

White Design: Engineering the Visualization of Race and Racism in Social Media

by

Kelsey Cummings

BA, Smith College, 2013

MS, University of Oregon, 2015

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh

2020

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

DIETRICH SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

This dissertation was presented

by

Kelsey Cummings

It was defended on

March 27, 2020

and approved by

Mark Lynn Anderson, Associate Professor, Department of English

Brenton Malin, Associate Professor, Department of Communication

Elizabeth Reich, Assistant Professor, Department of English

Dissertation Co-Director: Zachary Horton, Assistant Professor, Department of English

Dissertation Director: Jinying Li, Assistant Professor, Department of English

Copyright © by Kelsey Cummings

2020

White Design: Engineering the Visualization of Race and Racism in Social Media

Kelsey Cummings, PhD

University of Pittsburgh, 2020

This dissertation is a study on how social media platforms engineer whiteness as ideology and aesthetic. Where work in the field to this point has primarily emphasized the ways in which platforms reproduce ideologies like white supremacy, I demonstrate that the platform is itself a generative mechanism that has infrastructural connections to white supremacy in the form of shared mechanics, including identification, categorization, and interpellation. To advance this research, I conduct textual, visual, and design-based rhetorical analysis on three case study platforms: YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram. From this work, I establish a theoretical framework combining visual culture studies, platform studies, and critical race studies.

This research contributes to the field of media studies by reframing how race and platforms correlate. Platformization as a phenomenon brings about fundamentally distinct dynamics with regard to conceptualizations of white supremacy, prompting a reassessment of how the latter is commonly defined in critical race studies. This work also contributes to the ongoing development of media studies via its public-facing nature and investment in understanding new media through anti-racist theory. Because of the growth of public knowledge on how content platforms have ideological functions that align with existing biases, my research contributes new insight into both scholarly and popular discussions of the relationships between race and social media.

The first chapter conceptualizes *platform* in theoretical relationship to *race*. Both platform and race are infrastructures that generate affect through interpellation. Belonging and loneliness are generated in the narratives that platforms produce as political power is given and denied based

on the social construction of race. Chapters two, three, and four use case studies of social media platforms (YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram respectively) to demonstrate that there are always already design-based connections between platforms and the content that they host. Over the course of these chapters, I analyze media practices and objects that range across “passive” and “active” forms of engagement (from the acts of watching and searching to that of posting) and across moving and still images (from the formats of the video and GIF to the photograph).

Table of Contents

1.0 Introduction.....	1
2.0 Chapter One: Identify: Race and Platform.....	8
2.1 Terminology	9
2.2 Platform: Affect and the Social	16
2.3 Platform as Metaphor	24
3.0 Chapter Two: Watch: Visualizing Whiteness on YouTube	29
3.1 Introduction of the Case Study	31
3.2 Analysis.....	40
3.3 Levels of Looking and Meaning	52
3.4 White Space.....	58
3.5 Conclusion	62
4.0 Chapter Three: Search: Design in Twitter’s GIF Search	66
4.1 Monetizing the GIF	69
4.2 Race and Capitalism.....	72
4.3 Monetization of Affect.....	75
4.4 Suggested GIFs	79
4.5 “What’d You Search to Get This Gif”	91
4.6 “IDK”	94
5.0 Chapter Four: Post: Content Moderation and Biopolitics on Instagram	97
5.1 Applying the Framework.....	101
5.2 Content Moderation	112

6.0 Conclusion	122
Bibliography	124

Preface

This dissertation was made possible by the invaluable support of my committee. Thank you first and foremost to Jinying Li for being as brilliant a mentor as she is a scholar. Thank you to Zach Horton for his excellent guidance and for generously entering in as co-chair. Thank you so much to Brent Malin, Mark Lynn Anderson, and Liz Reich for all of their vital insight and feedback. I'm very grateful to other faculty members at Pitt for their instruction and mentorship. Thank you to Neepa Majumdar and Lucy Fischer for providing crucial direction at the beginning stages of this project. I owe particular gratitude to the faculty administrators and staff members who provided me with essential aid throughout my time in the program; thank you especially to Nancy Glazener, Randall Halle, David Pettersen, Tyler Bickford, Jesse Daugherty, and Briar Somerville.

There are so many teachers and mentors to whom I am forever grateful for making my work possible. Thank you in particular to Jen Malkowski for nearly a decade of service as a wonderful, inspiring advisor. I am especially indebted to Alex Keller, Floyd Cheung, Pamela Stanescu, Scott Daniel, John McClellan, and Jenny Snyder, all of whom shaped my love of learning more than I can say.

I could not have completed this project without the loving encouragement of many friends and colleagues. Thank you to Matthew Hadodo and Emilie Rook for being the best accountability group I could have asked for. Thank you to Treviene Harris, Melissa Yang, and Dan Libertz for the productive writing sessions. For their emotional support and for seeing this journey through with me, thank you especially to Evan Chen, Kate Cove, Avey Nelson, Amanda Awanjo, Nick

Marsellas, Adam Hebert, Sonia Luper, Kelsey Cameron, Jesse Anderson-Lehman, Laur Nelson, Kuhu Tanvir, and Hannah Eko.

Thank you most of all to my family, for whom I'm more grateful than I can say. Thank you so much to Dad and Mom for being my earliest teachers and deepest supporters. Thank you to my brother Scott for being a true inspiration.

1.0 Introduction

A now-accepted tenant of the discipline of new media studies recognizes that implicit bias is built into platform design. Richard Dyer's *White* famously analyzed film camera technologies that were made to depict white skin and were therefore incapable of properly conveying images of subjects with dark skin (1997). In 2011, Kelly A. Gates described the cultural implications of facial recognition software and its potential threat to civil rights in *Our Biometric Future: Facial Recognition Technology and the Culture of Surveillance*. In 2018, Safiya Umoja Noble published *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, making critical advances in platform studies through a focus on structural oppression and search algorithms. Awareness of the role that implicit bias plays in platform design also exceeds the limit of academic contexts. On 22 March 2017, the US Congress held a hearing before the Committee on Oversight and Reform on "Law enforcement's use of facial recognition technology" (U.S. Government Publishing Office). On 22 May 2019, Congress held another hearing on FRT's "impacts on our civil rights and liberties," and on 4 June 2019, on "ensuring transparency in government use" of FRT (U.S. Government Publishing Office 2019a; US Government Office 2019b). International news media, too, recognize and discuss manufacturing and manifestation of bias in platforms, as in publications like the *New York Times* (Chokshi 2019; Chinoy 2019) and the *Guardian* (Perkins 2019). Case studies of platform bias that have emerged in popular media include the featuring of blackface and yellowface in Snapchat filters (Meyer 2016); both Snapchat and Instagram, via their filtering features, routinely lighten skin, shrink noses and jaws, and enlarge eyes to ostensibly make subjects look more attractive (Chen 2016; Jerkins 2015; King 2016; Mulaudzi 2017).

White supremacy is built into the design of social media functions as the means by which content-based expressions of white power thrive in their creation and dissemination. Ruha Benjamin uses the term “New Jim Code,” for example (referencing Michelle Alexander’s influential description of mass incarceration as *The New Jim Crow* [2010]), to refer to “the employment of new technologies that reflect and reproduce existing inequities but that are promoted and perceived as more objective or progressive than the discriminatory systems of a previous era” (2019). Noble critiques the term “implicit bias” in her discussion of similar technologies, emphasizing that oppression is not an underlying side effect but is in fact one of the central purposes of many new media such as search engine algorithms (2018). Lisa Nakamura writes, “We are in a moment of continual and delicate negotiation between the positions of the object and the subject of digital visual culture. [...] I wish to posit a theory of *digital racial formation*, which would parse the ways that digital modes of cultural production and reception are complicit with this ongoing process” (2008, 14). Since the publication of *Digitizing Race*, the field of digital studies has continued to develop its conceptualization of these and related concepts. My work builds on this scholarship to consider the broader relationship between new media and identity through the specific case of social media and race.

In the following dissertation, I use three case studies (of the platforms YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram) to demonstrate how platform and race share certain mechanics. The function of this argument is to expand our understanding of implicit bias in the context of platform studies; rather than being a phenomenon limited to certain types of platform use or certain constructions of race, I argue that the connection between platform and race is a more fundamental one. Race is an identifying force that categorizes and is naturalized; the platform is also an identifying force that categorizes and is naturalized. By this I mean that both race and platform use central

mechanics of identification in order to place subjects (whether classified as citizens, non-citizens, users, and/or producers) in particular categories of being that determine their relationship to, for the most part, the production of capital. Both race and platform are also made natural or invisible in contemporary social systems, such that those same subjects being categorized are expected to view these categorizing forces as natural rather than manufactured phenomena.

Therefore, in addition to studying how intrinsic bias or oppression manifests in particular platforms, as significant scholarship has to this point, we also need to study and understand the connections between these phenomena that exceed their literal overlap. If/when a platform's mediation and delivering of content and service do not explicitly exhibit racial bias, and if/when the construct of race manifests outside of a platform, I argue that they are still intrinsically connected concepts. In other words, absent any content at all, the platform will still share mechanics and ideological functions with the construct of race (and therefore with white supremacy). Platform and race fundamentally share an epistemology of identification, which draws from even as it in some ways differentiates itself from longstanding histories of colonialism, manifest destiny, and imperialism. As in these latter tools of white supremacy, I argue that race more broadly speaking (and platform in parallel with it) identifies (explores, studies, examines, etc.) subjects for the purposes of subjecting (conquering, exploiting, pillaging, etc.) them. These mechanics are therefore always reliant on and reproducing of the histories of white supremacy under discussion. When the platform identifies its users in order to categorize and monetize them, it is following in the *epistemological and mechanical* tradition of race's construction by white supremacy, which itself serves the function of justifying attempted genocide, slavery, and other forms of white supremacist violence.

An understanding of the dynamic that I describe between platform and race can have important implications for how policymakers, developers, and users approach projects of advancing platform-based equity. Though some (literal) stakeholders prefer to answer the problems of social media-based inequity by simply expanding the platforms' existing features, especially by hiring more exploited content moderators or attempting to increase and improve the use of automated content moderation, I argue that a more structural approach to the problem is needed. In a recent conversation, Lisa Nakamura used the following metaphor: "If you have a car that's designed to break down every five miles, it doesn't matter how many mechanics you hire to fix it. It's going to keep breaking down."

In the dissertation's first chapter, I explain my use of terminology (including the phrases *white supremacy* and *white power*) and my use of platform as metaphor. I conceptualize *platform* in theoretical relationship to *race*, demonstrating how both platform and race are infrastructures that generate affect through interpellation. Belonging and loneliness are generated in the narratives that platforms produce as political and economic power is given and denied based on the social construction of race. This argument draws in part from the work of scholars like Beth Coleman on *race as technology* (2009). One of the functions of theorizing race as technology is to undermine its erroneous associations with biology as they have been established historically; another function is to critically consider how technology is weaponized by white supremacist power systems. Reviewing relevant literature on affect theory and critical race studies in chapter one, I specifically focus on whiteness as a subfield. My goal in considering race in the context of digital studies is to particularly understand the role that white supremacy plays in the design of social media platforms. I will approach this project through a theoretical lens combining critical race and visual culture theories to ask what the significance of platformization is in the context of contemporary racial

politics. This will be particularly useful in the American national context, but equally important as an application to global racial dynamics, particularly given the fundamentally globalized nature of social media. Historically, my project is situated within an academic conversation that aims to contribute to popular public discourse through the application of critical race theory to the study of socio-political effects of social media technologies and uses. I have chosen social media as the objects of study for my critical analysis of race and visual culture because their platforms and content represent areas of high public contention in the context of racial politics.

Chapters two, three, and four use case studies of social media platforms (YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram respectively) to demonstrate that there are always already design-based connections between platforms and the content that they host. Chapter two considers YouTube and the mechanic of watching. With the specific case study of YouTube's like/dislike function, I demonstrate how white supremacy as affect is built into the platform itself. This chapter also focuses on the relationship between white supremacy and white power, describing how explicit manifestations of racism draw from its structural manifestations. The chapter's central case study, the YouTube channel PewDiePie, illuminates how the platform visually designs affect, economy, and whiteness. In sum, this chapter demonstrates how whiteness manifests in design features on YouTube. It explores these YouTube design features, such as the like and dislike functions, from the perspective of critical race studies and affect theory. It shows that the platform's economic functions are connected to its affective functions. In sum, I argue in chapter two that the design of YouTube can be understood through its various economic and affective investments in whiteness.

In chapter three, I consider the mechanic of searching on social media platforms via the case study of Twitter's integrated GIF search. This approach reads cross-platform and algorithmic convergence through the framework of affect theory. This chapter also examines the role of

platformed visual culture in racial configurations of Twitter's GIF (Graphics Interchange Format) search. Following in the tradition of Nakamura's work, the chapter engages in conversation with existing studies of race and new media through a visual culture framework that is specifically concerned with the ways in which visual culture manifests and is itself manifested in social media. The GIF is a uniquely social manifestation of visual culture in that its format lends itself to easy dissemination among users. Prior to and resulting in the integration of GIF search engines into social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr, user engagements with .gif files have been particularly high in social media contexts. The GIF therefore represents a useful case study for this chapter because it is a central format of visual communication in social media contexts. Additionally, Twitter is uniquely suited to an understanding of GIFs on social media more broadly speaking because its integration of the GIF search engine coincided with the emergence of broad public discourse on the role of social media platforms as content moderators (see Newton 2018). In short, I consider Twitter and GIFs in relation to one another in this chapter because the relations between the two are reflective of broader trends across other content platforms, including phenomena like integrated advertising and post promotion. The measurement of popularity and promotion of GIFs reflects their broader function as economic mechanisms as well as cultural objects. Chapter three particularly focuses on the relationship between whiteness and economic functions of various platform features like the integrated GIF search.

Finally, in chapter four, I use a case study from Instagram to examine the relationship between biopolitics and social media platforms. This approach engages with the act of posting original content as a means by which content moderation can be understood. I argue that biopolitics are a central framework through which social media platforms can be understood, drawing from and expanding on the Foucauldian tradition in my analysis. A central case study in this chapter

considers a post by celebrity Karamo Brown that became infused with various questions around authenticity, visual culture, and the role of content moderation on platforms like Instagram. I use this case study within the chapter's larger argument to assert that white supremacy informs the mechanics of content moderation in social media contexts.

In summary, this dissertation is a study on how social media platforms engineer whiteness as ideology and aesthetic. I conduct textual, visual, and design-based rhetorical analysis on three case study platforms; from this work, I establish a theoretical framework combining visual culture studies and platform studies. Where scholarship in the field to this point has primarily emphasized the ways in which platforms *reproduce* ideologies like white supremacy, I demonstrate that the platform is itself a generative mechanism that has infrastructural connections to white supremacy in the form of shared mechanics, including identification, categorization, and interpellation.

This research contributes to the field of media studies by reframing how race and platforms correlate. Platformization as a phenomenon brings about fundamentally distinct dynamics with regard to conceptualizations of race, prompting a reassessment of how whiteness is commonly defined in critical race studies. My work also contributes to the ongoing development of media studies via its public-facing investment in understanding new media through anti-racist theory. Because of the growth of public knowledge on how content platforms have ideological functions that align with existing biases, my research contributes new insight into both scholarly and popular discussions of the relationships among race and social media.

2.0 Chapter One: Identify: Race and Platform

Identification is the central characteristic of platforms, meaning that platforms categorize units, in large part, in order to identify them. In the social media context, the platform categorizes networks of users and identifies demographics in order to advertise products. I argue that the platform is a central schema or analogy through which we can understand race. Race is a concept that categorizes subjects for the larger purpose of identifying them; in the American system of slavery, for example, physical characteristics were used to delineate between “person” and “property.” Both race and platforms are infrastructures that also generate affect through interpellation. Subjects experience belonging and loneliness as a result of the narratives that platforms (specifically social media platforms) produce, as econo-political power is similarly given and denied to subjects according to the construct of race.

This chapter will therefore begin by establishing my theorization of the relationship between the concepts of race and platform. I approach this project through a theoretical lens combining critical race and visual culture theories to ask what the significance of platformization is in the context of contemporary racial politics. This conceptualization will be particularly important in the American national context, but also useful in some of its applications to global racial dynamics given the fundamentally globalized nature of social media. Historically, my project is situated within an academic conversation that aims to contribute to public discourse through the application of critical race theory to the study of socio-political effects of social media technologies and uses. Social media platforms represent areas of high public contention and concentration with regard to racial politics. In this chapter, I demonstrate the advantages of understanding and theorizing race in relation to platform, discussing the implications of this

approach for my remaining work in the dissertation. Beginning with definitions of central terms, I then describe why and how using platform as a metaphor to understand race is an important approach and then provide contextualizing information on affect theory as it informs my work.

2.1 Terminology

For the purposes of this dissertation, I define *race* as the social construction of identity based on physical differences among subjects in the form of skin color, hair texture, and other physical characteristics. Distinct from ethnicity, which is itself determined by the nations and cultures from which a subject and their biological family emerge, race is changeable based on the (historical, cultural, and/or social) contexts within which race is perceived. Unlike ethnicity, race is as much if not more based on *the surrounding society's* view of the subject than it is based on the subject's view of themselves. How a subject's race is viewed by others (individual subjects, corporations, local and national governments, etc.) will significantly influence their access or lack thereof to various forms of economic, political, and cultural power.

Within several academic fields, significant discussion has been and continues to be held over identifying race as a social construct, or a fabricated product of cultural influences that does not hold inherent genetic meaning (Fontanarosa and Bauchner 2018; Templeton 2013). Essentialism, no longer recognized as scientifically valid, posits that race is a fixed category determined by objective biological differentiation of subjects, where social constructivism posits that race is a human-made concept resulting from social and political contexts that can be, and are, changed (Kung et al. 2018). Changes in skin color, based in part on ancestral geographic location, are highly malleable from one generation to another based on sexual partners, change in location,

effects of climate change, and other factors, as are conceptualizations of race based on political and social context. This latter fact is famously demonstrated by studies like Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* (1995). Dyer is one of many scholars who describe and critique the history of the biological, naturalized category of race (1997, 18–30).

When moderators of the Reddit forum “Black People Twitter” began verifying (putting check mark icons next to the usernames of) users who were actually Black by asking them to send in pictures of their forearms, the results demonstrated various ways in which race is understood, particularly online.¹ As the *New York Times* reported, “Thousands of users submitted photos to the Black People Twitter subreddit moderators showing their skin color and user names — and in some cases, other things suggestive of black identity, like hair and skin care products” (Harmon 2019). This case study is illuminating in a number of arenas, particularly in a consideration of how different social media spaces and moderators manage community-building while handling bad-faith users (in this case, non-Black users attempting to enter a Black community discussion under false pretenses). This case study also demonstrates the complexity of defining *race* in the specific context of social media platforms. “There was considerable discussion about whether a photograph could demonstrate a person’s blackness, given the wide variety of skin colors among African-Americans and the complex social meanings of race that extend beyond skin color. [...] One [user] sent a picture of his whole family because he was light-skinned and wanted to prove he was black”

¹ I follow in the tradition of scholars who capitalize the word “Black” when referring to the population of people in recognition of the status of Black subjects as members of an ethnicity equal in historical and cultural depth to other ethnicities like “Asian American,” “Latinx,” etc. (Lanham and Liu 2019; Tharps 2014). When quoting sources that do not capitalize “Black,” I keep the word lowercased as it was originally written to minimize interruptions in the flow of reading.

(Harmon 2019). Though in the contemporary American context, *race* is first and foremost defined by a subject's skin color, there are many other factors that come into play and influence how subjects are privileged or disadvantaged by the systems in which they live.

I argue for the benefit of theorizing and analogizing race in relation to platform not only because of the two concepts' shared functions as categorizing (or identifying) mechanisms, but also because of their frequent naturalization, particularly in popular and lay discourse. Just as race has historically been framed as essentialist within white supremacist society, the platform is routinely understood as a neutral and always-present phenomenon upon which any type of communication can and does occur, in a free market kind of model of information. Despite the fact that contemporary scientists acknowledge and prioritize social constructivism, race as a method of categorization and identification is often still used in medical contexts. On the one hand, the use of race as a categorizing method in these contexts allows for the documentation and study of bias-based disparities in health care (as in the case of Black Americans' disproportionate childbirth mortality rates [Martin and Montagne 2017]). On the other hand, medical professionals like Ritchie Witzig argue that this practice results in race's legitimization or medicalization, which can be actively harmful to patients: "Assumptions about disease that are made because a race has been assigned can result in important negative consequences for individual patients and inaccurate genetic inferences for populations" (1996). Essentialist beliefs about race have been consistently associated with and connected to white power ideologies (Kung, et. al., 2018).

The naturalization of race in advancement of white power ideologies is discussed by writers like Angela Saini, who describes in an *NPR* interview how eugenics is popularized via publications like *Mankind Quarterly*. She states, "What is particularly shocking to me is that some of these editors and some of these writers are on the boards of mainstream journals now. And that should

concern us because it says that these ideas have passed from the very, very fringes of science into some aspect of the mainstream, that they are gaining traction in mainstream academia” (qtd. in Kung, Demby, and Meraji 2019). A similar pattern emerges when we compare race and platform in this context, namely, that categorization is made natural. Wendy Chun writes, “as ideology creates subjects, interactive and seemingly real-time interfaces create users who believe they are the ‘source’ of the computer’s action” (2011, 67-68). Though Chun specifies interface, my argument applies the logic to platforms as a whole. Ideology and platform manufacture categories, and different categories, like *whiteness*, serve different functions.

Whiteness is simultaneously a subject’s or community’s state of being and, more importantly for the purposes of this project, a broader ideological force. Ignatiev writes that “the white race consists of those who partake of the privileges of the white skin in this society. Its most wretched members share a status higher, in certain respects, than that of the most exalted persons excluded from it” (1995, 1). Therefore, the condition of whiteness is the condition of receiving privileges and improved living conditions for being white, and the condition of whiteness is also the condition of upholding the former by one’s default or “natural” behaviors; it is only by actively promoting anti-racism that the white subject does not *maintain* white supremacy (Oluo 2018). Defining *whiteness* also necessitates an understanding of its varying levels of visibility to different subject positions. Tressie McMillan Cottom writes, “In this milieu we, as a friend once described it, know our whites. To know our whites is to understand the psychology of white people and the elasticity of whiteness. It is to be intimate with some white persons but to critically withhold faith in white people categorically. It is to anticipate white people’s emotions and fears and grievances because their issues are singularly our problem. To know our whites is to survive without letting bitterness rot your soul” (2019). Part of the condition of whiteness is to not (need to) be aware of

one's whiteness, while people of color, as individual subjects and collective communities, must cater to that very whiteness. As Sara Ahmed writes, "the project of making whiteness visible only makes sense from the point of view of those for whom it is invisible" (2004b).

For the purposes of this project, I draw from the critical race theory tradition to define *white supremacy* as the socio-political power structure within which whiteness as ideology, aesthetic, and identity dominates culture and economics alike (Gillborn 2006; Rabaka 2007). Critical race theorists use the term *white supremacy* to describe contemporary conditions of ongoing and normalized racial oppression. This differs from many popular and lay uses of the term, which use it to refer to extremist or explicit manifestations of racism, rather than structural or unconscious manifestations of racism. Kathleen Belew argues that extremist racism is more accurately identified by the term *white power*, writing:

I use 'white power' to refer to the social movement that brought together members of the Klan, militias, radical tax resisters, white separatists, neo-Nazis, and proponents of white theologies such as Christian Identity, Odinism, and Dualism between 1975 and 1995. Some have described this group of people with the terms 'white nationalist,' 'white separatist,' the 'racist right,' or 'white supremacist.' None of these terms is appropriate for describing the larger movement. Not all proponents of white power advocated white nationalism or white separatism, and white nationalism presumes a different outcome—one inherently less violent—than that envisioned by a vocal segment of the white power movement. The term 'racist right' presumes a political continuum that does not properly describe this activism, which at times shared more with the revolutionary left than with the conservative mainstream. Therefore, the encompassing term 'white power,' which

was also a slogan commonly used by those in the movement, is the most precise and historically accurate term. (2018, ix)

Belew's works, targeted as they are variously to both scholars and laypeople, emphasize the importance of properly identifying the phenomena under discussion in order to ensure that we recognize their longstanding histories. I follow in this tradition by identifying white supremacy as systemic racial oppression, not as individual or group-based expressions of white power ideologies. It is important in the contemporary moment to divorce the term *white supremacist* from its lay association, particularly among white subjects, with white power and white power ideologies. Part of a responsible practice and theory involves emphasizing the ways in which white supremacy is a structural phenomenon. Oluo writes, "But if you live in this system of White Supremacy you are either fighting the system, or you are complicit. There is no neutrality to be had towards systems of injustice..." (2018, 211). Oluo's work in this area demonstrates that activist and academic term definitions are always informed by and informing one another; they therefore need to be understood together and simultaneously. A recognition of the distinctions between white power and white supremacy acknowledges the fact that white supremacy is always already present in our culture. It also acknowledges that white supremacy manifests both structurally and on an individual level; racist microaggressions, for example, are white supremacist despite the fact that they are not explicit expressions of white power ideology.

White supremacy is also distinct from the more general term *racism*, an encompassing word that describes white power, white supremacy, and similar expressions (both structural and individual) of race-based oppression. Because *racism* includes and is most often associated with individual expressions of bias or hatred, it differs from *white supremacy*, which emphasizes structural phenomena as the central conditions under discussion. In describing why she stopped

using the word *racism* and started using the term *white supremacy* to identify the phenomenon, bell hooks writes, “It is the very small but highly visible liberal movement away from the perpetuation of overtly racist discrimination, exploitation, and oppression of black people which often masks how all-pervasive white supremacy is in this society, both as ideology and as behavior” (1995, p. 184). Derrick Bell uses the term *racism* rather than *white supremacy* despite the fact that his use of the former reflects hooks’ and others’ definitions of the latter. Bell draws from affect theory to analyze the intergenerational anxieties that characterize and maintain racism in white subjects (2004, p. 50). For Bell, there is no need to differentiate individual racism (white power ideologies) from structural racism (white supremacist systems), because they are ultimately one and the same. But hooks rejects a potential disadvantage of this approach, writing that the concept that “all white people are ‘inherently racist’ [...] socializes white people both to remain ignorant of the way in which white supremacist attitudes are learned and to assume a posture of learned helplessness as though they have no agency—no capacity to resist this thinking” (1995, p. 270). My work draws from both hooks and Bell, using *white supremacy* in order to identify structural racial oppression and also using the connection that Bell draws between individual racism and structural racism in order to understand the role of both in social media platforms. *White supremacy* draws attention to the role of whiteness as racial construct in the maintenance of systems of oppression and inequality. In drawing this distinction, I expand on pre-existing studies that consider, in part, the ways in which white subjects might productively contribute to anti-racist activism (Dyer 1997; Wekker 2016). This subject is of particular interest in social media contexts, which necessitate a critical interrogation of the myriad complexities that characterize users’ racial and identity-based engagements on digital platforms (see Daniels 2012; Gillespie 2010; Nakamura 2014).

