures over and over again, both early theorizers of cinema (Bazin, Benjamin, Eisenstein, Deleuze, Kracauer, Vertov) and more recent scholars whose work shapes the field (Bordwell, Gunning, Hansen, Doane, Mulvey). Our undergraduate curriculum suggests a similar belief that there are certain films, directors, and movements whose importance is beyond question, from Hitchcock to Kurosawa, from Italian neorealism to Russian formalism. While there are sometimes classes on other media or weeks devoted to other media within a film-centric class, there is nothing analogous to the systematic investment in film as a technology and film studies as a body of knowledge.

media texts—have come into popular use...including mobile apps, social media, streaming video, animated GIFs, and contemporary virtual reality platforms” (127). One way of responding to the explosion of forms is to analyze each of them through film studies’ established analytic categories: we can theorize the ontology of GIFs or the aesthetics of drones in terms similar to those film scholars developed in relation to celluloid. This approach continues film studies’ established investment in technological form, imagining that longstanding critical tools in the film theorist’s arsenal can reveal all we need to know about (or at least the most important facets of) emerging media. The object changes, but the shape of analysis doesn’t.

However, modes of analysis premised on technological form run up against the multiplicity and instability of technology in contemporary media environments. As Hector Amaya writes, “Old technologies are still relevant, and new ones seem to emerge every day. If we start with media technologies, as we used to, the sites of intellectual inquiry will multiply enormously, potentially fragmenting our disciplines and isolating growing numbers of microcommunities” (118). There are two interlocking problems here. First, the multiplication of media forms means that it is difficult for any one of them to sustain a field of study. For example, consider micro-video service Vine, which allowed users to create and share six-second looping videos. Founded in 2012, Vine lasted only four years, barely enough time for scholars to write and publish an initial round of essays investigating it as a new media form. The pace of innovation, updating, and obsolescence means that our media are not as stable as they once were; it is hard to sustain a career as an expert on only one technology. Second, media forms are now interdependent to such an extent that it is difficult to say which features of a media environment are attributable to a given technological form. My dissertation documents the intertwining of television, social media, blogs, streaming video, podcasts, digital surveillance cameras, and

more. Each chapter engages several technological forms by design. I could have used a different organizational schema, moving through television, then social media, then streaming video. I chose not to because approaching each media form in isolation yields limited returns. Today's media forms are not self-sufficient; presuming that they are for the sake of analysis does a profound injustice to the way they are designed, deployed, and experienced.

Our modes of analysis should shift with our objects of study. If attended to carefully, contemporary media forms can teach us how to approach them. My own design involves moving away from analysis of isolated technological forms and toward the practices and patterns of usage that develop around them. Media environments have grown in expanse and complexity, and there are few generalizable rules that obtain in all situations. Writing over a decade ago, Geert Lovink argued the following about digital media and methodology: "In my view the question of what the Internet is all about has been sufficiently dealt with. It is time for critical research to move on, away from the general level of functionality. It is no longer the technical possibilities that characterize the medium" (Lovink 8). I share Lovink's conviction that we have talked enough about "the general level of functionality," about technical structures divorced from context and usage. Instead of abstractly theorizing the implications of the newest technological form, I suggest a measured embrace of the empirical. In media environments that threaten to overwhelm us with change and novelty, we could do worse than tracing out the actual interrelations of people, images, and technologies.

## **6.2 BEYOND UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA: THERE ARE NO UNIFIED POLITICS TO DIGITAL MEDIA**

Foundational ideas about digital media are bound up in dreams of utopia. As we saw in the introduction, however, this imaginary has since gone out of favor. Today, we are more likely to hear about the dangers of the digital: the rise of fake news, the use of drones in warfare and surveillance, the proliferation of racist and sexist attacks via social media, the online recruitment of young white men into alt-right causes, the toxic cultures behind tech companies' shiny facades. If digital media once provoked utopian dreams, they now feel more like a nightmare.

In the current moment – a time of fractured political discourse and renewed right wing nationalisms – it is tempting to see dystopia as the ‘truth’ of digital media. Our utopian fantasies have fractured, revealing darkness underneath: we have come face to face with what some call the authoritarian, anti-minority essence of this once-heralded medium (Hindman, Keen, Morozov, Postman). Thus, it might seem strange and unproductive to write a dissertation on digital formations aligned with progressive causes. One could argue that time is better spent unearthing and critiquing the conservatisms spread through digital technologies and practices. However, while there is certainly value to such work, we should be wary of trading utopia for dystopia in approaching digital media.

