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Sensuous Participation: Queer Youth of Color, Affect, and Social Media

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Sensuous Participation: Queer Youth of Color, Affect, and Social Media

by

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family: my mom Janice, my dad Paul (Yonghwan), my sister Crystina, and my brother Michael. For so many reasons, including fostering a sense of intellectual curiosity and alternative thinking from the beginning: using those "teach your baby to read" cards, being unafraid to let your kids pursue their artsy interests, being the original foodies, being matter-of-fact in matters of the world, for getting me through the last few months back in LA with home-cooked meals, tales from the circulation desk, and countless games of Magic: The Gathering. I love you.

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Sensuous Participation: Queer Youth of Color, Affect, and Social Media

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Supervisor: Shanti Kumar

This dissertation presents the findings of a long-term, qualitative, ethnographic study of the ways queer youth of color use the social media platform Tumblr.com. It synthesizes the author's own immersive experiences as an active participant-observer in queer of color networks on Tumblr.com for over five years with semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with users online as well as offline interviews with queer youth of color Tumblr users in the Austin area. Existing at the nexus of critical race studies, queer studies, affect theory, and Internet studies, *Sensuous Participation* reinterprets the concept of "participatory cultures" to account for the affective motivations for participation in online networks. It asserts that our current understanding of the affective motivations that drive people to participate in online participatory cultures is thin and looks to the practices of queer youth of color, who have developed robust ways of expressing feelings that challenge systemic racism and heteronormative cultural forms, as evidence of the passions that drive participation. Ultimately, borrowing the idea of "the sensuous" from film theorist Laura U. Marks, it argues that social media networked publics such as Tumblr.com must be understood as networks of passion, and it asserts that the cultivation of collective passion in this way has the potential to transit static categories of identity politics.

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Introduction

PROLOGUE

I don't remember how exactly I first found Anthony's Tumblr. It was years ago. Hundreds of thousands of images ago.

I do remember what he would post back then. His Tumblr was laden with '80s sci-fi—screencaps of Cronenberg films like *Scanners*, for example. You know how that movie has all these weird Canadian downtown postmodern architectural shots? Matrices of fluorescent bulbs installed in Cartesian grids embedded in an endless, canted concrete ceiling. Strangely empty mall escalators, moving in chorus. These kinds of things. (He would never post something so obvious as a GIF of the famous *Scanners* head-explosion shot. Cliché.) He also wouldn't attribute the images, so you really had to know '80s sci-fi to get the references. The effect, however, was that even if you didn't know what the references were exactly, they all accumulated visually to create a sensibility that was retro, full of muted grays and yellows and steel, urgent hairstyles, neon.

What really struck a chord with me, however, was all the visual referencing of the *Alien* series he did, particularly his affinity for shots of Sigourney Weaver looking badass. This is because, if you had asked me when I was a kid who my favorite actress was, I would have said without hesitation: Sigourney Weaver. Sigourney Weaver playing Ellen Ripley, ensconced in the infamous yellow exosuit in *Aliens* as she battles the alien queen, Weaver looking determined yet tentative as she decides to blow the alien into space while singing "little star…" in the first *Alien* film. *How funny*, I thought. *Here is a gay that I have something in common with.*

But that's all I knew. Who was this guy? Where did he live? What did he do? I had no idea. He was someone I stumbled across while meandering through "notes" on a

post at some point, but beyond that, nothing. However, that's not entirely true—we had in common, I knew, a shared sensibility, at least for '80s sci-fi, Sigourney Weaver, and neon-tinged aesthetics. I knew it especially when he reblogged a picture I reblogged of the leaves of an oleander bush and washed-out pink flowers, caught in bright camera flash, shadows and high contrast giving it a severe quality. A picture of leaves on a bush. He saw something in it, as did I.

There is a strange rhythm to making friends on Tumblr. It is like an improv exercise in an Intro to Theatre Arts class that you might do as a high-schooler with a complete stranger—mime each other, predict each other, communicate with each other, but without using speech. You might "like" a few of the other person's posts in a row to hint that they've piqued your interest. Then, if you're feeling brazen, you might decide to follow them outright. Maybe you'd cross your fingers that they'd follow you back, but you'd try not to be disappointed if they don't. If you do wind up following each other, you'd be what are referred to on Tumblr as "mutuals." Mutuals are weird relationships. Your posts show up in each other's dashboard feed, and you wind up getting little zaps of affinity and kinship when you get notified that they like or reblog one of your posts. It is a palpable, barely spoken reinforcement. Someone—and often, you have no idea of their real name, where they live, what they do—is in tune with you.

MAKING SENSES

This dissertation is born out of my almost six years of participation in various Tumblr networks that involve LGBTQ people, people of color, and LGBTQ people of color. It is informed by two main observations: 1) Tumblr has emerged in recent years as a chief locus of queer-of-color political expression and 2) The character of this expression is, for lack of a better term, weird. It is obtuse and fuzzy and confusing at first

glance. Also, unlike older iterations of blogging, it does not rely chiefly on long-format text posts, instead favoring images, GIFs, short text, and links. As a scholar who is a queer person of color myself, I found myself heavily invested in this space and its attendant implications. So many queer youth of color learning so much about concepts like "heternormativity" and the social construction of race and hegemonic whiteness—things that I wish I knew when I was that age. Life would have made a lot more sense.

My choice of the word "sense" and its elaborations in this introduction is deliberate. I invoke it precisely because it sounds like a small concept, something quotidian, something familiar. That is its power: the sense that someone else sees the world the same way you do, the sense that you are not alone, a sense of shared marginality, a sense of humor, a sensation of butterflies from a new flirtation. Put another way, this dissertation asks: what are the contours and what is the power of a shared sensibility as expressed across Tumblr, especially if you are marginalized along the axes of race and sexuality?

The title of the dissertation, "Sensuous Participation," is a phrase that weds two concepts that have lingered in the back of my mind as I have written up my findings in the chapters that follow: Laura U. Marks's understanding of the "sensuous" in her work on "intercultural cinema" (2000; 2002) and Henry Jenkins's (and other scholars') concept of "participatory cultures" (2006a; 2006b; Burgess & Green 2009), describing the ecosystem of amateur cultural production afforded by digital and Internet-based technologies. Both concepts are politicized at their core. Marks attempts to create a mode of accounting for the felt, sensed, and tactile as it is channeled across experimental filmic accounts of cultural alterity, and Jenkins advocates for the potential of digital media to upend legacy modes of top-down cultural production. I want to enjoy and celebrate their radical politics and build on their respective projects by making them speak to each other.

Wedding the terrain of mediated senses with the architecture of dispersed media production, while attempting to hold their radical political potential together: that is this dissertation in a nutshell. “Sensuous participation,” ultimately, aims to accomplish two things: To introduce the concept of the “sensuous” into the literature on participatory culture and also to describe the character of this interaction on Tumblr.

**

I was first introduced to Tumblr in the spring of 2009. I was living on the East side of Austin, going out a lot, and I found myself clicking with a group of Austin indie/creative gays I would see at East side bars. One of them introduced me to a Tumblr called CTRL+W33D which was run by a few people, including a friend of mine in Austin. CTRL+W33D is a hilarious, biting, highly NSFW lambasting of mainstream gay male culture, aggregating tons of X-rated visual ephemera that make you laugh out loud at the same time that they make you cringe. For instance, I am, as I write, in a Starbucks, and the first thing I see on CTRL+W33D is a Vine (a short looping video) of a guy on his back, legs in the air, laughing while farting a cloud of white powder out of his asshole. This post is followed by an amateur photograph of a guy in a full clown suit, legs splayed in front of the camera, displaying a full erection and then a manipulated photograph of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles with green porn-star bodies and ample flaccid penises. These are not images produced by CTRL+W33D; they are simply aggregated here, collected from various weird corners of Tumblr and the rest of the Web. I remember going through pages and pages of this Tumblr with some friends back in 2009, laughing uncontrollably while being simultaneously grossed out, and thinking, *Where the hell did they find this stuff?*

Needless to say, Tumblr is a space that allows for the fostering of a sensibility. Tumblr thrives on it—its users endlessly collating, curating, circulating content that

means something to them. As explored in Chapter 2, Tumblr thrives on the act of *content curation* more than the act of original *content creation*—this allows for a strange-feeling rhythm and speed that is different from social media such as Instagram, which is structured around primary authorship. And as explored in Chapter 3, I assert that this curation-as-expression fosters a sense of attunement between users—one that carries political heft.

WHAT IS TUMBLR?

Tumblr was launched in 2007 as a short-format blog (or "micro-blog") site. It was founded by a 20-year-old named David Karp as a space where users could create "blog" posts that accommodated many different forms of media with ease—Karp didn't want to make blogging feel like "work," as was his experience with previous blog sites such as Blogger or Blogspot. (See Chapter 1 for an in-depth exploration of the history of Tumblr.)

Tumblr works through a combination of following and reblogging. Users create an account and, like Twitter, can start "following" other users. This manifests in the "dashboard," which displays the latest posts from all the Tumblr users that you follow. Posts have the possibility of being several different kinds of media—users can post text, links, audio, video, or images. True to Karp's stated vision, Tumblr makes it very easy to post any of this content. Steps to publish are minimal. Images don't need to be formatted or sized any particular way, or "embedded" in a blog post using HTML—Tumblr's system takes care of it.

When you come across a post on your dashboard, you have a few options as to what you can do with it. You can do nothing and keep scrolling. You can decide to "like" the post—you do this by clicking on a grey heart icon, which then turns red after you

have pressed it. When you "like" a post, this action gets recorded and attached to the post. Anyone who looks at a post can see a record of who has liked it. You can also decide to "reblog" a post by pressing an icon that is two arrows in a circle. When you do this, the post gets reblogged on your own Tumblr, and is now visible to anyone who follows you. This action also gets recorded and attached to the original post.

Reblogging is the chief way that content gets distributed across Tumblr. It is a cascading dynamic; you see something you like, something that grabs you in a particular way, and you decide to have it duplicated on your own Tumblr blog, almost immediately. There is something rhythmic and strange about this cascading dynamic (explored further in Chapter 2),

The cumulative record of "likes" and "reblogs" is thought of as a collection of "notes." Notes are the sum total of the number of likes and reblogs. So, when you look at any given Tumblr post, you will see how many "notes" it has received—meaning, how many times it has been "liked" or "reblogged." This is a very easy, built-in way of understanding any given Tumblr post's popularity and lifespan. Notes are also clues that connect you with other users. Let's say you follow someone with a very distinct sensibility, and you find a post of theirs that resonates with you. You might click through to the notes—especially if there aren't that many—and see who else on Tumblr has "liked" or "reblogged" that post. You can click on their username and then scroll through their Tumblr. In my experience, this is a chief way that I have made mutual connections on Tumblr.

Tumblr has two faces. What I've just described is Tumblr's inward face; the way that you interact over Tumblr with the people you follow, whose content appears on your dashboard. Tumblr also has an outward face. This is another way that Tumblr is different from other social media. Tumblr's outward face manifests in the way that each Tumblr

user's own blog—their collection of posts—appears to non-users as a web page, usually following the format http://*username*.Tumblr.com. So, anyone on the Internet can peruse your Tumblr page, presented as a sum of your posts, if they know your Tumblr username. Like MySpace before it, Tumblr allows users a high degree of flexibility in customizing how their outward-facing Tumblr blog appears to the world. You are free to add CSS and HTML that modifies your Tumblr blog to look how you like it to look. Some Tumblrs are simply unrecognizable as Tumblrs, until you realize that there is an echo or subterranean architecture that manifests in a "like" button at the top right hand corner of the web page you are looking at. Tumblr also allows users to redirect their Tumblr address to their own domain name, which makes it even more confusing at times—are you looking at a Tumblr? Someone's personal Web site? A corporate home page? All three?

The extreme flexibility of design that Tumblr allows its users to take advantage of is one of the reasons that Tumblr, at least in its early years, developed a reputation for being a home to designers, artists, and otherwise aesthetically-inclined types. If you were a photographer who wanted to showcase your work on Tumblr, you could design your Tumblr blog to look almost exactly how you'd like it to look. The dynamic of the "post" as a central schematic unit remained the same, but the look and feel of your own Tumblr presence could be made distinctly yours, to the point that it would be almost unrecognizable as a Tumblr. Likewise, if a commercial brand wanted to create a Tumblr, they could design their Tumblr to reflect the brand's aesthetics (see Chapter 1).

For these reasons, Tumblr is less a "site" that people visit online; it is more a conduit for content that manifests in multiple faces, is woven into existence on the fabric of through user interaction, and evades standard aesthetics. These facts may be part of the

reason why Tumblr is disorienting to those who visit it the first time, or are unfamiliar with its codes and subtle architecture.[1]

What is interesting, given the chatter about Karp being a savant, someone whose wherewithal and acumen are developed far beyond his young years, is that Tumblr actually does feel like it was designed by a 20-year-old. In fact, this is a possible way of understanding why it is so popular, why it fills a niche that older social media such as Facebook do not. Tumblr, especially in its early days, seemed impenetrable, ruled by a code and norms that were never explained anywhere officially, only intuited. There was no real search function that produced usable results until very recently; unlike traditional social network sites such as Facebook, users are anonymous, the platform doesn't reveal a user's list of connections, and users can change their usernames—the only persistent identifier on the site—at their whim. Users can have multiple Tumblrs housed under one account. Tumblr feels almost as if it purposely gave the middle finger to established conventions of indexing, search, and persistence on the Internet.

Some final scope: as of this writing, in 2015, Tumblr is one of the most popular social media in existence. According to Tumblr's "About" page, there are 111.7 billion Tumblr posts and 237.7 million Tumblr blogs. In one day, Tumblr users posted over 74 million times ("About"). Alexa's rankings list Tumblr.com as the 44th most popular site in the world ("Alexa Top 500…"). Yet, unlike Facebook, for example, Tumblr has remained appallingly understudied by academic researchers. This is probably because of the site's strangenesses, as outlined above and as detailed throughout this study.[2] But

[1] In fact, Tumblr can be so bewildering that the satirical news site *Clickhole* (a spinoff of *The Onion*) published an article entitled "Anthropologists Are On The Verge Of Figuring Out How You're Supposed To Read Tumblr Comments" in 2014, making fun of precisely how bizarre and unwieldy the site's organization (or lack thereof) can get.

[2] The list to date is quite short: Renninger 2014; Bury et al. 2013; Fink & Miller 2014; and myself, Cho 2015, are some of the only article-length academic explorations of Tumblr.

therein lies one way of understanding the urgency of this project: Is it mere coincidence that what is perhaps the most vibrant locus of queer of color critique online is housed in a site that is very, very difficult for non-participants to enter?

Tumblr has changed over the years I've been on it, the ways people use Tumblr have multiplied and changed, discourse about Tumblr has changed, and larger world events have had a syncretic relationship with Tumblr, influencing users and its users influencing the world.[3] #BlackLivesMatter happened, Transgender Day of Visibility happened, and accordingly, my personal and research interests have evolved over the time of my participation and interviewing. Tumblr has become known, and indeed frequently lampooned, for being a haven for people who are interested in "social justice." As many of my participants have described to me, Tumblr has become *the place* for young queers to develop a socially aware, activist politics that skewer white, heteronormative ways of apprehending the world. The reality of a highly visible, highly active queer and queer people of color activist circulation as it has developed over the past few years on Tumblr became a driving force behind another set of questions that I deploy in this dissertation: How in the world does this politics take shape? How can we explain, understand, and describe it? Literally, what words do we use?

This study started with an indulgent curiosity; it wound up being an investigation into a cultural phenomenon that has exploded in recent years, located precisely where queer- and people-of-color politics meet. It is a bewildering, massive, opaque ecosystem. How do we make sense(s) of what is going on here?

[3] See the *New York Times* article "Millennials and the Age of Tumblr Activism" (Safronova 2014).

REVIEW OF LITERATURES

In order to give some shape to the stakes of this study and how it intervenes in existing areas of scholarly inquiry, I use vocabularies culled from three main bodies of literature: queer of color critique, affect theory, and participatory cultures.

From queer of color critique I am inspired by a relentless insistence on gaze-shifting and alternative, embodied pleasures, displeasures, and other ways of being. I see queer of color critique as consistently moving the needle of critical discourse to the margins, forcefully highlighting silences contained within mainstream white understandings of "queer" and the unspoken normative heterosexuality presumed in "race." It is the attention to archives that don't even seem like archives, the insertion of body specificity into supposedly neutral terrain. When E. Patrick Johnson modifies "queer" to "quare" to understand a specific black queer lineage and context (2005), when Cathy Cohen asserts that we understand "queer" as something that transits identity category and instead highlights a "shared marginal relationship to dominant power" (2005, 43), when M. Jacqui Alexander invokes ancestral memory as a source of knowledge and power (2006)—these are instructive moments of expansion of scope within critical theory that speak directly back to Eve Sedgwick's warning that "queer" relies too much on the reductive mechanics of paranoia (1997). Instead, it is in this spirit of addition and expansion that I frame this study of queer people of color.