The application of critical race theory to an analysis of social media platforms allows for an understanding of the ways in which white supremacy as a political system affects social media users through specifically platform- and mechanics-based phenomena. Rather than viewing white supremacy as an unintended “bug” in the system of social media interface (much as white power ideologies are sometimes viewed as anomalous “bugs” in the system of culture and politics), this dissertation draws from critical race theorists’ engagements with white supremacy as an intentional and fundamental feature of our contemporary socio-political systems broadly speaking and the social media systems produced within them specifically. This is important to a comprehension of white power rhetoric and organizing as they manifest in social media content because it allows us to comprehend how such content fundamentally relies on pre-existing biases of social media platforms and interfaces.

2.2 Platform: Affect and the Social

Because my focus is on social media, my use of the term *platform* primarily draws from the established definition that prioritizes its status as a host of content sharing, with a particular emphasis on user generated content (Steinberg and Li 2017, 177). This necessarily means that I also understand social media platforms as “transaction-type or mediation-type” entities, because content sharing has been– and increasingly continues to grow– connected to advertising transactions (Steinberg and Li 2017). By virtue of their hosting of user generated content, social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter connect advertisers to their target audiences as they simultaneously connect users to one another’s content. The platforms that I discuss are characterized by their dual primary functions as content hosts and advertising mediators. Jirō

Kokuryō emphasizes that platforms are made distinct in part by virtue of their affective functions, and specifically, by the fact that they aim to engender trust from and among users (1995). In other words, “...the platform is a ‘place’ (albeit more often a transactional place than a physical space) where transactions can occur, thanks to the manner in which a platform creates a mutual sense of trust among strangers” (Steinberg 2017, 195).

Beyond trust, the social media platform enables many more manifestations of affect through its connection of users, and interface design is one of the central means by which we can interpret these affects and the platform ideologies that they coexist with. Judith Donath notes that design is the means by which “public” and “private” spaces are demarcated online, one example of how user behavior is inherently affected by platform design (2014). Which sites a user visits, which forms of meta data their profile provides, and what they do on particular sites, are all fundamentally informed and at least partially shaped by the interfaces of the media they are engaging with. “If platforms program our sociocultural practices into computer architectures, then interfaces are where this process takes effect and manifests itself, because an interface is a discursive and affective space where we encounter, negotiate, and feel the material and symbolic milieus of a platform” (Li 2017, 234). Chun describes that we can best understand “interfaces as ideology”; “Interfaces offer us an imaginary relationship to our hardware: they do not represent transistors but rather desktops and recycling bins. Interfaces and operating systems produce ‘users’—one and all” (2011, 66-67).

One of the reasons why social media platforms are characterized by user vulnerability is that they necessitate intimacy, and not just emotional intimacy, but intimacy in the sense of a more bodily (more affective) type of access and vulnerability. The user’s “digital fingerprint” follows them as platforms collect advertising data on a macro level; the user reads from and posts to

platforms at home, while eating breakfast, in bed, etc.; the user's webcam and phone capture and can record these intimacies as well. In turn, emotional intimacy also characterizes user engagement, because the social function of the platform is to facilitate interpersonal relationships and communications. All communications are levelled in this context. If a friend likes an Instagram user's post, the user receives the same type of notification on their phone that they would receive if a stranger tagged them in a harassing comment. The mundane (advertisements and other platform functions) coexists *and* is levelled with these positive and negative affective intimacies as well (a sample Instagram notification: "X, Y, and Z recently added to their stories"). Interface is particularly important in the context of user vulnerability because of interface's mediating function, which provides users with feelings of agency and control (Chun 2011); though the latter phenomena are not connected to intimacy, they illuminate how interpersonal affect influences users' engagement with the platform more broadly speaking. When I open the "Snap Map" feature in Snapchat, which shows a map of the area that I am in with avatars of my friends in their own physical locations, the sense of touch (online instructions read "To open the Snap Map, go to the Camera screen and pull down" [Snapchat Support]) mediates the visual representation of physical space in the form of a literal map. The interface reminds me of my physical control over it in the form of the touch screen, alleviating in the process the potentially alienating reminder of my and other users' physical location-based vulnerability (which accompanies all mobile technologies rather than being unique to Snapchat).

To *identify* is both to determine the definition and primary features of a subject and to empathize with a subject such that one imagines a fundamental connection between them and oneself— to see oneself in the subject, in other words. I use both definitions throughout this chapter in order to demonstrate the connection between platform and affect. As Sara Ahmed notes,

identification in the affective sense is not just the creation of an “emotional” relationship between oneself and another, but also an embodied connection to that other (2004a). “Rather than locating emotion in the individual or the social, we can see that emotionality – as a responsiveness to and openness towards the worlds of others – involves an interweaving of the personal with the social, and the affective with the mediated. [...] it is through the movement of emotions that the very distinction between inside and outside, or the individual and social, is effected in the first place” (Ahmed 2004a, 28). Ahmed argues that the emotions that characterize and manifest in relationships (pain, fear, love, etc.) are *mediated* through the body, creating the social. (This is a central argument from which the affective turn and affect theory developed; two of the major ways in which affect is differentiated from the emotions of a single subject are its embodied nature and its collective/communal/relationship-based nature). There is no “true social” unaffected by mediation, because all relationships and communications are mediated through embodied experience.

As a result, we constantly strive to achieve an idealized vision of the social through various means, including social media platforms. Extra mediation occurs in parasocial contact, because the already-mediated relationship is mediated again through platforms that are designed to appear seamless, as if one were having an “in-person” conversation with another subject. (Think of commercials for Facetime, Skype, and similar video conference applications that sentimentally depict parents saying goodnight to their children from abroad—intimacy is sold by virtue of the idea that liveness, image, and sound brought together represent the closest approximation of “in person” contact possible). The assumption underlying this premise is that subjects are more intimate with and sympathetic to one another when communication is mediated as little as possible. See, for example, news coverage about how perpetrators of online harassment do or do not behave

differently when confronted via different, more “personal” media, such as through a telephone conversation (West 2015). We might also think of a common sentiment expressed about online harassment: “They wouldn’t say that if they were speaking to you face to face.”

Subjects desire the unmediated “real social” despite its impossibility, and search for it via social media alongside other parasocial platforms. Recent quantitative research suggests that “Whether or not someone perceives social media to be intimate is actually a better predictor of loneliness and happiness than frequency of use” (Pittman 2018, 173). Thus, users’ perceptions of a platform’s intimacy are correlated to their happiness with the platform and even with their general happiness. On social media platforms, the search for the “real social” via the parasocial involves our imagining of different platforms as serving different affective functions, and this provides an example of how all users experience platform design as a determiner of content. Different platforms provide intimacy in different ways, because their features enable or fail to enable parasocial connection. A Facebook profile is private by default and a Twitter profile is public by default; factors like these, alongside other influences like the popularity of a platform among various demographics, need to inform our understanding of social media platforms’ affective functions as a whole.

Some research suggests that in a continuation of Allport’s Contact Hypothesis (which posits that prejudice in a given subject can be reduced as that subject is exposed to members of the group they are prejudiced against), parasocial contact in the form of watching television shows featuring a marginalized group is also associated with reduced prejudice (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 2005). It is important to note that there are many nuances and debates regarding this intergroup contact, both as it occurs in physical, in-person interactions and in parasocial contexts (Ortiz and Harwood 2007). However, the notion that parasocial engagements can affect broader

social relations, and can specifically reduce prejudice in a given subject, is an important framework through which platforms are understood both by scholars and laypeople. As a 1999 fan letter written to romance novelist Shirley Hailstock described, “I guess I might sound bigoted, but I never knew that black folks fall in love like white folks” (qtd. in Beckett 2019) The idea that one’s prejudice can be reduced (and/or empathy can be engendered) via particular types of parasocial engagement, occurring under particular circumstances, means that platforms are always already sites of both affect and power, which themselves are always already commingled.

If intimacy (whether the intimacy of love, hatred, physical proximity, demographic information, etc.) is a central defining trait of social media, can any engagement with social media platforms preclude vulnerability? In *Updating to Remain the Same*, Chun asks what it might look like if we designed new media that did not punish vulnerability (in the form of doxing, revenge porn, virtual harassment, etc.), but instead protected vulnerability as a right of new media users (with said vulnerability *to* such punishments being particularly characteristic of people of color and white women, as Chun’s discussion of the Steubenville rape case demonstrates). Referencing the example of physical loitering as a form of political activism, Chun considers whether and how that metaphor might be extended:

To loiter online, we would have to create technologies that acknowledge, rather than make invisible, the multitude of exchanges that take place around us— technologies that refuse the illusory boundary between audience and spectacle, author and character. In addition, we would also have to build ones that question the basic premise that memory should equal storage, that everything read in should be written forward. Importantly, loitering is ephemeral: it inhabits the present. It can also transform ‘open’ private spaces into truly public ones. (2016, 160)

Here, Chun describes an ideal state of existence within which subjects might engage in political activism via “loitering” in online spaces. Such a state would be reliant on the allowance of ephemeral content; technologies would have to be built not to store and “remember” everything, but, on the contrary, to feature the “right to be forgotten” as a characteristic of platforms themselves. One of Chun’s critiques of new media discourse is its punishment of user-subjects for simply being vulnerable. Slut shaming and similar phenomena that Chun describes rely on mindsets that blame victims for their exposure rather than interrogate the power systems established and enforced by the platforms with which users engage.

A methodological approach that I want to consider and employ throughout this dissertation involves the application of theoretical frameworks to platforms. Much feminist work has engaged in this type of methodology, from Vivian Sobchack’s “*No Lies: Direct Cinema as Rape*” (1977) to Michele White’s *The Body and the Screen: Theories of Internet Spectatorship* (2006). The former is particularly interesting when considered alongside social media platforms; if direct cinema functions as rape, not only in the case study film that Sobchack describes but also, as the film itself might argue, in a larger enterprise of cinema itself, then what does that mean for a comparative understanding of platforms like Twitter, Instagram, or YouTube? Sobchack argues that the viewer experiences rape by watching the film *No Lies* (1973), which presents itself as a cinema verité documentary depicting a filmmaker who aggressively interrogates a rape survivor, only to reveal via credits in its conclusion that the film was actually fictional. Importantly, it is the vulnerability of spectatorship that Sobchack draws our attention to:

The [audience] fury comes, I would suggest, from an experience akin to the one Shelby, as a fictional victim of sexual assault, describes and reveals. We feel humiliated and victimized and foolish at our susceptibility to [director] Block’s

attack and we also feel horribly impotent. [...] And how morally culpable is the film anyway since it makes us aware of how casually we place our trust and faith in the cinema? The film may attack us but it is our own expectation that makes us vulnerable. (1977, 18)

If, through the norms that the platform requires, film itself is always already capable of forcing and then exploiting vulnerability in the spectator, then what would a non-exploitative platform practice look like? Because, as film scholars have noted, it is not necessarily that “we place our trust and faith in the cinema” naturally, but often that we spend a lifetime being trained to do so by the cinema itself (whether in the context of cinema vérité or any other filmmaking method).

The norms and practices of film as a platform shift; over time in the American context, audiences are expected to be raucous and rowdy, then quiet and attentive, then no longer necessarily theatergoers at all, but instead multiply engaged users who are divided in their visual and aural attentions, and so on. Film can maintain its norms to a certain degree, but it is still reliant on user agreement, such that if a spectator/user decided to check their Instagram feed instead of paying attention while watching *No Lies*, the film’s own breaking of an expected contract might become moot, because the spectator themselves would have already broken the contract that demanded their attentive deference. Could user action force a change in the platform itself? How would this be possible? Chun’s conceptualization most importantly necessitates a change to the platform, not (just) to user engagement with it. A society can decide that a user’s career should not be negatively affected by the revenge porn that their ex-lover posts of them, but that decision might and probably will take decades to implement socially, culturally, and politically. In the meantime, if the platform itself were to engage with user vulnerability in a fundamentally different way, what would that look like?

Race is an identifying force that categorizes and is naturalized, and the platform is also an identifying force that categorizes and is naturalized. Therefore, it is not only that we should study and understand how intrinsic bias manifests in particular platforms, as much scholarship has to this point. We also need to study and understand the connections between these phenomena that exceed their literal overlap. If a platform has no racial bias (by which I also mean, absent *any content at all* being hosted on a given platform), and when the construct of race manifests outside of a platform, I argue that they are still intrinsically connected concepts. They fundamentally share an epistemology of identification, which draws from even as it in some ways departs from longstanding histories of colonialism, manifest destiny, and imperialism.

2.3 Platform as Metaphor

I theorize platform in relation to race and critical race studies because platforms prioritize neoliberal systems of exchange, personalization, and exploitation as well as visual culture and visualization. In the context of social media, the platform is a site of both maintenance and control of white supremacy. Popular and scholarly discourses alike have emphasized the problems of political “bubbles” and “echo chambers” that emerge in the context of individuated social media platforms (Hern 2017; Nikolov et al. 2015). Social media filtering is a platform-based phenomenon with ideological repercussions, making it a site of simultaneous technological and political anxiety. Specifically, platformization represents an important issue in the context of critical race studies because it combines interpersonal and corporate communications and in doing so, demonstrates the rhetorical overlaps that characterize both modes of visual culture. In my study of the relations among programming, visual culture, and race, I will demonstrate how scholarship can engage with

social media contexts that are determined by platform design. An understanding of the relations among these phenomena will illuminate how programming affects and is affected by racial ideologies and visual culture.

Categorization represents an important conceptual link between race and platform. In her discussion of Ahmed's work on Aryan nation rhetorics, Susan Ruddick writes, "In Spinozist terms, what are arguably the true causes of community (for example, practices of cooperation, social and economic equity, tolerance) are displaced from the social field and attributed, quite literally in this case, to the white body (arising from the imagined purity of the white race). In this construct, imagined purity is thus threatened by the presence or commingling of 'other' bodies" (2010, 29). Platforms categorize, and in the case of social networks, this categorization organizes existing networks of users, maintaining existing forms of physical and social segregation. Ruddick argues that "To challenge these regimes, the task is to know how to move from the passive experience of affect, the 'sad passions', even love in this case, to active joy. Affect, constituted passively, *does not comprehend its cause adequately* and ultimately limits the capacity to act" (2010, 29). In Deleuze's conceptualization, active joy recognizes the true nature of one's relationship to outside forces and subjects, enabling one to be empowered through capability of response, the *action* of which itself promotes joy (Ruddick 2010). However, as Ian Bogost and other early platform theorists note, there is a mechanism behind such an action; platform still enables action.

Race and platforms can be conceived in relationship to one another because they are both constructed within a system where connection is reliant on the differentiation of nodes or statuses. To effectively communicate via the platform, the (external and internal) understanding of sender and receiver must be concrete, in the same way that racial constructions maintain socio-political status quo by differentiating races based on physical characteristics, with these definitions being

constantly in flux based on the desires of power systems within particular historical contexts (Painter 2010). Within the platform interface, additional categorization beyond that enacted by ideology has to take place: “Maps dominate interfaces, from our ‘desktop’ to the clickable image maps on web pages, and mapping—the act of making and outlining connections—drives our actions online, from creating social maps based on Facebook friends to following links within web pages. [...] Maps and mapping are also the means by which we ‘figure out’ power and our relation to a larger social entity” (Chun 2011, 69). This mapping is literal in the case of the Snap Map; the user sees themselves as one node among many, connected by physical location.

How does the concept of race function similarly to how the concept of platform functions? In both cases, a determinative system is built within one of apparent neutrality. The platform determines what is and is not possible for the content that it hosts. Much scholarship has established the technologized nature of race; race as technology also coexists with race as platform (Linscott 2017; Sexton 2011). When race begins its existence as a technology through which white supremacy is established and maintained, it evolves into a platform, whereby the categorization of subjects is not just the result of one technology but is in fact the base on which categories are built, and from which they emerge. McCallum elaborates on Foucault’s work regarding the categorization of populations, writing, “Bio-politics is regulatory, centred not on the body but on life itself, bringing together mass effects characteristic of a population; it is a technology which tries to control random events and protect the security of the whole from internal dangers” (McCallum 2016, 2532). Thus, race is one of the central technologies through which biopolitics is enacted (Foucault 2007). Notably, McCallum emphasizes the collective nature of biopolitics, wherein government exerts control over the population en masse through embodied and ideological approaches. Marvin writes, “In the end, it is less in new media practices, which come

later and point toward a resolution of these conflicts (or, more likely, a temporary truce), than in the uncertainty of emerging and contested practices of communication that the struggle of groups to define and locate themselves is most easily observed” (Marvin 1988, 5). Marvin’s use of active tense here is useful to note—if and where we distinguish between groups’ self-identification and the forcing of identification onto groups by platforms, we need to consider the broader conceptualization of subjects that is being used.

Following in the tradition of Ahmed’s work, I argue that all communication and relationships are mediated through bodies, meaning that there is no unmediated “real social.” Power dynamics are visible through media, as the very concept of race can be compared to a platform on which social, political, and economic life exist. Taking Hardt and Negri’s analogical use of the concept of network as a frame, my work engages with the concept of platform as a metaphor. This approach differs from Gillespie’s use of the platform as a diagram, which is more centered on the platform’s physical organizing principles rather than its ideological organizing principles.

An understanding of race necessitates underscoring its connection to the platform, and vice versa. Affect theory demonstrates the ways in which race and platform (and/or race as platform) maintain existing power structures. Describing radical reassessments of love and care within the capitalist framework, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing writes, “Perhaps radical love *is* the process of gathering allies across discrimination and difference, interlacing the real with the possible, and always opening up the field of political play” (2012, 46). If the problem with love and care is that they function to appease subjects while maintaining oppression, Tsing argues, a radical form of love would unite subjects outside of their existing bonds. The politics of affect are also central to a critical understanding of platform. Means TV (means.tv), a “post-capitalist streaming service,”

makes visible the political nature of platform by identifying itself as such. In doing so, it provides an initial example of what a differentiated platform practice might look (Means TV 2020). By point of contrast, the next chapter will consider YouTube, taking its like/dislike mechanic as a case study that demonstrates how affects of white supremacy manifest in social media-specific contexts.

3.0 Chapter Two: Watch: Visualizing Whiteness on YouTube

A central tenant from which I work in this dissertation is that the concept of *affect*, distinguished from the concepts of the *social* and the *political*, describes in part the creation and maintenance of a community centrally based on intimacy, rather than based on identity and/or ideology. (The function of these distinctions is not a value judgment in any direction, but simply a definitional clarification delineating how affect is different from the social and/or the political). Platform features like commenting and liking/disliking serve social functions, the latter of which are major factors determining the formation of whiteness on streaming media. Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal write, “Platforms are neither neutral nor value-free constructs; they come with specific norms and values inscribed in their architectures. These norms may or may not clash with values engraved in the societal structures in which platforms vie to become (or are already) implemented” (2018, 3). The comment feature serves the function of presenting the platform as one that fits the “interacting” mode of user engagement, not (just) that of “broadcasting,” to use Anders Olaf Larsson’s terminology (2015). Absent the comment feature, it would be easy to perceive YouTube as a traditional “broadcasting” platform in the sense that it does not seem to naturally solicit engagement. This is not actually the case, in that YouTube allows users to upload videos and, specifically, to upload videos in response to others’ videos; however, casual YouTube users, who watch but do not post videos to the platform, are less likely to be aware of these features. As a result, the like, dislike, and comment features on YouTube provide a mode of *interaction* that is easily accessible to all users. These features are what most prominently make YouTube *social* media, as via these features, users can react to the content that they consume on the same platform

on which it is hosted. Sociality is one of the central means by which whiteness and similar phenomena are formulated on platforms like YouTube.

The idea that comments *matter* enough that they should be built into the platform's infrastructure, and even that comments *must* exist in this format, permeates discourse of and about YouTube. This applies to such an extent that even the ability to like or dislike comments themselves is sometimes perceived to be an expression of free speech; in response to a query about what happens when you dislike a comment on a YouTube video, Reddit user MartyEhYT writes, "Youtube is just transitioning over to the facebook system where you can't dislike something, you know, good ol censorship. I bet they'll soon remove the dislike button altogether" (2018). The privileging of comments on social media and other online platforms, however, is simultaneously belied by the longstanding adage *never read the comments*, and by platforms' efforts to better regulate or do away entirely with comments sections (Davidson 2015; Valenti 2015).

YouTube has now made it possible for users to disable all comments on a given video upon uploading it, but this capability is presented as an anomaly, an alternative to the standard norm. Being able to like/dislike videos (AKA upvote/downvote them, in the terminology used by other social media platforms like Reddit) is ideal for advertisers, as it tells them about the prospective audience for a certain channel. For users, likes and dislikes allow them to find videos more easily and to filter them, which involves a trade-off that users willingly make; in exchange for the convenience of finding videos they are more likely to enjoy, their likes and dislikes are used to sell them more products. As I have discussed, a central anxiety of social media is how we are to

characterize its communicative functions, especially in the context of the public sphere.² We might argue that the privileging of “public” discourse on private platforms emerges at the expense of “civil” discourse, or monitored discourse, or democratic discourse (insofar as “democracy” can exist on a private platform). YouTube operates as a market within which communication is presented as being of paramount importance despite its ultimate subordination to profit. Ironically, “YouTube king” PewDiePie simultaneously decries his critics and describes the communicative necessities that are often enforced within his very own platform of choice when he claims, “Whoever yells the loudest gets paid.”

3.1 Introduction of the Case Study

“In the YouTube clip, a pair of South Asian men wearing costume loincloths held up a banner that read, ‘DEATH TO ALL JEWS.’

They danced and laughed, while in a separate screen the YouTuber named Felix Kjellberg (also known by his stage name PewDiePie) covered his mouth with his hands. ‘I don’t feel too proud of this, I’m not going to lie,’ Kjellberg said in the Jan. 11 video, which had been viewed more than 9.9 million times.

² It is out of the primary purview of this project to conduct an in-depth discussion of the relationship between my subjects of study and literature on the public sphere, but that relationship represents an interesting area of potential further development (see Calhoun 2010; Calhoun 2002; Everett 2002; Habermas 1989).

Kjellberg, a 27-year-old Swedish comedian, had paid the men to hold up the sign. ‘I’m not anti-Semitic or whatever it’s called,’ he said as he watched. ‘It was a funny meme, and I didn’t think it would work.’”

(Ben Guarino and Kristine Phillips, “Anti-Semitic jokes cause YouTube, Disney to distance themselves from PewDiePie,” 2017)

“Before entering a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, the site of one of the deadliest mass murders in the country’s history, a gunman paused to endorse a YouTube star in a video that appeared to capture the shooting.

‘Remember, lads, subscribe to PewDiePie,’ he said.”

(Kevin Roose, “A Mass Murder of, and for, the Internet,” 2019)

PewDiePie is a YouTube channel run by user Felix Kjellberg, and has been the most subscribed to channel on YouTube several times and for significant periods of time over the course of its existence.³ As of this writing, PewDiePie is the second-most subscribed to channel behind competitor T-Series, a development that is critical to an understanding of the channel’s role in YouTube platform politics. I use PewDiePie as the central case study of this chapter not only because the channel’s enormous popularity provides insight into the content that is most popular (and therefore profitable) on YouTube, but also because the channel’s central role in a number of

³ I refer throughout this chapter to “PewDiePie” in order to make it clear that I am primarily discussing the YouTube channel itself, though Kjellberg’s public persona, made most obviously manifest in his videos, is important to the ways in which he manages the channel more generally speaking. This is why I refer to “PewDiePie” as either “he/him” or “it” depending on the context of the statement, because PewDiePie is a brand composed simultaneously of a persona and a channel.

racist controversies, which culminated in the creation, dissemination, and subsequent shutting down of the “Subscribe to PewDiePie” meme, demonstrates how YouTube’s economic and affective functions overlap and are inherently determined by one another. The main racist controversies that PewDiePie has been associated with over his career on YouTube were his use of the n-slur during a video game livestream and his use of the platform Fiverr to project the message “DEATH TO ALL JEWS,” described in the quotation cited above. However, these are just two of many race-based scandals and controversies that PewDiePie has stoked and been involved in, as I discuss in greater detail below. This chapter therefore considers PewDiePie’s channel as a case study to understand the function of interface design and algorithmic design on YouTube. I begin by considering PewDiePie’s contentious relationship with YouTube itself, then with competing channel T-Series. This case study allows us to not only understand the economic functions of the platform for its users, but also the cultural capital that is imbued in the platform’s various capabilities.

On YouTube, there is an affective, as well as an economic, investment in “winning” (of and on the platform itself) through video statistics. Likes and dislikes particularly represent an affective interface design, which ensures that streaming media serve social functions. The affective and digital economies under discussion are closely linked. This simultaneity is particularly affectively and culturally salient to intensive YouTube users rather than casual YouTube users. For example, following the release of the first *Ghostbusters* (2016) trailer, debuting the reboot that starred four women, users began a campaign to get the video as many dislikes as possible (there are over one million dislikes to 306k likes as of 9 May 2019, and one of the top comments from user Plot Twist reads, “Just checking for the 1M dislikes”) (Sony Pictures Entertainment 2016). *ScreenCrush* reported of the *Ghostbusters* trailer that “The thumbs down votes aren’t organic,

they're part of a coordinated attack on the film by people who are opposed to its very existence. There have even been reports across the web that angry fans are using bots to artificially drive up the 'dislikes' on the trailer" (Sampson 2016). Since the prominent news coverage of this particular example, the phenomenon of coordinating mass dislikes has become known as "dislike mobs" according to *The Verge*:

'Dislike mobs' are the YouTube equivalent to review bombings on Steam — a group of people who are upset with a certain creator or game decide to execute an organized attack and downvote or negatively review a game or video into oblivion. It's an issue on YouTube as well, and one that creators have spoken out against many times in the past. Reports have suggested that a video with a high number of dislikes — that outweighs the number of positive likes — is less likely to be recommended, and could therefore hurt the creator's channel. (Alexander 2019b)

The exact effect of video dislikes is unclear to intensive and casual users alike, such that a Google search from my personal account on 9 May 2019 quickly auto-filled the term, "does disliking on youtube do anything" from the words "does disliking." Whether or not a video's dislikes lower its actual visibility on the platform is the central focus of the PewDiePie video that I discuss in greater detail below; importantly, the way that users and/or creators on YouTube perceive functions like the dislike feature is often more important than the actual intentions behind or effects of their existence, particularly in the case of intensive YouTube users. The perception of YouTube functions like the dislike feature shapes intensive users' often highly contentious relationship to the platform.

YouTube's meters and those meters' measuring of popularity result in competition among users and creators over watch-time, likes, dislikes, subscriptions, etc. These meters thus prioritize

a politics of visibility where “winning” is not just economic, but also cultural. Thus, “dislike mobs” exist for the singular reason that cultural meaning is attached to dislikes in the first place, at least among intensive YouTube users. Through this framework, we understand how dislikes function as a means of protest against particular content or creators, despite the fact that the actual economic effect of dislikes on a video is unclear if existent at all. This structure, which places central importance on the cultural capital of YouTube products, mirrors common preoccupations within white power ideologies, which center on a sense of belonging and community. Popularity is revered because it suggests the opposite of loneliness and alienation—now that the subject has adopted white power ideologies, they are told that they are no longer by themselves, but are instead part of a greater whole. The subject can then gain community not only through being popular themselves, or through liking (upvoting) preferred users and videos, but also through joining groups like dislike mobs, which are centered on attaining a particular goal (such as one million dislikes on the *Ghostbusters* trailer), and which then celebrate that goal as the earned achievement of a specific community. This community may or may not be explicitly white, but it can often be coded as white through various signal terms (“alt-right,” “anti-SJW,” etc.). For example, when Milo Yiannopoulos was permanently suspended from Twitter following his encouraging of followers to harass *Ghostbusters* star Leslie Jones with racist abuse, he wrote in a statement, “With the cowardly suspension of my account, Twitter has confirmed itself as a safe space for Muslim terrorists and Black Lives Matter extremists, but a no-go zone for conservatives” (qtd. in Warzel 2016). Statements like this, and less overt examples of dog whistling, regularly characterize white power content in social media contexts.