According to Georges Perec, “All utopias are depressing because they leave no room for chance, for difference, for the ‘miscellaneous’” (191). Dystopias have a similar problem: there is no room for internal variation, for the specifics of time and place. If digital media are dystopic, they are so totalizing that there is little room for actors with agency to do things in relation to them. Thus, dystopian conceptions of the digital are just unproductive – and uninteresting – as utopian ones. Consider Evgeny Morozov’s critique of “cyber-utopianism,” which swings

between nuanced calls for “an alternative, more down-to-earth approach to policymaking in the digital age” (318) and proclamations that the Internet “empowers the strong and disempowers the weak” (xvii). For Morozov, to be a “cyber-realist” is also inevitably to be a pessimist, for close attention to the internet’s politics can only lead to discovering its complicity with authoritarian regimes:

if, on careful examination, it turns out that certain types of authoritarian regimes can benefit from the Internet in disproportionately more ways than their opponents, the focus of Western democracy promotion work should shift from empowering the activists to topple their regimes to countering the governments’ own exploitation of the Web lest they become even more authoritarian. There is no point in making a revolution more effective, quick, and anonymous if the odds of the revolution’s success are worsening in the meantime. (28)

Though the first sentence is phrased as a conditional, Morozov already knows the answer to which he will come. The internet inevitably gives advantage to authoritarian rule. Despite a professed investment in the social and geographical contexts of digital activism, this line of inquiry can only lead one way. I am wary of utopian dreams about the digital. However, I am equally wary of dystopian nightmares, especially when they masquerade as realism. At this point, scholars have thoroughly debunked digital utopianism, critiquing it to such an extent that it holds little credibility as an academic position. The same is not necessarily true of digital dystopianism, which boasts a compelling affective resonance with the current state of the world.

In such an environment, I made a conscious choice to center corporeal networks marked by minority identification and progressive politics. Digital media are “politically variable” (Kunstman and Stein xi); there is no single truth to be found in them. That is, they are no more

the rightful territory of authoritarian regimes than they are of left-leaning activists. In studying them, we need to recognize the limits of utopian/dystopian binaries and forge other schemas for reckoning with contemporary media. The digital formations I work through in these chapters attest to the “both/and” function of the digital: it is a site of liberation and oppression, of activism and authoritarian rule, of grassroots creativity and corporate exploitation. And humans are responsible for its political potential on both sides. In crediting digital technology with great power (for good or for evil), we ignore the human agents and practices that shape its power.

If there are few grand proclamations here, it is because scholars of media have done enough proclaiming about the digital. I see little value in adding my voice to the chorus shouting about what digital media are and aren’t, exhorting their power to liberate or destroy the world. Instead, this dissertation works toward a model of digital politics attentive to the concrete and the particular: I propose that we proclaim less and attend more and better. Technology does not ever stand apart from the people who use it, and my chapters attest to the work people put in to create, maintain, and mobilize digital networks.

To be clear, moving beyond utopia and dystopia does not mean assuming the neutrality of technology. A growing body of work asserts the fundamental truth that digital technology has politics precisely because it can never be separated from people. If companies like Google imagine that they can combat human biases through automation, they downplay the various ways that creators build bias into technological products, from foundational design choices to training data sets. Algorithms don’t save us from the vagaries of flawed human decision making but rather reinforce and rework them in complicated ways (see Eubanks, Noble, O’Neil, Pasquale, Wachter-Boettcher). I share the belief that technology is never outside social and cultural life, and that we need to critically evaluate its politics as a step toward a better world.



However, our theoretical arsenals need to develop other modes in addition to critique (Felski). There is value in centering objects and practices that do work we find provocative and productive. The things we choose to analyze shape our imaginative horizons, and I believe in the stakes of centering progressive objects and communities. Through them, you see systems of domination but also how people negotiate with domination to forge other ways of living. Consider the digital network, a technological form at the heart of this dissertation. Arguably the defining structure of our age (Galloway and Thacker), it has provoked both utopian and dystopian theorizing. But, there has been relatively little attention to the diverse ways that people inhabit networks. Writes Wendy Chun:

What would happen if users warily embraced, rather than hid or were hidden from, the inherently public and promiscuous exchange of information that grounds TCP/IP? What if they focused on creating and inhabiting public spaces online and offline, rather than accepting transparent bubbles of privacy which render them transparent? (95, *Updating*)

In these chapters I have tried to move beyond analysis of the network as a decentralized social structure or a form undergirded by centralized protocols. I have tried not just to declare “we need to inhabit networks differently” (Chun 160, *Updating*) but also to honor how people are already doing that, making public digital spaces geared toward minoritarian needs. My chapters document the way images gather people together in digital space, describe the practices that sustain networked inhabitation, and analyze the possibilities for community organization and collective action that emerge through them. This is, I think, a more satisfying account – and one less prone to overgeneralization – than those that focus on technology without considering people.