For queer youth of color, simply existing is a high-stakes endeavor. Daily life is filled with small acts of aggression and survival. Jose Muñoz memorably put it this way:

> "I always marvel at the ways in which nonwhite children survive a white supremacist U.S. culture that preys on them. I am equally in awe of the ways in which queer children navigate a homophobic public sphere that would rather they did not exist. The survival of children who are both queerly and racially identified is nothing short of staggering" (1999, 37).

As discussed in detail in Chapter 3, Tumblr can function as a venue for small moments of daily survival tactics for queer youth of color, whether it be drawing inspiration from Mariah Carey's flippant "diva gestures" (Khubchandani 2014), ranting against white supremacist police tactics, or simply through the act of expressing bad feelings (Edelman 2004; Love 2009; Halperin & Traub 2010; Cvektovich 2012). Queer of color authors have reminded us that feelings matter: Jose Muñoz teases out the political potential in connection "feeling brown" and "feeling down" (2006) and David Eng asks why there have been no robust post-structuralist models of kinship relations, positing that kinship be reimagined through structures of feeling (2010).

Though queer of color critique has provided a rich set of tools through which to understand the political implications of feeling alterity, the list of empirical studies of queer youth of color cultural practices is surprisingly short.[4] This could be because of a number of reasons: qualitative ethnographic fieldwork is intensive and expensive; high-profile institutional funding sources may not consider studies of this sort "worthy" of large-scale investment; and simple access to queer youth of color research participants is difficult. This is because, on one hand, queer youth of color may be reticent to participate in studies sponsored by large research institutions due to a suspicion of those very institutions as inhospitable and white supremacist. On the other hand, there is resistance from the institution in granting approval for conducting research with populations that trigger institutional warnings, such as sexual minorities and minors. The IRB approval process for this study, for example, took over six months and required full board review, even though risk to the participants was deemed "minimal." This study adds to the short list of empirical research with queer youth of color. Accordingly, there has been little

[4] Karen Tongson's study (2011) of queer youth of color subcultural production and consumption patterns in LA's suburbs is a landmark intervention. Mary Gray's study of rural queer youth (2009) is highly ethnographically detailed but does not focus on race identity or queer youth of color.

research in one arena where there has been an explosion of actual, widespread queer of color critique on a daily and large-scale basis in recent years: social media. This study aims to rectify that absence.

This study also intervenes in the research and literature on participatory cultures (Jenkins 2006a, 2006b; Benkler 2007; Ito 2008). I choose to engage with this literature for a number of reasons. Most importantly, the participatory cultures paradigm has been successful at documenting and celebrating the agentic potential of amateur cultural production vis-à-vis Internet media. This is a crucial move in thinking about the play of power in the culture industries, one that invokes and challenges the spectre of the Frankfurt School's suspicion of mass media (Horkheimer & Adorno 2007 [1944]) as well as modifies key tenets of British cultural studies' insistence on negotiated readings and oppositional cultural practices (Hall et al. 2013; Hebdige 1979; McRobbie 2000). Simply put: participatory cultures research firmly establishes that audiences have agency. It has been useful in emphatically pointing out that in the moment of social media the distinction between producer and consumer has become increasingly blurred (Burgess & Green 2009; Gray 2010).

However, while participatory cultures research and theory has been very good at describing the affordances of participation in online publics, it has largely avoided questions of affect. Participatory cultures literature is very good at describing what participation looks like and its potential outcomes; it is far less developed in terms of describing *why* people participate, what sorts of pleasures and passions motivate participation. This is where this dissertation intervenes. Additionally, as I explore further in the next chapter, much of the literature on participatory cultures is locked in a Fordist understanding of point-to-point assembly line logics of production. In spite of its insistence on radically rethinking and upending the relationship of producer and

consumer, its vocabulary remains beholden to a surprisingly traditionalist economic model of understanding investment and payoff, paying little heed to more radical though established understandings of the variegated nature of labor in a late capitalist era, including affective and immaterial labor (Hardt 1999; Terranova 2000). It is a point of this dissertation to suggest that Tumblr users are part of a large ecosystem of capital that includes affective labor. I draw upon Hardt and Negri's understanding of affective labor, labor that produces or manipulates affects, as a constituent component of the workings of empire in the era of late-capitalism (2004). It is also a point of this dissertation to suggest that even though Tumblr's management is trying very hard to capitalize on the massive circulation of affective labor on the site, we must also recognize that these practices generate transgressive pleasures, anti-statist sentiments, solidarity in negativity, and real moments of the cultivation of self-esteem, especially for those queers of color whom Muñoz forcefully reminds us accomplish daily acts of survival. This is a generative tension.

Finally, this dissertation uses and builds upon the substantial literature in affect theory. Affect is a tricky thing—it has multiple meanings and uses and is highly dependent on context. For example, a Deleuze-Guattari (1987)/Massumi (2002)-inflected approach to affect considers it to be a quality akin to intensity (Paasonen, Hillis & Petit 2015), something that emerges in the realm of the pre-cognate, and therefore insists on a divorce between affect and emotion (Thrift 2004). A public feelings perspective, on the other hand, sees this distinction as relatively less important than the political potentiality of what is being felt. This is explored further in Chapter 2. Addressing this issue head-on, Cvetkovich (2012) writes, "I tend to use affect in a generic sense, rather than in the more specific Deleuzian sense, as a category that encompasses affect, emotion, and feeling, and that includes impulses, desires, and feelings that get historically constructed in a range of

ways (whether as distinct specific emotions or as a generic category often contrasted with reason)…" (4). "Feeling," for Cvetkovich, is "intentionally imprecise" (4), and that is its usefulness. This is another inspiration, following Laura U. Marks, for why I invoke "sense," "sensuous," and "sensibility" in this dissertation—I see these words as doing the work of broadly encapsulating *sensation*, which is something both felt *and* known.

One thing I cannot support, however, is a misread of affect's transit of the subject as somehow apolitical. It is easy to misread Thrift, for example, when he states, "Identity and difference has been analyzed at length under the rubric of signification at the expense of affect" (2004, 71)." Affect's resistance to the neatness of the subject and "identity" and "ideology" can be misinterpreted as ephemeral and therefore somehow flighty, simultaneously transcending specificity into a plane of immanence and intensity as well as being so pointedly specific to authorial or situational experience that it resists generalizability. In its insistence on a pre-subjective eminence, it has the danger of bypassing very real, embodied, identitarian concerns that target certain, specific bodies for oppression more than others. In a way, this dissertation is a reparative project, a big exercise in trying to hold these two approaches together: being able to regard and appreciate the specificity of the politics of the marginalized while at the same time holding a figurative Geiger counter to affect's radiances as they transit the neatness of the "subject."

THE SHAPE OF THE STUDY

This dissertation is the result of an immersive, qualitative, reflexive online and offline ethnographic research practice that has spanned almost six years. My research methods combine three tenets of classic ethnography: participant observation, qualitative interviewing, and long time on task (Spradley 1979). In addition to conducting this

research in the online Tumblr space (what Hine calls "virtual ethnography" (2000)), I also conducted research in a second, complementary "space"—that of queer youth of color in the Austin and specifically UT community. The research in the Tumblr space leans more heavily toward experiential, reflexive, and first-person observations, though it does include significant interviewing. The research in the Austin space leans more toward substantial qualitative interviewing about social media within life context and less first-person immersion in my participants' daily social media use. Throughout, I have made it a priority to radically locate myself as a participant researcher within the context of my study, following in a substantial tradition of reflexive anthropology developed in the last half century (Foley 2002; Lassiter 2005; Behar 1997; Mayer 2001).

This is for two reasons, one practical and one political. First, because Tumblr can be so obtuse to outsiders, because things happen so unceasingly and so quickly, because it is permeated by in-group codes, it is not a space that rewards piecemeal interloping. I had the sense that in order to understand its flows and workings, I had to do it myself. I literally could not gain access to the daily workings of Tumblr without creating my own. I created my first Tumblr in 2009, and have since created two more. I have posted and reblogged thousands upon thousands of items, made friends, flirted, ranted, and gotten off. Second, I wanted to locate myself as a "native" participant researcher, as a queer person of color. I wanted to experience the pleasures and thrills of connection across Tumblr, I wanted to experience the passions of a shared politics—simply put, I wanted to feel what it felt like. Rather than try to write about affect, passion, and sense in a way that assumed objectivity and kept experiential knowledge at arm's length, I decided to do the opposite, diving headfirst into it, implicating myself all along the way. Additionally, one reason why it was important for me to talk to people both online and off is that I was inspired by what Mary L. Gray identifies as an "in situ" approach to ethnographic media

study, borrowing an archeological term, an attempt to "map the relationship…between a cluster of media engagements and a milieu that is constitutive of its meaning (2009, 126)." This approach makes it possible to understand Tumblr use within a larger ecosystem of social media use (see Chapter 3) as well as within individualized life contexts.

Though I aimed for immersion and participant observation, I also quickly realized that I was still an outsider along many axes, despite my sexual and racial identities. I am older than many of the people I interacted with; I initially didn't share many of the same pop culture reference points; I have a lot of experience as a working professional, unlike many people I interacted with, who are still in school on some level; I am Asian American, which is perhaps the least vocal presence in Tumblr queer of color communities, often shaped by Black experience and voice. This ethnography, then, is heartily comprised of acts of interpretation, translation, and referencing context-specific vocabularies, and I rely heavily on the testimony of my participants throughout.

Data collection in a study like this, one that transits online and off, one that includes my personal experiences as well as the testimony of others, one that must include the internet artifacts themselves, is multi-faceted and demands a range of approaches. How do you archive in a space that is known for being resistant to indexing? First, I realized that my own Tumblr(s) could become archives themselves that were easy for me to reference. If I saw someone I followed post something that I found was interesting for some reason, in true Tumblr style, I would simply reblog or like it. My own Tumblr practices became active, living archives of their own. In fact, this is how many people use the "like" button, since Tumblr allows you to view all of your "likes" for the history of your account. Second, Tumblr, though it contains no actual straightforward "message" service, nevertheless allows you to store all of your

correspondence via the "ask" or "fan mail" functions. My interactions with Tumblr users were automatically archived. Third, interviews arranged through Tumblr took place either through Skype, phone call, or e-mail (the last least frequently). Interviews arranged with my Austin participants took place in real life at various public locations around Austin, such as coffee houses. All interviews were audio recorded and I also took handwritten jottings. All participants in the study, whether sourced online or off, participated in at least two interviews that lasted 45 minutes to one hour each. Some participants remained in contact a lot longer over the span of years and in other ways, including informal text messages. Some became friends. All participants gave informed consent according to IRB guidelines, and this study was approved by the UT IRB.

The core interview participant group consisted of 18 people, ten from Tumblr networks online and eight real-life Austin participants. This is the group that I returned to at least twice during my interview process, and many more than that. I recorded approximately 35 hours of audio, correlated to real-time jottings. In reviewing my audio data, I would review my jottings and then go to the appropriate places in the audio recordings to get exact quotations as well as contextualization in conversation. Locating participants proved to be a process with mixed levels of success. Some close Tumblr friends were responsive and enthusiastic in participating; others ignored me altogether. I was surprised to find that many Tumblr users with whom I had shared affinities and had multiple interactions with were totally uninterested in participating. I attribute this to the somewhat secretive, anonymous nature of Tumblr—you are okay with sharing some really deep, personal thoughts, but only to a largely anonymous though sympathetic audience. The minute you get to know who someone *actually* is, things get slightly uncomfortable. In fact, several of my participants, Tumblr connections whom I "knew" fairly well, joked that "Now you know my real e-mail address" as we were setting up

interviews—a level of trust not necessarily common. My Austin participants were located largely through snowball sampling within networks I was already a part of—University of Texas student organizations, community organizations, and simple friend networks. See Appendix 1 for a short list of profiles of each participant.

I want to stress that this is a description of observable, point-out-able "data" only. There is another level of experiential "data" that comes from countless—thousands upon thousands—of what I think of as "touches" online. When you realize that a certain post of yours is getting a lot of likes from people you don't even know and never interact with, when you like someone's post and they like yours back, but perhaps you never become mutual and the relationship ends there, when you observe a post back-and-forth between a mutual of yours and someone else—these kinds of things all inform one's experience on Tumblr in ways that are suggestive but do not appear in easily traceable archives. Nevertheless, they are important and have influenced my own accounts and experiences on Tumblr, and, following Marks, I use the word "touch" as a way of understanding mediated transmission of sensuous experience, such as the collective affective heft of the Tumblr streams outlined in Chapter 5.

LAYOUT OF THE DISSERTATION

Following this Introduction, Chapter 1 explores the history of Tumblr in depth and situates it in the broader context and history of developments in Internet technology. Tumblr was built specifically as a reaction to earlier participatory culture technologies such as the blogging platforms Blogspot or Blogger—it was designed to make the process of blogging easier and more beautiful. Alongside this history, I also review major currents in academic literature about these Internet technologies and find something interesting in common: they rely largely on a dry, straightforward economic metaphor of

production to explain user investment in these spaces. This chapter argues that there must be other ways to understand user investment, not the least of which is along the axis of affect. It proposes that, if we are to understand spaces such as Tumblr from an economic standpoint, we at least need to account for recent understandings of affective labor and immaterial labor in terms of how it is exploited within the various machinations of late capitalism. After all, *someone* is making money (or hopes to) off of Tumblr.

However, though this chapter details how Tumblr is actively looking to monetize users' affective investment in the site, it also suggests the possibility that there is a lot more going on on the site, and that we cannot simply flatten critical attention to Tumblr into a pure economic model, even if it is an affective one. What is vastly more interesting to me is the potential of affective relationality on Tumblr to foster a sense-in-common, so much so that has gained substantial momentum as a formidable venue for a queer and people-of-color-centric politics.

Chapter 2 situates my entry into Tumblr, fleshing out some of the properties of the sensuous by positing that there is something sensuous about the time and rhythm of Tumblr. This chapter draws heavily from of my own participant-observer experiences on Tumblr and, to put it bluntly, is motivated by the question, "Why does Tumblr feel so *weird*?" This is not an uncommon sentiment for new users of Tumblr. Additionally, it asks, "Is there something generative and potentially political in this weirdness?" The answer is yes, and I draw upon literatures in queer studies, chiefly those in queer temporalities, to explain the stubborn political potential of this weirdness. This chapter closes by offering the concept of "queer reverb" to think about the accretions of intensity that ebb and flow as Tumblr posts transit the network. This is a pointed rejoinder to the linear systems of production and capital that inform participatory culture scholarship, as outlined in Chapter 1.

Chapter 3 explicitly answers a question that lingers in the wings in participatory culture scholarship but rarely gets addressed: How do we begin to understand the *passions* that drive participation? This is a deliberate word choice, drawing from social media scholar danah boyd's use of the term "passion play" (Hamburger 2014) in trying to understand why young people are investing less of their inner emotional lives on Facebook and more on other platforms. This chapter presents evidence from Tumblr posts—call-outs of white hegemonic standards of sexual attractiveness or embracing one's bad feelings—as well as one-on-one interviews to paint the contours of a passion, one that is celebratory of a queer of color stance, engages in active queer of color critique of mainstream popular culture. This is focused on cultivating sympathetic architectures of feeling, or as I call them, "attunements." This chapter closes by reinterpreting the concept of participatory cultures in order to account for what Laura U. Marks terms the "sensuous"; in brief, this is a way of apprehending that relies on haptic sensation rather than optic information.

Chapter 4 zeroes in on another passionate practice on Tumblr—celebrity fandom. But rather than isolate fandom to online "fan communities," I am more interested in this chapter to examine the everyday emergence of celebrity in the Tumblr networks I have participated in and observed, how they operate as affective magnets or tent poles, channeling a sense-in-common between users, activating passions. This chapter relies heavily on Tumblr artifacts as well as interviews to understand how three celebrities in particular, Nicki Minaj, Beyoncé, and Iggy Azalea, activate passions as they play out in queer of color networks on Tumblr, passions that are dripping with politics that are queer and people-of-color affirming, anti-statist and reject white supremacist normatives.

The Conclusion chapter summarizes the contents of the dissertation and points to the significance of its findings within the fields of queer studies, new media/social media

studies, as well as critical race theory. It also pays heed to recent developments on Tumblr, spurred by recent national political events such as #Blacklivesmatter, that were not within the timeframe of my fieldwork, and offers several new directions for research that further elaborate the key themes developed here.

There is a lot to say about queer of color networks on Tumblr. This dissertation scratches the surface in some areas and delves much more deeply in others. It aims to, itself, be guided by a haptic knowledge—one that relies on a sensuous regime of feeling, of touch, as a guide, instead of a superimposed, distanciated opticness. This is on purpose, because this is how Tumblr networks happen: rhizomally, following scents and traces, going in circles and fits and starts rather than linear paths.