The term “dog whistling,” or “dog whistle politics,” uses the metaphor of the dog whistle to describe how particular rhetorical strategies speak to a subset of an audience such that the true,

underlying meaning of the message is audible to that group while being inaudible to others. Ian Haney-Lopez writes, “In general, using a dog whistle simply means speaking in code to a target audience. Politicians routinely do this, seeking to surreptitiously communicate support to small groups of impassioned voters whose commitments are not broadly embraced by the body politic” (2014, 4). In recent years, racial dog whistling has become more prominent in American public discourse and more commonly identified by news media, particularly as it manifests in the speech of Donald Trump. Haney-Lopez goes on to write,

A final important difference between routine coded political speech and racial dog whistling lies in what the target audience hears. To be sure, some voters clearly perceive a message of racial resentment and react positively to it; *politician W is with us and against those minorities*, they may say to themselves. But many others would be repulsed by such a message, just as they would reject any politician who openly used racial epithets. For these voters, the cloaked language hides—even from themselves—the racial character of the overture. Terms like gangbanger and sharia law superficially reference behavior and religion. Even as these terms agitate racial fears, for many voters this thin patina suffices to obscure from them the racial nature of their attitudes. (2014, 5)

Though Haney-Lopez wrote this prior to the announcement of Trump’s presidential run and subsequent election, his analysis demonstrates the central issues that emerge with racial dog whistling, and that have come to greater public prominence and visibility since 2016.

Questions of belonging also emerge in and influence conflicts between users and YouTube itself. When PewDiePie and similar users express disgust or anger with the platform, there is no cognitive dissonance for them because a) the platform is not their friend, but rather a vehicle

through which other users gave them capital and/or a sense of belonging, and b) the platform can be segmented and anthropomorphized based on its history and owners/managers. YouTube users as well as media scholars have identified the ways in which the platform's enormous growth since founding, and most importantly its purchase by Google, has resulted in its corporatization (this issue will come up again in PewDiePie's competition/conflict with T-Series). "Despite its reputation for being a youthful alternative to mainstream media, since being purchased by Google, YouTube has increasingly evolved from a site where ad-free, amateur videos were posted to a site dominated by commercialized, professional videos" (Morreale 2014). Users are aware of this phenomenon, and it and their perceptions of it shape subsequent engagements with the platform in important ways. For PewDiePie, the ambiguity of the site's algorithms are indicative of its failure to uphold the "standards" that users expect of it.

PewDiePie's conflicts with YouTube manifest in various videos, but most notably in "Can this video get 1 million dislikes?" (2016a) and "YouTube Rewind 2018 but it's actually good" (2018). The former is a sequel to "Can this video hit 1 million likes?" (2016b) in which PewDiePie satirizes popular YouTubers who use aggressive and/or outlandish tactics to ask for likes, which will increase their visibility on the platform. PewDiePie especially mocks the terminology of "smash that like button" and over-the-top performances of masculinity in the form of, for example, taking one's shirt off.⁴ In "1 million dislikes," published two weeks after "1 million likes,"

⁴ See Maloney, Roberts, and Caruso for discussion of PewDiePie's performances of gender and sexuality (2018). Though the authors argue that these (2015–16) performances reflect "affectionate homosociality" and "satirising [of] hypermasculine aggression" (2018, 1705), and Roberts and Maloney have asserted that "In PewDiePie's most popular videos we found no instances of sexism, nor of the feminising discourse men have traditionally used to dominate other men" (2017), a number of PewDiePie videos posted since the article's publication

PewDiePie pretends to speak with what he presents as the shadowy, oppressive forces that control YouTube; his face is literally a white space surrounded by an ominous, largely black room of shadows. When PewDiePie answers his phone, a formal male voice says, “Mr. PewDiePie? It’s Google.”

PewDiePie: Google... Google, you called at last. Now tell me... tell me about the secret algorithm. You promised, once I hit 50 million [subscribers], you would tell me everything. I need more power! I’m running low. JackSepticEye is catching up. I’m falling behind! Google... what, you want Lilly Singh on top? That’s right, I know you don’t.

Google: Now that you’ve finally made it to 50 million subs, you have access to a super-secret, higher level of YouTube Heroes: YouTube Super Saiyan God Level Hero.

PewDiePie: YouTube Super Saiyan God Level Hero? What is the key information?

Google: Listen closely to this information...

PewDiePie: Okay.

Google: The likes, they don’t do anything. It’s a dead button. It’s been a dead button all along.

PewDiePie: ... No ... Ugh! ... The dislikes. What about the dislikes?

refer to women as “wahmen,” satirize the idea of “respecting women,” and use common misogynistic terms from platforms like Reddit, such as “white knighting” (PewDiePie 2018b, 2018c, 2017a, 2017b).

Google: Don't you see? That's the key. The more dislikes, the more power. How do you think so many shit channels can rise to the top? Ghostbusters... Rebecca Black... Justin Bieber VEVO... Call of Duty...⁵

PewDiePie: So, you're telling me, if I get more dislikes...

Google: You will become more powerful than you could ever imagine.

PewDiePie: It will be done. (2016a)

The rest of the video is a remake of “1 million likes,” in which PewDiePie goes to ridiculous lengths to beg his viewers for dislikes. Here, he satirizes YouTube culture, particularly that of YouTubers who “inauthentically” try to gain viewers and subscribers, while also including a more serious critique of YouTube itself. PewDiePie’s explicit assertion that the platform values “shit channels” and intervenes in what might be called users’ “natural” economy in order to promote said “shit channels” over the good, authentic ones (like PewDiePie’s) reflects a broader conflict occurring on the platform regarding its corporatization. This narrative of conflict, of the lone entrepreneur YouTuber pitted against the Goliaths that are mega companies, is one of the points of contention that brings PewDiePie vs. T-Series to a head.

That “1 million dislikes” is in fact one of the most disliked videos on YouTube, and that its creator had to search that out and explicitly request it in order to make it so, gestures toward Dyer’s argument that whiteness depends on absence to define itself. PewDiePie’s request for dislikes is not just another iteration of his request for likes, but a fundamental redevelopment of it;

⁵ It’s worth noting that three of the four “shit channels” PewDiePie lists are explicitly feminized in the context of YouTube as a whole. The *Ghostbusters* reboot is disliked because it depicts women in the film’s starring roles, Rebecca Black is disliked because she is a young girl, and Justin Bieber is disliked because he is popular among young girls (see Dougher and Pecknold 2016).

look at how easily I dominate this platform, such that I have to seek out supposedly negative feedback that comes automatically to Ghostbusters and similar channels. Simultaneously, look at how ill-functioning this platform is, that it allows videos with negative feedback to circulate at the rate that they do. This narrative of YouTube as villain recurs more generally throughout white power discourse on the platform. A slightly strange thing about anti-YouTube discourse is that so much of it happens *on* YouTube. Users seem to fantasize about shaming the platform into functioning the way that they want it to, while ignoring the fact that it doesn't matter to YouTube's profitability whether or not they dislike official YouTube videos and like PewDiePie's anti-YouTube videos. If users do understand this economic dynamic, they ignore and deprioritize it in favor of an emphasis on *cultural* visions of "winning" over the platform, which is fundamentally affective. Despite the fact that every like, dislike, comment, and most importantly, view that they give the platform maintains and/or increases YouTube's economic power, these users' investment in the notion of mocking YouTube's perceived social politics wins out as being of greater importance.

3.2 Analysis

Affective investment is a central determining factor in user engagements (casual and intensive alike) with YouTube. This is particularly the case for professional YouTubers, users who are YouTube famous by their own design and as a profession. YouTubers have to create and maintain consistent personas in order to draw fans and keep viewers subscribed to their channels. Brooke Erin Duffy writes of the social media stars that she interviewed, "both fledgling digital media producers and well-established blogger-brands emphasized the time, energy, and discipline

necessary to build and sustain a social media persona” (2017, 63). The YouTuber’s persona consists not just of the genre of videos that they create, but of their physical appearance, the mise-en-scene of their videos, the ways in which they perform for and interact with viewers (both within and outside of the videos-proper), etc. The creation of a persona also has to convey “authenticity,” despite its intrinsically inauthentic nature. As PewDiePie’s mocking of YouTubers who try to get a certain number of likes on their videos demonstrates, the perception of inauthenticity is a significant sin in the context of YouTube culture. “Attention-creating performances of a private authentic self are the most valuable commodity in social media celebrification. Marwick’s definition of microcelebrity as thinking of oneself as a celebrity and treating others accordingly is another way of saying that the production of attention is reciprocal; success or failure in social media and in the ‘star system of YouTube’ is immediately readable by the number of followers, likes, subscribers, and so on” (Jerslev 2016, 5240).

PewDiePie’s conflict with competing channel T-Series provides a case study on the importance of popularity to both YouTube’s economy and content. PewDiePie encouraged and helped organize the fan movement “Subscribe to PewDiePie” in response to the possible threat that T-Series, a major music channel operating out of India, might take PewDiePie’s place as the channel with the greatest number of subscribers. On 29 April 2019, I conducted four searches on YouTube to compare the relative visibility of these two channels. When I searched for the term “t-series” while logged into my personal Google/YouTube account, I scrolled down four pages of content (17 videos, some of which were from T-Series) before getting to a link to the official T-Series channel. The content that I passed included apparently entirely unrelated videos that I had already watched, like Childish Gambino’s “This is America.” Passed content also included several videos about the “PewDiePie vs. T-Series” conflict. When I conducted the same search for the

term “t-series” while logged out of Google/YouTube, I scrolled down just one and a half pages (five videos total) before getting to the official T-Series channel. Alternately, whether I searched for “pewdiepie” while logged in to or logged out of Google/YouTube, the official PewDiePie channel was the very first result that appeared in both cases. This point of comparison is a useful one to consider because it demonstrates that the initially informal “competition” under discussion had and continues to have important effects on the YouTube interface itself in the form of search results. The fact that the T-Series channel became so strongly associated with the PewDiePie channel, especially following the Christchurch mosque shooting and PewDiePie’s call to end the “Subscribe to PewDiePie” meme, demonstrates that algorithmic features in the form of search results are some of the central means by which creators on YouTube garner clicks, view time, and ad revenue.

Perhaps unsurprisingly because of the nature of my research, when I was logged into my personal account, the first video result for the “pewdiepie” search that was not itself a PewDiePie video was “Pewdiepie and The Rebranding of White Nationalism,” by user Kat Blaque (2019). This video provides a useful discussion from a YouTuber’s perspective on how white power content is normalized in the context of platforms like YouTube in order to win new supporters. Affect is a determining factor in white power, particularly in these cases—feelings of alienation, depression, and loneliness result in the white subject’s desire for authority figures that espouse white power ideologies. Kat Blaque cites YouTuber Faraday Speaks, who says in his own video “My Descent into the Alt-Right Pipeline,” “It appealed to me because it made me feel a sense of belonging” (2019). Affective investments in belonging in this context frame white power community as a response to white alienation, itself presented as a product of the demographic decline of whiteness. PewDiePie generates feelings of belonging through visual and aural

languages such as a signature fist bump, which he usually concludes videos with by gently bumping his fist against the camera. He brings the viewer in and frames them as part of a collective by addressing fans conspiratorially and fondly. In the area of affective investment, the concept of a corporation (T-Series) and/or a nation (India) competing with an individual (PewDiePie) becomes a central rhetorical tenant of PewDiePie's narrative. It is in response to claims that his competition is inherently racial and racist that PewDiePie and his fans claim that the conflict is all about economics, rather than race or nationality (Asian Boss 2019b). This concept evokes white power imaginings of the small group of whites competing with an overwhelming, savage horde of people of color a la the film *300* or the small group of whites being assailed by a shadowy, all-powerful organization, a la anti-Semitic concepts of "globalization."

PewDiePie's first "diss track" against T-Series, "bitch lasagna," initially presents itself as ironic and humorous, only existing to parody hip-hop music videos (with the genre being of particular note for its association with Black American musicians). By the end of "bitch lasagna," however, the track and video take themselves more seriously both as cultural and economic objects. Culturally, "bitch lasagna" engages in more overt attacks on T-Series that are always explicitly focused on its status as an Indian corporation—as I describe below, almost all of the "disses" expressed in the track take as their subjects India and its population, not T-Series. Economically, the video concludes by acknowledging its status as an object of capital. When the video concludes by encouraging viewers to stream the song on Spotify and download it on iTunes, it provides them with an economic, material means by which to assert their preference for PewDiePie (and all that he represents) over T-Series (and all that it represents). In doing so, the song provides PewDiePie's viewers with a way to help him "win" via the promotion of the diss track; despite the fact that it ostensibly isn't supposed to be taken seriously, it is nevertheless

presented as an object that viewers and fans will genuinely want to consume for, at some level, its artistic merits as well as its comedic ones.

The desire to win is affective in the sense that it involves an intimate, physical and emotional investment. Importantly, the fear of losing, inherently connected to the desire to win, is also more fundamentally affective. The investment in *not* losing, in “winning” on a cultural and economic level, reflects broader trends that have been identified and studied by social scientists. Jonathan M. Metzler’s *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment is Killing America’s Heartland* (2019) describes the ways in which white subjects often actively choose to support public policy that physically harms them/us in order to “win” by maintaining the socio-political subjugation of people of color. Metzler writes,

...increasingly unified forms of conservatism advanced politically through overt or implicit appeals to what has been called *white racial resentment*. In other words, these agendas gained support by trumpeting connections to unspoken or overt claims that particular policies, issues, or decisions served also to defend or restore white privilege or quell threats to idealized notions of white authority represented by demographic or cultural shifts. This was both a top-down process (politicians used racial resentment as a tool for class exploitation) and a bottom-up one (the language of white resentment became an increasingly accepted way of talking about whiteness more broadly). (2019, 7)

The symbiotic relationship that Metzler describes here is also visible in PewDiePie’s engagement with his fans, which relies simultaneously on their forming movements, memes, etc. independent of his direct influence, which he then encourages or reacts positively to, and his active creation and maintenance of particular narratives that his fans accept as truth. It is not just that PewDiePie

wants to be “defended” by his fans, or that his fans want to “defend” him—rather, the even more important goal is to see him “win” and stay “winning.” “White backlash politics gave certain white populations the sensation of winning, particularly by upending the gains of minorities...” (Metzl 2019, 8). White “winning” necessitates the defeat of and infliction of loss upon people of color. It is not enough to maintain existing white privileges; rather, undoing socio-political work conducted by people of color (as in the Trump administration’s preoccupation with reversing policies advanced under the Obama administration), promoting the actively dominant position of whiteness, and maintaining white supremacy as a system that *actively*, not just passively, harms people of color is the only acceptable outcome under this framework. YouTube fuels the fear of losing under discussion in the context of this case study because it frames the potential loss as being the result of competition with a foreign company of non-white others. As Metzl notes, “Forms of white disconnect emerging today—and not coincidentally, at the very moment when US white populations begin to imagine an end to demographic dominance—instead encourage a host of anxieties and decisions that threaten the well-being of a great many people” (Metzl 2019, 19). It is in answer to the perceived “threat” of white supremacy’s loss that white populations become preoccupied with a game- or war-like framework, in which power is lost if it is not won. Anxiety is fundamentally connected to affect generation, because the desire to win is more precisely defined as the desire not to lose.

When PewDiePie officially “lost” to T-Series in the most subscriptions contest, he posted a music video titled “Congratulations,” in which he sarcastically congratulated T-Series on “winning.” In the vein of earlier rhetoric about the competing channel, this video depicts T-Series as a corporate giant that cheated through various means in order to “win,” and places specific emphasis on the fact that T-Series is an Indian channel. Particularly notable lyrics of

“Congratulations” include, “India, I’m sorry about the memes, you’re the best / I love my Indian bros from Bombay to Bangladesh / I’ll take on all the world for you, I’m a heavy hitter / ’Bout to cause a genocide so you can call me Hi–” (2019a). Instead of finishing the word “Hitler,” PewDiePie and the other performers in the video return to the song’s chorus. It might seem somewhat ironic that in mocking the fact that his detractors have called him a white supremacist, PewDiePie makes a joke about the Holocaust, but this cognitive dissonance is a central component of the white power rhetoric that often characterizes social media content like “Congratulations.”

It is in the fact that PewDiePie’s white power ideologies are a source of debate that white power (and white supremacy) is naturalized in public discourse; if some of his viewers don’t perceive him to be a white power ideologue (he cites in some videos the fact that he has fans who are Indian, with the implication being that he can therefore not be racist and/or nationalist against Indians), then his relationship to white power is a point of contention. If this relationship is a point of contention, then the bar for what constitutes white power ideology becomes ambiguous, making it a more regular feature of public discourse. Another set of lyrics from “Congratulations” states: “I got a letter in the post, hmm, what is this? / T-Series saying ‘cease and desist’ / Had a problem with me telling them to hold their defecation / But let me educate you, silly, that’s not defamation / T-Series can eat a dick / Still not defamation / Suck my fucking Swedish meatballs / Still not defamation / Did you know that Indians have poo-poo in their brains? / That’s a blatant racist lie / Yeah, but still not defamation” (2019a). The lyrics to “Congratulations” reflect the importance of irony to whiteness and white supremacy in the YouTube context; PewDiePie “can’t” be accused of racism, because he is mocking and embodying the very accusations of racism that have already been leveled against him, *and* because he identifies his own racist remarks as being racist. In the process, PewDiePie defends white power ideology, arguing that even if a statement is “a blatant

racist lie,” since it is “still not defamation,” then the speaker should face no consequences either legally or economically (meaning on the private platform of YouTube). PewDiePie himself states this “blatant racist lie” in the process, demonstrating that he will face no consequences for it because there is nothing wrong with advancing white power ideologies on YouTube. This rhetoric serves the simultaneous function of dog whistling and faux innocence, the latter of which is central to successful circulations of the former. Matthew Sheffield quotes from the neo-Nazi site *Daily Stormer* to demonstrate how white power activists have embraced PewDiePie: “Some may ask ‘is Pewdiepie really racist? Is he really a Nazi? Does he really want to kill all Jews?’ Who knows. He could be doing all this only to cause a stir things up [sic] and get free publicity. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter, since the effect is the same; it normalizes Nazism, and marginalizes our enemies” (2017).

If the viewer of “Congratulations” is a white power activist, then they identify the song as belonging to and circulating the ideologies of their platform, but if the viewer is not, then they identify the song as mocking the supposed dramatic over-sensitivity of people of color who identify PewDiePie’s message as being white supremacist. It is also important to note the line, “Suck my fucking Swedish meatballs,” which explicitly emphasizes PewDiePie’s nationality in order to implicitly emphasize his whiteness. He doesn’t need to point out that he has blond hair and blue eyes when he can instead draw from white power rhetoric that identifies Swedes as part of the superior “Aryan” race. Indeed, the fact that PewDiePie’s persona is heavily informed by his being Swedish will also serve as a reminder to followers and fans who are already in the know about a since-deleted Tweet in which PewDiePie explicitly referred to himself as Aryan. On 28 November 2016, PewDiePie replied to @ayyjqce’s “@pewdiepie since when did you become a fucking nazi?” with the Tweet, “@ayyjqce aryan, superior genetics since birth” (qtd. in Sheffield

2017). Dorothy Kim describes how German nationalist movements, culminating in the Third Reich, imagined and idealized the nation's fictionally white, Viking heritage. Kim writes,

After World War II, despite the defeat of the Axis powers, these ideas didn't go away. Rather, they saw a resurgence in specific circles, including various far-right neo-pagan groups, like the Scandinavian Nordic Resistance Movement, known for their neo-Nazi violence. [...] Nor is this use of Old Norse and Viking "history" limited to specific alt-right subgroups. In fact, it is a generalized social fixture in these circles. For example, when researcher Patrik Hermansson went undercover among the denizens of this world, he attended 'gatherings where extremists drank mead from a traditional Viking horn and prayed to the Norse god Odin.' The Viking past contributes to a medieval toolkit of language, allusion and symbolism used to transmit white supremacist messages. (2019)

Thus, via his vaguer methods of rhetorical signaling (Swedish nationalism that translates to white nationalism) as well as previous explicit comments on being Aryan, PewDiePie consciously evokes white power ideology that reads his Swedish nationality as being indicative of Aryan "superior genetics."

The use of irony is central to not only the type of internet humor that PewDiePie engages in, but the more general relationship between meme culture and white power. As Kat Blaque notes, irony gives subjects "plausible deniability," which enables white power content to be expressed and normalized in popular settings (2019). Popular reading by viewers of the PewDiePie videos as being ironic rather than serious manifests, for example, in the YouTube video "Do Indians Find PewDiePie's Music Videos 'Racist'? | ASIAN BOSS," in which one interviewee says,

“[PewDiePie’s music videos are] funny when people are, you know, are aware that he is sort of, you know, a comedian. I mean, he jokes a lot. But if– I think if someone isn’t aware that he’s a comedian, they would obviously get offended by it” (Asian Boss 2019a).

PewDiePie’s “I’M RACIST?” video, in addition to having been published in December 2016, shortly after the 2016 US presidential election, seems to mimic the rhetoric often used by Donald Trump online, either intentionally or unintentionally. The use of caps lock has been noted as a characteristic of Trump-style writing, particularly on social media (with Twitter being the platform-of-choice for Trump) (Bort 2018; Mufson 2018). Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Doron Taussig describe that “*Making himself the arbiter of the legitimacy of institutions able to hold him accountable...*” is a central feature of Trump’s rhetoric (2017, 635). PewDiePie’s consistently combative relationship with YouTube suggests a similar investment in preemptively attacking the platform upon which he is reliant and to which he is at least marginally accountable. Similarly, PewDiePie shares an anti-news media preoccupation with Trump, the latter of whom “insulates his followers from reporters’ exposure of his inconsistency, lack of facticity, and the impracticability of his plans by labeling the legacy media ‘FAKE NEWS,’ questioning their motives, and identifying them as enemies of the American people” (Jamieson and Taussig 2017, 638). In “I’M RACIST?” PewDiePie accuses news media (consistently referred to by PewDiePie as “the media,” with publications like the *Wall Street Journal* and entertainment site *LADbible* having no perceived distinction based on prestige or rigor) of being biased against him, performing exaggerated affect that indicates his seemingly persecuted status in the process. This exaggerated affect not only presents PewDiePie as victimized, but also maintains his access to plausible deniability; the literal crocodile tears that he sheds can easily be identified as part of a comedic

performance, despite the fact that many of his fans read these tears as being sincere and humanizing.

The articles that PewDiePie references in “I’M RACIST?” themselves focus on his earlier video “DELETING MY CHANNEL AT 50 MILLION” (2016c). In this video, PewDiePie criticizes infrastructural changes to YouTube that removed a “subscriptions” channel from viewers’ home page on YouTube, replacing it with a “trending” channel. This change, PewDiePie and some other YouTubers argued, meant that viewers watched new videos from their subscribed channels less often and either intentionally unsubscribed or were unknowingly, automatically unsubscribed from those subscribed channels, hurting YouTubers’ bottom line. The design has since been changed again by YouTube, so that “from your subscriptions” is a main channel that comes up on the YouTube home page.

As the title of his video suggests, PewDiePie claimed that once he hit 50 million subscriptions, he would delete his channel in protest of the site’s changes. With over-wide eyes, an exaggerated voice, and a smile, PewDiePie says near the end of the video,

YouTube is trying to kill my channel. It’s happening. It’s clear, if you watch my analytics, it’s all going down there. And I think my videos are *better*, I think they’re really funny, and it seems that you guys enjoy them as well. So it’s a shame that it’s going in this direction. [deepens voice] I’m not gonna let YouTube win! I see how it is, it’s because I have so many subscribers... they’re trying to kill my channel. This is all a *conspiracy*! [ominous music begins] YouTube wants to kill my channel. It’s because I’m always complaining to them... I don’t have family friendly content... I clickbait too much, huh? Is that it? It all makes sense. YouTube wants my channel gone. They want someone else on top. Someone really,

extremely cancerous, like Lilly Singh. I'm white. [claps once] Can I make that comment? But I do think that's a problem. And I'm not gonna let YouTube win! I'm not gonna let YouTube defeat me! (2016c)

Thus, PewDiePie aims to use the “DELETING MY CHANNEL AT 50 MILLION” video to convey both serious critiques of YouTube as a platform and exaggerated reactions to those critiques, which try to convey self-deprecating humor, as in the line, “This is all a *conspiracy!*” However, the fact that his seemingly parodic complaints about his whiteness disadvantaging him on YouTube are sincerely believed by white power activists means that when he “jokingly” signals, “I'm white. [claps once] Can I make that comment? But I do think that's a problem,” many of his viewers can and do take it seriously. Singh, the YouTuber that PewDiePie references as a rival, is also known as ||Superwoman|| on YouTube, where she has over 14.7 million subscribers as of 20 May 2019. She is of Indian descent and runs a comedy channel that often references Indian culture. PewDiePie has a long history of mocking and attempting to feud with ||Superwoman||, one that one of his fans has actually compiled a collection of (Hopeless R***** 2018). His most public attack came two years after the “DELETING MY CHANNEL AT 50 MILLION” video in the form of PewDiePie calling ||Superwoman|| “a crybaby and an idiot” after she Tweeted about the wage gap between male and female YouTubers (Stone 2018). His “jokingly” referring to her as “really, extremely cancerous” in the “DELETING MY CHANNEL” video therefore coexists with and is inseparable from his other, “non-joking” critiques of her, which explicitly draw attention to her identities as a woman of color. (PewDiePie also notably uses the cancer metaphor when discussing news media: “It's disgusting. It's absolutely disgusting. How desperate can you be? This clickbait journalism— is just the— the purest form of cancer” [2016d]).

There are two central reasons why the history of this particular video is an important and useful precursor to my discussion on its aftereffects; first, it demonstrates how PewDiePie consistently utilizes irony as a method of message protection, wherein the message being conveyed is inherently shielded from scrutiny by the humorous and exaggerated nature in which it is performed, and second, it begins to illuminate the ways in which endless, repetitive layers of meaning and un-meaning are fundamentally characteristic of whiteness in and of social media.