### **6.3 BEYOND “THE BODY”: DIFFERENTIATED BODIES MATTER**

Bodies are a recurrent preoccupation in the study of media. A number of different approaches assert their centrality: studies of labor (Mayer) and representation (Dyer), investigations of haptic and embodied interfaces (Parisi, Paterson), theories of media as bodily extensions (Clark and Chalmers, McLuhan) or of the body as the primordial medium (Wegenstein). Despite widespread investment in the idea that bodies matter to media, however, media studies has a hard time making space for consideration of differentiated bodies. We still treat “scholarship that addresses nonwhites as ‘niche’” (Amaya 119), and our theories of media too often ignore the fact that bodies differ from each other in significant ways.

One manifestation of this tendency is the concept of “the body,” which abstracts from the messy multiplicity of bodies to a singular, universal subject. As Michael Warner reminds us, abstraction favors some bodies over others: “the rhetorical strategy of personal abstraction is both a utopian moment of the public sphere and a major source of domination, for the ability to abstract oneself in public discussion has always been an unequally available resource...The subject who could master this rhetoric in the bourgeois public sphere was implicitly, even explicitly, white, male, literate, and propertied” (165). That is, while all of us live in and through bodies, the kind of body you inhabit influences how easily you can become abstracted away from the particulars of your existence. White masculinity tends to be read as abstract and rational by default: it is less a marked, particular body than the absence of signals of particularity. Every deviation from the ideal of white masculinity marks a person with specificity, so that a speaker becomes less and less generalizable. Straight, white men can speak for everyone; if I speak, I am understood as a queer woman whose positionality and experience inflects my point of view.

There are similar dynamics at play in media studies' invocations of "the body." Implicit in "the body" is a normative vision that establishes white, male bodies as the most important bodies for media and technology, sidelining any discussion of difference. When identity and bodily particularity do earn a mention, they are special interest concerns, an additive line of inquiry that interested parties bring to media culture from the outside. Embodied difference thus becomes the counterpoint that contextualizes media theory but remains essentially separate from it. My project asserts that shunting identity and embodiment off into their own (secondary, sequestered) silo is not just a political problem, but also a philosophical one that impoverishes our ability to understand what and how media mean. In a moment where identity plays an increasingly visible role in politics, we need to theorize through differentiated bodies.

It is for this reason that I choose the kind of case studies that I do. The corporeal networks I analyze are all marked by some form of minoritarian identification. They foreground their own gendered and racialized dimensions and so will never be read as abstract or general. The visible mattering of bodies is valuable here because it instructs us in how to look at contemporary media formations more broadly. In the wake of the 2016 elections, Americans came face to face with the inadequacy of abstract, rational discourse as a paradigm for politics. It is getting harder to pretend that bodies and feelings play no role in our political system. With the spread of alt-right groups, it is also getting harder to imagine white men as a universal rather than a particular, embodied identity. White masculinity's emerging digital spaces are also premised on identitarian affective community. Understanding these spaces and the communities that gather in them is an urgent task, but it is equally urgent that we do not reinscribe white masculinity as the default assumption of media studies. Starting from gendered and raced corporeal networks

ensures that we remember white male spaces enact one mode of embodied digital being, not the only or the most central one.

Starting from differentiated bodies provokes the question: how should we conceive of the relationship between media and bodies? I think this is an open question, and one for which there will never be a single right or definitive answer. I began this section with a list of methodological orientations, and I end it with a refusal to choose between them. Even within this project, bodies perform many roles. They function as onscreen objects, anchors of audience reactions, interfaces with technologies, branding strategies, textual narrations, vehicles for collective action. One might think that this range implies analytic sloppiness, but I disagree: we need to be open to the multiple ways in which bodies can intervene in a given media environment. I suggested above that contemporary media invite us move beyond analysis premised on an individual technology. They invite us as well to think across the sites and methods of bodily mattering. Instead of choosing one lens, we need analytical tools that can conceive of many kinds of bodies that function in many ways.

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