INTERLUDE

There was a very sexy picture of a young man in my Tumblr feed. I traced it back to the original poster, and to my surprise, it's a self-portrait. I sent him a message. We've been e-mailing pictures of ourselves back and forth, some NSFW. He, as far as I can tell, is about 25. Lives in Minneapolis. His room is painted dark green. Lit dimly with large table lamps with old yellow fabric lampshades, fringe and tassel. Short pile carpet. He traffics in prairie arcana. Old west curlicues. Here is a photo of him over his left shoulder, sitting on a large rock, at sunset. He is just inhaling a puff from a cigarette. Wavy hair, the suggestion of curls, suggestion of interiority. We trade compliments. He is flirty. Erotics reaching across space and time.

**

Anthony and I have been trading messages on Tumblr, too. I am somewhat shocked to find out that Anthony is only a senior in high school, 18 years old. Suddenly my sense of shared sensibility is thrown into stark relief. He is not even old enough to remember the '80s! Where did this Sigourney Weaver fascination come from? How does he even know about Cronenberg films? He tells me he just likes that sort of thing, that sort of aesthetic. He geeks out over it.

We connect on new levels. He, like me, is a Californian. He is deciding where to go to college. He's already been accepted to UC Santa Barbara, and is waiting on the decision from UCLA. That's where he really wants to go. He wants to escape the sleepiness of California's interior San Joaquin Valley. I don't blame him. He is out to his friends and some of his family, including his sister. But he doesn't know that many LGBT people in his real life circles in his hometown and at school.

I tell him how excited I am that he is going to go to college. He's going to have so much fun. Regardless of UCLA or UCSB, I am projecting. I didn't come out until the

summer between my junior and senior year of college, so one of my persistent longings has been thinking about how college would have been if I weren't in the closet most of the way through—*I'd* have had so much more fun. I am secretly also hoping that he doesn't go to UCLA because I have fled the city and its self-image obsession to Austin for grad school. LA is a hard place to be gay and have healthy self-esteem.

Part of me is marveling at Tumblr and how it has allowed Anthony such a robust place of learning and vocabulary-building regarding his own racial and sexual identity. He is quite confident, in my opinion, in terms of queer politics—he uses terms like "heteronormativity." I wish I knew what that was when I was his age. He tells me he learned most of this sort of politics from Tumblr. He's excited and curious to go to college.

A few days later, I get a slew of notifications on my phone. He's gone through and "liked" most of my tagged selfies on Tumblr.

Chapter 1: Social Media, Participatory Cultures, and Affective Labor

This chapter has two aims. First, it aims to paint a broad picture of how industry and the academy describe and understand what we call "social media." It also situates Tumblr within this industrial context, including a brief history of its development. Second, it finds that one chief current of thought that surfaces again and again in the academic literature on social media and social media and Internet participatory cultures is one that emphasizes political-economic logics of production in an attempt to describe the way that people invest their time and energy in these sites. I expand this discussion in this chapter by inserting a brief overview of the concept of affective labor—as Hardt and Negri define it, labor that manipulates affective states, taking special prominence in the era of late capitalism (2004)—as a potential additional way to understand user participation in social media. A consideration of social media as systems of affective labor can be a useful first step in thinking about the role of passions in participation, how they are both cultivated and harnessed.

Ultimately, this chapter argues for a reconsideration of social media as understood through a straightforward logic of material capital and production to also account for the massive expenditure of affective labor that social media such as Tumblr encourage. It delves into detail on how exactly today's version of Tumblr attempts to capitalize on affective labor in order to make a profit based on advertising—advertising that is strategically tailored to mirror and mine user affects. It closes by offering an understanding of Tumblr's affective economy that slices two ways: that it is trying very hard to monetize labor that manipulates affect while at the same time this cultivation of affect allows for resistances that are deeply embodied and gutturally oppositional to white

supremacist, heteronormative cultural forms. This generative tension will surface again and again as a core observation throughout this dissertation.

WHAT ARE SOCIAL MEDIA?

Despite its ubiquity, the term "social media" is a surprisingly hard thing to define. For instance, "social network sites" (SNSs) such as Facebook fall under the rubric of social media, but not all social media are social network sites.[5] In order to fully understand the scope and limits of what we consider "social media," it is useful to focus on several corollary concepts: Web 2.0, user-generated content, and social network sites.

"Web 1.0" refers to the architecture and operation of the World Wide Web in its first iterations: browser windows pulled up static HTML web pages that were not interactive in that they did not have any mechanism for registering user/visitor input. Yahoo is often invoked as a prime example of a successful Web 1.0 technology—it was, in its early days (and still is to some degree) a top-heavy, centralized content delivery service, in addition to its search capability. Yahoo authors wrote Yahoo content pages that were displayed in HTML and hyperlinked to each other in a hierarchical fashion. Users could not interact in any way with the web page besides clicking on links that were pre-determined to point to one individual destination. Similarly, Web hosting platforms such as Geocities gave users their own slice of the Web, where they could use HTML to create stand-alone web pages that relied on architecture such as HTML frames. Like putting together a one-of-a-kind shadow box in which each component must fit each other's geometry perfectly, these Web 1.0 pages were difficult to alter on a frequent basis, could not register any user interactivity (with the possible exception of a stand-alone "guest book" page separate from the other content pages), and were not dynamic in

[5] Snapchat, for example, is a form of social media that is not an SNS. I observe that Tumblr is not exactly an SNS later in this section.

the sense that they could not do anything that the user did not explicitly direct either by clicking or hitting "refresh."[6]

"Web 2.0" is an idea largely credited to Internet publishing magnate Tim O'Reilly in 2004 surrounding the first "Web 2.0 Conference" (O'Reilly 2005b) but in fact introduced by information architect Darcy DiNucci in 1999 (DiNucci 1999). The main thrust is that the power to create content on the Web shifted from central content creators (writers at Yahoo, for example) to the users themselves. The user is able to leave their mark on the page—indeed, pages themselves are shaped by user interactivity (O'Reilly 2005a). This can occur in any number of ways, including commenting on a web page, tagging content, "liking" posts, "logging into" an account or profile on a web site, uploading content such as images, text, or video, and the like. If Yahoo was emblematic of Web 1.0, then Wikipedia is emblematic of Web 2.0—crowdsourced, open, filled-in from the user up, instead of from the top down. Early social bookmarking sites such as Digg, file-sharing platforms such as Napster, and image sharing sites such as Flickr are examples of Web 2.0; content creation is distributed via users' ability to interact with the Web. Technical advancements such as Ajax (Asynchronous JavaScript and XML) allowed Web sites to dynamically update within a browser window without the user's prompting (this is what makes it possible for new e-mails to show up in a Gmail browser window without the user reloading the page) (Garrett 2005). In other words, the ability to register user interactivity in-browser without either reloading the web page or going in on the back end and altering HTML code is a large part of the turn to Web 2.0. This is what makes it possible to upload pictures to Flickr, videos to YouTube, and status updates to Facebook.

[6] See Carmode & Krishnamurthy (2008) for a thorough rundown of the differences between "Web 1.0" and "Web 2.0."

Web 2.0 has also been referred to, by virtue of these characteristics, as the "social Web" (Appelquist et al. 2010). What we understand as "social media" is roughly parallel to these concepts—user-generated content, dynamic Web pages, the ability for the individual to "participate" within the bounds of an "open" infrastructure. Social media can exist over any device that is connected to the Internet, including personal computers as well as, as has increased exponentially over the past decade, mobile phones. Some social media platforms such as Instagram, for example, *primarily* exist as mobile interfaces—but they are still social media since they rely on user-generated content (photographs) and encourage user interactivity, including comments and "likes," and are structured around user profiles.

In fact, Instagram is a modified version of a "social network site," which is a subset of "social media." Friendster, MySpace, and Facebook are all popular social network sites that have flourished over the last decade or more. Boyd and Ellison define SNSs as follows:

> "We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system." (n.p. 2007).

Elsewhere in the same article, boyd and Ellison explain, "What makes social network sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks" (n.p. 2007). It is the visibility of the network—the ties themselves—and not simply person-to-person interaction that makes SNSs distinct from other forms of user-to-user interactivity such as chat rooms, bulletin boards or Webmail.

Twitter is an example of an SNS (some have called it a social network "service" instead of "site") that combines the properties of SNSs with another aspect that has become commonplace: the "feed." In a "feed," live user updates are broadcast to users who follow them. Currently, this feature is so ubiquitous that it seems like it has always been a facet of SNSs, but in fact it is a relatively new addition to them; there was significant uproar, for example when Facebook changed its main avenue of interaction from landing on your own profile and seeing what people had posted there to landing on a "feed" of your "friends'" activities, pushed onto your browser window whether you wanted it or not (boyd 2006).

To sum up, as a synthesis of the discussion above, any given social media platform can be distilled down to a few components: 1) A profile, account, or otherwise personal presence that one uses to access the platform; 2) The ability for registrational interactivity—that is, the ability for users to leave their mark within the platform for others to see (whether publicly or by invitation); 3) A reliance on this process as a way for users to contribute user-generated content to the platform. The "stuff" or content of the site comes from the bottom-up, not the top-down, in other words; 4) Connections between users.

HOW TUMBLR FITS—AND DOESN'T

According to boyd and Ellison (2007), the first social network site was SixDegrees.com, founded in 1997. This had all the properties that they identify as constituting social network sites: user profiles, connections, ways to traverse your friends' connections from a "public display of connections." Popularity of social network sites ebbed and flowed through subsequent years, including a trifecta that gained substantial popularity in the US: first Friendster, founded in 2002, then MySpace, in

2003, then Facebook in 2004. Twitter was launched in 2006 as a short format group text messaging service that ultimately ended up morphing into its own version of social networking, reliant on short-form messages and public displays of connections. Instagram, the mobile phone-based photo sharing social network, was founded in 2010 and purchased by Facebook in 2012.

Tumblr launched in 2007. It occupies a strange space in the social media landscape. First, it is not exactly a social network site, especially if we follow the definition outlined by boyd and Ellison, above. User create web pages, their own "Tumblrs," but they are not profiles and contain no personal information—especially when the user doesn't want to reveal anything. This brings up a larger point: Unlike most social network sites, Tumblr is largely anonymous. Furthermore, Tumblr users are generally very careful about guarding their privacy and anonymity. Unlike Facebook, which recently unleashed a wave of policing aimed at cracking down on fake usernames (a move that particularly angered many drag queens) (Cauguiran 2014), Tumblr allows users to freely alter their usernames at any time. Since one's Tumblr username is the basis for one's Tumblr URL (usually http://username.Tumblr.com), a change in username can immediately affect the general public's ability to access any given Tumblr. Put another way, if your mom or dad finds out your Tumblr username, you can immediately change it to something else and evade their surveillance. Your followers will still follow you, but people who are not already following you will not be able to find you with your new username.

Tumblr is different from social network sites such as Facebook in two other big ways. First, it allows for unreciprocal following; you do not have to get approval to add someone to your network. Second, it does not allow users to traverse the connections of other users. You generally cannot go to someone's Tumblr and see which Tumblrs *they*

follow, unless they have altered the code of their Tumblr to include this feature (most don't). These facts combine to create a terrain that is disorienting upon first visit; the conventions of social network sites simply aren't there. Coupled with the fact that Tumblr allows a huge degree of customization in the layout and design of one's own Tumblr page, it is unsurprising that people still refer to Tumblr as a "blog" site, and not a social network site. Tumblr follows the logic of earlier blog services such as LiveJournal and Blogger much more than it follows the logic of social network sites, though with several important exceptions from earlier blog services, such as the primacy of image-based circulation instead of long-format text (explored in Chapter 2). The easiest way of understanding Tumblr as social media, then, is not as a social network site, but as a kind of Twitter for short-format and mostly image-based blogs: personal presences that are collated into a feed based on user curation.

TUMBLR HISTORY

The history of Tumblr reads like a classic tech success story. David Karp, a high-school dropout who ended up being home-schooled on New York's Upper East Side, started the site in 2007, when he was 20, along with developer Marco Ament (Davis, 2008). Karp didn't go to college. Instead, when he was 17, he worked for the Web site UrbanBaby as Head of Product. This site was acquired by CNET in 2006. He channeled the money he earned from that sale into his own development and consulting company, Davidville (Shontell, 2013). Karp built a blogging platform for one of his investor's companies, but found the process of blogging cumbersome and unwieldy (Bercovici 2013). Karp was inspired to re-think blogging by a site called Projectionist, a so-called "tumblelog." This was Web software that was already out there, "tools [for] putting up

random bits of media and making it look a little bit like a blog" (Davis, 2008). Karp explained further:

> "You can put up bits of media but the theme or the 'skin' will take care of the aesthetics, and the media will be in nice little enclosures. Video will come up in a nice frame, blurbs will come up in nice little bubbles, there will be the ability to make gorgeous typography quotes… The magic of Tumblr is we let you put anything in and get it out any way you want. We want you to be able to post anything. Tumblr takes care of formatting content nicely and making it look good on your blog…You can incorporate your content into any other site, make your own domain name and do anything with that data. We've created what is the most flexible platform for publishing in the world. You can put anything in and get anything out." (Davis 2008)

Tumblr was developed specifically as an open-ended, easy-to-use, beautiful publishing platform that let users upload all forms of multimedia—not simply long-form blog text. Karp, in fact, saw traditional long-format blogs such as Blogger or Word Press as "work" (Davis 2008); the idea was to make Tumblr feel the exact opposite. *The New York Times* called it "blissfully easy" in 2009 (Boutin). Tumblr attracted venture capital early: $750,000 in 2007 (Marshall 2007), $4.5 million in 2008 (Kafka 2008), increasing incrementally to the tune of $85 million in 2011 (Ludwig 2011). Karp was, and is still, routinely touted as a wunderkind in the media, garnering profiles in magazines like *Forbes* (Bercovici 2013), *Inc.* (Welch 2011), and even *Maxim*, which declared him "barely legal" (2008).

Following a now well-trodden tech economy startup model, Tumblr, when it started, had no mechanism for actually making money off of its users, much like the early days of Facebook, Twitter, Amazon, and the like. This trope of Web startups, speculation, and venture capital almost reads trite nowadays, if not for the reality that this is still how the industry works—or at least, appears to want to work. You get users, you get them engaged, *then* you figure out how to make money off of them. As a side note, a

serious critical evaluation of this startup model from an affective labor stance is still waiting to be made in the literature on digital and social media—an engaged user base, under this framework, could be thought of as a pre-sunk pool of affective labor waiting to be sold, literally, to the highest bidder in every startup's dream: the buyout.

The author of Karp's *Forbes* cover story in January 2013 laid out the stakes for Tumblr as well as the unique level of emotional investment by users in the site—and the connection to hungry brands wanting to cash in:

> "[Advertisers], Karp says, are awaiting digital advertising formats whose artistry and expression forge an emotional connection with consumers—the sort, romanticized in *Mad Men* and celebrated in Super Bowl commercials, that can make them laugh, cry or call their mothers. The same tools that make Tumblr a favored medium for creative types make it the ultimate blank canvas for marketers." (Bercovici 2013, n.p.)

This wasn't always Karp's outlook regarding advertising. In a 2008 interview, he described a different revenue model, one that mined the most active users for money via richer features or subscriptions:

> "What we're thinking about now is whether to position this as our Flickr model. If you're an active user, we basically want to find a way for you to pay for the thing. Or, maybe these pay-for-pro-tools are only for the top one to five percent of our users who can use them to build something so extraordinary. If you're using Tumblr as a publishing platform and building brands on top of it, then of course you're going to pay for this package because it just takes that advanced publishing functionality to the next level." (Davis 2008, n.p.)

In fact, in 2010, Karp famously told the *Los Angeles Times*, "We're pretty opposed to advertising…It really turns our stomachs" (Milian 2010, n.p.)—a move which he later regretted, calling himself an "idiot" for that statement in 2012 (Paul 2012, n.p.). Unsurprisingly, the no-advertising stance changed in 2012, when Tumblr started selling its own version of "ads": a "spotlight" feature that sticks to the sidebar of a user's feed which brands can buy, and where they can see their own content mixed in with curated

content from the site's editors (Paul 2012). This currently takes the form of a "recommended blogs" feature and a "radar" feature that shows a snippet of content.

Tumblr's start-up fantasy became reality on May 20, 2013, when Tumblr was acquired by Yahoo for $1.1 billion cash. Yahoo's then-recently-hired CEO, former Google executive Marissa Mayer, wrote on her own Tumblr, "We promise not to screw it up. Tumblr is incredibly special and has a great thing going. We will operate Tumblr independently. David Karp will remain CEO. The product roadmap, their team, their wit and irreverence will all remain the same as will their mission to empower creators to make their best work and get it in front of the audience they deserve" ("Marissa's Tumblr"). This marked more than a windfall for Tumblr's founder. It also represented a change in how the company would approach advertising, as different approaches rolled out in subsequent years. As one observer wrote, quoting the press release that marked the occasion, the acquisition of Tumblr by one of the Internet's biggest companies meant that "[T]he deal will give Yahoo a chance to 'monetize' Tumblr in a way that 'is meaningful ... to the user experience.' [Mayer] said that Karp and his team agree that Tumblr has now grown up to the point where it makes sense to sell more ads" (Isidore, n.d.).