3.3 Levels of Looking and Meaning

PewDiePie opens “I’M RACIST?” with a plug for an upcoming livestream, then a skit in which he pretends to talk to his mother on the phone, assuring her that he is “not a Nazi” before sarcastically closing off with, “Hail Hydra” (a Marvel Comics phrase indicating one’s membership in a contemporary Nazi offshoot). The way that PewDiePie introduces his specific ire with news media in this video centers on equating such media with “hate comments” and “generally really dumb comments,” which he is “used to.” He says, “I’ve seen bad articles, but now they all just came out at once” (2016c). He begins by citing less credible or more gossip- and entertainment-centric sources like *Sky News*, beginning a very long breakdown of an article published on *LADbible*. He quotes part of the article’s opening sentence: “Is there anything more annoying than some insecure rich guy...,” trailing off between “rich” and “guy” as mournful music starts to play over the medium-close up shot of his face. “Wait, insecure?” he says. After a pause, the camera cuts to a close-up shot of his face in black and white; he pretends to wipe away tears and says, “Okay, I guess– I guess, you know, I mean, I know I’m– I’m a little self-conscious about my body...” The camera cuts to a still-black and white medium-close up shot that zooms back in on

the close up as he continues, cradling part of his face in one hand: “You know, I feel– I feel weird about it, but you didn’t have to sneak that in there, okay?” There is a jump cut back to PewDiePie in a medium-close up color shot, and the music abruptly cuts off as PewDiePie laughs. He throws his hands out, taking a step back from the microphone in exasperation before stepping back to it. “What do you mean, ‘insecure rich guy?’” he says. “What do you mean, ‘Is there anything more annoying?’ Yes [there] is, this article. How about that for starter?”

Feigning deep personal offense or jokingly crying for comedic effect is a common trope on YouTube and other platforms, but I argue that PewDiePie’s performances of affect in this context serve dual functions that reflect an important facet of whiteness’ more general socio-political manifestations. PewDiePie knows that because he is white, his emotions will be taken more seriously by audiences that have been raised in a society that prioritizes/protects white subjects’ humanity and affect while systemically denying the existence of humanity and affect in subjects of color (Brunsmma, Brown, and Placier 2013; Cabrera 2014; Castagano 2013).⁶ Indeed, some of the top comments under the “I’M RACIST?” video affirm that despite the seemingly joking nature of PewDiePie’s sadness, some viewers still experienced the amount of empathy and pity we might expect if the video’s subject were *sincerely* performing hurt. User the epic derpster writes, “I feel bad for pewds, he gets to much hate when he tries to be funny” (1.7k likes as of 19

⁶ We might argue that white subjects cannot be affectively prioritized in this way if Black subjects, and to a lesser extent, other subjects of color, are consistently imagined as having exaggerated emotionality in Western culture. However, this approach would fail to account for the fact that emotionality is read as being de-humanizing in subjects of color while it is read as not only humanizing, but sympathetically so, in white subjects. Contestations of emotionality are a consistent feature of critical academic work on race and racism (Matias, Montoya, and Nishi 2016; Radd and Grosland 2019; Wanzo 2015).

May 2019). In response to a line that PewDiePie says in the video, user Samantha-M. quotes, “‘Because hating on PewDiePie is such a meme that we can get clicks out of it.’ That hurt my heart” (937 likes as of 19 May 2019). Similarly, user Sorenmine writes, “‘is there anything more annoying than some insecure rich guy?’ How about people who think money can magically cure all of your mental problems?” (24 likes as of 18 May 2019), and user My_name_is Amy writes, “‘This breaks my heart, i can’t imagine how it feels being under the microscope where people use your name to generate clicks. Keep doing your thing Felix, those of use who actually watch your videos know what kind of person you are ;)’” (18 likes as of 18 May 2019). PewDiePie’s evocation of his mother at the beginning of the video, his affected tears, and the rest of his performance in the video actively encourages viewers to perceive him as a victim, assailed on all sides by “the media.” At the same time, he uses enough irony to be able to claim plausible deniability; he can always deny having actually meant it when he expressed victimhood, despite the fact that many of his fans read him as a victim in need of defending.

Later in the video, PewDiePie says of the *LADbible* article’s author, “Like, does this guy have autism? I don’t like to make that joke, but I’m– I’m concerned if you thinks that was– if he can’t tell the difference [between sarcasm and seriousness].” Again, PewDiePie mimics Trumpian rhetoric that relies on incivility via personal attacks and, specifically, ableist remarks (Jamieson and Taussig 2017). That PewDiePie acknowledges his autism “joke” as being something he doesn’t “like to make” indicates the ways in which he attempts to differentiate himself from Trump-like rhetoric. And ultimately, the duality of making the joke but not liking to make it, of being sarcastic but also being serious, of pretending to be victimized for comedic effect but also presenting oneself as actually being victimized, all aids PewDiePie’s rhetorical strategy. What makes people laugh is what was intended from the beginning. What people take offense to was

sarcasm from the beginning. This is the ultimate function of dog whistling, to have it both ways, such that one can always deploy plausible deniability if accused of actually meaning what they said. It's notable that PewDiePie at one point in his response video says, "It's extremely annoying how I can't make jokes on my channel without anyone quoting it as actual facts, like something I actually said. Do they know my— have they seen any videos coming out on my channel?" (2016d). Despite the fact that he did actually say that he was being discriminated against for being white, he uses the language of "quoting it as actual facts" to argue that the irony of his statement was apparent from the beginning because of his performance of the line. It is clear from the video that PewDiePie is exaggerating for comic effect, but it is also clear that his jokes often thinly veil sincere sentiments, as is the case across genres of comedy. It's also clear that his brand, both the persona and the humor style, is niche and generally only legible to his fans, viewers who are "extremely online," meaning that it only makes sense that mainstream news and entertainment outlets might misinterpret his use of sarcasm. PewDiePie's referring to news and entertainment outlets as "the media," and his conflation of all such outlets, mimics the generalizations often made in Trumpian rhetoric.

This video most importantly conveys the relationship between visibility and power as it manifests on YouTube. We experience endless levels of looking here; we see PewDiePie himself as he narrates, snapshots of Twitter feeds and Facebook comments, a rolling feed of the article being quoted, the video that the article cites, etc. When we have these infinite levels of looking, we see another example of literal levelling—everything is the same. Everything means the same thing, and it's all given equal importance. All that matters is visibility, such that PewDiePie takes offense to even very minor gossip blogs getting some small number of views from covering one of his controversies. More importantly, over the course of his videos, PewDiePie makes it so that

nothing matters. Nothing means anything, both in the sense that there is no meaning imbued in any word or action, and in the sense that *nothing*, the absence of words or actions, can mean *anything*, any infinite number of meanings chosen based entirely on the narrator's (PewDiePie's) design. As one watches these videos, one is so inundated with content in, of, and tangential to the original texts that all of these objects become equal in meaning, which is to say, equal in meaninglessness. The viewer is not supposed to be able to tell the difference, never mind *care* about the difference, between irony and sincerity or sarcasm and seriousness, because ultimately, everything is irony and everything is sarcasm. It can only be this way if PewDiePie is to deny accountability for or even ownership of certain things that he says.

The specific comment "Just to get more clicks on their shitty fucking website" is indicative of how much investment PewDiePie has in this particular facet of the conflict. Within the framework that he perhaps unconsciously presents to us, visual economy is of paramount importance, and is itself the central site *of* the conflict. The anger that he expresses toward *LADbible* and similar outlets is not just about their content or the "slander" of his name, but about the fact that they get clicks and views from that content. The economic effect that PewDiePie perceives (and prioritizes) in this conflict is others making ad revenue by capitalizing on his fame, to no monetary benefit of his own. Why, then, does PewDiePie frame the issue as being a specifically affective one (as in the video's very title "I'M RACIST?", which makes the topic inherently personal rather than economic)? PewDiePie knows that appealing to his viewers' affective sensibilities (their emotional investment in the star they affectionately refer to as "Pewds," their sometimes sexual attraction to him, and their platform-based investment in what he represents on YouTube as an "independent," original creator) is the most effective means by which

to mobilize them. (Though PewDiePie acknowledges himself that he has several editors working for him, and he likely has a number of other employees that help him maintain the brand as well).

Thus, in the “I’M RACIST?” video PewDiePie explicitly engages with his fans and other viewers, including “haters,” in order to ensure that the conflict is affectively meaningful for them. If viewers are invested in and aware of the ways in which PewDiePie wants them to engage, they will act accordingly, and PewDiePie gives them implicit instruction on what he wants them to do. At one point in the video, he quotes approved reader comments on the articles that he critiques: “‘He was being sarcastic, did you even watch the video fully?’ Thank you! Well, I’m glad to see that people understand in the comments. ‘Good god, when did you become *BuzzFeed*? Remember when you were an actual newspaper for real journalism?’ Well... this is just how it is now. ‘Cause fucking *BuzzFeed* gets millions of clicks and real– real news stories doesn’t get enough coverage, so they got to clickbait to keep up” (PewDiePie 2016d). He also mocks comments that are derogatory or negative toward him, and concludes the video by saying, “Thanks for defending me when these shitty, stupid articles arrive. I– I really appreciate that. And, uh, I’ll see you in the next video.” He then winks at the camera and adds, “Stay awesome,” giving his signature “bro fist” in which he gently fist bumps the camera. This first conclusion to the video demonstrates how PewDiePie capitalizes on his fans’ affective (emotional, physical, and economic) investments in him to produce specific results, including encouraging fans to continue “defending” him.

Perhaps ironically, PewDiePie follows this sincere and affectionate closure with the video’s real ending. After cutting to black, the camera slowly fades back in on PewDiePie putting on a brown military hat and jacket. He sits at his desk and watches footage of Adolf Hitler giving a speech on his computer; at one point, the camera cuts directly to the footage being played. As he watches the speech, PewDiePie smiles and nods in approval. The message is clear: *It’s so*

ridiculous that they're calling me a Nazi that I'm going to dress up like and pretend to be one. The *New York Times* reports,

...we do know that the design of internet platforms can create and reinforce extremist beliefs. Their recommendation algorithms often steer users toward edgier content, a loop that results in more time spent on the app, and more advertising revenue for the company. Their hate speech policies are weakly enforced. And their practices for removing graphic videos — like the ones that circulated on social media for hours after the Christchurch shooting, despite the companies' attempts to remove them — are inconsistent at best. (Roose 2019)

The fact that PewDiePie shares a concern about social media's recommendation algorithms with anti-racists suggests an interesting point of tension, from which emerges the true nature of his conflict with YouTube as he expresses it in his videos. His conflict with YouTube is about what the *function* of the platform is, and why and how it is monetized. He states, "The video ["DELETING MY CHANNEL"] is literally me standing up for everyone on YouTube. I— and I even explained that it's not about the views, it's about reaching your audience, but you know, whatever's convenient for you to shit on me. Go ahead, you know."

3.4 White Space

The result of the visual economy under discussion is that algorithms promote extremism, because controversial content drives views and engagement. A search that I conducted on 29 April 2019 for the term "white genocide" resulted in the same page of top results whether or not I was logged into my own Google/YouTube account. The identical nature of these searches, compared

to the different results that I got for other searches while logged in or out, might suggest a predetermined set of results for this particular search term, or might suggest that these particular search results are so popular that they emerge at the top of a search regardless of whether or not the user is logged in. (It's also important to note that my results are always already determined in part by my IP address, my location, my language, etc. My argument in using these examples is not to say that they are representative of any broad trends, but rather to provide examples of interface visibility—how the YouTube interface works from a user perspective, wherein the user can usually only guess as to which algorithms are determining their results and, subsequently, “their” YouTube). The ambiguity of algorithms, and of many other platform functions that are not necessarily immediately apparent to the user, can be understood in part through a consideration of what *is* made visible to the user: colorful content in the form of thumbnails, titles, notifications, emojis, etc., all set against the backdrop of white space. As Chun and Galloway demonstrate, interface visibility is always inherently political (Chun 2011, Galloway 2012).

When I look at white space on social media, I'm looking at something to be filled with content. Here, I draw from Mulvey's concept of “to-be-looked-at-ness,” arguing that white space in social media is a vessel into which affect is poured. Mulvey uses her original concept to describe how the (male) gaze is central to filmic engagements with female bodies, with those bodies existing to be looked at (1999). Similarly, I argue that social media platforms present specifically white emptiness and prompt users to fill this space with content, making the space's only function to delineate an absence to be filled with presence/meaning. Text boxes that provide prompts (“Select files to upload” in the case of YouTube, the more intimate “What's happening?” in the case of Twitter, etc.) use white space, sometimes in conjunction with the blinking cursor, to indicate to-be-filled-ness. Despite the fact that this default imagery, of black text on white space, is less easy

on the eyes than light text on dark space, it remains a staple of visual culture on social media platforms. (The exception, in the case of my examples, is Instagram, which automatically fills in the most recent photo saved to the user's phone when they open the app to post, rather than depicting a white space—see Chapter Four for more on this).

It is possible to darken that white space in various ways. Software downloads like f.lux can automatically adjust the coloring of a device's screen depending on the time of day or the lighting in a room, as part of a wellness effort to improve users' sleeping patterns and vision. The "dark mode" option on Twitter and the "dark theme" feature on YouTube provide options to reverse their default settings and provide content against a black backdrop, with white text. YouTube specifies that this setting is "ideal for night," and prior to a recent update, Twitter's setting was known as "night mode;" this is appropriate, given that eye strain is particularly noticeable for some users at night time, and also notable as a rhetorical change that has interesting implications for my consideration of the "light/dark" (white/black) dichotomy as it compares to a "day/night" dichotomy. So, despite these optional features, the default setting on the platforms that I discuss is the white background. This white space is meant to make the design look neat and clean. White background space also draws the user's attention and gaze to the movement and color of video thumbnails, the text and images featured in Tweets, in other words, the content for which the user is on the platform in the first place. To be clear, I am not suggesting that this phenomenon is some sort of subliminal manifestation of whiteness as a political project. Rather, I find white space to be interesting in the context of social media, and its prominent (but naturalized, invisible) presence is also relevant to my broader argument. I take white space metaphorically as well as literally. As users, we are expected not to "see" white space in the same way that we are expected not to "see" search algorithms; if the platform is functioning as intended ("doing its job," to anthropomorphize

as is sometimes our inclination with platforms), we should be able to interact with it on a regular basis without noticing these features. What happens when we do notice it, and what does this mean for the visual economy of social media broadly speaking?

Prisoner of Love #1 (Second Version) (1992) is a painting (oil and gesso on linen) by American artist Glenn Ligon. Ligon prints and reprints the words, “We are the ink that gives the white page a meaning,” a variation on a quotation about Black Americans from Jean Genet’s book *Prisoner of Love*. As the words repeat over and over on the 80-inch-long canvas, the ink begins to bleed, making the words blur and lose their legibility. They, of course, lose their meaning in this process, and the word “we,” now almost entirely illegible, repeats a final time to be cut off in the last line of the text. Kimberly Rae Connor writes of the series that this work is part of:

The sentence he [Ligon] selects to ‘break down’ is ripe with multiple meanings even before he begins his process of deconstruction. It reads: ‘They [Black Americans] are the ink that gives the white page a meaning.’ This panel is accompanied by three others that are formally similar, but where the sentence varies: ‘We are the ink that gives the white page a meaning,’ and the interrogative ‘Why must we be the ink that gives the white page a meaning?’ Finally, echoing Genet’s own qualification, the last quote cautions, ‘When I said that we were the ink that gives the white page a meaning, that was too easy an image.’ Ligon subverts the outsider designation they, when he comps on the quotation with the pronoun we, thereby repersonalizing the text. By resisting a fixed meaning assigned to a given text, Ligon draws attention to locations of power in the dominant culture that would determine how black life is ‘read’ (1996).

This work provides an excellent example of and entryway into thinking about the relationship between white space and whiteness, between to-be-filled-ness and white supremacy. When we describe whiteness as the default setting under white supremacy, we are also describing whiteness as absence. The absence of whiteness is “filled” with color, with cultures and labors of people of color, particularly with Black cultures and labors.

The intentional ambiguity that characterizes PewDiePie’s videos, comprised of the layers of meaning and interpretation that I have described, is itself “to be filled.” I argue, therefore, that to-be-filled-ness is characteristic of whiteness not only through the visual economy of social media, but also through the ideological processes through which white supremacy is communicated. To what extent do social media interfaces intentionally mimic already-familiar imagery from digital culture, like the blank page of Microsoft Word—something that is white *in order to* be filled? I am not pointing this out because it reflects a naturalization of whiteness; rather, it matters to my argument because the creation of content is the central function of the social media platform. To-be-filled-ness is whiteness, and vice versa, in this visual economy. Whiteness is access to the ability to create content. But in the context of white supremacy, this “content” is no more “created” than it is “discovered” by whiteness. It is rather taken, appropriated, re-appropriated, stolen.

3.5 Conclusion

Before PewDiePie posted the video “Ending the Subscribe to Pewdiepie Meme,” there was significant news coverage of the Christchurch mosque shooter, Brenton Tarrant’s, citation of the meme right before he killed 51 people and injured 49. A *Verge* article on the fallout of “Subscribe

to PewDiePie's" role in the shooting stated, "...Kjellberg has disavowed people using the meme in hateful or illegal ways, including positioning it beside anti-Semitic imagery or carving it into the World War II memorial. He's also tried to use the phenomenon for good, raising more than £170,000 (roughly \$230,000 USD) for an orphanage in India during a charity drive in December" (Alexander 2019a). The article cites a video from December 2018 in which PewDiePie stated, "But there's a part of this [meme] that I really, really don't like, but— and it's a shame, because I— it [isn't] the vast majority of people, but sometimes in these comments, and you guys have told me this as well, you see comments such as, like, 'Fuck Indians' or 'Fuck Indians C-word,' just really distasteful, unnecessary comments. And I obviously make Indian jokes and stuff like that, but I do that [to] all countries, and this is not what I'm about, and I know my fan base isn't about this either." It has been a very longstanding strategy of PewDiePie's to feign innocence regarding, if not ignorance of, racism expressed by his fans. And PewDiePie's reliance on comedy, his laying claim to the identity of a universal satirist who mocks "all countries" equally, not only flattens and equates expressions of nationalism that are historically radically different, but also claims to be "tasteful" and "necessary," in implicit comparison to expressions of racism on the part of his fans that PewDiePie claims not to approve of.

In this video, PewDiePie goes on to state, "I'm getting more attention now than I'll probably ever get. And I feel really weird about it as well. So why not just take that fact and redirect it to something more positive? And show that this fan base and this group of people can do something positive as well, because I know we can. No more 'Fuck India.' Let's instead *help* India." As I will discuss in Chapter Three, the rhetoric expressed in this last sentence is a classic example of white man's burden, a framework within which it is the benevolent white master's duty to aid in the civilization of his savage, colonized inferiors. Indeed, PewDiePie immediately

follows this statement by describing, “Maybe you already knew this, or maybe you didn’t, but there’s over ten million child laborers in India between the age[s] of five and 14, and even more between the age[s] of 15 and 18. Almost 23 million. So that means that almost one out of ten kids in India are working.” This statement distinctly mirrors other assertions that PewDiePie makes about India; lines in “bitch lasagna” include, “You India, you lose” and “*Motu Patlu?* What the fuck is that even supposed to mean? / Your language sounds like it came from a mumble rap community,” while lines in “Congratulations” include, “Guess to beat a Swedish boy, you need a billion Asians,” “India got YouTube figured out, that’s sick, son / How ’bout next you figure out how to fix the caste system? (Oof) / Maybe all those ads will solve your crippling poverty,” and the “’bout to cause a genocide” and “poo-poo in their brains” lines discussed above. Thus, even in seemingly magnanimously raising money for an Indian charity, PewDiePie intentionally or unintentionally reasserts the very sentiments that influenced his fans’ circulation of “Fuck Indians” in the first place.

I have chosen in this dissertation to intentionally focus on mainstream platforms and cultural phenomena; my goal is to study and understand implicit, casual, and naturalized manifestations of white supremacy on commonly used platforms. As a result, it has felt incongruous to cover PewDiePie as this chapter’s case study; he is and has been a white power activist in ways both explicit and implicit, and I have been more and more discouraged as I describe the PewDiePie channel in part because of how popular and mainstream it *remains*, despite a seemingly endless litany of scandals and controversies that seem like they should have halted the progress of, if not ended, PewDiePie as a brand. But PewDiePie’s use of affect has made it so that he and others can engage in white power behaviors and nevertheless claim not to be white power activists. PewDiePie first establishes a narrative within which he is need of protection from “the

media,” which seeks to unfairly attack him and is held off in large part by the efforts of his fans. He uses physical and verbal expressions of emotionality—vulnerability, affection, etc.—to capitalize on audiences’ predisposition to overstress his humanization at the expense of humanization of people of color. And he operates within and upholds a structural system that levels and equates events to his advantage—just as his videos visually layer different sources, events, sentiments, meanings, etc., his career relies on the endless burying of the past with a constant circulation of new content that encourages his viewers to be always consuming his content, if for no other reason, just to keep up with it.

The way that YouTube is designed enables and supports white power content as well as white supremacist epistemologies. Within this system, popular content is good because it is also profitable content, meaning that extremism and controversy are inherently desirable content traits. As a result, white supremacy shapes visual cultures of YouTube through the platform’s interface. YouTube videos, because of the platform’s prioritization of watch-time among other factors in its internal economy, are central objects of moving image culture online and in social media specifically. In the next chapter, I consider televisual moving image culture in the form of GIFs. GIFs, and their presence on Twitter, exemplify the role of circulation and repetition in the visual economy of social media. From broadcast television to YouTube videos, and including a wide array of other source material, GIFs recreate looped images of original content in order to circulate it as a uniquely affective method of communication.

4.0 Chapter Three: Search: Design in Twitter's GIF Search

Starting on 17 February 2016, Twitter began implementing its GIF search, which became available to all users by 8 March 2016. Users had already been attaching external GIFs to their Tweets via the platform, but the integration of the search function allowed users to more easily attach them to public Tweets and private Direct Messages, and to search for GIFs based on keywords. The official blog post announcing the rollout of the GIF search cited GIPHY and Riffsy (now known as Tenor), themselves GIF search engines, as Twitter's two partners in the development of the feature (Reddy 2016). News coverage of the change emphasized its appeal to lay users rather than corporate entities (Rundle 2016) and its indication of "a larger trend: augmenting text communication with visual cues like GIFs and emoji" (Deleon 2016). Twitter's implementation of the GIF search is situated within a larger movement across social media and mobile platforms, as it was preceded by similar features being introduced to the dating app Tinder and Facebook's direct Messenger and followed by similar introductions to the iPhone's text Messages and Facebook's posting and comment features.

Within a broader economic framework, the goal of these integrations is not only to appeal to users' enjoyment of GIFs, but also to eventually establish a market through which GIF popularity can be sold to corporations; in 2016, Casey Newton wrote for *The Verge*, "Companies like Giphy are betting that the feature becomes ubiquitous so that it can one day begin selling 'promoted GIFs' to advertisers," and true to this assessment, Tenor now advertises promotion of Tweets on its "Tenor Insights" feature, which measures the popularity of GIF search terms over time (Newton 2016). One such prompt links to the company's email account and reads, "Interested in promoted placement within Tenor search results for [search term] GIFs? Let's talk" (Tenor

Insights 2020). Tenor lists its existing partnerships with corporations such as Netflix, 20th Century Fox, MTV, Universal Pictures, Vevo, and *Cosmopolitan* on its site, which reads,

Movie studios, TV networks, story-tellers, game publishers and sports leagues turn to Tenor to connect with consumers in mobile, driving GIF views and shares that fuel:

- Ticket sales for opening weekend and beyond
- Tune-in to season premiers, sweeps and finales
- Sustain engagement with key franchises in between installments and seasons. (Tenor 2020)

An example of a recent partnership describes, “For the upcoming *Justice League* film, Warner Brothers turned to Tenor to feature GIFs from the hotly-anticipated trailer. In less than 5 days after trailer release, Tenor generated over 90 million views and hundreds of thousands of direct shares of Justice League GIF content...” (Tenor 2020). In addition to Tenor’s advertising, Twitter describes to potential advertisers its ability to “use rich media entities to grab your audience’s attention” in promoted Tweets, with such entities prominently including GIFs alongside images and videos (Twitter 2020).

How does white supremacy manifest in and characterize Twitter’s platform design? What can these manifestations tell us about the ways in which medium specificity can be understood ideologically? I have chosen GIFs as the central site of interest for this chapter because of their status as moving image media uniquely suited to dissemination via contemporary social media platforms. GIFs, due to their extreme prioritization of visual culture and communication, are essential to the analysis of image-driven platform design in the context of social media (Morgan and Scholma-Mason 2017).

A short, looped repetition of still images that creates movement, the GIF is a popular format because of its status as a still image-based form that is easily catalogued by search engines in the same way that still images are catalogued. Prior to and resulting in the integration of GIF search engines into social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr, user engagements with .gif files have been particularly high in social media contexts because of the formatting contexts (including lack of compression) that make GIFs easy to post and save. The fact that users already produced, uploaded, and circulated .gif files before they were hosted in search contexts by social media platforms indicates their significance as preferred methods of user communication that were subsequently adopted by platforms. Twitter is uniquely suited to an understanding of GIFs on social media more broadly speaking because its integration of the GIF search engine coincided with the emergence of broadening public discourse on the role of social media platforms as content moderators (see Newton 2019). The reliant relationship between Twitter and GIFs is indicative of broader trends across other content platforms, including phenomena like integrated advertising and post promotion. GIFs also have singular affective dynamics that make them central means by which social media and power can be studied.

This chapter first discusses the economic implications of Twitter's integration of the GIF search into its platform, with an emphasis on Twitter's partnership with Giphy and Tenor. This discussion emphasizes the monetizing technological features of this new search, as well as its departures from those options previously available via Twitter as a platform. Visual whiteness develops in the realm of existing tropes of visual culture studies (primarily related to representational politics), while white supremacist ideologies are more embedded in the technological and economic structures within which visual cultures are produced. My use of "ideologies" draws from the Althusserian tradition in the vein of Judith Butler, emphasizing

ideologies in part as methods through which subjects understand their material circumstances and are interpellated within those contexts (Althusser 2014; Butler 1997).

4.1 Monetizing the GIF

The use of Tenor's and Twitter's services by corporations like Netflix demonstrates the myriad potential applications of GIF promotion as it intersects with social media marketing broadly speaking, and the logic of Web 2.0 more generally. As Robert W. Gehl writes, "I define 'Web 2.0' as the new media capitalist technique of relying upon users to supply and rank online media content, then using the attention this content generates to present advertisements to audiences. It is currently the hegemonic business practice on the Web..." (2011, 1229). Corporate engagement of users as simultaneously laborers and commodities in the context of advertising is a central means by which contemporary social media practices and interfaces need to be understood. "With Derrida's criterion in mind, most Web 2.0 sites are totalitarian because their archives, as well as the conditions of production of social facts based upon those archives, remain closed to the very users that have built them" (Gehl 2011, 1242). Gehl's call for the need to acknowledge Web 2.0's "totalitarian" impulses aligns with an understanding of Twitter's GIF search as a function that has the ability to enforce white supremacy not only through its content, but also through its design. Further, Gehl's characterization of Web 2.0 has proved to accurately describe the ongoing development of social media in particular, which are increasingly monetized by corporate entities.