TUMBLR, ADVERTISING, AND ENGAGEMENT

Since the Yahoo buyout, Tumblr has abandoned all of its past rhetoric about advertising reticence. Instead, Tumblr has rolled out many new ad campaigns that feature prominently as posts inserted in a user's dashboard feed (Fig. 1). They appear almost exactly like any other post that would circulate on Tumblr, including "like" and "reblog" buttons, as well as a tracker of how many "notes" the post/ad has received (the accumulation of "likes" and "reblogs"). In fact, the only indication that a post is an

advertisement is the small text “sponsored” and a “$” icon in the header of the post (Fig. 1) as well as the fact that it is attributed to a brand’s Tumblr account.

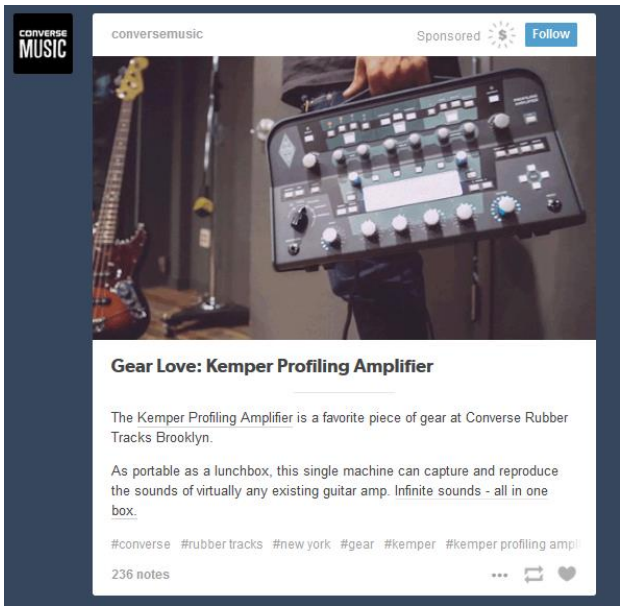

Figure 1: A Tumblr “sponsored” post.

These sponsored Tumblr posts appear once every handful of posts as one scrolls down one’s dashboard, and they represent a concerted effort on the part of the people in charge of Tumblr to accomplish a tricky thing: to try to make money off of the Tumblr user base without alienating it. This especially tricky on Tumblr because of two reasons: 1) Tumblr has not had advertising throughout the majority of its lifespan, so its users are not used to seeing it; and 2) Tumblr, as Karp himself noted, is all about aesthetics. This begs the question: how do you introduce advertising into this digital space that is minimally invasive, in terms of look and feel? Writing in 2013, a *Fortune* commentator called the Yahoo purchase a “$1.1 billion mistake” (Saroff) for these reasons, concluding that there was no real roadmap to monetizing its users. In fact, it seemed that the very fabric of Tumblr was designed expressly to circumvent standard Web display

advertising—each Tumblr page is infinitely customizable, and people take their own personal Tumblr themes very seriously.

The *Fortune* commentator, however, didn't quite understand how people use Tumblr. Yes, Tumblr users create themes and highly customize their Tumblr "blogs." Yes, a sudden appearance of display ads plopped in the middle of one's painstakingly crafted Tumblr theme would create outrage across Tumblr's user base. But the real way one uses Tumblr *isn't* by visiting public-facing Tumblr pages on the Web—it's by scrolling through the feed of the Tumblr users you decide to follow, much like Twitter. This feed is brought to you on your dashboard page, which is housed within a standardized aesthetic, set centrally and is the same for all Tumblr users. *This* is the space that Tumblr, post-Yahoo acquisition, decided to intervene in with advertising, making it far less invasive and much more ephemeral. You scroll past the ads the same way you scroll past any other post as it appears, and it's gone as soon as you do, just like any other Tumblr post.

I've been a Tumblr user since 2009, and I have seen these changes roll out firsthand. One thing that is interesting to me, and pertinent to this dissertation, is that brands that advertise on Tumblr are clearly trying to make their ad content be as "Tumblr-ey" as possible. By "Tumblr-ey," I mean several different things: 1) Short and sweet. Usually a Tumblr sponsored post is a GIF of something simple and eye-catching with a short caption; 2) Humorous or otherwise meme-like, designed to be "viral" and repeatable. A memorable early Tumblr campaign for The Home Depot featured images of its signature large orange utility bucket in various situations—an extension of the brand-wide campaign that implored would-be customers "Let's Do This." According to one industry account, the campaign was centered around Tumblr and asked Tumblr users to post pictures of the bucket at use in everyday life, accompanied with the hashtag

#letsdothis (Nagy 2013). The “most interesting” #letsdothis photos would be reblogged on The Home Depot’s own Tumblr (Fig. 2).

Figure 2: The Home Depot's Tumblr in 2013.

Tumblr actively courts advertisers. The “Business” section of Tumblr’s main page presents a compelling case: “Hello, brands. Welcome to Tumblr. Your biggest fans are already here.” There is a large button that reads “Contact a brand strategist,” ostensibly to help would-be advertisers craft an effective campaign across Tumblr (Figure 3). GE, Delta, BMW, Dior, and others are visually excerpted as major brands that have used Tumblr to advertise.

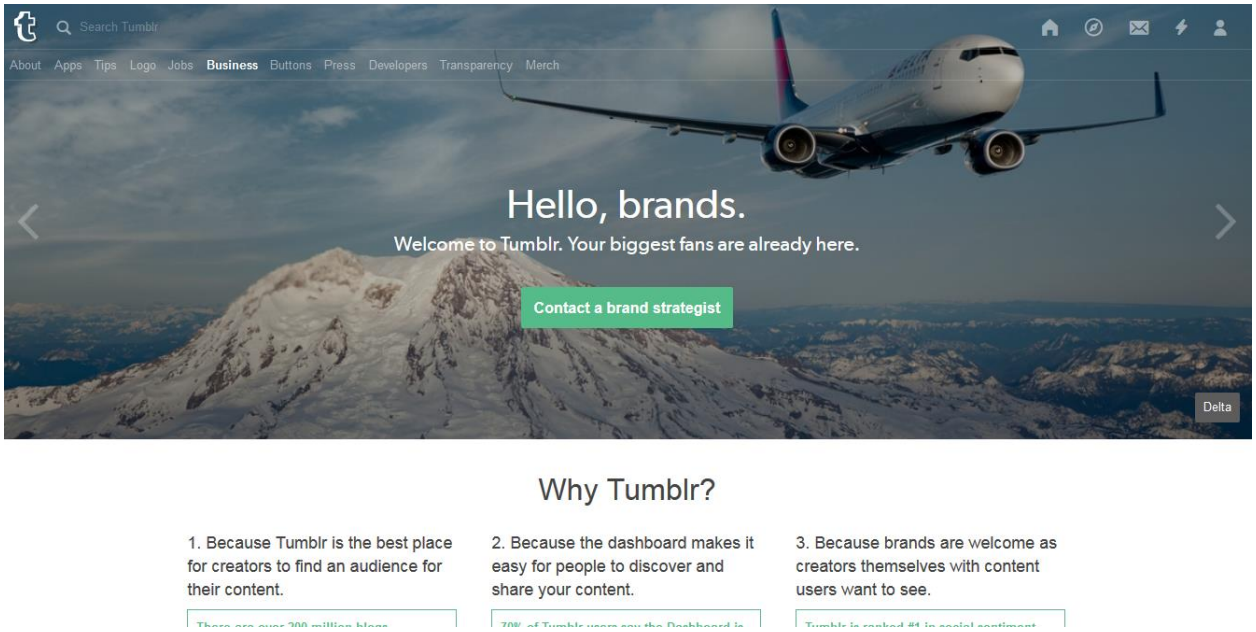

Figure 3: Tumblr "Business" page.

Statistics litter the page: "There are over 200 million blogs publishing 80 million posts per day"; "70% of Tumblr users say the Dashboard is their favorite place to spend time online"; and, quite interestingly, "Tumblr is ranked #1 in social sentiment towards brands" ("Business"). Further down this page, the copy reads, "Yes, we've got ad products." These currently come in three different forms: sponsored posts (Fig. 1), including sponsored video posts, radar posts (on the sidebar of the dash), and sponsored blogs, which show up in the "recommended" section of the dashboard. And, in a clear and almost embarrassingly simplistic answer to the industry-wide question of how Tumblr and Yahoo would be integrated, the "Business" page (Fig. 3) suggests that Tumblr sponsored posts can also be syndicated content pushed through to Yahoo pages, such as promoted content within Yahoo News stories or other Yahoo content areas.

The Tumblr "Ad Specs" document, dated September 9, 2014, outlines a clear working path and suggested best practices for advertisers, including a timeline to launch,

creative guidelines, and restrictions and tips on each type of advertising format that Tumblr sells. Here is its list of "Do's" aimed at potential advertisers:

> "Use engaging creative. Photos and animated GIFs are much more fun than text.
>
> Use the appropriate post type. Create video posts for videos; photo posts for photos, photo sets and GIFs; audio posts for audio, etc.
>
> Create original content. Sponsored Posts must be original creations made by you; reblogs from another source cannot be sponsored.
>
> Check your anchor text. Be sure hyperlinks are contained in the text itself.
>
> Add click-through links. Supported on single-image photo posts.
>
> Choose a different post for each same-day placement. You can reuse posts on different days, but each placement on a single day should have a different post." ("Tumblr Ad Specs")

As evident in this list, the Tumblr sales team is crafting a framework for advertisers to understand how their ads should work within the Tumblr ecosystem. However, this is a bare-bones set of instructions. As shown with the Home Depot case study, Tumblr is welcoming to advertising campaigns that extend beyond simple ad placement. In fact, Tumblr is very specific about how it measures and sells its own take on "engagement." Tumblr defines "engagement" as "Likes, reblogs, follows, and clicks" ("Tumblr Advertiser Analytics"). It refines engagement into two types: "paid engagement," which is the placement of the ad into the user's experience, such as in their dashboard feed or on the "radar" sidebar; and "earned engagement":

> "An organic engagement that happens downstream of the paid placement (for instance, if someone reblogs the Sponsored Post and one of their followers likes it); or any subsequent engagements by the same user with the same post (if someone likes then reblogs a Sponsored Post we only charge for one engagement)." ("Tumblr Advertiser Analytics")

To translate: if an advertiser places an ad in Tumblr users' dashboard feed, Tumblr gets money every time someone clicks or likes or reblogs that post. If someone likes a sponsored post that appears as a reblog from another user, that "engagement" is free to the advertiser. This gives the advertiser the incentive to create advertisements that are compelling enough to be reblogged and fed downstream to as many subsequent users as possible. In fact, Tumblr's marketing literature touts that "eCPE," or "effective cost per engagement" can be decreased exponentially if the content is robust enough to be circulated by Tumblr users themselves.

On January 22, 2015, Tumblr announced a new program called Creatrs (Lopez 2015). The structure and purpose of the program is designed to utilize the sorts of creative investments that Tumblr and its community are known for. Tumblr has identified a small group of its own users, "Creatrs," who will be commissioned by advertisers to create native content for the advertiser that will roll out across Tumblr. The brands who commission work from these Tumblr artists are required to buy advertising on Tumblr to house this creative work that promotes the brand. In the eyes of business, this is a "win-win." A select group of Tumblr's hand-picked users get a portion of the proceeds of an ad campaign in exchange for their creative labor; the advertiser/brand gets a campaign that is "native" (done specifically for the Tumblr environment); Tumblr makes money; and perhaps most importantly, the campaign is "Tumblr-ey" since Tumblr's own users are the ones who are creating it.

Tumblr touted the success of an early Creatr campaign in its "Case Studies" page on its marketing blog, Marketr.[7] The October 2014 horror film *Ouija*, about teens who deal with the ghastly consequences of a possessed Oujia board, used Tumblr to outreach

[7] The Oujia campaign was conducted in 2014; this hints that Tumblr was actively selling the Creatr network to industry before officially announcing it to the public in 2015.

to its target demographic, teens and millennials. Tumblr claims that the campaign received 625,000 engagements, including a 28% reduction in eCPE due to earned engagement ("Ouija Case Study"). Furthermore, Tumblr itself hired a digital market research firm to measure how its users responded to this campaign—especially content that was created by the Creatr network. It found that awareness of the film was 19% higher among users who "engaged with earned media"—this being downstream reblogs—than among users who were not exposed to this advertising, and that those who were exposed to earned media were 54% more likely to state they were going to see the movie than those who were not exposed to the advertising. This means, in layman's terms, that paid content that is reblogged by unpaid users is an effective way to amplify the advertising campaign, perhaps because it proffers legitimacy and clout to the campaign because it is then housed in user's own Tumblrs and not simply "promoted" into a dashboard feed.

What Tumblr defines as "earned engagement" is particularly interesting because it can be thought of as a tangible metric of affective labor—it is the users doing the work of promoting a product because they have some sort of attachment or investment in the original post, enough attachment to reblog it themselves. Though the *Oujia* campaign only ultimately created a 7.63% earned engagement rate ("Ouija Case Study"), the statistics outlined above appear to reveal that earned engagement is more powerful than paid engagement in terms of the resonance of the advertisement with users (more people planned on seeing the film after viewing an earned engagement rather than a paid engagement).

Tumblr is trying very hard to create forms of advertising that piggyback on the way that people actually use the site. Tumblr aims to capitalize on this labor by selling it to advertisers. Instead of simply placing display ads on Tumblr pages, it is clear that

Tumblr's sales team is going to great lengths to invent other ways of making advertising resonate with Tumblr users.

It is clear that David Karp's past rhetoric on the unwelcome nature of advertising on Tumblr is long gone. It is also clear that, especially with the Yahoo buyout, Tumblr is under immense pressure to make money while it also tries to avoid alienating its users by making drastic changes in their experience. Clearly, the simple placement of display ads on any given Tumblr user's own personal blog would be anathema to this experience, so Tumblr has bent over backwards to try to find ways to monetize its users' investment in the space that are parallel to the architecture of the space itself.

This is not a new maneuver with respect to participatory cultures. Cammaerts (2008), writing on the supposed democratizing potential of the blogosphere, critiques utopian theorizations of participatory cultures by calling attention to, among other things, its "Colonisation by the Market." The buyout of Blogger, Blogspot, and YouTube by Google, as well as the buyout of MySpace by NewsCorp are examples of this in action, according to Cammaerts, who goes on to cite Deuze's (2007) analysis of corporate-funded promotional blog activities such as "blogola" (a play on "payola") and "flogs" (or "fake" blogs) as further evidence that these spaces are never free for long from the grip of institutional capital.

However, as I hint at in this section, it is not enough to understand these spaces as simple assembly-line, input-output economies. The minds behind Tumblr, for example, clearly recognize that in order for engagement to be fostered, advertising needs to be affectively nuanced to work the same ways that participation works. Unfortunately, as I unpack in the section that follows, key thinkers in participatory cultures do not do a good job in giving us a vocabulary that accounts for affect, even as its spectre is invoked regularly in the academic literature.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE LOGIC OF ECONOMIC PRODUCTION

Social media, and Web 2.0 technologies more broadly, are generally regarded as a paradigm shift in the way that we use the Internet. In 2006, *Time* Magazine decreed that "You" were their "Person of the Year" in homage to this shift in Internet authorship (Grossman 2006). These technologies and their uses comprise what Henry Jenkins has influentially termed "participatory cultures"[8]—communities of social production and feedback that remix, remake, and shape popular culture, demonstrating a heretofore unseen magnitude of audience agency in the culture industries. In this section, I aim to unpack what I see as a logic of economic production that undergirds these accounts; these theories of understanding social media are laden with a residual Marxian language, one that includes regular usage of terms such as "production," "labor," and "excess capacity." I argue that, while useful in describing behavior and structure from a macro level, these accounts 1) do not provide us a complete schema with which to understand the investments on the part of individual users in contributing to this machine of social production; and 2) are actually not quite up to date themselves, even in a Marx-inflected rubric of understanding social production, because they do not include recent conceptions of affective and immaterial labor.

Anderson, in a 2004 article in *Wired* Magazine, introduced the idea of the "Long Tail" to the mainstream. Under this economic model, Anderson argues that the long, shallow end of the traditional demand curve deserves attention, in which "narrowly-targeted goods and services can be as economically attractive as mainstream fare" ("About me," n.d.). This is a phenomenon that is made possible by the digital nature of today's economy, including relative freedom from shelf space requirements and the

[8] Though participatory cultures are not necessarily digital, digital technologies and Web 2.0 have made them exponentially more available and influential. I explore and unpack how we understand participatory cultures in chapter here and in the following chapter.

ability to catalog and offer even the most niche products alongside the most popular ones. He cites Amazon.com and iTunes as prime examples of this business-model shift. Shirky (2010) also adopts a language of economics in aiming to understand use of participatory cultures, referring to the intellectual production that social media cultivate as "cognitive surplus." This is, quite literally, free time: "Over a trillion hours" worth, he says in a well-publicized TED Talk, an accumulation of mind-power ("everybody knows where the violence is, but no one person knows what everyone knows") (2010). When it comes to the topic of "intrinsic motivation," however, Shirky remains flat, invoking settling on the vague concept of "civic value" as an explanatory device.

Benkler, in his important book *The Wealth of Networks* (2006) adopts an economic approach in this technological shift as well. For Benkler, the "networked information economy" is a "feasibility space" which now allows for "commons-based peer production" of the sort discussed here, or "social production." According to Benkler, "a new model of production has taken root" (59), one that he also calls "intrinsic motivation": "Intrinsic motivations are reasons for action that come from within the person, such as pleasure or personal satisfaction" (94). Benkler explores this concept, drawing on sociological literature that understands motivations in terms of social standing as opposed to fiscal remuneration, and also—but not at extensive length—understands that there are "psychological rewards" to participation in this model of social production (98). Benkler asserts that:

The core technologically contingent fact that enables social relations to become a salient modality of production in the networked information economy is that all the inputs necessary to effective productive activity are under the control of individual users (99).

Individual access and registrational interactivity become the core components for Benkler's theory of social production, in which—in a long-tail-reminiscent mode—the "excess capacity" (100) that this social production relies upon is distributed and born of the many. Also, the form of the content—modular and fine-grained—allows for this sort of collective, piecemeal collaborative production to be iteratively constructive (100).

In a foundational text on what he calls "convergence," Henry Jenkins also toes a political economic line:

> "[O]n the one hand, new media technologies have lowered production and distribution costs, expanded the range of available delivery channels and enabled consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate media content in powerful new ways; on the other hand, there has been an alarming concentration of the ownership of mainstream commercial media, with a small handful of multinational media conglomerates dominating all sectors of the entertainment industry." (2004, 33).

Convergence is a "reconfiguration of media power and a reshaping of media aesthetics and economics" (35). For Jenkins, it is as if someone took the old hierarchical model of top-down media and shook it up; the power brokers still have the power, but the masses now influence the power brokers in an "uneasy truce" (35). Jenkins introduces nine sites of negotiation in the impending convergent media world such as "Redefining intellectual property rights" and "Restricting media ownership." Importantly, Jenkins strays beyond the realm of simple economics and gestures toward other imbricated shifts: "Rethinking media aesthetics" is a main point of his treatise as well as new ways of measuring audience impact, including tracking "a prolonged relationship and active engagement with media content" (38). Both of these points hint at something excessive and overfull. It should be of little surprise, then, that "engagement" shows up again in discourse around users and Tumblr—I believe that "engagement" is a coded word for

something that is affective and visceral, something that travels alongside economics but is harder to put into words and formulas.

It is important to note that Jenkins has revised his theories of "convergence" and "participation" since their first publication. Jenkins, Ford, & Green (2013) espouse the concept of "spreadable media" to account for the ways in which social connection and personal motivation encourage the spread of media across participatory cultures. They write, "Spreadability recognizes the importance of social connections among individuals, connections increasingly made visible (and amplified) by social media platforms" (6).

Writing directly against other metaphors, such as "viral media" or "memes," "spreadable media" is a model that accounts for both audience or participant agency and motivation (as opposed to media having a virus-like life of its own) as well as outlining infrastructural properties that help encourage media to spread. Key to this idea is an understanding of "spreadable" in relation to "sticky," which is a more hierarchical, industry-friendly and perhaps slightly outmoded way of thinking about how media works. If one is advocating for spreadable media content, the idea is not to try to draw all audience eyeballs to one central place; the idea is to use dispersed infrastructure and audience or participant agency to get media itself to circulate. Spreadable media relies upon "dispersed material," "diversified experiences," "myriad temporary and localized networks," and "grassroots intermediaries" instead of top-down, traditional forms of targeting audiences (5-7). Tumblr, the chief locus of this study, is a prime example of a spreadable media environment.

In this work, Jenkins et al. aim to move the needle of critical discourse away from a pure economic understanding of participatory cultures and get at something more—other ways of understanding incentive and investment in these cultures. One idea that they propose is a revisiting of Raymond Williams's concept of the "residual," one of

Williams's famous four phases of cultural change (the others being emergent, dominant, and archaic). Jenkins et al. play with the term "residual" carefully, quoting Williams's definition: "areas of human experience, aspiration, and achievement which the dominant culture neglects, undervalues, opposes, represses, or cannot even recognize" (96-97), while also recognizing that "residual" also carries an affective attachment, though they do not label it as such: "The residual can linger in popular memory, become the object of nostalgic longing…" (97). Jenkins et al. even toy with the Hollywood jargon usage of the term: a "residual" is commoditized, a paycheck for work done long ago. Their analysis of "residual" comes painfully close to broaching the idea of affect, yet the authors stop just shy of making this claim—even though the very text which they cite, Williams's 1977 *Marxism and Literature*, is often remembered most for its formative engagement with what Williams calls "structures of feeling." Unfortunately, they do not tread there. Instead, they revert to an on-the-nose reading of "residual" as simply "retro," a discussion which itself could be full of affective heft but ultimately falls short.

What I find intriguing about these useful models for understanding participation in our "networked information economy" is that they touch on, hint at, but yet ultimately skirt around or leave by the wayside a sustained examination of the character of this emotional investment in this "excess capacity"—Benkler's "psychological rewards" for participation in this "social production." While a political-economic model of understanding the frameworks and character of social production in digitally networked arenas offers us robust frameworks for tracing the flows of labor, time and capital (even social capital), this model also struggles to account for emotional and affective investment—feeling.

Yet, industry is captivated by feeling. Furthermore, industry recognizes that feeling is money. In 2014, Facebook revealed that it had secretly tampered with nearly

700,000 users' news feeds in an experiment that wondered whether "exposure to emotions led people to change their own posting behaviours" ("Facebook emotion experiment," 2014 n.p.). Facebook altered users' feeds to skew more "positive" or "negative." They found a small but significant correlation with what those users whose feeds were altered posted themselves—they in turn posted similarly positive or negative posts. Facebook researchers called this "Massive-Scale Emotional Contagion" (McNeal 2014, n.p.).

One commentator, quoted in *The Guardian*, put it succinctly:

> "Facebook cares most about two things: engagement and advertising. If Facebook, say, decides that filtering out negative posts helps keep people happy and clicking, there's little reason to think that they won't do just that. As long as the platform remains such an important gatekeeper – and their algorithms utterly opaque – we should be wary about the amount of power and trust we delegate to it." (Booth 2014, n.p.)

"Engagement," as mentioned above, is a heavily freighted term. Jenkins et al. (2013) tackle this term in their book, understanding it as a counterpoint to older ways of understanding audiences such as "appointment based" models. Engagement "see[s] the audience as a collective of active agents whose labor may generate alternative forms of market value" (116). Engagement is the audience's (or perhaps even the individual "participant's") span of interaction with the media across the vectors of time and venue, be it the living room or the Facebook feed. For Jenkins et al., cult fandom of *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* and *Lost* fan paratexts are evidence of engaged audiences that problematize the way that industry has traditionally measured audience reception.

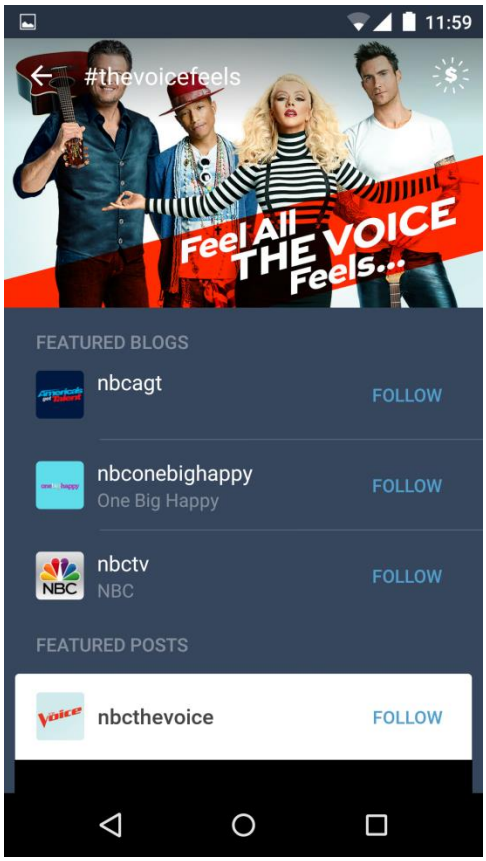

Figure 4: An advertising campaign on Tumblr, "#thevoicefeels".

There is a vague consensus of how to measure user engagement online, culling together a fuzzy cloud of metrics that involve duration of visit, frequency of visit, % repeat visits, recency of visit, depth of visit, and more ("Customer Engagement"). Tumblr itself has trafficked in discourses of "engagement." In July 2013, Tumblr's official marketing division, "Marketr," boasted about Tumblr "engagement" in terms of time spent on the site as well as depth of site visit (Rahmanian 2013). According to their internal team, Tumblr users spent an average of 18 minutes per visit and "consumed" 35 pages of content per sitting, making it number one in terms of engagement in the top 100 Internet properties, when placed in comparison with other comScore ratings (a leading

Internet analytics firm). According to their numbers, in comparison, the average user of Facebook only spent ten minutes at a time on the site, the average user of Pinterest 5.6, and the average user of Twitter 2.8. Tumblr's marketing team minced no words in their evaluation of their power to hold a user:

> "Unlike other social networks that use little blue links and re-targeted coupons, Tumblr gives brands a platform to share their story, engage users in meaningful ways, and foster a community of brand advocates." (Rahmanian 2013)

Clearly, engagement is perceived to have a monetary value for advertisers. If users are "engaged," there is money to be made. If we are going to dialogue in this vernacular, it is useful to explore some recent understandings of ways in which labor is utilized in a late-capitalist, neoliberal economic paradigm.

AFFECTIVE LABOR

Though leading participatory culture theorists such as Jenkins and Benkler may not stray into the terrain of affect directly in their analysis even as they paint around it explicitly with their examples and loaded language, there is another body of literature that aims to wed economics and affect: that of affective labor.

In their book *Multitude* (2004), Hardt and Negri define "affective labor" as follows:

> "Affective labor, then, is labor that produces or manipulates affects.... One can recognize affective labor, for example, in the work of legal assistants, flight attendants, and fast food workers (service with a smile). One indication of the rising importance of affective labor, at least in the dominant countries, is the tendency for employers to highlight education, attitude, character, and 'prosocial' behavior as the primary skills employees need. A worker with a good attitude and social skills is another way of saying a worker is adept at affective labor." (108)

Writing in 1999, Hardt specifies that, though affect has always been entwined with labor, late capitalism has seen an shift in terms of the degree of utilization and structural positioning of affective labor:

> "[T]he processes of economic postmodernization that have been in course for the past twenty-five years have positioned affective labor in a role that is not only directly productive of capital but at the very pinnacle of the hierarchy of laboring forms." (90)

A closely tied concept is "immaterial labor": "labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, knowledge, or communication" (94). Affective labor is "the other face" of immaterial labor (95)—as evident in health services and the entertainment industry. Although Hardt was writing in the era before SNSs, one line from this treatise rings prescient: "What affective labor produces are *social networks*, forms of community, biopower" (96, emphasis added). The newness is not that affective labor is itself new; feminist analysis of "caring labor, kin work, nurturing, and maternal activities" (97) has revealed that this form of labor has always been there. What is new is "the extent to which this affective immaterial labor is now directly productive of capital and the extent to which it has become generalized through wide sectors of the economy" (97).

To reiterate Hardt's simple but profound statement: Affective labor produces social networks. There is an obvious through-line here in porting Hardt's understanding of affective labor to social media. These are spaces that actively encourage users to contribute affective labor, to weave social networks together through whichever proprietary combination of likes, status updates, profile pictures, or reblogs that site uses. If we understand use of social media in this way, then "engagement" is affect's grasp, a metric that is monetizable. Billions of people pouring their hearts out on their social media, their "forms of community," all centralized on clusters of privately-held servers whose proprietors are quietly mining their data for the market; Tumblr and most other social media as giant churning wheels of affective labor.

This critique has been hinted at in the literature on social media, but not explored in depth. Ouellette and Wilson (2011) adopt this angle of critique in their analysis of

Oprah-famous TV personality Dr. Phil's convergent media empire. They view Dr. Phil's various participatory cultures, online and off, as exhortations to involve women in unpaid "second shift" labor in service of a move toward individualized post-welfare neoliberal governmentality that reifies old historical patterns of gendered division of work. Moms are expected to be "CEOs of their families," a discursive move that only ends up doubling down on gendered regimes of invisible labor. However, the authors do not conduct in ethnographic research, reading these platforms and sites as texts only, and as such, adopt a unilateral view of their function in service of capital that does not allow for subversive pleasures or resistant practices. Carah, in a study of the use of nightlife photographers by major brands on Facebook concludes, "the analytical surveillance capacities of social media platforms like Facebook rely in part on the affective labor of cultural intermediaries like nightlife photographers" (2014, 250-1). It is interesting, however, that Carah chooses to identify an actual source of paid (or otherwise compensated) labor in this discussion of affective labor; I am more interested in quotidian practices of social media behavior themselves as forms of affective labor that span these networks.

Affective labor on social media: yet another ploy by late-capitalist hegemonic formations to harvest our capacity to produce for profit? Or are there coinciding uses and pleasures that complicate a straightforward political-economic read, uses and pleasures that could even be thought of as contrary to normative regimes of race and sex? I believe—and I hold this as a through line throughout this dissertation—that the answer is a mix of both.

At this point it is useful to turn to Tiziana Terranova's famous work on "free labor" and the Internet (2000)—not to bolster a paranoid reading of late capitalist neoliberal incorporation, but rather to step back and holistically evaluate the machine of

participation (online as well as off) in broader, and less vitriolic terms. In fact, though this writing is often used as a touchstone for on-the-nose Marxist critiques of the digital economy, Terranova herself is careful to situate so-called "free labor" as something that is highly interwoven with our understanding of modes of production, historically:

> "As will be made clear, the conditions that make free labor an important element of the digital economy are based in a difficult, experimental compromise between the historically rooted cultural and affective desire for creative production (of the kind more commonly associated with Gilroy's emphasis on "individual self-fashioning and communal liberation") and the current capitalist emphasis on knowledge as the main source of value-added." (36)

She adds:

> "The fruit of collective cultural labor has been not simply appropriated, but voluntarily *channeled* and controversially *structured* within capitalist business practices. The relation between culture, the cultural industry, and labor in these movements is much more complex than the notion of incorporation suggests." (39, emphasis original)

Terranova resists a one-dimensional understanding of "free" digital knowledge workers as serfs or peons only, acknowledging that, while they undergird a massive "intensification" of the properties of late capitalism (54), there are other motivations for work that provide value and pleasure. In fact, she closes her article with a suggestion to turn away from critical theory's overarching nihilistic tendencies and instead pay heed to cultural studies' legacy of activated uses and repurposing of culture:

> "[T]he purpose of critical theory is not to elaborate strategies that then can be used to direct social change. On the contrary, as the tradition of cultural studies has less explicitly argued, it is about working on what already exists, on the lines established by a cultural and material activity that is already happening." (54)

Terranova, here, allows for the possibility of contrarian practices that slide underneath or over the top of "lines established by a cultural and material activity that is already happening." The implicit parallel to Deleuze and Guattari's foundational concept

of “lines of flight” is appropriate—the point is to see social interrelationships, and therefore the potential for social change, as constantly in motion, rather than calcified in concepts like “base,” “superstructure,” “identity politics,” or, even “free.”

Jodi Dean is a scholar whose work aims to circulate affect in conversation with digital networks, though she does not center her argument around labor and participation. Writing in an idiom that locates affect in a Lacanian understanding of the interplay of drive and *jouissance*, Dean argues that we should apprehend the “affective networks” of Internet cultures as such:

> “Affective networks express/are the expression of the circulatory movement of drive—the repeated making, uploading, sampling, and decomposition occurring as movement on the Internet doubles itself, becoming itself *and* its record or trace. The movement from link to link, the forwarding and storing and commenting, the contributing without expectation of response but in hope of further movement (why else count page views?) is circulation for its own sake.” (2010, 42)

Though my project is not a psychoanalytic understanding of affect and social media, I think we have a lot to learn from Dean, particularly her emphasis on psychoanalysis’s investment in anxiety, failure, and negativity as a sort of dark, generative impulse. We would do well to remember the Freudian understanding of “drive” as a compulsive tendency that is haunted by radical negation—death—in a theorizing of participation in social media cultures; for Dean, there is the deferment of, or anxiety about, enjoyment (19), that lurks around every click. This coincides well with some of the “bad queer feelings” that I explore in the following chapter, feelings that are actually generative and perhaps overflow traditional containers of the “subject” as they weave users together on reverberated flows of affect.

However, I do not want to swing this far in my own understanding of affective flows/networks. I want to recognize that there is something excessive that overfills and circulates in the networks I study and participate in, but I do not want to place too much

stock in "circulation for its own sake," for to do so would be to tread dangerously close to erasing user agency and specific political positionality. I want to advocate for an understanding of the play of affect in online networks that accounts for the half-life of transmitted intensity while at the same time understanding how that intensity warps and refracts off of—and is channeled and motivated by—the territories we traditionally call "identity" and the "subject." These things, in my view, do not negate each other. In fact, they must be held in conversation, especially if we are to account for the lived reality of oppression.