GIFs are made valuable for corporations not only through the measuring of their "natural" popularity, and the trends associated with particular GIF searches on features such as Twitter, but

also the promotion of corporate GIFs in conjunction with other forms of social media marketing. Kate M. Miltner and Tim Highfield describe the ways in which the monetization of GIFs by entities such as Tenor complicates GIFs' resistant affective potentialities: "Investment in the GIF not only recognizes the creative and communicative potential of these visuals but also underlines its transition from user-driven media to highly commodified content. [...] the creation of GIFs is institutionalized, with commercial partnerships and advertising shaping the content available to users" (2017, 8). Where the authors see GIFs' original functions as existing outside of exclusively corporate communication, the monetization of these images makes them institutional rather than individual. Miltner and Highfield's analysis here makes it clear that assessing the effects of GIFs' monetization necessitates an analysis of the relationship between this monetization and the more general use of algorithms to measure GIFs' popularity in social media and mobile contexts.

The measurement of popularity and promotion of GIFs demonstrates their broader function as economic mechanisms as well as cultural objects. Promoting GIFs is a natural continuation of other forms of corporate advertisement that can currently be purchased via various social media platforms and mobile apps.

...searching for GIFs around particular emotions or feelings provides results based on existing popularity and trends, rather than an individual's own tastes. This may impact the [user's] performance of cultural knowledge through GIFs, where the canon (as displayed within search results) becomes reframed around the top results in searches. (Miltner and Highfield 2017, 9)

The use of "canon" here is telling, as it evokes long standing dialogues around the function of canonization as a maintainer of existing systems of power, particularly as they relate to white supremacy. Emotions are themselves commodified in the context of the GIF search in that they

are highly visible when popular, less visible when unpopular, and capable of either being promoted or not. This fact is an important consideration through which we need to understand the relationship between affect and existing power systems.

Noble draws from Alexander Galloway's characterization of digital interfaces as being not "transparent," but actually actively structuring:

The interface of the search engine as a mechanism for accessing the Internet is not immune, nor impartial, to the concerns of embedded value systems. Search is also more than the specific mathematical algorithms and deep-machine learning developed by computer scientists and software engineers to index upward of a trillion pages of information and move some from the universal data pile to the first page of results on a computer screen. (Noble 2018, 147)

Here, Noble argues that the interface of Google's search function actively prioritizes the value systems of its creators (such that it presents itself as a neutral agent and the information that it provides as hierarchically valued based on truth, rather than promotion or popularity). Noble's consideration of Google as a case study is important to an understanding of the Twitter search features that I discuss because Google's monopoly status has resulted in the almost universal adoption or mimicking of its methods by other corporations.

In the fact that search designs present themselves as being mathematically determined rather than ideologically driven, designs always already exist to maintain white supremacy, because the designs' conceptualizations of neutrality and empirical truth function as legitimation of not just white supremacist content, but also white supremacist epistemologies. White supremacist epistemologies are characterized in part by the use of empiricist structures and designs to justify white power ideologies (as in eugenics and scientific racism). It is important that search

designs have not come to be this way inadvertently but were indeed designed for these purposes. Noble writes, "...algorithmic oppression is not just a glitch in the system but, rather, is fundamental to the operating system of the web" (2018, 10). When we consider search design in conjunction with algorithmic design, we have to account for the ways in which the latter is integrated into the former in order to ensure the ongoing maintenance of white supremacy. As a case study, Noble discusses how Dylann Roof, the mass shooter of nine Black churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015, cited his Google searches for terms such as "black on white crime" as motivations for his white power ideology. Noble emphasizes that the design of the search precludes a questioning of or intervening regarding the legitimacy of search terms. Search design always already accepts the premises that users bring to their formation of questions or topics, resulting in what we might term digital confirmation bias (Noble 2018, 116).

4.2 Race and Capitalism

GIFs are commodities on social media that uniquely demonstrate the economy of the platforms involved. I draw here from the literature on capitalism's influence on racial formation (and vice versa) in order to demonstrate why commodities like the GIF are important to the study of social media. The relationship between race and capitalism has been the source of much scholarship in the critical race theory tradition, with theorists like W.E.B. DuBois and bell hooks asking whether and how these two concepts can be understood in relation to one another (Du Bois and Rachleff 2003; hooks 1995). Cedric J. Robinson's work on Black Marxism provides the most in-depth demonstration of the fundamental connection between global capitalism and racial formation: "The historical development of world capitalism was influenced in a most fundamental

way by the particularistic forces of racism and nationalism. This could only be true if the social, psychological, and cultural origins of racism and nationalism both anticipated capitalism in time and formed a piece with those events that contributed directly to its organization of production and exchange” (Robinson 2005). In the American historical context, slavery was one of the central means by which race was formulated as a concept. Charles Hirschman writes that with the rise of Darwinian theory in the nineteenth century (resulting in further manifestations of eugenics) came widespread acceptance of the belief that different races comprised subspecies of humanity (Hirschman 2004). Edgar T. Thompson writes, “The idea of race is a situational imperative; if it was not there to begin with, it tends to develop in a plantation society because it is a useful, maybe even necessary, principle of control. In Virginia, the plantation took two peoples originally differentiated as Christian and heathen, and before the century was over it had made two races” (1975). Thus, race was conceptualized in part as a means by which to visually distinguish enslaved people from free people. Much literature has been written on how this distinction existed in part to discourage white workers from developing class-based solidarity with (former) slave populations and other people of color over the course of several generations.

Although the formal institutions of slavery were abolished in the nineteenth century in the Americas, and colonialism was beginning to be questioned and even resisted during the early decades of the twentieth century, racism had developed a life of its own. Not only did white supremacy provide economic and psychological benefits to whites, but racial ideologies were central doctrines of the modern world. Racism and the inevitability of racial inequality were affirmed by science and were widely held beliefs among most intellectuals, including leading scholars in the social sciences, well into the twentieth century. (Thompson 1975)

Capitalism is intertwined with race because, on a global scale, colonialism has relied on the comingling of the two.

To exist in the world is to exist in prearranged racial frameworks that have been established over the course of colonial histories; thus, even in nations that have very different conceptualizations of race than those of the United States, and/or nations whose populations are majority people of color based on American racial frameworks, white supremacy informs economic trends on the global stage. Trade itself is affected by white supremacy both internationally (as in the case of formerly colonized nations owing “debt” to former colonizers) and within individual nations (as in the case of skin bleaching products promoted in nations affected by colorism resulting from white supremacy). Michael C. Dawson notes that there are longstanding debates over the question of whether capitalist hierarchies are divisible from white supremacy, and whether racial justice would necessitate the collapse of capitalism. “Even though racial hierarchies can reinforce, and are often compatible with, capitalist social orders, there are also moments in which white supremacy and capital develop antagonistic tendencies” (Dawson 2018). My research is not centered on the details of these debates, but instead focuses on the nuances of the relationship between capitalism and white supremacy as they emerge in the specific context of social media. I use this approach in part because the explicit reframing of questions around the “digital divide” has characterized critical developments in theories of Afrofuturism (Everett 2002), meaning that broader work in critical race studies calls for the detailed consideration of contemporary technologies and their specific relationships to race. An understanding of social media necessitates the conceptualization of the internet as an enterprise of capitalism, within which affective labor comprises a large part of social media-based exchange.

4.3 Monetization of Affect

Affect theory must be understood in conjunction with critical race theory in part as a result of their contemporaneous developments. Affect is a tool through which power systems are enforced. This manifests for example in Sara Ahmed's argument that conceptualizations of happiness exist to encourage subject conformity (2010). Just as affect has traditionally been mobilized in order to maintain power systems, social media contexts see affect similarly function as a site of anxiety within which white supremacy and similar phenomena are upheld. Those affective conditions (and the visual and ideological systems within which they work) that mandate the ongoing proliferation of white supremacy are given the capital that makes it possible for them to continue to shape user-subjects' relationships to given ideologies.

Promotion of Tweets based on their popularity is visible in Twitter's GIF search through its consistently updating nature. As new GIFs become more popular, they rise higher in the search's suggested terms. For example, in a comparison of the top GIFs recommended under the suggested category of "Dance" on 25 October 2017 and 2 December 2017, two of the GIFs remained top suggestions (one of a child from the reality show *Toddlers & Tiaras* dancing and another of a baby from a home video dancing), suggesting the consistent and self-fulfilling nature of many GIFs' usage. The consistent popularity of the *Toddlers & Tiaras* GIF reflects the particular affective dynamic of simultaneous fascination and disgust that viewers often associate with the show's representation of young girls (Zaborskis 2015). The circulation of particular GIFs also reflects the importance of algorithms to an understanding of social media platforms and functions. The concept of the platform is central here:

The term 'platform' helps reveal how YouTube and others stage themselves for these constituencies, allowing them to make a broadly progressive sales pitch while

also eliding the tensions inherent in their service: between user-generated and commercially-produced content, between cultivating community and serving up advertising, between intervening in the delivery of content and remaining neutral. (Gillespie 2010, 348)

Here, Gillespie emphasizes the ways in which platformization is a process through which platforms intentionally frame themselves as sites of simultaneous, integrated advertising and interpersonal communication. Within the platform, algorithms managing trends, user-specific targeting, and similar time-sensitive promotion of content show the ways in which platforms imagine themselves as simultaneously enabling lay users' relationships and communications along with corporate advertising. As I mention in chapter one, platformization levels out communications on social media such that mundane advertisements, positive social connections, and distressing phenomena like targeted harassment are all made equal within the platform. The affective experience of social media becomes inconsistent if not contradictory—I receive the same aural and visual notifications for every “update” the platform gives me, but each of these updates might have wildly different emotional effects on me. The intentional conflation of users' “natural” social interactions with advertisements fundamentally informs affects in social media. Twitter's partnership with Giphy and Tenor combines their respective measurements of GIF popularity to provide users with top suggested GIFs, demonstrating one of the ways in which GIFs are conceived in the platform context as *both* “natural” demonstrations of users' relationships and promoted communicators of advertisers' products.

Tenor measures trending terms in part via its “Emotional Graph,” described on its site: **“The Tenor Emotional Graph:** Mapping the thoughts and feelings people want to communicate in mobile messages to the GIFs that help them say it better than words. Built on 300M+ daily

Tenor GIF searches” (Tenor). Twitter’s suggested terms remain consistent and overlap considerably with the most used terms on Tenor’s Emotional Graph, including “OMG,” “Yes,” “No,” “LOL,” and “Thank You.” Many distinct terms also remain similar, such as Tenor’s “happy” alongside Twitter’s “Happy Dance” and Tenor’s “love” alongside Twitter’s “Hearts.” The popularity and subsequent promotion of these terms affirms the primary function of GIFs as affective communicators, through which the user treats the GIF subject as an avatar. GIFs are already a consistent, “native” method of communication for users on most social media platforms, making promoted GIFs easy to integrate into various interfaces alongside their “naturally” popular GIF counterparts. Tenor’s description of GIFs as tools “that help [users] say it better than words” reflects not only the economic incentives of monetizing GIFs for corporations, but also the attraction of GIFs for users and advertisers alike; their affective associations should make users more likely to identify with the products being advertised via promoted GIFs, because users often already identify with the subjects of GIFs that they choose to communicate with.

Affect is more complex than the “emotions” (some of which, such as “Yes,” are not even actual emotions) that are outlined in the context of social media GIF searches. This complexity is in part due to the fact that affect has long been understood as exceeding the internal psychology or feelings of a given subject. As I describe in chapter one, affect not only encompasses the bodily experiences of individual subjects, but is also often a communal rather than a strictly individual phenomenon (Berlant 2011, 15). The development of affect theory over recent decades, and the approach that I use specifically, has been characterized by increasing turns to the political facets of affect and particularly to the ways in which identity engages with individual and collective affects. In the context of social media monetization, affect is an important component of GIF searches to understand because it is the means by which GIFs serve communicative functions (with

“emotions”-based keywords being one of the central methods for finding GIFs), and simultaneously, one of the means by which identity is mediated on platforms such as Twitter. The visuality of GIFs allows them to visually mediate race, gender, and other identities, and in doing so, also allows them to mediate ideologies like white supremacy. The “popular” and popular culture are central sites at which affect theory debates have unfolded because affect is always tied up in popular discourse and the physical and psychological effects that it has on subjects (Grossberg 2010, 328).

Digital labor happens when readers’ engagement with particular sites gives advertising revenue to site owners.

Internet and media watching/reading/listening/using is value-generating labour, and the audience commodity and the Internet prosumer commodity are commodities created by the work of watching/reading/listening/using. The audience produces itself as commodity; its work creates the audience and users as commodity. Media usage is, in the case of commercial, advertising-funded media, audience labour. Audience time is in value-generating labour time—capital exploits the unremunerated audience. (Fuchs 2014, 132)

Christian Fuchs uses Facebook as an example of a context within which users generate digital labor for both Facebook and its advertisers through their engagement with the site. The convergence of digital and affective labor represents a site of political, economic, and social importance. Market sites such as Etsy are emblematic of “post-Fordist business practices” that erase boundaries between work and leisure (Luckman 2016, 92). Consequently, the same erasing of boundaries that occurs on social media platforms necessitates a conceptualization of social media as sites of digital *and* affective labor, and of social media users as affective commodities.

4.4 Suggested GIFs

Nakamura emphasizes that despite early rhetorics describing the internet as detached from bodily identities, it is in fact heavily informed not only by such identities themselves, but specifically by their visual manifestations. “Visual culture’s engagement with the substance of images holds particular promise and offers critical purchase precisely when brought to bear on digital objects, which do possess distinctive cultures of bodily representation, flow, privacy, identity, and circulation...” (Nakamura 2008, 13). Rather than divorcing the user from their body, digital contexts simply introduce new mediations of bodily existence and communication. Building from Nakamura’s work, Jessie Daniels writes, “...rather than offer an escape route out of notions of race tied to embodiment, the visual culture of the Internet complicates race and racism in new ways that are still closely tied to a politics of representation...” (2012, 699). Here, Daniels emphasizes that via visual phenomena such as avatars, new media-based communications have always been engaged in the introduction of new ways of mediating representation.

The categories of race and technology are not only implicated in one another through longstanding racist discourses of science, but also through theories of performance, boundaries, the breaking down of those boundaries, and similar academic work in the vein of scholars such as Donna Haraway (Chun 2009, 22). Nakamura’s developments of this field of study include her theory of “digital racial formation,” which emphasizes the ways in which digital culture and user engagements with it enforce the specifically racial subject/object dynamic (Nakamura 2008, 14). Within social media contexts, race and technology are especially tied up in one another because digital mediations of identity mandate identificatory relations that determine the user as subject or object based on their self-formation in relation to manifestations of racial identity. Nakamura uses the “parsing” metaphor as a means by which to highlight the interconnected nature of subject and

object: “Object and subject are not mutually exclusive roles: it is not possible to definitively decide who is being *interacted* and who is being *interactive* except in specific instances. Individuals can experience more or less interactivity or representational power depending on what they are doing on the Internet; how, where, and how long they are doing it; and whether and how they are represented offline in relation to it” (Nakamura 2008, 35). The user’s engagements with visual cultures of the internet (in the form of avatars, GIFs, videos, and other images) are always already determined by the digital norms within which racial formation has been established as a categorizing tool for users.

White supremacy is as much about the naturalization and valorization of a white presenting woman’s body (see one of the top GIFs to result from a Twitter search of “hot girl” on 2 December 2017, which depicts a white woman running on a beach in a bikini) as it is about the degradation and mockery of a Black presenting woman’s body (see one of the top GIFs to result from a Twitter search of “ugly crying” on the same date, which depicts a Black woman, her face twisted with unhappiness and her eyes closed, apparently whimpering or about to cry). The *Oxygen* icon in the bottom corner of the latter GIF, as well as its imagery, connects it to reality television aesthetics and cultural associations. The idea of “ugly crying” itself is tied up in American conceptions of reality television and its performative functions. With regard to representational politics, “We need a social media image ethics that acknowledges the conditions of production of memes and their operation within an attention economy that includes racial abjection as both a product and a process” (Nakamura 2014, 260). Nakamura’s description of the ways in which racist imagery is continued, altered, or combatted applies to the context of Twitter’s GIF search. The “process” of racial abjection in new media is the circulation, use, reuse, and remixing within visual culture of racial tropes and images that maintain systems of white supremacy (a reality show scene becomes

a GIF becomes an advertisement for the reality show) where the “products” are the images itself, which are commodities and signifiers of white supremacist economies. Nakamura calls for an interpretation of social media imagery that accounts for the ways in which process and product are codeterminative, because racial abjection as cultural tool of white supremacy is indivisible from racial abjection as economic tool of white supremacy. Degrading people of color sells reality television products, which in turn degrade people of color.

Facets of user engagement with GIFs become complicated by dynamics particular to Twitter; its higher popularity among Black American users than among other demographics, as well as the various identificatory and voyeuristic functions of the GIF format mean that we cannot easily ascribe meaning to individual GIFs without accounting for a number of factors. However, the role of GIFs within the broader history of visual culture indicates the critical importance of reading such GIFs in conversation with longstanding image-based tropes and enactments of white supremacy. The fact that white presenting women are associated with the “hot girl” search, and that a Black presenting woman is one of the top results of an “ugly crying” search, reflects white supremacist discourses that have long predated social media. (Note that, as Noble discusses in her research, platforms can and do make unannounced changes to “correct” these “mistakes,” as when Google adjusted its algorithm after scholars like Noble demonstrated its racist misogyny against Black women; it seems likely that Twitter makes similar adjustments regularly). What makes the visual discourses under discussion new in the GIF format is that the GIF’s repetitive movement literally writes and rewrites the image into the user’s mind, heightening its rhetorical usefulness as a visual object. Unlike still photographs, which lack dynamic movement, and unlike streaming videos, which begin and then end, the GIF continues on seemingly indefinitely, and in doing so, provides the user with a never-ending communicative device. In the context of Twitter as a

platform, the discourses under discussion are understood as new because the platform itself is just as concerned with proliferation and the promotion of popular or trending content as the GIF format is, such that Twitter will integrate algorithms into its interface that hinder the user's ability to access anything besides the content that the platform most needs to display (whether because of its popularity or because of its promoted nature).

GIFs represent critical turning points in the ongoing evolution of visual culture because of their unique connection to race and racism. An important facet of GIFs that distinguishes them from other forms of communication is their frequent conflation of identification and voyeurism. The user of the GIF is most often understood to be conveying their own affect via the GIF they are using; thus, as Akane Kanai writes, GIF usage involves “the relational production of self.” This production (identification) is not only reliant on cultural references and shared touchstones that cross various user demographics and intentions, but also on more specific relationships among individual users and user communities. Additionally, GIFs can often function as voyeuristic media (cinema has also been described in this way), through which users achieve (or believe that they achieve) an “inside look” at others. This can sometimes take the shape of projection, in which users ascribe motivations to other subjects through the application of GIFs. Where Kanai focuses on users who express their own emotional states via GIFs (as in captions like “Me when I’m running late for work”), users can also project states of mind onto others via similar captions (as in captions like “The barista when I gave him my order this morning”). This phenomenon can also manifest when users “lurk” in online spaces to which they do not normally “belong” and view GIFs as expressions of identities or ideologies particular to those spaces. A user might see a GIF, not know the text from which it originates, and then become preoccupied with discovering the name of the film or show. There is also an element of voyeurism when users engage with GIFs


that they do not fully understand or have context for. For example, I might use a GIF of a professional basketball player scoring a slam dunk to convey success even if I do not know that player's name or team. The reason that GIF usage often involves conflating identification and voyeurism is because the subject of the GIF is always ambiguously identified; my usage of the GIF and the question of whether or not I project myself or others onto its subject(s) is determined by the particular contexts within which I am using it. It is this distinction that establishes the difference between GIFs as voyeurism and cinema as voyeurism; theorizations of GIF-based voyeurism necessitate an understanding of the specific content being discussed in each context, where the act of watching a film can theoretically be understood as slightly more static and less content-specific.

As Miltner and Highfield write, the meaning behind a GIF is highly reliant on its context; because of the ease with which users can divorce GIFs from their original contexts, the new meanings that they are inscribed with (reliant as they are on new contexts) are important to an understanding of GIFs as constantly shifting signifiers. They also suggest that GIF meanings are determined in part by preexisting knowledge of the user in cases where two users already know one another. For example, if I know that my friend hates a particular celebrity and they send me a message featuring a GIF of that celebrity (even an ostensibly flattering GIF that was originally made by a fan of that celebrity), my understanding of the intended meaning will be very different from my understanding of a friend sending me a GIF of a celebrity whom I know that they love (even an ostensibly unflattering GIF that seems to mock that celebrity).

GIFs are polysemic, largely because they are isolated snippets of larger texts. This, combined with their endless, looping repetition, allows them to relay multiple levels of meaning in a single GIF. This symbolic complexity makes them an ideal tool for

enhancing two core aspects of digital communication: the performance of affect and the demonstration of cultural knowledge. (Miltner and Highfield 2017)

Because of the “multiple levels of meaning” that manifest in any given GIF, these media are also easily used to communicate even with users whom one does not know but with whom one has a shared cultural vernacular or point of reference. One of the top GIF results for a 30 December 2018 search of “whine” on Twitter depicts actor Emma Roberts huffing as her character on the television show *Scream Queens*. As Miltner and Highfield demonstrate, the function of using this GIF might be not only to convey one’s own feelings of whininess, but also to convey knowledge of the television show, an inside joke or reference, and/or cultural cachet. The GIF’s empathetic functions extend its affective capabilities. Empathy and affect in these contexts are not just about defining and expressing oneself visually, but also about conveying conceptions of the world via the visual language of the GIF.

In white power contexts, GIFs are frequently used not only in their identificatory, avatar-emphasized functions, but also in their fantasy-based functions. Much as Kanai emphasizes that users project themselves and their personal experiences onto the GIF, broader worldviews and ideologies can also be read into GIFs, particularly in the service of white power ideologies. On 2 December 2017, user @BlueSea1964 Tweeted, “ Police Officer Offers K-Y Jelly To Man Sentenced For Shooting Him: ‘You Will Need It Where You Are Going’! 😄😄😄 #BackTheBlue #Police #BlueLivesMatter.” Attached were a URL to a *Daily Wire* story and a GIF of a white man in a doctor’s office putting lubricant on his translucent glove-covered hand, which results in a horrified facial expression from a Black man sitting in a medical gown. Though it is not possible to save a GIF from another user’s Tweet, finding this GIF based on the Tweet’s keywords was easy; when I searched for “ky jelly” on 3 December 2017, the GIF used in this Tweet was a top

result to appear. When I used Google to do a reverse image search of the GIF, it was identified as a popular “rectal exam” image by Tenor and similar sites, and when I searched Twitter’s GIF function for “rectal exam” on 3 December 2017, the GIF once again appeared as a top result. I identify the means by which I was able to find the GIF originally used in @BlueSea1964’s Tweet to emphasize that keywords identify the themes commonly associated with and assigned to GIFs; part of the reason that this GIF likely emerged when I searched for “ky jelly” specifically is because @BlueSea1964’s Tweet itself reified the association between that phrase and the GIF.

This technological feature of Twitter’s GIF search is more obviously visible when, for example, a search of the term “suicide” results in several GIFs from the film *Suicide Squad*, a search of the term “Brooklyn” results in several GIFs from the television show *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, and other searches often result in suggested GIFs that do not appear to have clear connections to the keywords used. For example, a search of the term “sure Jan,” associated with a GIF from *The Brady Bunch Movie* that became popular in 2015, results not only in multiple iterations of the original GIF, but also in several results that seem unrelated, such as a GIF of an animated refrigerator and a GIF of Tom Hanks looking skeptical. Uses of the written phrase “Sure, Jan,” in conjunction with the original GIF as well as others causes myriad top results to emerge from a GIF search of the term. As users choose GIFs from the search and attach them to individual Tweets, the textual content of those Tweets allows for the ongoing establishment of connections between given keywords and GIFs, the function of which is to make the GIF search “smarter” in connecting users to popular or trending GIFs that match the keywords they search.

An understanding of some of the interface features of Twitter’s GIF search from a user perspective is important to our comprehension of the relationship between the search itself and white supremacist ideologies because the search allows for associational qualities that uphold the

latter. Though Twitter's GIF search does not provide results for a search of "rape," reading "No results" in response, it makes the use of a GIF to fantasize about Black men being raped in prison settings easy (these images and fantasies draw explicitly on the histories of sexual assault and exploitation of Black men discussed by Nakamura in her study of scambaiting photos). The content of @BlueSea1964's "K-Y Jelly" Tweet demonstrates various intersections that characterize the rhetorics of white power: the conflation of all people of color (the person who was convicted and taunted by the police officer, according to the *Miami Herald* article linked by *Daily Wire*, was a Latinx presenting man named Kevin Rojas, not a Black presenting man), rape culture and its fantasies of exerting power through the injury and humiliation of people of color in particular, homophobia that conflates all gay male sex with degradation and rape, and American histories of the use of rape alongside the criminal justice system to maintain the oppression of people of color, and especially Black people. In the context of this GIF's specific content, white power is advanced through a celebration of whiteness as vindicated, righteous victimhood. Whiteness (and white masculinity, specifically) has to be defined as empowerment, in foil against the humiliation of Black people (and Black men, specifically). "White identification can never give access to a positive experience of culture and community. Its historical project has ever been (only) negative: a quintessential 'not that,' 'not black'" (Perkinson 2005). White power thus attempts to develop pride in opposition to non-whiteness. The popularity of a GIF depicting a Black person's horror in response to the implicit threat of a rectal exam (that becomes equated with rape), and the absence of an equivalent GIF depicting a white subject's similar threat, demonstrates that GIFs' reliance on pre-existing original content in the form of television shows, films, and other source material results in a reliance on white supremacist visual cultures.

Other GIFs also display white power ideologies through their depictions of people of color. Of particular note are those that appear in response to a 10 March 2018 search of the term “racist,” which depict variations on a GIF of a young Black child saying, “That’s racist!” Following the original GIF, its animated variations include one showing the child wearing a dollar symbol necklace and a bone in his hair, holding a basketball in one hand and a watermelon in another, while a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken wings hovers behind him. Animated watermelon spurts from his mouth as he speaks, and the caption, “That’s racist!” remains. Similarly, the third GIF to appear depicts the child in a sombrero and with a false mustache, holding a bottle of Jose Cuervo tequila in one hand and a taco in another, with three chili peppers hovering behind him. The caption reads, “Eso es racista,” in the colors of the Mexican flag, and the text “lolbrary.com” is listed below the caption. The top results for the “racist” search are useful to understand the nature of white power discourse in the context of visual cultures online. Without knowing the source of the original GIF, we are still able to see how its remixing reflects the myriad ways in which white power visual cultures circulate. Of particular note is the fact that the popularity of these images has likely been intentionally boosted by white power users for the purposes of forcing users of color who might search the term “racist” because they want to critique a racist statement or image to have to scroll through a number of white power images in the process. The user’s assumed critique of racism is malevolently made into a site of its redistribution.