It is taking this cue that I wish to close this section. In addition to a simple understanding of affective labor as pure commodity that functions only in service of the machine of late capital, I want to suggest that there are other uses, knowledges, and pleasures that skirt alongside, piggyback upon, and flirt with this understanding of "labor" that is beholden to a rubric of production. In fact, I want to ask, in this chapter and in this dissertation, whether or not the coagulation of affective heft and investment that I have observed in my time on Tumblr has valences that resist the intertwining of racist and heteronormative state logics with the machine of production while *at the same* time being roped into capital. Can we hold these moments together?

Ultimately, what is missing from the labor/production/political economy critique of participatory cultures is sustained attention to affect. This is somewhat surprising, given 1) the strong body of literature that highlights the political economy of online participatory cultures and 2) the strong body of literature around affective labor. This is not a concept that comes out of left field, and the dearth of these linkages is surprising.

Jenkins, outlining the properties and effects of "convergence," quotes Pierre Levy on the Internet's power to accumulate knowledge: "No one knows everything, everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity" (2004, 35). I would like to alter

this statement to create a credo on the convergence of feeling in the networked information economy: No one *feels* everything, everyone *feels* something, all *feeling* resides in humanity. We can think of networked economies as economies of distributed feeling as well as economies of distributed labor and capital; in fact, I have suggested in this chapter (and throughout this dissertation) that these things are concomitant. One cannot consider the "excess capacity" of Benkler's free labor or Shirky's "cognitive surplus" dispersed across the network without considering the fact that affect is also defined as "excess"—intensity, sensation, value—also dispersed across the network.

In fact, if we adopt an analytic that borrows from the various understandings of affective labor practices as outlined above, we begin to see that, from the get-go, these spaces are structured to encourage and foster intense, laborious affective investment. The moment of sale does not represent the beginning of the end of the good old days; it simply represents a moment of visible fruition of the cultivated affective labor practices that have driven the mechanics of the space since its inception. Simply because a buyout gives the space a price tag doesn't mean that users will suddenly be objects in service of capital any more than before; in fact, they always were, whether understood as potential or actual sources of revenue.

From a macro perspective, the entire goal of the space is to encourage affective labor practices, to foster and grow them to the point at which they can be monetized in cold, hard cash; the buyout is hardly a rupture but rather a contiguous point in a maturation of a scheme of intertwined affective labor and real capital that started from the very beginning. With respect to Cammaerts, the space is not some kind of virgin *terra nova* that is at some point discovered and then "colonised by the market"; the space is structured by the market from the inception. Get the users, get them invested, then figure out how to make money. This is why I find accounts such as the dialogue about Tumblr's

"Trans Media Moments, Tumblr, 2011-2013" (Fink & Miller 2014) that decide to stop attention at the moment of the Yahoo buyout to be important yet slightly problematic. The Yahoo purchase certainly turned on the pressure to make money, but it is actually in Yahoo's best interest to *not* change the dynamics of the site if they are going to be able to further encourage and harness the buying power of this affective investment. Though we have seen the infiltration of actual advertising into the Tumblr ecosystem since the Yahoo buyout, we have also seen relatively little substantive change in the flows and architecture of the site itself. Instead, as we have seen with respect to the ways that Tumblr is experimenting with advertising, we have actually seen the profit motive shape and bend methods to monetize user engagement to the existing architecture of the site—not the other way around.

WHERE NOW?

In this chapter I have reviewed foundational literature in order to offer first steps in thinking about user investment in social media spaces as a form of affective labor. I outlined the ways that major thinkers about "social production" in the age of convergence rely, not mistakenly, on logics of material production and labor in their accounts of how these spaces generate value—in all senses of the term. Though the literature on affective labor is substantial, I find it curious that major thinkers in participatory culture debates do not employ it, even as they rely on shadows of Marx in their analyses, and indeed hint at things like pleasures and passions, and even reference foundational texts in understandings of the structural politics of affect, such as Raymond Williams's writings.

The few scholars who have broached this subject do so in a manner that is searing, indicting macro-scale institutional power for taking advantage of and capitalizing upon affective labor. Rubrics that they use, such as "surveillance," "governance," and

"citizenship" are all appropriate critical lenses with which to understand how late capitalist economic formations wrest value from these investments by users. However, though I understand the value in this approach, I wish to push this dialogue even further. While it is necessary to be vigilant and aware of the extraction of value by hegemonic structures, I also want to hold together what Terranova describes as social change that comes by "working on what already exists" (2000, 54)—in my view, the potential for affective investment in participatory cultures to circulate in ways that challenge normative regimes of race and sexuality.

How, then, does affect work? If people are writing about it, but writing around it, how can we begin to tackle it head-on? How does it grow and thrive and circulate and falter? How do we locate the user as a crucial node in this system and retain their specificity at the same time we understand flows of immanence and intensity as spanning users? The next chapter is an entrance into the field, offering some initial observations along these lines. It finds that there is something queer about the *time* of the space, something that evades assembly-line logics of economic production in favor of the solidarity of stubbornness and dwelling.

INTERLUDE

There is a picture of a young man, dark-haired, extreme close-up. A smooth young face that is on its way to premature age—you can see it around his eyes, in the smallest wrinkles. It is an old black-and-white photo, so old that the emulsion is deteriorating and his cheek fades into an indeterminate grayness. All I can really see are his sharp cheekbones, dark brow, and eyes, looking off to the side.

Queerlife has been posting a lot of these vintage images recently. They go without comment, without clear historical referent. It is image upon image, times overlapping and redoubling. I can't help but feel that there is something erotic in voyeurism across time. Looking into the past of young men.

**

It's May 23, 2014. A 22-year-old half-Asian, half-white man has just killed six people in Isla Vista, a student community adjacent to UC Santa Barbara. All of his rants on social media are about race and sexuality. How he hates interracial couples. How he tried so desperately to be white. How he wanted to get the girl. How he was never masculine enough. Gut punch. It makes me think about repetitions, refrains, how race and sex and dance together, always, and how some people are born into the rhythm and step in time with grace and lightness and some never learn it.

I think about Anthony, who is finishing up his freshman year at UCSB. And I think about myself—also mixed race Asian American, and how I spent a lot of my time in college trying to place myself, especially around the twin axes of my race and sexuality. It turned into my thesis project, a documentary about being mixed race. But I totally sidestepped my sexuality in that documentary. I just couldn't deal with it. Anthony, in the last few months, has been spending too much time on Tumblr, in my

opinion. He isn't living the hedonistic gay college adventure that I had hoped he would. He had been posting a lot of stuff about how bad he felt, there was an overarching feeling of longing to his posts.

Duh, I think to myself. It's hard being 20. It's hard navigating life as a racial and sexual minority.

I send Anthony a message. Is he OK? Does he know anyone involved? He doesn't respond. But I see a post on his Tumblr later that day. He's simply stunned, like the rest of the UCSB community. He doesn't know what to think. I'm glad, at least, that he wasn't around when the killing spree happened.

A few months later he texts me. At midnight. He will sometimes do this, he is two hours earlier on the West coast. We are just making text small talk. He tells me about the classes he's going to take, whether or not he is going to change majors, things like that. He's already taken classes like "Decolonizing Chicana Feminism" and another class on LGBTQ social movements. I am jealous. They didn't have anything like that when I was in college, I tell him.

I have also become something of an advice-giver to him. A gay elder. Which freaks me out, but OK, I'll go with it. He has a crush on a fellow student. They've hooked up already once but he wants to keep seeing him and take it further. What should he do? *As if I'm anyone who should be doling out relationship advice!* I think. I'm barely sorting my own shit out.

Chapter 2: Queer Reverb: Tumblr, Affect, Time[9]

Like many people I know, I stumbled into Tumblr through porn. As mentioned in the introduction, in early 2009, a friend of mine in Austin told me about a new "blog" some art-queer friends of his started that did nothing but post pictures, usually irreverent bizarre images that lampooned mainstream U.S. gay culture. I visited the site. I didn't realize I would step into a universe of porn portraiture, of images cascading upon images upon images, an endless saturation. But it wasn't just porn. Tumblr as a whole is a massive churning machine of evocative photos, image aggregation on steroids, 37.5 million posts per day.[10] It was disorienting, no one explained very much with words, there were no "profiles" like Facebook, there were no "friends," there were no clear ways to traverse or search the network—just post after post of explanation-less images, traded from one anonymous Tumblr user to another. A gorgeous landscape photo of a tropical beach after a photo of a genderqueer boy wearing a three-piece suit after a galactic vision constellated with Lady Gaga in Alexander McQueen heels.

I realized very quickly that there is a huge queer ecosystem on Tumblr.[11] Queer Tumblr users circulate porn, flirt, provide support to deal with homophobia as well as advice on coming out, disseminate news pertinent to LGBT communities, organize real-

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[9] Portions of this chapter have been previously published in: Cho, Alexander. 2015. "Queer Reverb: Tumblr, Affect, Time." In *Networked Affect*, edited by Ken Hillis, Susana Paasonen, and Michael Petit, 43-57. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

[10] Though detailed statistics are hard to come by, the site announced on March 8, 2010, that it was averaging two million posts and fifteen thousand new users every day (Karp 2010). In 2011 the site was due to pass ten billion posts, with an average of 37.5 million per day (Pingdom 2011).

[11] There is a popular meme, "Rules of Tumblr," that reverberates in different permutations across the Internet. In a YouTube video posted by JustKidding1026, called "What you need to know about Tumblr," a young woman gives snarky tips on the site's etiquette, saying, "If you're homophobic, you're prolly not going to last long on this website." The video goes further: "Seeing as most people on the site are either lesbian, gay, or they support homosexuality. Just saying. Just saying" (What You Need to Know 2010). Elsewhere, another version of Rules of Tumblr states: "[Rule] 8. Tumblr isn't for homophobes. Tumblr is mostly people who support gay people, or lesbian/gay people themselves. We don't discriminate on Tumblr" (Urban Dictionary 2010).

life meet-ups, post pictures of themselves, "reblog" pictures of others, "like" pictures of sexy men and women, post seemingly un-queer pictures of art, design, architecture, landscape photography, and alter the HTML and CSS of their Tumblrs to express their individuality. This was not surprising; historically, queer people have had a significant relationship with Internet technologies, due to our precarious position as a sexual minority that must slip so-called private behavior in and out of public space. The Internet, with its ability to link people across geography and under the cloak of anonymity, has historically afforded queer people the chance to express themselves in a way that may be awkward, uncomfortable, or unsafe in public. (Alexander 2002a, 2002b; Egan, 2000; Campbell, 2004; Gross 2003, 2004; Hillis 2009).

However, Tumblr felt different from 1990s-era Web 1.0 blogs full of pages of long-form, cathartic HTML text. Instead of literal testimonial and narrative storytelling, it appeared that Tumblr users favored communication through image, most without attribution or caption; they relied less on text and more on the felt register of suggestive imagery, one of intimation, assemblage, intensity, and aesthetic. Tumblr seemed like a terrain of affinities speaking at a thousand miles a minute, one that regarded written language as a simple, runty cousin. My feeling of disorientation upon first entering the space was like being immersed in language that didn't quite make sense—all there was was the gist. I sensed that there was *something else* being circulated here, something that resisted definition and exceeded classic semiotic formulas. It seemed, from the first moments I was in the space, that Tumblr traded in affect.

I had the sense that to understand Tumblr, I needed to fully immerse myself in it. It is not a space that rewards piecemeal interloping. I have made friends, flirted, posted a ton of pictures and videos, ranted, and gotten off. This chapter draws on my five-plus years on Tumblr to draw attention to practices that involve cyclicality, repetition, and

refrain as crucial in understanding the flow of affect. I suggest that the dynamics I outline here are useful in understanding the properties of the traffic of affect on Tumblr more generally and possibly across social media writ large. My discussion of these practices also traces the contours of a possible resistant queer politics rooted in the interplay of cyclical, erotic, and melancholic queer temporalities that linger in a stubborn persistence of the past. I also offer the metaphor of "reverb" as part of the effort to develop a vocabulary to describe how affect channels and circulates in social media environments.

"TERRAIN VAGUE"

Tumblr is a hard space to understand from the outside. Unlike Facebook, there is no aesthetic uniformity. Universal structural conventions are pared down to a bare minimum—any given Tumblr is a collection of posts (which, according to the individual design, can be vertically or horizontally arranged). Each post has a permalink (though the linking device/text is also customizable). Though some pre-packaged themes make it possible to display who you're following, most Tumblrs do not, and I've never come across a Tumblr that displays who is following you. Furthermore, since there is little to no text (most Tumblrs trade in pictures), and since attribution via reblogging is done with a simple hyperlink to the originator's page, very often there is the appearance of grand chaos going on, or at least some sort of in-group Web practice that interlopers don't understand. My first extended period of time attempting to navigate through queer Tumblrs was disorienting, to say the least.

Because of these formal qualities—indeed, in order to simply understand how people connect on Tumblr—I chose to become a participant observer on the site, creating my own Tumblr. My hunch was that this was the best way to gain familiarity with the nuances of use and small decisions involved in negotiating the queer divide between

public and private as evidenced on this site. Following Spradley (1979), Emerson et. al. (1995), and Hine (2000), I compiled regular field notes on these experiences, as well as notes on significant developments in those Tumblrs I followed. I paid special attention to 1) Whom I decided to follow; 2) Who decided to follow me; 3) Who liked and/or reblogged my posts. In order to lend a degree of structure to the participant observation process, I created a recurring series of HTML "snapshots" of my Tumblr as well as of those that I follow. These snapshots, taken both on a regular basis as well as of significant public Tumblrs I follow, etc., are used as temporal and formal benchmarks in my analysis.

In my experience, people view Tumblr as a place of affinity and emotional self-expression; often so "real" and potentially painful that they do not share their Tumblr names with friends "in real life." But this is not escapism, and it is not identity tourism, any more so than picking out what shoes we wear to work—there are shoes that are for one place, and shoes that are for another place. I want to take immense precaution against viewing Tumblr as its own "online world," somehow divorced from real life. This is not how my participants see it, nor how I experienced it. Simply because we may reveal things in an anonymous space online that we might not in person to someone we know doesn't make for an alter-ego. Poststructural theory, in fact, dictates that our identities are shifting from minute to minute, regardless if we are online or off. This is the spirit with which I entered Tumblr. In fact, further tying online and off together is the reality that people view Tumblr as a way to articulate resistance and as destination to learn—for my informants, Tumblr is a space to hone their politics around LGBTQ issues such as heteronormativity, queer of color critique, and gender and feminist studies. Many who may not be learning about these concepts in high school or college are learning them on Tumblr.

Tumblr, like 4chan or Reddit, feels like a space that is WWW-adjacent – it shares the same plumbing, but it has an entirely different zip code. The language of the space is different from the rest of the internet, it has its own social code and way of communicating. A frequent reaction to encountering Tumblr the first time is bewilderment—it is hard to understand. This is because of a few things:

- It is relatively unsearchable.
- Each page is customizable to a degree that could potentially be unrecognizable / lack of visual context clues.
- Users are anonymous by default.
- The site allows for non-reciprocal following / and it works on a dynamic of reblogging.
- Much of the content is images, often without caption or credit.

According to boyd and Ellison (2008), social network sites such as Facebook have three basic properties: constructing a profile within a bounded system, articulating a list of other users to whom they are connected somehow, and allow users to "view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others in the system" (211). Tumblr, though it is definitely "social media," exists somewhere on the fringe of social network sites and older forms of blogging.

Additionally, Tumblr sidesteps some of the intuited properties of "networked publics" that danah boyd, Mizuko Ito and others have outlined in detail regarding the dynamics of social network sites. The "networked public" is a conscious talking-back to earlier understandings of the public sphere, including Habermas' "bourgeois public sphere" as well as Benedict Anderson's idea of the media as conduit for national imaginary. A "networked public," according to Ito, is "a linked set of social, cultural, and technological developments that have accompanied the growing engagement with

digitally networked media" (Ito 2008). Boyd builds on this definition, positing the "bit" as an architectural metaphor, small digital units that can come together to build structures, as it were, that people inhabit (2010). Architecture is in fact a useful trope, in fact—there is a whole literature about the experience of architecture as sensation and feeling. Architects and designers, unlike media scholars, have a long-standing and highly sophisticated vocabulary of understanding feeling, sensation, and affect. To that end: what is the emotional affordance of the networked public? What does its architecture evoke? This is another way of putting the central research question of my project.

I want to dialogue with boyd's useful properties of networked publics; understanding Tumblr's deviations from these properties is a way we can understand how Tumblr "makes weird" the standard model of a networked public. Here are a networked public's main affordances, according to boyd:

> "Four affordances that emerge out of the properties of bits play a significant role in configuring networked publics:
>
> • Persistence: online expressions are automatically recorded and archived.
>
> • Replicability: content made out of bits can be duplicated.
>
> • Scalability: the potential visibility of content in networked publics is great.
>
> • Searchability: content in networked publics can be accessed through search." (boyd 2010, 7)

While these properties may be second nature and easily applicable to a social network site such as Facebook, Tumblr offers some key departures. The chief deviations are regarding persistence and searchability—neither of these properties is very well represented on Tumblr. In fact, it is almost as if the space is purposefully made unsearchable. When I first started on Tumblr in 2009, the "search" function was laughably bad—if it did return results, the amount of results could be counted on two

hands, or the search function only scoured tags and not content. There was literally no way to meaningfully search for anything. This functioned as a sort of gate; even though every single Tumblr is available for the general public to access, there are so many that you would never be able to browse them all, and therefore the only way in is to follow a trail of virtual breadcrumbs from a lead of some sort – not via a top-down search, but a bottom-up experience. This is an incredibly disorienting initial angle of entry, but this angle privileges an affective mode of understanding. It's like being blindfolded and feeling your way through a new room.

Also, in terms of search: you can't traverse the connections of a Tumblr user, which makes strange our assumptions of what social network sites should let us do when we first encounter the space. Unless the specific Tumblr you are looking at has included code in their design to make the Tumblrs that they follow visible, there is no way to traverse any lists of connections. This, combined with the fact that you can follow Tumblrs unreciprocally (they don't have to "approve" you since there is no way to make a Tumblr "private"), is a disorienting experience compared to other social network sites. For example, Facebook, it could be argued, is built on exactly the opposite structure—only reciprocal following, and highly-visible friend connections.

Persistence is also different from other social network sites. In other words, time on Tumblr works in very different ways than we are used to seeing it work on sites such as Facebook. Things have duration, but they are not permanent or constant and are unpredictable. As soon as something comes across your dashboard, it can be gone that easily, and there isn't a very robust way to get it back – almost like it's lost in a quickly flowing river. Given the site's willfully awful search capability, the only way to keep track of something is to "favorite" it by clicking on a heart on the post's page, either on the web or on a mobile interface. Even favorites can get unwieldy, quickly numbering in

the thousands if you are a relatively active Tumblr user. Tumblr does its best to de-emphasize persistence in favor of immediacy and the next.

Finally, Tumblr traffics in humongous levels of replicability. The baseline function of Tumblr is the "reblog." That is, if you see a post that you like and that you want to include on your own Tumblr, all you need to do is click on the "reblog" icon and then the "post" button and, presto, it's on your own Tumblr. Tumblr is a machine of replication and duplication, which means that its chief user dynamic is one of curation.

To sum up: Tumblr tweaks the properties of social network sites as we know them. One way of thinking about it is as follows: Extreme replicability minus searchability plus a fleeting amount of persistence equals an ecosystem that is built on saturation. These qualities all add up to a structure that is well-designed for channeling user affect.

I want to also address the fact that Tumblr is anonymous by nature and that the site allows for an almost unlimited amount of customization in terms of HTML and appearance. Many Tumblr pages don't even look like they could be Tumblr blogs. There is, however, a slight signature – that is the combination of a mostly image-based accumulation aesthetic and the existence of a main page and an individual "post" page. There is also the Tumblr official overlay in the top right corner that allows for instant "liking" or messaging once you are a logged-in user. But this is the barest of structures. Anonymity and intense customizability make Tumblr an unusual, bewildering space but also make it a space of intense possibility and creative investment. The minimal-structure of Tumblr can be bewildering but also enticing.

I want to push this further, and argue that this bewilderment is part of the sense-making of Tumblr. There is a minimal structure here, one that is vacant on purpose. This is similar to what architecture theorist Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió calls *terrain vague.*

For Solà-Morales, *terrain vague* is best exemplified by photos of vacant lots, parking lots, abandoned spaces, and the like. These are necessary constituents of the lived and represented imaginary of urban spaces. Rather than view these spaces as exceptions to an urban plan, Solà-Morales understands these spaces as intrinsic components of cities, especially in our late-capitalist moment. Important for understanding *terrain vague* is the consideration of continuity or, as I understand it, motion in time in terms of how these spaces are utilized (if at all) or framed as part of the understanding of a larger cityscape. One day a parking lot, the next a carnival fun fair, the next a pumpkin patch.

Furthermore, *terrain vague*, for Solà-Morales, is necessary—even enticing—for us because it is the literal material of our own strangeness, the impossibility of the modern urban vision working well-oiled and tooting along as reconfigured in a post-modern real. Invoking recent work by Julia Kristeva, Solà-Morales locates "the radical impossibility of finding oneself, of locating oneself, of assuming one's interiority as identity" in classically Freudian terms (122) around *terrain vague*. This is, to put it mildly, the fundamental tension of Tumblr. This is how Tumblr works. It is a mass of *terrain vague* with the barest of boundaries. Thinking of Tumblr as *terrain vague* is to think of it as smooth space in a social media landscape populated by striated spaces, to borrow terms from Deleuze and Guattari. It is the anti-Facebook, a vague expanse that is constantly, as I explore later in this chapter, in motion. To participate in Tumblr is to ache for and feed on the flow of self-as-affect, confronted by a disjointedness and sameness/repetition that is the self's schizophrenic shadow, never quite touchable but always in reach.

LAY OF THE LAND – TYPES OF LGBTQ TUMBLRS

This is not to say that there aren't territories or typologies among the millions of Tumblr users. In order to give some shape to the landscape, I break down LGBTQ blogs on Tumblr into three main categories: Personal blogs, advice/social issue blogs, and porn blogs.

Personal Tumblrs are by far the most prevalent in the LGBTQ ecosystem. Personal Tumblrs are the backbone of the whole site, in fact—the experience of Tumblr is the experience of being your own personal curator. In the following sections of this chapter, I write about some qualities of personal LGBTQ Tumblrs, specifically the practices of temporal repetition and nostalgic politics. However, as I outline later, one useful theoretical device to understand how personal Tumblrs work is that of the assemblage, following Deleuze and Guattari. Each Tumblr is usually comprised of varying degrees of reblogged posts from other Tumblrs, posts that suit the author's taste for whatever personal reason. Often, this manifests in strange alliances of posts—an interior shot of chocolate damask wallpaper juxtaposed against a moonlit landscape that comes after an erotic photo of a naked man lying in white sheets. The whole becomes more than the sum of its parts, it becomes a curated taste board where pictures speak a thousand words. You can get a feel for the author's personality almost instantly, and this act of affective statement is what I find incredibly fascinating about how people use the site.

Even though they are not the same, I'm grouping advice and social issue blogs together because they share a similar orientation—run by one or more moderators, they are less about curating a sensibility and more about providing a political service to the Tumblr community. Advice blogs seem like they have dwindled in number since the first days I started spending on Tumblr in 2009. They took Tumblr's "ask" feature at face

value. Visitors are encouraged to "ask" questions to the blog moderators, often LGBTQ advice blogs run heavily thematically anti-suicide and contain numerous resources such as hotlines and web sites of various LGBTQ resource organizations across the United States and abroad. Social issue blogs are those that are dedicated to a particular political issue, usually organized around an identity. Examples of this include "pocproblems," "this is notlatinx," and "weareallmixedup." Often, these blogs are run by small groups of "mods," or moderators, who are frequently far-flung geographically but collaborate on answering submitted questions and posting content. Perhaps because of their group-authored nature, social issue blogs such as these are frequently some of the most vocal, aggressively progressive participants in Tumblr's "social justice" community. They develop a space for multi-vocal debate, among the mods as well as among followers and question "askers."

Porn is a backbone to Tumblr. Though there are no statistics, the amount of porn on Tumblr should not be understated—it could easily be 30% or more of everything on Tumblr, though this is impossible to know from the outside. Porn is interesting on Tumblr because it represents a type of engagement that is different from the standard user-creates-profile and then interacts with others style of social network site. Instead of being a closed system in which only members and friends of those who are linked together can see content, Tumblr is a totally public, totally unreciprocal, totally anonymous blog format. As of now, there is no way to make your Tumblr private from the world. So, although it is not in the scope of this study, I believe that many people interact with Tumblr as a porn site only – simply visiting pages without making their own accounts, following one post after another into an erotic wormhole on a purely casual basis that is uninvested in any sort of act of personal expression or Tumblr image curation. They're simply there to get off.

LGBTQ porn Tumblrs run a gamut of styles and fetish that you might see anywhere else on the internet. There is mainstream porn, culled from heavily produced studios; there is erotic photography; there is selfie or amateur porn; there is vintage porn, and on and on. However, there is so much of it, and it keeps getting refreshed on such a consistent timeline, that Tumblr has, in some commentators' eyes, become synonymous with porn (Bosker 2013; Clark-Flory 2013).

Much like personal Tumblrs, porn Tumblrs often traffic in a particular erotic sensibility, self-branding as one particular genre or another. In my interviews, I've realized that LGBTQ Tumblr users have an ambivalent relationship with Tumblr porn. The attitude has been overwhelmingly one of, "yeah, it's there, and I can use it to get off if I want to, but Tumblr is much more than porn to me." In fact, one of my participants estimates that only 5% of his personally curated feed, or "dashboard," based on the Tumblrs that he "follows," is porn. When I asked him why, he said, "I don't need the guy behind me in class to see a cumshot flying across my screen when I check it during lecture." In fact, it seems like many Tumblr users have reached a level of "matter-of-fact-ness" when it comes to how much porn they will reblog on their own Tumblrs; many self-censor and declare their blogs safe-for-work, or they will post suggestive erotica, but not full-frontal or sex act erotica.

These categories are porous and sliding; often, for example, personal blogs may post reblogged erotica that is heavily curated toward the blog owner's taste, or, highly-visible personal blogs may feature advice-oriented questions that followers have asked that the blog owner deems appropriate for sharing with the rest of their followers. Porn blogs often have personal asides, or political asides, though many do not.

How, then, do we begin to develop a vocabulary for how sense and guttural forces flow across the Tumblr landscape, and in particular its relationship to LGBTQ Tumblr

users? First, I move through current understandings of affect theory in the humanities, how it appears below the surface in some understandings of participatory cultures. Then I tie this with an invoking of the term "queer" in multiple political registers. Following that, I cite examples that I have observed on Tumblr that demonstrate affective flows and their queer temporal qualities.

THE SHAPE OF AFFECT

Affect is generally conceived as a force or intensity that exists somewhere in between an embodied, sensorial experience and the naming of an emotion. In other words, affect is a moment of suspense, a shift, an attunement between entities. As Gregg and Seigworth (2010, 1) explain, "Affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body … in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds … visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion." Contemporary affect theorists understand that beings are always in the process of becoming, entwined in a map of forces that ebb and flow, one with profound real, embodied consequences. In other words, an analysis vis-à-vis affect adopts a resistance to the neatness of the "subject" as the primary nodal point of reference in favor of an understanding of interlocking forces and fields of intensity. Massumi (1995, 2002) equates affect with intensity and emergence, a plane of the virtual, the generative potential of the event not yet determined. In contrast, "emotion" such as "anger" or "happiness" is the precipitate, the concretized fallout after a subtractive logic of cognition. Or as Thrift states, quoting Steven D. Brown and Paul Stenner, "Emotions we experience are merely the names given to differently assembled euphoric or dysphoric relationships, akin to chords" (Thrift 2004, 62).

A key concept for understanding this understanding of affect, inspired by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), is the idea of the assemblage, a way of thinking about interconnection as messy, overlapping, and inseparable. Where classical modernists saw discrete entities (such as a clean "subject"), and where structuralists envisioned a rigid schema of relations (such as in linguistics or kinship), the assemblage supposes constant multiplicities: "A multiplicity has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 8). As queer theorist Jasbir Puar (2007, 212) explains, the idea of assemblage "is attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency." Nonlinear, incoherent, and impermanent are all very good ways to describe an initial encounter with Tumblr. You are the sum of your posts, which are a visualization of your connections to others—a porous, living assemblage.

An attention to affect recognizes the necessity but also the limits of a linguistic model of semiotic meaning. The two concepts should not be thought of as opposite, but rather as interrelated: affect is the condition of surplus and intensity; representational language is a system of codes and containment.[12] Rather than understand meaning strictly as a formula of signifier and signified, an attention to affect is a focus on excess, that which overfills or cannot be captured in language. As Jack Katz states, there is a whole register of "ways of expressing something going on that talk cannot grasp" (cited in Thrift 2004, 60). For this reason, unlike other social media, Tumblr offers a unique opportunity to trace the lines of intensity and affinity that connect people through affect.

[12] See the special issue of GLQ: Lesbian and Gay Quarterly on "Queer Temporalities" (Freeman et al. 2007) for an extended deliberation on this subject.

It is as if Tumblr's operational logic is the old saying, "A picture is worth a thousand words."

In contrast to image-based networks such as Flickr or Instagram that emphasize amateur photography, the vast majority of images on Tumblr are reblogged from others in a stream, which were reblogged from others, and so on. Tumblr's structure and its users deemphasize the question of origin or authorship at the level of the image—often, the original poster of an image will have pirated that image from elsewhere on the net, posting it with no credit, leaving the question of origin unanswerable. In this way, the locus of authorship on Tumblr is less focused on the creation or capture of an original image and located instead around the personalized stream as a whole, a dynamic of constant movement and active selection. The authorial locus on Tumblr is not the act of creation; it is the act of *curation*. The experience of Tumblr is less like reading a LiveJournal blog and more like walking through a million different constantly shifting galleries—both may contain serious emotional heft and personal investment, but the latter relies much more on aesthetics, intimation, sensibility, and movement—in short, affect.

AFFECT'S BLUEPRINT

As explained in Chapter 1, existing models for understanding social media are robust and useful in describing static characteristics such as structure, architecture, quantity and hierarchy, but lack a way of talking about viscerality, force, value, intensity, and motion. I assert throughout this dissertation that there is something else going on, some affective mode of understanding engagement, that we are missing. In this section, I further this discussion by unpacking three terms that we use to describe these spaces and suggest that, while they do good work in furthering our understanding of these spaces,

they actually already carry within them an attention to affect that their authors are reluctant to explore in depth.

To reiterate: "participatory culture" is a concept that generally refers to the capability of Web 2.0 technologies (including social media) to allow masses of people to "participate" in creation of cultural artifacts, an evening out or opening up of decision making from the top down to the bottom up, enables personalized or individual voices to "participate" in the public sphere in a way that was prohibitive in a pre-Internet, pre Web 2.0 era. In one often-cited document for the MacArthur Digital Media and Learning project, Jenkins et al. (2007) have also forcefully argued for the need for attention to participatory culture practices in educational settings, with the imperative that the "haves" and "have-nots" of the 21st century will be defined by their training and ease in how to navigate and leverage participatory culture settings, influencing education and career opportunities. They define "participatory culture" as follows:

> "A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created)." (3)

Tumblr is a participatory culture. There is a high level of community-created artifacts, including memes, evocative photos, text posts that appear like blog entries, links, and social connection. There are countless sub-communities on Tumblr, though, true to form, they are never organized by the site's minimal infrastructure (as they would be on Reddit, for example, from the top down). Rather, you need to participate in the Tumblr world in order to understand what's going on—it is a space that does not reveal itself fully if you are simply an onlooker.

There is a useful tension throughout the concept of "participatory culture," and that tension is a nod to—but a reluctance to engage with—the felt or intangible qualities that enable participation in the first place. The first component of the definition is an example: "relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement." Though issues of real access to technology and the Internet are still palpable for many young people in the United States, "barriers" are less about simple access (computers, internet) and more about soft, intangible skillsets and capitals: issues of expertise, quality of technology, cultural norms, and enfranchisement. As an example, we know from reports by the Pew center (Smith 2010) and qualitative efforts such as Waktins' outlining of the "mobile paradox" (2010), that black and Latino youth use mobile tech more frequently than their white counterparts, but that the quality of the use of tech and the ability to make participate significantly may be hampered by the lack of these less-tangibles. The question of simple access to participatory culture technologies and environments has been replaced by some more nuanced questions: what is the quality of interaction and access for youth who may be otherwise disenfranchised, and what are the intangible sociocultural barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, even if resources and access may be similar across different youth populations?

Jenkins et al. (2007) hint at the necessity to expand our field of vision in terms of what constitutes "haves" and "have-nots" later in this same document. In one striking passage, they actually allude to forms of participatory enfranchisement that play out on the register of the intuited or felt:

> "Historically, those youth who had access to books or classical recordings in their homes, whose parents took them to concerts or museums, or who engaged in dinner conversation developed, *almost without conscious consideration*, skills that helped them perform well in school. Those experiences, which were widespread among the middle class and rare among the working class, became a kind of class

> distinction, which shaped how teachers perceived students. These new forms of cultural participation may be playing a similar role." (14, emphasis mine)

It appears that Jenkins et al. themselves, in a seminal report, hint that the most crucial point of attention for reconciling the "participation gap" may in fact be a class-based osmosis of a set of intuited or felt sensibilities, a sort of "soft skill" set that is not taught in school but rather absorbed by carefully crafted environmental surroundings and that were sensed and learned at the furthest end of deliberate consciousness. This, to me, sounds like affect.