White supremacy manifests in the popularity and cyclical popularization of GIFs that convey the naturalization of whiteness and of digital blackface, a GIF-specific term coined by Lauren Michele Jackson (2017). One trend in GIF usage on Twitter includes engaging with images based on their ability to allow users to not only indicate their knowledge of culture, but also access cultural cachet that might not otherwise be available to them. This often comes in the form of using

Tweets of beloved celebrities and public figures to suggest their conveyance of everyday affect (“Celebrities are just like us”) as well as the coolness of a celebrity being claimed by a lay user. A GIF of Rihanna looking unimpressed and rolling up her car window serves the latter function; users convey disdain through Rihanna’s body in its specific iteration here. An element of these uses of GIFs that has recently become more contested is digital blackface, or the use of GIFs of Black people by white users to convey specifically *exaggerated* affect that is reliant on longstanding histories of minstrelsy and similar white power-based appropriations of people of color. White users’ engagements with GIFs that depict Black people often rely on conceptions of affect as being more easily accessed via and written onto Black people’s bodies. It is in these uses of GIFs by white users that economic and cultural exploitation most overtly overlap; as Black people’s images are decontextualized, made performative, and appropriated by white users, the producers of the GIFs under discussion (from the people of color depicted in the GIFs to the people of color who often create such GIFs from their original source material) are not financially rewarded for their labors. This problem indicates one of the tensions of GIFs’ monetization, and a facet of GIFs that is important to an understanding of their ideological functions beyond representational politics. On the one hand, we might imagine that GIFs’ monetization could result in the economic empowerment of people of color who are so often the producers and disseminators of GIFs. But alternately, the reality of monetization tends to reward already rich and white corporations, such as those that partner with Tenor. If monetization is the integration of a product into the capitalist system such that the product becomes profitable, then the product’s integration will necessarily default to maintaining existing capitalism, including its associated white supremacist functions. Once more, the systemic and economic nature of white supremacy is a

central framework through which the GIF search must be understood, because it works in conjunction with cultural representations to consistently maintain existing power systems.

The function of my emphasis on white supremacy as manifesting in the design of Twitter's GIF search is to prioritize the ways in which user engagement with social media platforms is inherently driven by their interfaces. When users engage with Twitter's GIF search, their rhetorical choices are determined by the availability of particular GIFs (unless they have the resources and desire to create their own GIFs, which is true of some users, but which is not the case for the majority of lay users). The interface design encourages users to search and employ GIFs by highlighting the search itself; when the user begins to compose a Tweet, there are four icons below the text box that allow the user, from left to right, to "add photos or video," "add a GIF," "add poll," or "add location." The convenience of the GIF search is in its integration into Tweet composition alongside other media-based functions that can be added to Tweets. Users are encouraged to identify with and deploy GIFs, and one of the results of this is the ongoing maintenance of existing systems of white supremacy via the GIF search. This is not to say that the search cannot be characterized by resistant, anti-racist ideologies and communications. People of color use and have used Twitter as well as its GIF search in order to advance anti-racism on a regular basis. See, for example, the two top results of a "Black Lives Matter" search as of 3 December 2017, which affirm the statement by depicting the words rolling via the GIF's continuous loop. Twitter's GIF search represents the ongoing, complex development of social media designs. This feature makes white supremacist mechanics and white power content easily available to users, though it has the potential to be used against such systems and ideologies. The preeminence of popularity and trends in social media broadly speaking, as well as Twitter's GIF

search specifically, means that users of color can and do form communities that allow for the trending of hashtags, GIFs, and other communications in opposition to white supremacy.

I conclude my discussion of Twitter's GIF search by considering the often-fraught implications of ethics around GIFs' creation and circulation. Much like the scambaiting photos discussed by Nakamura and similar visual culture objects of the internet, GIFs have the potential to capture and circulate images non-consensually. When one searches "falling" via the feature, some fictional source material GIFs appear, such as one that depicts a scene from the television show *Parks and Recreation*, but many GIFs of seemingly real source material dominate the top results. One such GIF depicts a Black presenting woman crying as she runs out of her home in slow motion, tripping, and falling on her face on the concrete sidewalk. Reverse image searching of the GIF reveals that the source material of the GIF was the reality show *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. The ongoing dissemination of this GIF, long beyond and outside of the context of the reality show that the subject appeared on, might demonstrate one of the problems of new media's treatments of privacy and memory as Chun describes them: "**The assumption: consent once, circulate forever.** Once you have put an image into circulation, it can be circulated forever" (2016). Platforms exceed content such that, as Chun discusses, consensual and nonconsensual content are circulated in the same manner. They appear alongside one another in Twitter's GIF search, indistinguishable unless the user has specific knowledge of the contexts and source materials for the GIFs under discussion. Indeed, a user might see a GIF of the fictional character Leslie Knope tumbling into a giant hole and assume it to be "real" based on its realistic mise-en-scene even as they might see the GIF of reality star Gloria falling on her face and assume it to be "fake" (it is, after all, from a reality show). The user's preexisting biases will inform the way that they consume GIFs, such that lack of empathy for Black women under white supremacy can be

affirmed by the GIF search that encourages the user to mock her fall. The search function implicitly suggests that because the GIF is so popular, it must be worth the user's continued circulation. This example of a GIF's potentially troubling ethical implications gestures toward more fraught examples and demonstrates one of the inherent problems with an interface that privileges trends no matter their ideologies.

4.5 “What’d You Search to Get This Gif”

“Me when influencers sell weight loss teas/gummies/lollys/corsets to young girls. (Ps. Where do I get this gif?)”. This was the response of television actor and verified Twitter user Jameela Jamil when a fan asked her to “caption this” GIF of her *The Good Place* character holding an axe over her shoulder and looking menacingly off-screen. The practice of asking fellow Twitter users how to access a GIF has become commonplace on the platform, to the extent that even a celebrity searching for a reproduction of their own image might turn to fans to find its source. The question of “How can I find this GIF?” is important to an understanding of the economy of images within which GIF circulation occurs on Twitter. The infrastructure of Twitter's GIF search expands its function in the monetization of GIFs because it makes it difficult for users to easily reproduce content outside of the search itself. Because a user cannot save a GIF from another user's Tweet, they have to find the keyword that was used to access the GIF in the first place, then save the GIF to their desktop from their own search (and possibly their own Tweet). As I have already discussed, trends in popularity determine a given GIF's place in the search results, meaning that as users ask one another which search terms to use to get results, the GIFs being searched for will continue to be bolstered to the top of the list (if only for a particular period of time).

There are several racial applications of this phenomenon in the context of Twitter, as one exchange among Twitter verified user @TimothyDeLaG and a follower demonstrates. @TimothyDeLaG initially Tweets sponsored content: “Omg I can’t wait to get back home. The McRib is back.” He attaches a GIF of an Asian presenting toddler dancing in a purple shirt, necklace, and blue underwear. @marcelusmantes replies, “What’d you search to get this gif?”, to which @TimothyDeLaG, himself Asian, replies, “Lol asian dude.” As of 12 November 2018, this GIF appears as the eighth result of a search of the term “Asian dude.” The racially signified “Asian” supersedes the generally signified “dude” only in some of the top resulting GIFs, one of which depicts a stylized text of “DUDE” on a white background, and one of which depicts Black actor Kel Mitchell as his *Good Burger* character saying, “IMMA DUDE.” Alternately, the other top results of the search depict images such as a cartoon stereotype of an Asian man’s head and a group of fashionable Asian women walking down a hallway with the caption “ASIAN SWAG.” The search process translates image to text and back to image again; a GIF is categorized based on keywords, which users then employ to try to find various GIFs. This process necessarily involves reduction via translation (of images to words and words to images), which can be over-determined by pre-existing user biases.

Twitter’s GIF search functions as an impermanent digital archive and categorizing catalog within which users have relatively little control. The turn by users to asking one another which search terms allow access to a particular GIF demonstrates that this search function and its sibling functions on other social media platforms prioritizes protocols that obfuscate user engagement. Users are made to be reliant on the search function to find GIFs rather than being able to save them directly from others’ Tweets, as is possible with still images in JPEG or PNG format. This practice creates a circular process (or habit, in Chun’s terms), within which the search is conducted again

and again, with users affirming its power by using it. Because this is the case, we need to consider a) the fact that Twitter's GIF search makes users reliant on it, b) the fact that users recognize this and engage with it by asking one another how to use the search to acquire particular GIFs, c) the fact that, in doing so, users not only engage with but also undermine the prevalence of the GIF search (because saving a GIF from the search results means that a user can now upload that GIF individually without having to find it via the search again), and d) the fact that users still create and disseminate their own GIFs independent of the Twitter search.

If the Twitter GIF search were not inherently impermanent, the need for users to find particular search terms that garner particular results would not be as necessary, because searches would always consistently have the same results. However, because the Twitter GIF search is constantly updating based on the popularity and promotion of particular GIFs, a user will always need to know which relatively recent search term was used in order to gain access to another user's GIF. It is also more likely that a user will save a GIF to their desktop rather than remembering which search term resulted in the GIF at a particular time, because this method is faster and easier than sifting through results that may or may not be consistent with the results that another user got days, weeks, or months earlier. As a result, in making it impossible for users to save GIFs directly from other users' Tweets, the system of Twitter's GIF search nevertheless enables user workarounds that make it easier for users to ultimately post GIFs without engaging with the search at all. If a user builds a folder of GIFs on their desktop, they might eventually reach saturation, at which point they will no longer desire to use the GIF search to discover new GIF objects.

Though we might read this function as discouraging user creation of GIFs, instead pushing users to draw from the preexisting GIF archive provided by Twitter and GIPHY, many users still create and disseminate their own GIFs via Twitter. For example, in response to @jameelajamil's

question about where she could get the GIF depicting her character from *The Good Place*, original poster @yaelgrogblas replied, “i was literally relating this gif to something like that!! and it’s here: <https://t.co/urVwKfqm9>.” The link leads to a fan account on Tumblr for the show, on which a user made the GIF as part of a larger GIF set (a common format on Tumblr that lends itself more seamlessly to dissemination of user-created GIFs).

It is significant that users still create and disseminate their own GIFs on Twitter because this practice indicates that users can and will work around some features of platform design. As I have written in greater detail in the introduction, an avoidance of technological determinism necessitates, in part, an acknowledgment of users’ capabilities to circumvent or undermine particular elements of platform design. This practice also helps us avoid conceptualizations of social media as only ever having “a user problem” when it comes to white power ideologies. If users are willing and able to work around platform design, then anti-racist users can work against implicit biases that characterize that design; at the same time, white power users can avoid content moderation that would potentially threaten the existence of their posts. Social media-based ephemerality can lend itself to the dissemination of both white supremacy and anti-racism.

4.6 “IDK”

The technology of Twitter’s GIF search, aligned as it is with previously existing patents developed by Giphy and Tenor, prioritizes storage such that the anti-ephemeral nature of the new media that Chun discusses is not only maintained but also further monetized. This is my central critique of the design of Twitter’s GIF search; much as it might be a tool that users can and do use to subvert systems of white supremacy, its natural allowances are centered on enabling the ongoing

proliferation of any ideologies that trend and might be commodified, even if those ideologies are white supremacist. Because white supremacy is the dominant ideology, rather than being a question of “if,” this latter statement is actually almost always a question of “when.”

Where the (always silent) GIF represents a movement away from sound-based moving image media (the YouTube videos of the previous chapter), the photograph or still image can be understood as an even more fundamental distillation of visual media. Here, in the social media context, we see a reversal of the historical trajectory of visual media (from photography to film), where the moving image becomes a default setting on platforms like YouTube and even has a strong presence on photography-centric platforms like Instagram. A prominent example is the “autoplay” video, often an advertisement, which automatically plays on various platforms without the user having pressed play. The autoplay video answers the problem of users avoiding advertisements by taking the choice to press play out of the user’s hands. Critics have also noted that on platforms like Twitter, the autoplay video can be a source of violent or explicit content that is foisted onto the user. In the advertising context, user backlash against the autoplay video is largely centered on its use of sound. Users’ annoyance primarily comes from the experience of suddenly hearing unexpected and unwanted sound. “Increasingly, advertising firms are shifting toward making autoplay videos with the assumption that people have muted their devices. Mr. Wiegert of the Martin Agency said his firm primarily makes ads with sound off by default. It designs them to communicate a company’s branding and message without requiring sound. [...] ‘Autoplay with sound on is just going to go extinct’” (Chen 2018).

In contrast with sound-based autoplay videos, videos on Instagram (advertisements and user-generated content alike) are automatically silent unless the user enables a video’s sound. The user is understood by the platform to implicitly consent to the presence of silent, looped videos—

their consent needs only to be obtained for the presence of sound in these videos. These videos thus become, essentially, long-form GIFs. What does this mean for our understanding of the GIF's relationship to both sound-based videos and still images? In the next, final chapter, I consider how user posting on Instagram is informed by visual content moderation, with a particular focus on how original visual content is regulated in comparison to the regulation of pre-existing visual content (like the GIFs that appear in the Twitter GIF search).

5.0 Chapter Four: Post: Content Moderation and Biopolitics on Instagram

“Someone reported this... why? Idk! But I’m reposting!!!!”

(Instagram user @karamo, Karamo Brown)

In this chapter, I argue that the user’s body is more uniquely subject to moderation by the social media platform than the user’s words or their use of commercial images (such as the GIFs discussed in chapter three). This is partially due to the fact that social media platforms like Instagram are more reliant on an image economy of users’ bodies; Instagram, for example, is known for its strong association with the selfie (Duguay 2016; Moon et al. 2016; Ridgway and Clayton 2016; Zappavigna 2016). The image economy of users’ bodies is measured in large part by visibility, likes, and comments, as in the YouTube videos discussed in chapter two. In 2014, “Georgia Institute of Technology and Yahoo Labs researchers looked at 1.1 million photos on Instagram and found that pictures with human faces are 38 percent more likely to receive likes than photos with no faces. They’re also 32 percent more likely to attract comments” (Maderer). Users’ natural human attraction to faces and fellow people manifests in quantifiable results on Instagram, where likes and comments are profitable for influencers as well as the platform itself.

Hund’s work demonstrates how Instagram relies on users’ circulation of their own images in order to continue to successfully monetize the platform (2017). As she writes, “In the case of fashion influencers, marketers and software developers are also able to easily experiment with and integrate new technologies for making money on social media: influencers’ lives become shoppable, the self and social contacts can be monetized, and life can be precisely curated...” (Hund 2017, 4). In other words, Instagram as a platform continues to adapt in order to best

capitalize on the profitability of its most popular influencers, and on the regular advertising that can also be targeted to users.

Across the board, online platforms are uniquely concerned with moderating the body. Though exerting control over subjects and especially over their bodies reflects broader socio-political contexts within which online platforms are developed, such platforms also have specific relationships to the body that should be considered as relatively singular. In chapter one, I cited theory positing that the body is itself a form of mediation, because all of our experiences are mediated through our bodies. What makes biopolitics unique as a framework is that this approach describes how control, discipline, and *regulation* characterize approaches to the body in assertions of power. Foucault writes:

the milieu appears as a field of intervention in which, instead of affecting individuals as a set of legal subjects capable of voluntary actions – which would be the case of sovereignty – and instead of affecting them as a multiplicity of organisms, of bodies capable of performances, and of required performances – as in discipline – one tries to affect, precisely, a population. I mean a multiplicity of individuals who are and fundamentally and essentially only exist biologically bound to the materiality within which they live. What one tries to reach through this milieu, is precisely the conjunction of a series of events produced by these individuals, populations, and groups, and quasi natural events which occur around them. (2007, 36-37)

Here, Foucault is describing the framework of security, which establishes a milieu, in contrast to the frameworks of sovereignty and discipline.

The question of the milieu is important to an understanding of content moderation on social media because the concept mirrors functionalities of the platforms under discussion, particularly Instagram. Material connections group individual subjects into a collective in the milieu, where platforms are more commonly envisioned as connectors of individual nodes (as in sovereignty and discipline). In the platform, the individual is ostensibly treated as a node independent from and connected to other nodes. However, the practical functionality of platforms follows the outline of the milieu because platforms need to materially connect subjects; they do so in order to affect subjects as a collective population. Foucault writes that the milieu “is what is needed to account for action at a distance of one body on another. It is therefore the medium of an action and the element in which it circulates” (2007, 36). I theorize the platform in relationship to the milieu in order to argue that content moderation conceives of users as a population, not as individual subjects or even a series of demographic groups. In order to function effectively, the platform must moderate content as if on an equitable basis, wherein all users are subject to the same moderation—more importantly, the platform does not conceive of itself as providing discipline or sovereignty in the Foucauldian sense. Moderation of content, though it appears to be conducted on individual users, is centrally concerned with affecting the population of users, to use Foucault’s terms. Users are not regulated in relation to one another; content moderation is often enforced inconsistently from one user to another by either human or program error. Rather, users are regulated in relation to their surroundings, the platform itself and “events which occur around them” (Foucault 2007, 37). As in the milieu, the platform aims to act on its users *as a collective*, measuring not their “required performances,” but the cost/benefit of moderating their content on a case by case basis. The platform therefore employs “the apparatus (*dispositif*) of security” (Foucault 2007, 20). “...the apparatus of security inserts the phenomenon in question, namely theft, within a series of probable

events. Second, the reactions of power to this phenomenon are inserted in a calculation of cost. Finally, third, instead of a binary division between the permitted and the prohibited, one establishes an average considered as optimal on the one hand, and, on the other, a bandwidth of the acceptable that must not be exceeded” (Foucault 2007, 20).

I emphasize the connection between milieu and platform here in order to argue that these mechanisms are characteristic of white supremacy as an ideology. The inconsistency and opaqueness of whiteness lends itself to arbitrary methods of security- as well as discipline- and sovereignty-based enforcement across platforms, milieus, and other environments. Content moderation, then, the means by which platforms act on their populations with unclear guidelines or unequal enforcement, can be understood through a broad framework of white supremacy because they both share certain functions and methods. Functions include the naturalization of a given system of enforcement, and methods include the leveraging of ambiguity to confuse or make unclear the actual nature of that system. The theoretical relationships that I am suggesting among whiteness, ambiguity, and content moderation ask how the relative opaqueness of the content moderation system, standards, and structure of enforcement might mirror the naturalization of white supremacy. This allows me to elaborate on the usefulness of applying a biopolitical framework to my case study.

In my preliminary discussion of biopolitics as they manifest on social media platforms, I will primarily draw from examples having to do with gender and sexuality, particularly pornography. This is because the literature in the field and popular news coverage of Instagram’s content moderation policies generally focus on gender and sexuality, sometimes at the expense of race. As a result, my initial, broader discussion of biopolitics will lay the groundwork for my case study and a more specific consideration of the relationship between whiteness and content

moderation. In this later case study on Instagram's content moderation, I will demonstrate how whiteness manifests as a design-based element.

5.1 Applying the Framework

In this section, I begin by drawing preliminary connections between race and biopolitics in the context of the platform, describing how platforms affect material bodies. I use a series of examples to support this point: users' physical engagements with the platform (through which they can gain and lose capital), the images of bodies that platforms like Instagram center on and their various means of production, the economic exploitation that enables platforms' profitability, and the user consumption that heightens the user's vulnerability in the form of surveillance. These examples support my argument that content moderation matters as part of a milieu of platform security. They also influence my understanding of a later case study on content moderation on Instagram.

Conceptualizations of race are always caught up in both their histories and the ways in which they are weaponized against rights in the present. The civic and/or human right is a concept that reflects important dynamics in and of the biopolitics of platform design. As Paul Gilroy writes,

Whether race is figured as natural history, frozen culture or political anatomy, institutionalised racism imagines and assembles it as an absolute, unbridgeable division in social and political life. [...] racism has travelled, mutated and grown from its enlightenment roots in the same intellectual compost that yielded the idea of essential human equality which, we should always remember, provided no significant obstacles to the consolidation of European colonies and empires. (2019)

One of the concepts that Gilroy illuminates here is the idea that race exists (is positioned by us) among past, present, and future in constant simultaneity. It doesn't matter, Gilroy points out, whether race is configured as any kind of "history," "culture," or "anatomy," because it is always already a function that coexists with contradictory enlightenment ideals of "essential human equality" and the systemic denial of that equality to people of color. (The simultaneous, coexistent, reliant nature of enlightenment ideals and racism also reflect the similar relationship between irony and white supremacy that I discussed in chapter three. Conceptualizations of logic and empirical truth alongside those of rights that can and will be denied share a connection with conceptualizations of irony and sarcasm as superior forms of humor. Enlightenment standards of "logic" are used such that a subject who expresses disapproval of irony "doesn't get it").

As Edward Said's work demonstrates, it is not just that the enlightenment ideals that Gilroy describes fail to prevent colonialism and imperialism, but that they in fact actively contribute to them (1978; 2001). Similarly, the content of social media platforms is never disconnected from the platforms themselves; rather, the platforms always have been and always will be active agents in these engagements before moderation of content enters into the equation. This chapter allows me to build from prior chapters' work in order to demonstrate one of my central arguments, that platforms are not only *platforms* on which politics are enacted or power is enforced, but that platforms are themselves politics and power. "Power is not founded on itself or generated by itself. [...] there are not first of all relations of production and then, in addition, alongside or on top of these relations, mechanisms of power that modify or disturb them, or make them more consistent, coherent, or stable. [...] Mechanisms of power are an intrinsic part of all these relations and, in a circular way, are both their effect and cause" (Foucault 2007, 17). The platform's power is

biopolitical. By this, I mean that the power of the platform lies in its ability to moderate its population on a material level.

Digital technologies are fundamentally entwined with military and police functionalities on an international scale, such that they can be and are used to surveil, target, and kill (or maim, as Puar discusses) particular subjects. As Gilroy argues,

Torture is prohibited. So is the use of any information it might produce. Exceptional circumstances cannot make its use legitimate. War and other public emergencies do not provide any justification. However, many governments, not least my own, have been contorting themselves to be able to torture their foes without being seen to have done so. [...] Restored to the metropole, those habits have incubated a new political rhetoric and a distinctive governmental idiom that delights in employing euphemisms such as ‘waterboarding’ and ‘stress positions’. Like the repertoire of cruelty they obfuscate, those ‘newspeak’ terms have proved to be as infinitely translatable as the 20th-century science of public relations from which they derive. In this context, applying the seductive language of advertising demands additional analysis. It reassures all who dwell complacently within the bubble of official politics that they are correct in believing they can make anything mean whatever they want it to mean. War can be peace and ignorance is certainly strength, even if freedom is not yet slavery. (2019)

Here, Gilroy connects justificatory rhetoric to the violence that it allows, conducts, or incites, and it is notable that much of the discourse he references occurs through digital communications, particularly on social media platforms. Euphemisms are themselves a type of violence even as they also describe violence; to refer to “detention centers” is to deny the fact of “concentration camps,”

and in doing so, to deny the torture that is conducted by and within such camps. As many public figures have argued, much rhetoric that proliferates on platforms like Twitter actively promotes and encourages violence against people of color and Jewish people in the form of mass shootings and hate crimes (Taylor 2019; Wolf 2019). To deny the Holocaust or the Atlantic slave trade, or to describe them euphemistically as in assertions that there were “happy” slaves or “kind” slave-owners is to “reassure all who dwell complacently within the bubble of official politics that they are correct in believing they can make anything mean whatever they want it to mean” (Gilroy 2019). (See my analysis in chapter three about a similar lack of meaning that emerges from the ironic and layered visual rhetorics employed by YouTubers like PewDiePie). As a result, when I describe platforms, I am describing them as simultaneously agents of physical and symbolic action on populations. The platform is the site of myriad material effects.

Online harassment has physical effects, from the stalking or harming of doxing victims and the loss of income for revenge porn victims who get fired to the anxiety, depression, and other mental health problems that often result from online harassment. Simultaneously, users can get capital for living expenses not just from normal economic exchanges online, but also from donations solicited and provided through PayPal, GoFundMe, and similar platforms. Users can also gain physical advantages through online health initiatives, suicide prevention chat functions, and community building among marginalized groups that might not be physically accessible to a user based on their geographic location.

Biopolitics inform my approach to platform studies. It is not just that we need to account for the body, or multiple bodies, or embodiment, but also and more fundamentally, that we need to account for the ways in which these phenomena are inextricably linked to the platforms under discussion, and the ways in which platforms are not just mediums for, but actual subjects of

physicality, embodiment, intimacy, vulnerability, and so on. I do not just experience embodiment *through* my laptop, but rather, I always already experience embodiment with and in relation to my laptop. In the following paragraphs, I review additional means by which we might understand the platform in relationship to the body.

To what extent does the body become property of, and/or subject to regulation by, the platform? It is the image of the body that the platform can most overtly regulate, especially in the case of social media, but bodily images and imageries are sites of contestation and complication. Think of a recent image of two dead migrants, a man and his infant child, their drowned bodies washed up; reprinting of this image on the cover of the *New York Times* was challenged by some readers in a fashion similar to contestations of the newspaper's use and circulation of other images of death and suffering, specifically those of people of color. In fact, the *Times* published articles in response to these criticisms justifying the necessity of their use of the images, including "Why The Times Published a Photo of Drowned Migrants" (Takenaga 2019b) and "Why The Times Published a Disturbing Photo of Dead Bodies After an Attack in Nairobi" (Takenaga 2019a). Think alternately of images of nudity, self-taken and self-posted. If someone posts an image of their nipple and it is removed as sexual content, what does that mean for a broader understanding of how gender and sexuality are regulated on Instagram? When and how do images of breastfeeding become identified as distinct from other images of "female nipples?" Indeed, how do we determine how "female nipples" meaningfully differ from "male nipples?" Think of images of Black people brutalized or murdered by police; the act of watching, witnessing (bearing witness to), and proliferating such images is sometimes contested as well (see Cameron 2018; Malkowski 2017). Black communities for whom police brutality is a daily lived experience do not need to, and/or might not choose to, seek out such images, but communities that are safe from such dangers are

generally understood to have an ethical obligation to see and do something about this type of documented violence. As Malkowski writes, “Those of us among ‘the privileged and the merely safe’ must weigh the necessity of our self-protection against our moral obligation to learn and think critically about the terrible things that happen to others, and—crucially—about the *way* these terrible things are mediated and the consequences of that mediation” (2017, 17). The documentary *13th* acknowledges the complicated factors that influence when and how we view images of black subjects’ murders through its decision to air footage of police killings with the explicit permission of the victims’ families (and with the fact that this permission was secured assured to the audience via captions). The act of demonstration embodied here evokes Mamie Till’s decision to have an open casket funeral for her son Emmett Till, showing his tortured body to funeral attendees and to the nation in order to demand both acknowledgment of and action against lynchings like that of Till.

There are obvious differentiations that demarcate a body from its image. However, the two also share crucial connections. We recognize this, to use one example, in the case of revenge porn, wherein a nude picture originally taken and shared consensually is then non-consensually shared with others. By virtue of its inherent reproducibility or shareability, the image is always vulnerable to such movement. Though images belong to their owners, they are nevertheless subject to violation. Further, increasing developments in technology make it easier for users to manipulate images such that, as has been discussed in some public discourse and news coverage, an arguable case of “revenge porn” could soon be entirely manufactured rather than reliant on the circulation of a “true,” original image (Ellis 2018). For example, when Kanye West used wax dolls and body doubles to represent nude or seemingly nude public figures in his bed in a music video, Taylor Swift later referred to the use of her image in that context as “revenge porn.” Attorney Lisa Bloom

told a celebrity gossip site that while the use of Swift's image "violate[d] the spirit of revenge porn laws," it did not actually constitute revenge porn because of its use of manufactured nudity (TooFab Staff 2019). Whether or not such an instance should be identified as revenge porn for legal purposes becomes complicated by a number of factors; what is the difference between creating an image that, while relatively realistic looking, is nevertheless obviously fake and disseminating an image that is in fact real? What is the difference between circulation of such images depicting celebrities, whom fans have been imagining, drawing, and photoshopping nude for ages, and images depicting laypeople who have not made the choice to trade their privacy for fame and fortune? (Is it reasonable or possible for a layperson to expect privacy in exchange for their lack of fame and fortune in the digital age of viral content)? Questions of racial identity are also of note in this example. The fact that West and Swift's longstanding feud has always been infused with issues of race and racism makes this particular story an interesting one to consider from a new media-based perspective.

The questions that emerge around images of bodies, whether real or manufactured and whether consensually or non-consensually shared, illuminate the deeply complex ways in which we perceive the relationship between the body and its image. In the digital age, to what extent is it *physically* possible to claim ownership over images of our bodies in the same way that we claim ownership over our bodies themselves? What does this look like from a legal perspective? When some social media platforms regulate images, they engage with these questions through the additional framework of claiming users' images as their own property in terms of service agreements (this is not the case with Instagram). In addition to images themselves being subject to contestations over ownership, the labor involved in creating and disseminating those images also comes into question.

Economic exploitation centrally characterizes the platform's relationship to user bodies. This manifests most obviously in content moderation itself, which has been revealed by both scholarly work (Roberts 2019) and news press (Newton 2019) to be a psychologically traumatizing job for which there are deeply negligible salaries and benefits. *The Guardian* reports that, though both Instagram and YouTube are based in California, California's child labor laws are not applied in the case of underage social media stars, who can be exploited by their parents and the platforms without any present or future pay (Wong 2019). Veena Dubal compares the labor problems emerging on social media with those more generally characteristic of the "gig economy": "It took six years for people to stop using the term 'sharing economy' and start looking at what Uber drivers do as traditional work. We're going to have to move from ogling the novelty of the situation to recognizing this is work and re-regulate these arenas that have been regulated for a century" (qtd. in Wong 2019). Questions of regulation are in this case intrinsically, fundamentally intertwined with questions of the body. Increasingly, there are fewer concrete differentiations between economic exploitation by corporations and legal exploitation by police and government forces:

Then there's Ring, the 'smart doorbell' startup that Amazon acquired for \$1 billion in early 2018. Whereas other Internet giants mostly confine their snooping to users' online behavior, Ring lets Amazon — and you — monitor other people's actions in the real world. Its Wi-Fi-connected devices, mounted outside the doors of homes and businesses, continuously survey a 30-foot radius, capturing video whenever they detect motion. Users can watch the footage in real time, and can pay a fee to store and watch recordings. (Oremus 2019)

As Oremus goes on to note, Amazon actively works with police and encourages users to report on and record surveillance of "suspicious"-looking neighbors, delivery people, and random passerby.

Concerns about the many problems associated with this type of technology reflect similar issues associated with police body cams, themselves sometimes offered as a possible tool of police accountability despite their various drawbacks (Cameron 2018). Police surveillance thus becomes inextricable from corporate surveillance, such that barriers between the public and the private, and government and market, become more and more ambiguous.

By virtue of this connection to the body, regulation also becomes connected to issues related to sexuality, which are somewhat uniquely concerned with privacy and access. In a recent study of online tracking and data leakage, authors Elena Maris, Timothy Libert, and Jennifer Henrichsen argue, "...porn consumption data is *sexual* data, and thus constitutes an especially sensitive type of online data users likely wish to keep private. Revelations about such data represent specific threats to personal safety and autonomy in any society that polices gender and sexuality" (2019, 1). Thus, the specific tracking and leaking of data related to online pornography represents an important area of interest in the larger context of embodiment and its relationships to online communications. This particular study focuses on how Google and Facebook, among other platforms, track users' data from porn sites without users' knowledge and despite any expectations that they might have of privacy when browsing in incognito mode. "Our analysis of 22,484 pornography websites indicated that 93% leak user data to a third party" (Maris, Libert, & Henrichsen 2019, 1). As they note, "Most crucially, our results reveal the wide-scale privacy and security risks of consuming online pornography. The high percentage of site URLs that may reveal specific information about the content that users access constitutes an opportunity for the linking of this sensitive data to those users' other tracked online activities and profiles" (2019, 5). Particularly for minority communities like LGBTQ consumers, and more generally for users who

access URLs that indicate specific sexual preferences, the authors argue that poor security and leakage of data on porn sites represents an area of extreme vulnerability.

Coverage of the study by the *New York Times* particularly emphasizes these content-based implications of the data. Warzel cites Maris, Libert, and Henrichsen's analysis that the tracking capabilities under discussion might out a user as LGBTQ, or, through the URLs that the user visits, identify them as having "specific interests like bestiality, and teenage and incest content" (2019). This statement evokes the disturbing issue of online child pornography and similar problems that have plagued users and developers alike in digital contexts. In fact, the notion that it might be easier for a corporation like Google than for law enforcement agencies to detect the proliferation of child pornography reflects on how online content moderation has the potential to be undereffective when it comes to legally and ethically critical matters. In addition to simple sexual preferences, the possibility that corporations can track illegal pornographic activity also brings up the question of whether and how the data leakage under discussion could be put to better use. A problem with this suggestion, of course, is that law enforcement agencies can and do use this type of surveillance and content moderation, but more often for the purpose of disproportionately targeting people of color rather than white users.

In his article, Warzel goes on to write, "Affirmative consent is at the heart of digital privacy. Nearly all tracking is by default and governed by impossible-to-read privacy policies. And in an era that privileges and prioritizes mass collection of personal information, that means gathering information that is not only invasive but also superfluous. The leaky user data of pornographic websites is merely an extreme example of what has become standard practice online" (2019). Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's work on "leaky" media illuminates how our data-based relationship to technology is also always intrinsically physical (2016). The very concept of

“leakiness” evokes fluids, including bodily fluids, in a way that we do not commonly associate with technology; developments in waterproofing notwithstanding, few people want anything leaking anywhere near their phone or laptop. But our technology still leaks, and that leaking is, in the case of porn site tracking, related to our physical relationship to the technology. It is also arguably related to our specifically sexual relationship to the technology. These physical connections also represent Foucault’s biopolitical milieu.

Where Warzel emphasizes the implications of porn site tracking for the privacy of a user’s sexual preference, he understandably takes for granted the very fact that users access online porn through the internet, that they often do so with the same devices they use for work, social networking, and leisure, and that they generally expect that accessing porn sites in incognito modes will provide some protection of their privacy. This question of tracking via online porn is relevant to my research because it demonstrates some of the ways in which the mediation of porn gives us a physical relationship to the device mediating it. I am not referring here to technology fetishes, but rather to an argument that physical intimacy is indistinguishable from and always connected to less visible emotional intimacy between users and their laptops, tablets, and phones (see Williams 1999, Williams 2004). As I discuss in chapter one, the very fact that my devices can and do record my image, voice, and browser history create intimacy, and this intimacy is always already ideologically charged in large part because of its physical nature. Power manifests through the nature of users’ embodiment and physical relationships to technology and media. The “leakiness” of technology, therefore, is not just about user relationships to other users and to the corporations that track their movements, but also about user relationships to the devices that mediate the former. When users (including Mark Zuckerberg) cover the cameras and microphone jacks on their laptops, they do so in acknowledgment of their laptops’ simultaneous intimacy and

leakiness (Rogers 2016). Intimacy is in fact partially defined by its seemingly private nature, and this means that the user's intimacy with their laptop is always both present and suspect—thus, it is always contradictory.

5.2 Content Moderation

Here I draw from the previous section to focus specifically on the role of content moderation on platforms like Instagram. I begin with a review of content moderation across social media platforms, then describe the particular concerns with visual “misinformation” that characterize content moderation on Instagram and compare these with Instagram's parent company Facebook. Finally, I employ a case study of Instagram's content moderation to demonstrate how whiteness manifests as a design-based element.

Self-censorship and content moderation by social media platforms play significant roles in the circulation of social media images. Tarleton Gillespie's work is critical to an understanding of these phenomena. He writes, “This project, content moderation, is one that the operators of these [social media] platforms take on reluctantly. Most would prefer if either the community could police itself or, even better, users never posted objectionable content in the first place. But whether they want to or not, platforms find that they must serve as setters of norms, interpreters of laws, arbiters of taste, adjudicators of disputes, and enforcers of whatever rules they choose to establish” (2018). The fact that content platforms take moderation on reluctantly, as a necessity, is critical to an understanding of how content moderation has functioned in social media contexts up until this point and how approaches to it will continue to develop over time. When users post images, they are not only themselves moderating their images based on social, political, or economic factors,

but are also subject to intervention by platforms when their images violate or are perceived to violate user terms and conditions. The final form of user engagement that this dissertation considers is posting of original content, and specifically of images depicting users' bodies in the form of selfies.

Here I ask how content moderation engages with images, and specifically with images of the body. When Instagram as an image-based social media platform attempts to moderate visual content, which cannot be as easily or automatically monitored as textual content via keywords, what does such moderation look like, and what does it mean for an understanding of the role of whiteness and white supremacy? Where chapter three considered to a lesser degree the content moderation of mostly pre-existing GIFs on Twitter, with the majority of those GIFs being produced by the company Tenor and originating from popular media like television shows and films, this chapter specifically focuses on the moderation of original visual content that is produced by users.

I also examine Instagram in this chapter because it provides a useful illumination of its parent company, Facebook, in a specific and more visually oriented context. As one of the progenitors and greatest successes of social media's development to date, Facebook is essential to an understanding of social media more broadly speaking. However, in this dissertation I focus on platforms that place more emphasis on design and visual components. In an even greater sense than the case of Twitter, the literature on Facebook is extremely wide-ranging and thorough (see Santos, Lycarião, and Aquino 2019; Miller & Sinanan 2017; Moore & Tambini, eds. 2018; Rider & Wood 2019; Vaidhyanathan 2018). As a result, my work aims to contribute to an understanding of social media that provides more depth in its conceptualization of Facebook as a mega corporation. By narrowing in on Instagram, which Facebook acquired in 2012, I am able to consider one of many social media platforms over which the latter has control. Instagram functions

in part as a means by which to understand its parent company, and especially to do so in more visual terms. Facebook's relationship to Instagram correlates interestingly to Google's relationship with YouTube, which I discussed in chapter two. These parent companies and their subsidiaries reflect the trend of corporate consolidation across the board, which has critical effects on the development of social media overall. This consolidation and the broader culture of corporations in Silicon Valley are themselves important components of bias in the digital economy and its products (Pao 2017). This consolidation keeps the social media industry insular and maintains its majority ownership by white people.

Recent scholarship, in conjunction with news media attention to the issue, has focused on the proliferation of "misinformation" on social media platforms, especially Facebook itself. "...media ecology, the technological features and capacity of digital media, as well as regulatory loopholes created by *Citizens United v. FEC* and the FEC's disclaimer exemption for digital platforms contribute to the prevalence of anonymous groups' divisive issue campaigns on digital media" (Kim, et. al. 2018). Issues around content moderation are therefore specifically focused in the contemporary context on not only violation of community guidelines in the form of, for instance, explicit imagery or harassment, but also in the form of such misinformation or "fake news." As I discuss in greater detail below, image-based misinformation is a distinct problem that manifests on Instagram particularly, in the form of deepfakes (AI-created videos that are entirely synthetic and can depict a subject saying or doing something that they never did) and cheapfakes (videos that are simply edited to change their content, such as posts circulated that made U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi appear to be slurring drunkenly in a speech) (Barrett 2019). How we define what constitutes "misinformation" and more specifically, *visual* misinformation needs to be interrogated by an analysis of content moderation on platforms like Instagram. Content

moderation's recent emphasis on preventing the spread of misinformation is also indicative of a broader problem being tackled in the industry that has to do with popular conceptualizations of objectivity and subjectivity (some of the enlightenment ideals discussed above).

Factors that affect where and how visual content moderation occurs in social media are important to note not just for the historical and social contextualization of the issue, but also for the implications to an understanding of the ideological functions of social media interface. Though Instagram did not initially receive the public scrutiny that Facebook and Twitter did with regard to the 2016 U.S. presidential election, it represents a critical case study to consider 1) because of its differentiation as an image-centric platform and 2) because of its increasingly prominent role as disseminator of political misinformation. Where Facebook and Twitter's considerations of unofficial political advertising, bots, and similar issues are often able to rely on keywords to identify text, Instagram seems to represent a more difficult regulatory space because of its intrinsic focus on the image. Citing government officials and industry professionals, *NBC* reports, "Memes and videos are set to become the dominant forms of election misinformation around the 2020 elections [...] That means Instagram, by far the most popular photocentric app, will be a particularly crucial battleground for election manipulation efforts — and the first skirmishes have already happened" (Smith 2019). As an NYU study notes, "The problem isn't a lack of technology. It appears to be a lack of a clear strategy for addressing the serious problems inherent in Instagram's operating model. The platform currently is testing a system that uses image recognition and other tools to find potential misinformation, which is sent to Facebook fact-checkers. According to *Wired* magazine, material deemed false isn't recommended to new users, but Instagram doesn't remove or down-rank it in users' main feeds" (Barrett 2019, 19; see also Lacey 2019; Newton 2019).

In addition to having different user base numbers and demographics, Instagram and Facebook also serve fundamentally distinct social functions. “Facebook places relative emphasis on social networking; users try to connect each other and the content on Facebook is mainly aimed to build and maintain their relationships. In contrast, Instagram, just like Twitter, is a micro-blogging service; users post about what they want to post and it is not assumed that uploaders are closely related to their followers” (Kim & Kim 2019, 1501). In another design-based connection with Twitter, Instagram is public by default, and a user must actively make their account private in order to prevent their photos from being accessible to anyone with the app or an internet connection. The implicit point of these design choices is to emphasize that Twitter and Instagram are public-facing platforms that often serve the function of mimicking or evoking, if not necessarily replicating, one-to-many communications like broadcast television. Rather than using interactive or reciprocal features (like friending on Facebook, where both parties must agree to make the connection), Instagram and Twitter use a follow model that frames users more overtly as consumers and commodities. When Instagram and Twitter users claim to “follow for follow,” or follow back any users that follow them, they replicate the very reciprocity and mutuality that characterize Facebook, just as, when Facebook allows users to like and follow public pages of celebrities rather than friend them, it replicates the one-to-many model characteristic of Twitter and Instagram. I bring up Facebook in relation to my use of Instagram as a case study in this chapter not because Instagram’s designs are comparable to those of Facebook, or because an analysis of them is applicable to an understanding of Facebook, but because the economic conditions within which Instagram functions are intrinsically tied to Facebook as its parent company and as an original, extremely important and influential social media platform itself. As

it hosts one-to-many communications on a follow model, I now consider Instagram's specific design-based relationship to race and whiteness.

I want to consider three converging issues via a case study of Instagram's content moderation: 1) the content that was reportedly flagged as being against Instagram's "Community Guidelines," 2) the realness or legitimacy of the content itself *and* of the content's having been reported, and 3) the content's place within broader visual cultures and histories. Here, I consider an example of content moderation that is representative of certain common trends on the platform, and that demonstrates how a Black celebrity engages with what we might term white standards of moderation.

Reality star Karamo Brown of Netflix's *Queer Eye*, who is a verified Instagram user with the handle @karamo, posted a selfie on 31 December 2019 with the following caption: "Someone reported this... why? Idk! But I'm reposting!!!! Bye 2019 and Hello 2020!!!! Also #ByeHaters #PostingAgain." The selfie depicted Brown posing in front of a mirror shirtless and with a towel around his waist. Brown's toned abs were visible, as was his hipbone and some body hair above his crotch. Shirtless selfies are allowed from cis male users per the platform's terms: "...we don't allow nudity on Instagram. This includes photos, videos, and some digitally-created content that show sexual intercourse, genitals, and close-ups of fully-nude buttocks. It also includes some photos of female nipples, but photos of post-mastectomy scarring and women actively breastfeeding are allowed" (Instagram 2020). In short, given the prominence of similar shirtless selfies on Instagram and the fact that the post in question was not taken down subsequently, the content under discussion did not violate Instagram's terms. Many of Brown's fans made joking comments on the post claiming that the image was reported because it was "too hot" or because Brown, as a gay celebrity, was making women jealous by flaunting his unavailable body. In

addition to implying that the post was flagged by an anti-fan because they wanted to target Brown's account, Brown's use of "#ByeHaters" might also reference some user backlash against the original post's caption, which included the hashtag "#DadBod" (*NY Daily News* 2019), a term usually referring to an average, nonexceptional physique. This backlash is representative of one element of attempted community moderation—users argued that Brown's use of "#DadBod" undermined his public role as an advocate for self-love by reifying unattainable beauty standards for men. This issue emerges again when users contest the legitimacy of the image and its caption, and I note it here because it demonstrates how content moderation has as much to do with the population of users as it does with the ostensibly pre-established platform standards.

Brown went on to edit the post's caption, removing all reference to the reporting of the post, and eventually turned the comments feature off on that particular post. The final caption that he posted read: "Bye 2019 and Hello 2020!!!! #LiterallyNewPhoneWhoDis 🤔 🤔 🤔 🤔 .". These changes seemed to be in response to some users accusing him of lying about the photo having been reported. These users claimed that the original photo posted had been photoshopped and that Brown had himself deleted and reposted the photo in response to people pointing out its inauthenticity. Under contestation was both the legitimacy of the photo, which users said was still photoshopped, and Brown's claim that the photo had been reported and (presumably) taken down by Instagram, resulting in his reposting it. These features of the example tell us a few things about Instagram through the framework of Foucault's milieu: the population can only regulate itself *as population* when users are under the impression that they are nodes, not a singular group. Users suggesting that Brown's photo was fake claimed, in part, that it was bad for fans' self-esteem to see a role model altering his own, already exceptional, body. I discuss this issue in greater detail below, where it emerges in relation to larger cultural discourses about Black

men's bodies and about gay men's bodies. Notably, there is also little to no contestation of the question of whether the photo's illegitimacy would be undesirable. When fans write that the post is photoshopped, they do so without feeling obliged to describe why that is a bad thing, as its visual misinformation is taken for granted to be a problem. This reflects the naturalized enlightenment ideals that characterize many aspects of contemporary culture; as I discussed above, enlightenment ideals are understood by scholars like Said to be inherently connected to white supremacy as an enterprise.

Content moderation is not just about the platform ensuring that content meets its standards of appropriateness or decency. Content moderation also manifests in different but related ways, via quantitative measurements of popularity, public backlash, and other forms of engagement. People already moderate their own content, choosing what to share and how to share it. If and when backlash occurs, it takes the form of users suggesting that the photo should be taken down or should never have been posted in the first place, as users stated in response to Brown's repost. In turn, the user can moderate their own content by turning off the comments on the photo and editing the caption; these features are made seamless in the platform's interface because they do not track changes. Rather, comments simply disappear, and the caption is changed with no indication that it was edited, as occurs for posts on Facebook. These platform features give the user control of their image and partial control over the visibility of people's reactions to it.

Part of the backlash against Brown's post centers on the sexualization of both gay men and Black men in American visual culture. Some users claimed that Brown was being hypocritical by contributing to his own objectification within the community, when he has previously argued that objectification is a problem in the gay community. Being both Black and gay compounds the scrutiny that Brown is under in this context. Black male bodies are seen as more inherently sexual

and therefore more indecent in Western visual culture. This increases the likelihood that a Black man's shirtless selfie will be reported for indecency, where a non-Black man's shirtless selfie is not. Whether or not Brown's original post was actually reported and taken down, the discourse around it demonstrates that content moderation is inherently connected to visual culture's histories. In the platform context, whiteness marks non-whiteness as visible in order to regulate it; the image needs to first exist in order for it to be taken down or rebuked. When I argue that this case study is about content moderation's relationship to whiteness, I mean that not only in its methods (ambiguity, inconsistency, naturalization) but also in its goals, content moderation is modeled on white supremacy. Content moderation enforces fundamentally white standards of decency, acceptability, etc.

Importantly for the purposes of this study, users contest content moderation not only through their engagements with official platform policies, but also through self-moderation and community-moderation. Attempts to police or control images are sources of contestation because of the fact that users behave as a population. These attempts are also informed by the visual culture that users have been raised in. Content moderation is shaped by user engagements because the platform relies in large part on users to flag content. This affects the ideology that informs the enforcement of standards (with enforcement of standards itself being an ideological enterprise). White supremacy focuses on the visualization of subjects of color in order to control such subjects and their images.

Whiteness characterizes the design features that enforce content moderation in the sense that the designs can be opaque and inconsistent. For example, as with many other social media platforms, Instagram provides a series of categories under which the user can flag a post as "inappropriate," which have different effects on the means by and extent to which the post will be

reviewed. Users engage accordingly; if I want to report a post, I never choose the option “I don’t like seeing this,” even though it might be true, because I know that it will likely not result in a review of the post in question.

This chapter has reviewed the frameworks of biopolitics and biopower to apply them to an understanding of content moderation in social media contexts. By considering the platform of Instagram and the feature of posting to it, I have argued that users’ bodies are regulated by platforms not just via control of images of the body, but also and more crucially, via control of the population of users. By manufacturing users as a population in the sense of Foucault’s milieu, platforms maximize profitability at the expense of equity, reinforcing existing power structures through both method and design.

6.0 Conclusion

This dissertation has (i) demonstrated how white supremacy and platform design are ideologically connected with each other in the context of social media; (ii) theorized white supremacy and platform as overlapping, intertwined phenomena/concepts; and (iii) used affect and biopolitics as frameworks to understand platform design in social media as an aesthetic and ideological project of white supremacy. Over the course of this dissertation, I have demonstrated that the construct of the (social media) platform parallels the social construct of race. Both of these phenomena do the following: establish binaries under which organization happens, identify various categories and subcategories within which subjects are classified, and use these categorizations to establish hierarchies of worth and meaning. Within both the platform and race, subjects are understood to be more or less human and are given or denied capital by virtue of their whiteness or lack thereof. *Platform* and *race* do all of this categorization in order to subsequently make capital off of subjects to the best of their ability. The central goal is always to maximize capital under the contemporary capitalist system. In concluding, I want to briefly begin to think about how to work against the system of white supremacist capitalism.

Here are some ways in which I think that we can undermine the logics of capitalism, platform, and race as they currently exist in relation to one another. We can find and emulate the best ways that people have used platforms for racial justice movements. Consider, for example, how people of color have organized on social media platforms meaningfully via movements like Black Lives Matter, the Dakota Access Pipeline protests, and efforts for justice in Palestine. Just like capital, the platform can be leveraged or used in meaningful ways for racial justice (e.g. Black-owned businesses, indigenous economic movements, etc.). The goal of this approach is to

empower subjects within the existing system of capitalism. Though the system of capitalism ostensibly cannot yet be dismantled, we can follow in the line of socialist policies that make capitalist systems less unjust. These policies specifically put the capital back in the hands of communities of color through the redistribution of wealth that was stolen from those communities.

How do you redistribute capital in the context of social media platforms? First, we can enact government regulation that undermines monopolistic power and that prevents the consolidation of subjects' data into private corporations. This can be worked toward in part by supporting local and national politicians with anti-racist policies and legislative goals. We can also reassess individual uses of and engagements with the social media platform. Increasing media literacy means increasing users' awareness of the ways in which they provide capital to social media platforms, which empowers them to make more informed decisions about their media usage. We can also empower our own uses of social media platforms in ways that prevent misuse by bad faith actors (white power movements, anti-democracy movements, etc.). Moving forward, our understanding of social media platforms must continue to be characterized by a fundamentally global perspective that acknowledges the transnational nature of these and other new media. A consideration of the role of social media platforms like WhatsApp, for example, is essential to an understanding of how racial justice movements manifest globally. Future research should continue to consider international platforms, not just American-based ones, in greater detail. In my own future work, I want to consider the ongoing role that affect plays in new media contexts, particularly as they relate to identity.

Bibliography

- Ahmed, Sara. 2010. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- . 2004a. "Collective Feelings: Or, the Impressions Left by Others." *Theory, Culture & Society* 21 (2): 25–42.
- . 2004b. "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism." *Borderlands* 3 (2). http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2_2004/ahmed_declarations.htm.
- Alexander, Julia. 2019a. "YouTube creators are trying to move on from 'Subscribe to PewDiePie.'" *The Verge*, March 19, 2019. Bullshit nonsense I fucking hate this <https://www.theverge.com/2019/3/19/18270905/subscribe-to-pewdiepie-youtube-new-zealand-attack-meme>.
- . 2019b. "YouTube wants 'dislike mobs' to stop weaponizing the dislike button." *The Verge*, February 1, 2019. <https://www.theverge.com/2019/2/1/18207189/youtube-dislike-attack-mob-review-bomb-creator-insider>.
- Althusser, Louis. 2014. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. Translated by G. M. Goshgarian. London: Verso.
- Asian Boss. 2019a. "Do Indians Find PewDiePie's Music Videos 'Racist'? | ASIAN BOSS." YouTube video, 12:21. May 3, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5iNamnG3f0>.
- . 2019b. "What Indians Think Of PewDiePie vs T-Series [Street Interview] | ASIAN BOSS." YouTube video, 11:03. March 5, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3L4RMxrzyw>.
- Barrett, Paul M. 2019. "Disinformation and the 2020 Election: How the Social Media Industry Should Prepare." NYU Stern. Accessed March 13, 2020. https://issuu.com/nyusterncenterforbusinessandhumanri/docs/nyu_election_2020_report?fr=sY2QzYzI0MjMwMA.
- Beckett, Lois. 2019. "Fifty shades of white: the long fight against racism in romance novels." *The Guardian*, April 4, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/04/fifty-shades-of-white-romance-novels-racism-ritas-rwa>.
- Belew, Kathleen. 2018. *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bell, Derrick. 2004. *Race, Racism, and American Law*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Bort, Ryan. 2018. "Area President Falls Asleep on Caps-Lock Key, Threatens Historic Suffering." *Rolling Stone*, July 23, 2018. <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/trump-iran-war-702360/>.
- Brunsmma, David L., Eric S. Brown, and Peggy Placier. 2013. "Teaching Race at Historically White Colleges and Universities: Identifying and Dismantling the Walls of Whiteness." *Critical Sociology* 39 (5): 717–38.
- Butler, Judith. 1997. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Cabrera, Nolan L. 2014. "'But I'm oppressed too': white male college students framing racial emotions as facts and recreating racism." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 27 (6): 768–84.
- Calhoun, Craig. 2010. "The Public Sphere in the Field of Power." *Social Science History* 34 (3): 301–35.
- . 2002. "Imagining Solidarity: Cosmopolitanism, Constitutional Patriotism, and the Public Sphere." *Public Culture* 14 (1): 147–71.
- Cameron, Kelsey. 2018. "The Matter of Identity: Digital Media, Television, and Embodied Difference." PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh.
- Castagano, Angelina E. 2013. "Multicultural Education and the Protection of Whiteness." *American Journal of Education* 120 (1): 101–28.
- Chen, Brian X. 2018. "Autoplay Videos Are Not Going Away. Here's How to Fight Them." *New York Times*, August 1, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/01/technology/personaltech/autoplay-video-fight-them.html>.
- Chen, Heather. 2016. "Anger over 'racist yellowface' Snapchat filter." *BBC*, August 11, 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-37042475>.
- Chinoy, Sahil. 2019. "The Racist History Behind Facial Recognition." *New York Times*, July 10, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/10/opinion/facial-recognition-race.html>.
- Chokshi, Niraj. 2019. "How Surveillance Cameras Could Be Weaponized With A.I." *New York Times*, June 13, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/13/us/aclu-surveillance-artificial-intelligence.html>.
- Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. 2016. *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- . 2009. *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

- Connor, Kimberly Rae. 1996. "'To Disembark': The Slave Narrative Tradition." *African American Review* 30 (1): 35+.
- Cottom, Tressie McMillan. 2019. *Thick: And Other Essays*. United States: New Press.
- Daniels, Jessie. "Race and Racism in Internet Studies: A Review and Critique." *New Media & Society* 15, no. 5 (August 2013): 695–719. doi:10.1177/1461444812462849.
- Davidson, Lauren. 2015. "Never read the comments. Here's why." *The Telegraph*, January 15, 2015. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/11342558/Online-articles-Never-read-the-comments.-Heres-why.html>.
- Dawson, Michael C. 2018. "Racial Capitalism and Democratic Crisis." Social Science Research Council, December 4, 2018, <https://items.ssrc.org/racial-capitalism-and-democratic-crisis/>.
- Deleon, Nicholas. "You'll soon be able to search for GIFs directly on Twitter." *Vice*, February 17, 2016, https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/xygdv7/twitter-adds-gif-search.
- Donath, Judith. 2014. *The Social Machine: Designs for Living Online*. United Kingdom: MIT Press.
- Dougher, Sarah and Diane Pecknold. 2016. "Introduction: Girls, girlhood, and popular music." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 28: 407-11.
- Du Bois, W.E.B., and Peter Rachleff. 2003. "Negroes and the Crisis of Capitalism in the U.S." *Monthly Review* 54 (11): 36.
- Duffy, Brooke Erin. 2017. *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Duguay, Stefanie. 2016. "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer Visibility Through Selfies: Comparing Platform Mediators Across Ruby Rose's Instagram and Vine Presence." *Social Media and Society* 2 (2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116641975>.
- Dyer, Richard. 1997. *White*. New York: Routledge.
- Ellis, Emma Grey. 2018. "People can put your face on porn—and the law can't help you." *Wired*, January 26, 2018. <https://www.wired.com/story/face-swap-porn-legal-limbo/>.
- Everett, Anna. 2002. "The Revolution Will Be Digitized: Afrocentricity and the Digital Public Sphere." *Social Text* 20 (2): 125–46.
- Faraday Speaks. 2019. "My Descent into the Alt-Right Pipeline." YouTube video, 38:13. March 21, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfLa64_zLrU.
- Fontanarosa, Phil B., and Howard Bauchner. 2018. "Race, Ancestry, and Medical Research." *JAMA* 320 (15): 1539–40. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2018.14438>.

- Foucault, Michel. 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-79*, edited by Michel Senellart. Translated by Graham Burchell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- . 2007. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France, 1977-78*, edited by Michel Senellart. Translated by Graham Burchell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fuchs, Christian. 2014. *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*. New York: Routledge.
- Galloway, Alexander R. 2012. *The Interface Effect*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gates, Kelly. 2011. *Our Biometric Future: Facial Recognition Technology and the Culture of Surveillance*. United Kingdom: NYU Press.
- Gehl, Robert W. 2011. "The Archive and the Processor: The Internal Logic of Web 2.0." *New Media & Society* 13 (8): 1228-1244.
- Gillborn, David. 2006. "Rethinking White Supremacy: Who Counts in 'WhiteWorld.'" *Ethnicities* 6 (3): 318-40. doi:10.1177/1468796806068323.
- Gillespie, Tarleton. 2018. *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions that Shape Social Media*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- . 2010. "The Politics of 'Platforms.'" *New Media & Society* 12 (3): 347-64. doi:10.1177/1461444809342738.
- Gilroy, Paul. 2019. "Never Again: refusing race and salvaging the human." *The 2019 Holberg Lecture, by Laureate Paul Gilroy*, May 31, 2019. <https://www.holbergprisen.no/en/news/holberg-prize/2019-holberg-lecture-laureate-paul-gilroy>.
- Grossberg, Lawrence, interviewed by Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg. 2010. "Affect's Future: Rediscovering the Virtual in the Actual." In *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Guarino, Ben, and Kristine Phillips. 2017. "Anti-Semitic jokes cause YouTube, Disney to distance themselves from PewDiePie." *The Washington Post*, February 14, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/02/14/pewdiepie-youtubes-most-popular-star-dropped-by-disney-over-anti-semitic-jokes/>.
- Habermas, Jurgen. 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Haney-Lopez, Ian. 2014. *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Harmon, Amy. 2019. "Discussing Blackness on Reddit? Photograph Your Forearm First." *New York Times*, October 8, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/08/us/reddit-race-black-people-twitter.html>.
- Hern, Alex. 2017. "How social media bubbles and algorithms influence the election." *The Guardian*, May 22, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/22/social-media-election-facebook-filter-bubbles>.
- Hirschman, Charles. 2004. "The Origins and Demise of the Concept of Race." *Population and Development Review* 30 (3): 385-415.
- hooks, bell. 1995. *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*. United States: Henry Holt and Company.
- Hopeless R----- . 2018. "Pewdiepie roasting Lilly Singh Compilation(2016-2018)." YouTube video, 3:04. December 11, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ISgz2V_YZg.
- Hund, Emily. 2017. "Measured Beauty: Exploring the aesthetics of Instagram's fashion influencers." *#SMSociety '17* 44: 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3097286.3097330>.
- Ignatiev, Noel. 1995. *How the Irish Became White*. United States: Routledge.
- Jackson, Lauren Michele. 2017. "We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs." *Teen Vogue*, August 2, 2017. <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/digital-blackface-reaction-gifs>.
- Jamieson, Kathleen Hall, and Doron Taussig. 2017. "Disruption, Demonization, Deliverance, and Norm Destruction: The Rhetorical Signature of Donald J. Trump." *Political Science Quarterly* 132 (4): 619-50.
- Jenkins, Morgan. 2015. "The Quiet Racism of Instagram Filters." *Racked*, July 7, 2015. <https://www.racked.com/2015/7/7/8906343/instagram-racism>.
- Jerslev, Anne. 2016. "In the Time of the Microcelebrity: Celebification and the YouTuber Zoella." *International Journal of Communication* 10: 5233-5251.
- Kanai, Akane. 2017. "The best friend, the boyfriend, other girls, hot guys, and creeps: the relational production of self on Tumblr." *Feminist Media Studies* 17 (6): 911-925.
- Kat Blaque. 2019. "Pewdiepie and The Rebranding of White Nationalism." YouTube video, 38:54. April 20, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H94mfxMTmc4&t=1s>.
- Kim, Dorothy. 2019. "White Supremacists Have Weaponized an Imaginary Viking Past. It's Time to Reclaim the Real History." *Time*, April 12, 2019. <http://time.com/5569399/viking-history-white-nationalists/>.
- Kim, Jang Hyun, and Yunhwan Kim. 2019. "Instagram user characteristics and the color of their photos: Colorfulness, color diversity, and color harmony." *Information Processing &*

Management 56 (4): 1494–1505. <https://doi.org/pitt.idm.oclc.org/10.1016/j.ipm.2018.10.018>.

Kim, Young Mie, Jordan Hsu, David Neiman, Colin Kou, Levi Bankston, Soo Yun Kim, Richard Heinrich, Robyn Baragwanath, and Garvesh Raskutti. 2018. "The Stealth Media? Groups and Targets Behind Divisive Issue Campaigns on Facebook." *Political Communication* 35 (4): 515-541. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2018.1476425>.

King, Hope. 2016. "Snapchat under fire for another 'racist' filter." *CNN*, August 10, 2016. <https://money.cnn.com/2016/08/10/technology/snapchat-racist-asian-filter/index.html>.

Kokuryō, Jirō. 1995. *Ōpun nettowāku keiei: kigyō senryaku no shinchōryū* (Open Network Management: New Trends in Business Strategy). Tokyo: Nihon keizai shinbunsha.

Kung, Franki Y.H., Melody M. Chao, Donna J. Yao, Wendi L. Adair, Jeanne H. Fu, and Kevin Tasa. 2018. "Bridging Racial Divides: Social Constructionist (vs. Essentialist) Beliefs Facilitate Trust in Intergroup Contexts." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 74 (April 2017): 121–34. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2017.09.008>.

Kung, Jess, Gene Demby, and Shereen Marisol Meraji. 2019. "Is 'Race Science' Making A Comeback?" *NPR*, July 10, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2019/07/10/416496218/is-race-science-making-a-comeback>.

Lanham, David, and Amy Liu. 2019. "Not just a typographical change: Why Brookings is capitalizing Black." *Brookings*, September 23, 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/brookingscapitalizesblack/>.

Larsson, Anders Olof. 2015. "Comparing to Prepare: Suggesting Ways to Study Social Media Today—and Tomorrow." *Social Media + Society* 1 (1). doi:10.1177/2056305115578680.

Li, Jinying. 2017. "The Interface Affect of a Contact Zone: Danmaku on Video-Streaming Platforms." *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 4: 233–56. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22142312-12340079>.

Linscott, Charles "Chip" P. 2017. "All Lives (Don't) Matter: The Internet Meets Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism." *Black Camera* 8 (2): 104–19. <https://doi.org/10.2979/blackcamera.8.2.06>.

Luckman, Susan. 2016. "Micro-Enterprise as Work-Life 'Magical Solution.'" In *The Post-Fordist Sexual Contract: Working and Living in Contingency*, edited by Lisa Adkins and Maryanne Dever. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Maderer, Jason. 2014. "Face It: Instagram Pictures With Faces are More Popular." *Georgia Tech News Center*, March 20, 2014. <https://www.news.gatech.edu/2014/03/20/face-it-instagram-pictures-faces-are-more-popular>.

- Malkowski, Jennifer. 2017. *Dying in Full Detail: Mortality and Digital Documentary*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Maloney, Marcus, Steven Roberts, and Alexandra Caruso. 2018. “‘Mmm... I Love It, Bro!’: Performances of Masculinity in YouTube Gaming.” *New Media and Society* 20 (5): 1697–1714.
- Maris, Elena, Timothy Libert, and Jennifer Henrichsen. 2019. “Tracking sex: The implications of widespread sexual data leakage and tracking on porn websites (Preprint, July 2019).”
- Martin, Nina, and Renee Montagne. 2017. “Black Mothers Keep Dying After Giving Birth. Shalon Irving’s Story Explains Why.” *NPR*, December 7, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/07/568948782/black-mothers-keep-dying-after-giving-birth-shalon-irvings-story-explains-why>.
- MartyEhYT. 2018. “What does the dislike button on youtube comments actually do?” *Reddit*, December 30, 2018. https://www.reddit.com/r/youtube/comments/aax7mh/what_does_the_dislike_button_on_youtube_comments/.
- Marvin, Carolyn. 1988. *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
- Matias, Cheryl E., Roberto Montoya, and Naomi W. M. Nishi. 2016. “Blocking CRT: How the Emotionality of Whiteness Blocks CRT in Urban Teacher Education.” *Educational Studies* 52 (1): 1-19.
- McCallum, David. 2016. “Categories of race: technologies of knowing and governing Australian aborigines.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39 (14): 2527-2544.
- Means TV. 2020. “Means TV.” Accessed March 12, 2020. <https://means.tv/>.
- Metzl, Jonathan M. 2019. *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment is Killing America’s Heartland*. New York: Basic Books.
- Meyer, Robinson. 2016. “The Repeated Racism of Snapchat.” *The Atlantic*, August 13, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/08/snapchat-makes-another-racist-misstep/495701/>.
- Miller, Daniel, and Jolynna Sinanan. 2017. *Visualising Facebook: A Comparative Perspective*. London: UCL Press.
- Miltner, Kate M., and Tim Highfield. 2017. “Never gonna GIF you up: Analyzing the cultural significance of the animated GIF.” *Social Media + Society* 3 (3).

- Moon, Jang Ho, Eunji Lee, Jung-Ah Lee, Tae Rang Choi, and Yongjun Sung. 2016. "The Role of Narcissism in Self-Promotion on Instagram." *Personality and Individual Differences* 101: 22–25. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.05.042>.
- Moore, Martin, and Damian Tambini, eds. 2018. *Digital Dominance: The Power of Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated.
- Morgan, Colleen, and Nela Scholma-Mason. 2017. "Animated GIFs as Expressive Visual Narratives and Expository Devices in Archaeology." *Internet Archaeology* 44.
- Morreale, Joanne. 2014. "From Homemade to Store Bought: Annoying Orange and the Professionalization of YouTube." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 14 (1): 113–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540513505608>.
- Mufson, Beckett. 2018. "Trump's Unhinged, All-Caps Iron Tweet Is Already a Meme." *Vice*, July 23, 2018. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/qvmv3v/trumps-unhinged-all-caps-iran-tweet-president-rouhani-meme-vgtrn.
- Mulaudzi, Shandukani. 2017. "Let's Be Honest: Snapchat Filters Are A Little Racist." *Huffington Post*, January 25, 2017. https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2017/01/25/snapchat-filters-are-harming-black-womens-self-image_a_21658358/.
- Mulvey, Laura. 1999. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford University Press: 833-44.
- Nakamura, Lisa. 2014. "'I WILL DO EVERYthing That Am Asked': Scambaiting, Digital Show-Space, and the Racial Violence of Social Media." *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (December 2014): 257–74. doi:10.1177/1470412914546845.
- . 2008. *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, vol. 23 of *Electronic Mediations*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Newton, Casey. 2019. "The Trauma Floor." *The Verge*, February 25, 2019. <https://www.theverge.com/2019/2/25/18229714/cognizant-facebook-content-moderator-interviews-trauma-working-conditions-arizona>.
- . 2016. "Twitter rolls out native GIF search powered by Giphy and Riffsy." *The Verge*, February 17, 2016. <https://www.theverge.com/2016/2/17/11027724/twitter-gif-search-giphy-riffsy>.
- Nikolov, Dimitar, Diego F.M. Oliveira, Alessandro Flammini, and Filippo Menczer. 2015. "Measuring online social bubbles." *PeerJ Computer Science* 1.
- Noble, Safiya Umoja. 2018. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York: New York University Press.
- Oluo, Ijeoma. 2019. *So You Want to Talk About Race*. United States: Basic Books.

- Oremus, Will. 2019. "Amazon Is Watching." *Medium*, June 27, 2019. <https://onezero.medium.com/amazon-is-watching-d51b20f1668a>.
- Ortiz, Michelle, and Jake Harwood. 2007. "A Social Cognitive Theory Approach to the Effects of Mediated Intergroup Contact on Intergroup Attitudes." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 51 (4): 615-631.
- Painter, Nell Irvin. 2010. *The History of White People*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Pao, Ellen K. 2017. *Reset: My Fight for Inclusion and Lasting Change*. New York: Spiegel & Grau.
- Perkins, Tom. 2019. "'It's techno-racism': Detroit is quietly using facial recognition to make arrests." *The Guardian*, August 17, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/aug/16/its-techno-racism-detroit-is-quietly-using-facial-recognition-to-make-arrests>.
- Perkinson, James W. 2005. *Shamanism, Racism, and Hip Hop Culture: Essays on White Supremacy and Black Subversion*. United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan.
- PewDiePie. 2019a. "Congratulations." YouTube video, 4:18. March 31, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PHgc8Q6qTjc>.
- . 2019b. "Ending the Subscribe to Pewdiepie Meme." YouTube video, 3:53. April 28, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ah5MYGQBRYo>.
- . 2019c. "What do Indians think of Tseries vs Pewdiepie?" YouTube video. 18:29. March 9, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qov0ypksviU>.
- . 2018a. "ALL WOMAN ARE QUEEN /r/nicgirls #13 [REDDIT REVIEW]." YouTube video, 11:16. July 9, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYgK5aAqZnI>.
- . 2018b. "bitch lasagna." YouTube video, 2:14. October 5, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Dh-RL__uN4.
- . 2018c. "Protect waman at all cost! - /r/whiteknighting/ #25 [REDDIT REVIEW]." YouTube video, 12:57. November 14, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5nZxIXyjyEo>.
- . 2018d. "This is getting out of control..." YouTube video, 5:05. December 3, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=204&v=p8L-LjWHPjw.
- . 2018e. "YouTube Rewind 2018 but it's actually good." YouTube video, 5:34. December 27, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=By_Cn5ixYLG.
- . 2017a. "How to: RESPECT WOMEN!" YouTube video, 14:12. June 2, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NsevBxOWFXs>.

- . 2017b. “This man has -1000 respect for women and the reason why might SHOCK you.” YouTube video, 14:24. July 13, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrDD5NTnoU4>.
- . 2016a. “Can this video get 1 million dislikes?” YouTube video, 4:54. December 24, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wx9Jv5uxfac>.
- . 2016b. “Can this video hit 1 million likes?” YouTube video, 3:19. December 10, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHR9aM494rs>.
- . 2016c. “DELETING MY CHANNEL AT 50 MILLION.” YouTube video, 10:19. December 2, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=557&v=6-_4Uoo_7Y4.
- . 2016d. “I’M RACIST?” YouTube video, 12:07. December 8, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QGX2mJ6IbS0>.
- Pittman, Matthew. 2018. “Happiness, Loneliness, and Social Media: Perceived Intimacy Mediates the Emotional Benefits of Platform Use.” *The Journal of Social Media in Society* 7 (2): 164-176.
- Rabaka, Reiland. 2007. “The Souls of White Folk: W.E.B. Du Bois’s Critique of White Supremacy and Contributions to Critical White Studies.” *Journal of African American Studies* 11 (1): 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-007-9011-8>.
- Radd, Sharon I., and Tanetha Jamay Grosland. 2019. “Desirabilizing Whiteness: A Discursive Practice in Social Justice Leadership That Entrenches White Supremacy.” *Urban Education* 54 (5): 656-76.
- Reddy, Sasank. 2016. “Introducing GIF search on Twitter.” Twitter Blog, February 17, 2016, https://blog.twitter.com/official/en_us/a/2016/introducing-gif-search-on-twitter.html.
- Rider, Karina, and David Murakami Wood. 2019. “Condemned to Connection? Network Communitarianism in Mark Zuckerberg’s ‘Facebook Manifesto.’” *New Media & Society* 21, no. 3: 639–54. doi: [10.1177/1461444818804772](https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818804772).
- Ridgway, Jessica L., and Russell B. Clayton. 2016. “Instagram Unfiltered: Exploring Associations of Body Image Satisfaction, Instagram #Selfie Posting, and Negative Romantic Relationship Outcomes.” *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 19 (1): 2–7. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2015.0433>.
- Roberts, Sarah. T. 2019. *Behind the Screen: Content Moderation in the Shadows of Social Media*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Roberts, Steven, and Marcus Maloney. 2017. “PewDiePie, new media stars and the court of public opinion.” *The Conversation*, February 20, 2017. <https://theconversation.com/pewdiepie-new-media-stars-and-the-court-of-public-opinion-73263>.

- Robinson, Cedric J. 2005. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. United States: University of North Carolina Press.
- Rogers, Katie. 2016. "Mark Zuckerberg Covers His Laptop Camera. You Should Consider It, Too." *New York Times*, June 22, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/23/technology/personaltech/mark-zuckerberg-covers-his-laptop-camera-you-should-consider-it-too.html>.
- Roose, Kevin. 2019. "A Mass Murder of, and for, the Internet." *New York Times*, March 15, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/technology/facebook-youtube-christchurch-shooting>.
- Ruddick, Susan. 2010. "The Politics of Affect: Spinoza in the Work of Negri and Deleuze." *Theory, Culture & Society* 27 (4): 21-45.
- Rundle, Michael. 2016. "Twitter launches native GIF search." *Wired*, February 17, 2016, <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/twitter-gif-search-new>.
- Said, Edward W. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Said, Edward W., and Gauri Viswanathan. 2001. *Power, Politics, and Culture: Interviews with Edward W. Said*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Sampson, Mike. 2016. "Why the 'Ghostbusters' Trailer is the Most 'Disliked' Movie Trailer in YouTube History." *ScreenCrush*, April 29, 2016. <https://screencrush.com/ghostbusters-trailer-most-disliked-movie-trailer-in-history/>.
- Santos, Marcelo Alves dos, Diógenes Lycarião, and Jakson A. de Aquino. 2019. "The Virtuous Cycle of News Sharing on Facebook: Effects of Platform Affordances and Journalistic Routines on News Sharing." *New Media and Society* 21 (2). SAGE Publications Ltd: 398–418. doi:10.1177/1461444818797610.
- Schiappa, Edward, Peter B. Gregg, and Dean E. Hewes. 2005. "The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis." *Communication Monographs* 72 (1): 92-115.
- Sexton, Jared. 2011. "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism." *InTensions Journal* 5.
- Sheffield, Matthew. 2017. "Is YouTube sensation PewDiePie really a Nazi? His intentions matter less than his effect." *Salon*, February 17, 2017. <https://www.salon.com/2017/02/16/is-youtube-sensation-pewdiepie-really-a-nazi-his-intentions-matter-less-than-his-effects/>.
- Smith, Allan. 2019. "Facebook's Instagram poised to be 2020 disinformation battleground, experts say." *NBC*, October 21, 2019. <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/facebook-s-instagram-poised-be-2020-disinformation-battleground-experts-say-n1063941>.

- Snapchat Support. 2020. "Snap Map FAQ." Accessed March 12, 2020. <https://support.snapchat.com/en-GB/a/snap-map-faq>.
- Sobchack, Vivian C. 1977. "No Lies: Direct Cinema as Rape." *Journal of the University Film Association* 29 (4): 13-18. Accessed March 12, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/20687385.
- Sony Pictures Entertainment. 2016. "GHOSTBUSTERS – Official Trailer (HD)." YouTube video, 2:37. March 3, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3ugHP-yZXw>.
- Steinberg, Marc. 2017. "A Genesis of the Platform Concept: I-Mode and Platform Theory in Japan." *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 4 (3): 184–208. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22142312-12340077>.
- Steinberg, Marc, and Jinying Li. 2017. "Introduction: Regional Platforms." *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 4: 173–83. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22142312-12340076>.
- Stone, Natalie. 2018. "YouTuber PewDiePie Calls Lilly Singh a 'Crybaby' After She Speaks Out About Wage Inequality." *People*, December 10, 2018. <https://people.com/tv/youtube-pewdiepie-calls-lilly-singh-crybaby-wage-gap/>.
- Takenaga, Lara. 2019a. "Why The Times Published a Disturbing Photo of Dead Bodies After an Attack in Nairobi." *New York Times*, January 17, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/17/reader-center/nairobi-kenya-photo.html>.
- . 2019b. "Why The Times Published a Photo of Drowned Migrants." *New York Times*, June 26, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/26/reader-center/rio-grande-migrants-photo.html>.
- Taylor, Jessica. 2019. "Trump Heads To El Paso And Dayton Amid Skepticism From Local Leaders." *NPR*, August 7, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/07/748848662/trump-heads-to-el-paso-and-dayton-amid-skepticism-from-local-leaders>.
- Templeton, Alan R. 2013. "Biological Races in Humans." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part C: Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 44 (3): 262–71. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsc.2013.04.010>.
- Tenor. 2020. "Tenor drives mobile GIF sharing for top entertainment brands." Accessed March 13, 2020. <https://tenor.com/contentpartners#intro>.
- Tenor Insights. 2020. "Tenor Insights for Star Wars." Accessed March 13, 2020. <https://tenor.com/insights/star-wars?range=30days>.
- Tharps, Lori L. 2014. "The Case for Black With a Capital B." *New York Times*, November 18, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/19/opinion/the-case-for-black-with-a-capital-b.html>.
- Thompson, Edgar T. 1975. *Plantation Societies, Race Relations, and the South: The Regimentation of Populations* (Durham: Duke University Press).

- TooFab Staff. 2019. "Taylor Swift Isn't Technically A Victim of Revenge Porn, Says Lisa Bloom (Exclusive)." *TooFab*, July 1, 2019. <https://toofab.com/2019/07/01/taylor-swift-isnt-technically-a-victim-of-revenge-porn-says-lisa-bloom-exclusive/>.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2012. "Empire's salvage heart: Why diversity matters in the global political economy." *Focaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 64: 36–50.
- Twitter. 2020. "Programmatically create and manage Twitter Ads campaigns." Accessed March 13, 2020. <https://developer.twitter.com/en/use-cases/advertise>.
- U.S. Government Publishing Office. 2017. "Law Enforcement's Use of Facial Recognition Technology." March 22, 2017. <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/GO/GO00/20170322/105757/HHRG-115-GO00-Transcript-20170322.pdf>.
- . 2019a. "Facial Recognition Technology: Part I Its Impact on Our Civil Rights and Liberties." May 22, 2019. <https://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/109521/documents/HHRG-116-GO00-Transcript-20190522.pdf>.
- . 2019b. "Facial Recognition Technology: Part II Ensuring Transparency in Government Use." June 4, 2019. <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/GO/GO00/20190604/109578/HHRG-116-GO00-Transcript-20190604.pdf>.
- Vaidhyathan, Siva. 2018. *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated.
- Valenti, Jessica. 2015. "Not all comments are created equal: the case for ending online comments." *The Guardian*, September 10, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/10/end-online-comments>.
- Van Dijck, Jose, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal. 2018. *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wanzo, Rebecca. 2015. "The Deadly Fight Over Feelings." *Feminist Studies* 41 (1): 226-42.
- Warzel, Charlie. 2019. "Facebook and Google Trackers Are Showing Up on Porn Sites." *New York Times*, July 17, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/17/opinion/google-facebook-sex-websites.html>.
- . 2016. "Twitter Permanently Suspends Conservative Writer Milo Yiannopoulos." *BuzzFeed News*, July 19, 2016. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/charliewarzel/twitter-just-permanently-suspended-conservative-writer-milo>.
- Wekker, Gloria. 2016. *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*. United Kingdom: Duke University Press.

- West, Lindy. 2015. "Ask Not For Whom The Bell Trolls; It Trolls For Thee." *This American Life*, January 23, 2015. <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/545/if-you-dont-have-anything-nice-to-say-say-it-in-all-caps/act-one>.
- White, Michele. 2006. *The Body and the Screen: Theories of Internet Spectatorship*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Williams, Linda. 1999. *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible."* Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Williams, Linda, ed. 2004. *Porn Studies*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Witzig, Ritchie. 1996. "The Medicalization of Race: Scientific Legitimization of a Flawed Social Construct." *Annals of Internal Medicine* (125): 675–679. <https://doi.org/10.7326/0003-4819-125-8-199610150-00008>.
- Wolf, Zachary B. 2019. "Trump blames everything but his own words for hate in America." *CNN*, August 5, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/05/politics/trump-rhetoric-el-paso/index.html>.
- Wong, Julia Carrie. 2019. "'It's not play if you're making money': how Instagram and YouTube disrupted child labor laws." *The Guardian*, April 24, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/apr/24/its-not-play-if-youre-making-money-how-instagram-and-youtube-disrupted-child-labor-laws>.
- Zaborskis, Mary. 2015. "Age Drag." *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 43 (1 & 2): 115–29.
- Zappavigna, Michele. 2016. "Social Media Photography: Construing Subjectivity in Instagram Images." *Visual Communication* 15 (3): 271–92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357216643220>.