This is not the only place that Jenkins engages with what we might call the felt or nuanced, the almost-or-just-barely cognate. For Jenkins, "convergence" is "a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content" (2006, 3). Convergence, for Jenkins, is not entirely centered in a political/economic or industrial vein, but rather it is something akin to a mode of being. Here, he talks about something that is perhaps pre-cognate: "Convergence does not occur through media appliances, however sophisticated they may become. Convergence occurs *within the brains* of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others" (2006, 3, emphasis mine). Could "convergence" be an affect? That is, an embodied sense-making and realm of virtual potential?

Gee (2004; 2005) is another oft-cited architect of the participatory culture framework. For Gee, "affinity spaces" are "semiotic social spaces" (2012 [2004], 72), often online, within which people align due to a shared endeavor or interest. He cites numerous examples– online multiplayer games are a chief example, as well as the customer engagement practices of the Saturn car company, and fan communities. For the purposes of this study, it is significant to note that Gee goes out of his way on several occasions to emphatically state that affinity spaces should be understood as radically de-

emphasizing identity characteristics such as "race, class, gender, or disability" (2012 [2004], 77). Specifically, "An affinity space is a place or set of places where people can affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals, not shared race, class, culture, ethnicity, or gender" (2012 [2004],67). In fact, this is first on his list of eleven characteristics of affinity spaces.

Though Gee's de-emphasizing "race, class, gender, or disability" at first reads as a well-meaning, off-hand egalitarian remark, it soon becomes clear that this de-emphasis of lived identity experience is in fact a primary facet of the "affinity space" concept. For Gee, affinity spaces are best cultivated when participants leave their categorical experience at the door, so to speak, only to rally around a shared interest--a troubling move that echoes the utopian discourse of early cyberculture researchers, and one that has been markedly disproven (Nakamura; O'Brien; Stone). In fact, he goes so far as to imply that faulty affinity spaces (such as many real-life classrooms) overemphasize students' race, gender, (dis)ability or class identities (2012 [2004], 80). He emphasizes this hierarchy yet again:

> "An affinity space is a place (physical, virtual, or a mixture of the two) wherein people interact with each other, often at a distance (that is, not necessarily face-to-face, though face-to-face interactions can also be involved), and only secondarily through shared culture, gender, ethnicity, or face-to-face relationships" (2012 [2004], 89).

For Gee, these "semiotic social spaces" exist where personal identity markers are de-emphasized and affinity coalesces around shared interest. I counter: As if one's interests, outlook, and various affinities were not somehow influenced by one's race, class, gender, or (dis)ability! I am interested in the exact opposite—an understanding of shared space and experience that piggybacks on but ultimately eludes simple semiotic formula. I interpret "affinity" instead as attunement, a shared sensibility, a sense-in-

common, which clearly implicates lived experience, the dynamics of power as they twine around very real, although socially constructed, categories of race, gender, class, (dis)ability, and, of course, sexuality. Perhaps we should approach "affinity" differently, to account for that which is guttural, which resists or at least eludes semiotic formula, that which is informed by lived bodily experience, the ebb and flow of intensity, powerful attunements of desire and need. This is the jumping-off point for "attunement" in the next chapter. A shared sense of belonging, longing, joy and trepidation. This is a hard task because these forces slip and do not stay still. Like trying to hold a wriggling trout in your hands, as soon as you realize the fleeting moment is happening, it's gone, and you're left with the slight slime of the encounter, the tactile memory of living scales on your skin, the sound of the splash as it vanishes back into the water.

Shaka McGlotten's *Virtual Intimacies* (2013) breaks the most ground in this field, as perhaps the most high-profile study of queerness, affect, and online media. Our projects are similar. For McGlotten, "intimacy" is the operator, a quality that will benefit from unpacking its virtuality. He writes:

> "Part of what I am trying to recuperate—intimacy's virtuality or immanence—is about trying to imagine forms of connection and belonging that are not necessarily identitarian and that do not fit neatly into our beliefs about how we might belong to a couple, a family, or a nation." (11)

This sentence is a shared anthem, especially the part about identitarian siloes. I take the troubling of the virtual to heart; he writes, "The virtual is something waiting or pressing, something sensed, something dreamed or remembered" (16), and I cannot help but think about the pressing urges and joys and bad feelings of my participants.

However, my approach builds upon and differs from McGlotten's important study in two major ways. First, McGlotten is less concerned with the structural properties of the online spaces he and his participants inhabit; he does not put his analysis into

conversation with extant literatures that have already endeavored to understand how sociality is mediated in online spaces. This is a significant lacuna because, as I show in this and the following chapter, there are very robust models—networked publics and participatory cultures, for example—that provide us with useful ways of understanding how people connect in these environments.

This begs a very big question for me: Isn't it true that the structure of and rules of enforcement in an online space has something to do with the way that people interact with it? For example, a significant finding in my fieldwork with young queer users of Tumblr is that the ability to be anonymous (malleability of username, the fact that it doesn't rely on "real world" connections), actually creates a space of safety of expression, as opposed to a space like Facebook. There is a substantial literature that talks about these kinds of things, yet an analysis of structural affordances surfaces very little in McGlotten's work. For instance, McGlotten does not reference danah boyd, perhaps the foremost scholar in the field of social media (or even Internet) studies. Though her writing does not investigate affect, it can provide a very useful building block for understanding how Internet spaces are set up to channel affect. "Sensuous" and its offshoot concepts, as deployed in this dissertation, can be viewed as a response to this—it refers to both an attitude and a heuristic of use.

The second way that this study intervenes is more fundamental, and diverges from what I see as a slippage in McGlotten's work: the overlap and synonymizing of "intimacy" and sex acts. I do not mean to be puritan in the slightest; rather, I aim to be expansive. What my young participants have taught me is that the connection between "queerness" and "intimacy" must be exploded beyond the confines of carnality. I am not faulting McGlotten for this—I come from the same cloth, and from the same generation. Yes, my participants are searching for intimacies. But after talking with my participants

at length and spending a lot of time with them online I am convinced that their approach to queerness is an approach that simply did not exist, say, fifteen years ago. Their vocabulary is peppered with sexual understandings that I literally had to look up—terms like "asexual" and "demisexual." Ixchel, an 18-year-old Chinese-Mexican-American participant in my study who describes herself as queer and demisexual[13], is much more about cultivating her online intimacies along the lines of affinities as a fan of the animated TV show *The Legend of Korra* and its queer valences (she gave me a spoiler: Korra does, in fact, run off with a woman in the end) or geeking out over trapeze and circus arts training (a hastily confessed ambition) than she is about using her online presence to search out sex. To think of intimacy chiefly in terms of carnality, and especially male-on-male casual sex, is to miss a lot of what is going on. There are so many other ways of being intimate.

I do not want to deny that my participants are people are whole people with sexual urges. I merely want to push this concept of intimacy further. They *also* spend a lot of time online communing over other facets of a sensibility that fosters an intimacy that might also be described as queer: being weird, being outcast, being fabulous, being enraged, being radical. Must intimacy vis-à-vis queerness be always understood in terms of sex? Or can it also be understood as channeled through a GIF of Mariah Carey flipping her hair? Or even a shared indignation at the murder of Eric Garner by NYPD officers? This dissertation advocates for a far broader understanding of queer sociality online—of intimacy—than those moments of sociality that are clustered around sex acts. I simply find it curious that, though McGlotten says, "I labor to render intimacy as a "structure of feeling," as social and psychic, as an entangled contact zone of political and personal

[13] This is commonly understood as a person who does not experience sexual attraction unless they form a strong emotional connection with someone.

energies, as constrained by *and* outside of an overdetermined politics of identity, sexual or otherwise" (11), he spends the vast majority of his time clustered around intimacy as defined by gay male sex only. McGlotten writes at length about intimacy's failure. I think part of that observation—which is so, so true in so many ways—reflects the constraint enforced by a narrow equation of intimacy with sex.

QUEER ANALYTICS

My use of "queer" as an analytic category is multivalent and slippery. I mean, on one level, that I train my attention toward the circulation of images and other posts among a highly visible group of Tumblr users that identify as LGBTQ, or any nonheteronormative permutation thereof. This is in step with a history of queer people using the Internet from its earliest iterations to express identity and articulate connection in a way that spans real and virtual geographies as well as tempers the risk of expressing sexuality in a traditional public sphere.

In a broader sense, drawing inspiration from Cathy Cohen, I invoke "queer" as an agenda that is widely encompassing in the experience of alterity—a relational stance that trains its eye on a "shared marginal relationship to dominant power" (Cohen 2005, 43). I identify this stance less as a deliberately inclusive political movement and more as a palpable, subterranean rhythm of bad queer feeling6 that runs through much of the Tumblr landscape I have observed, regardless of any one person's overt claim to static sexual orientation. It is the dark optimism of a hovering possibility for community, the release of self-expression in the midst of a system that you perceive to be tilted against you, and the potential for kinship and intimacy outside of heteronormative family and relationship structures. In a related vein, I am inspired by Sara Ahmed's "queer phenomenology" (2006) as a way of thinking about the sorts of objects that orient us

toward a sensibility or disposition that traverses strict categories of identity. The Tumblr I have observed, in other words, is full of a lot of snark, vaguely antistatist politics, and frustrated sexual yearning.

The third use of "queer" in this essay draws on its older meaning—peculiar, unsettling, weird. Rather than apply it to a person or user, I invoke it to describe an overwhelming sensation of strangeness upon encountering and trying to "figure out" Tumblr. It is a feeling of eerie dislocation, it is elusive, a shock of dumbness, the sense that you may not be able to understand the (primarily visual) vocabulary being used around you, an alien architecture of affinity and attunement that at first glance evades literal understanding. In the following section, I explore this queer feeling as a function of image moving along the vector of time, a trajectory that is warped, coiled, broken, and multiple, or at the very least, *not straight*.

I want to be clear in that I am not attributing these specific affective dynamics as they manifest on Tumblr only to queer users. Instead, I am focusing on a very small subset of the practices of queer users because I believe they demonstrate well the underpinnings of affective dynamics that characterize user interaction on Tumblr generally. Because queer people have had a historically fraught relationship with expressing sexuality in public, they have long relied on underground economies of expression and relation that traffic in code, affinity, and intuition rather than the literal (Muñoz 1999; Warner 2005). In the words of Ann Cvetkovich (2003), queer people have long relied on an "archive of feelings"—ephemeral, unofficial, evasive—as opposed to literal institutionalized records in order to build community and share history. Queer users of Tumblr continue this tradition, and attention to their practices can highlight the felt dynamics of this social media platform, though they are in no way the only people who use Tumblr in this manner.

Ultimately, however, this argument is not simply about how queer people use Tumblr. Rather, it pays attention to a small subset of the practices of a group of queer people to demonstrate that there is a dynamic of connection and interaction on Tumblr based on a nonlinear, atemporal rhizomal exchange of affect and sensation, a "queer reverb" of repeat and repeat; and there may be a possibility for this sort of transmission to buoy an antinormative or resistant politics.

The following argument regarding the character of time and queer Tumblr users is in two parts. First, among the many practices of such users I focus on the circulation of images that invoke past times as a kind of affective archive, one that purposefully highlights silences and gaps in queer history with floating "recollection-images." Second, I consider the ways that intensity builds on Tumblr through user practices of repetition in various forms. I combine these to suggest the notion of "reverb" as a way of understanding how affect circulates in this social media environment.

ARCHIVE AND THE RECOLLECTION-IMAGE

Queer people have a troubled relationship with archives and "official" historical narrative. Queerness is systematically erased from the public record as a "private" thing and is difficult to pinpoint in artifacts that endure in institutional memory banks. A reading of queerness and history is a reading between the lines, whether in a coded dedication or an obvious erasure.[14] Often queer history can only manifest in what we usually consider secret, ephemeral, or even intuited or felt (Cvetkovich 2003; Arondekar 2005; Dinshaw 2008). Recent efforts in queer studies have attempted to more clearly

[14] For example, an exhibition at Los Angeles's ONE Archives, entitled "To Whom It May Concern" (October 8, 2011–August 17, 2012), presented a collection of blown-up photos of dedication pages from the front matter of famous literary works by queer authors that are all veiled, insider, or tongue-in-cheek references to the author's sexual identity.

articulate queer people's relationship to time, or "queer temporality."[15] Queer temporality is a way of apprehending being-in-the-world that, in the words of Carolyn Dinshaw (Freeman et al. 2007, 178), insists on a "refusal of linear historicism." It is one that looks to moments of belatedness, stunted progress, omission from official records, histories of embodied feeling, asynchronicity and repetition as productive places of inquiry, recognizing that queer people, or rather queerness, has been relegated as adjacent to or incompatible with Western heteronormative historical narratives.

According to Walter Benjamin (1940), one of the hallmarks of the modern era is a constant movement through "homogenous, empty time," as opposed to the hauntings and co-occurrences of premodern civilizations and religious time. Attention to queer temporality explodes the idea of such homogenous and empty time, indicting the public face of white, heterosexual Western normativity as its vanguard. Of particular significance to queer people is Freud's application of the famous assertion that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny to the psychic self, so that the location of the "primitive," temporally, is equivalent to the infant, a location that, by assumed Western heteronormative extension, always places the adult straight white man at the endpoint of psychic maturity (Brickman 2003). In Freud's scheme the illogical and debilitating cyclical reliving of trauma or sadness is diagnosed as melancholy, usually a woman's affliction; proper mourning involves moving past and moving on. Likewise, non-Western "primitive" people are stuck in an infantile holding pattern of psychic development, and "inverts"—gay men and lesbians—have failed to progress to the logical endpoint of sexual development, are stuck in a sexual vector bending back on itself, an immature phase marked by same-sex attraction. According to this Western heteronormative

[15] See the special issue of GLQ: Lesbian and Gay Quarterly on "Queer Temporalities" (Freeman et al. 2007) for an extended deliberation on this subject.

temporal narrative, those who fail to line up in time's straight-and-narrow, those who are hopelessly primitive, melancholic and hysterical, queer, brown, or black, or some combination thereof, are unfortunately out of time.

How can we recuperate time that is not straight, according to this conception? Elizabeth Freeman suggests that we expand our heuristic to account for embodied experience: "something felt on, with, or as a body, something experienced as a mode of erotic difference or even as a means to express or enact ways of being and connecting that have not yet arrived or never will" (2007, 158); elsewhere she explains that "the stubborn lingering of pastness … is a hallmark of queer affect: a 'revolution' in the old sense of the word, as a turning back" (2010, 8; emphasis added). Embodied experience of the stubborn past: dwelling, melancholia, nostalgia, and camp are a few queer examples, usually marked by deviance—precisely for this reason. So, a "queer affect", in relationship to temporality, is one that lingers in a stubborn past, one that dwells in cycles and refuses the tidiness of progress, one that skirts through the archive in ephemeral or evasive ways.

One way the interplay of cyclical, erotic, stubborn, melancholic queer temporality manifests on Tumblr is in its massive traffic in vintage erotica, both male and female. One Tumblr I follow, Encyclopediaofcock, is an assemblage of retro gay porn, retro erotica that is less explicit, such as vintage photos of male sunbathers and pulp fiction covers, and present-day comic book geekery and self-portraits of the Tumblr owner. In one post, he states outright that he refuses to post any sort of contemporary porn. At fifteen to twenty posts a day, all sourced from other Tumblrs, Encyclopediaofcock is just one node in a large ecosystem of retro erotica available to queer affect.

About two weeks into my time on Tumblr, in 2009, I posted a close-up photo of two young men kissing taken by Wolfgang Tillmans, a famous gay male German

photographer. There is something visceral about this photo—it looks like it was taken in a hot, sweaty gay club, at the height of the night's excitement. For these two young men it appears that nothing in the world is more important at that moment than their kiss. There is a whiff of something late 1980s, early 1990s about it, in the floppy hairstyles and the track suits that the young men wear—hearkening to a time just before our current tilt to neoliberal gay inclusion, which usually excises carnal display from mainstream depictions of homosexuality. These two young men are so unconcerned with the camera that I remember feeling slightly unsettled the first time I saw this photo, perhaps tapping into my own internalized fears regarding homophobic violence. Perhaps that is why I posted it. I captioned the photo with a link to Tillmans's official gallery homepage, providing no title and no other words.

Watching what happened to this post over the next few weeks was fascinating. It was the first time anything I had posted was reblogged. The long-format version of the post allows me to trace chronologically how this image shot around the Tumblr landscape. As of this writing, it has thirty-two "notes"—notes get added to a Tumblr post whenever anyone "likes" it by pressing the heart icon on the top of the post page or reblogs it on their own Tumblr—eighteen "likes" and fourteen "reblogs." To follow one thread: blueboy reblogged it from me, wolf90 reblogged it from blueboy, and conniealba reblogged it from wolf90. Two Tumblr blogs that have a large following, springeve and manphile, both of whom specialize in gay male sexy/erotic pictures, reblogged this photo, which further generated a number of reblogs from their followers.

We don't really know the stories behind these vintage posts. Without any sort of caption or credit viewers are simply left to fill in the blanks with their own assumptions of who these people are. On some level they are empty of narrative, while at the same time they hint at a subterranean queer history. In her work on intercultural cinema, Laura

U. Marks (2000) also tackles the idea of history without specific referent. Writing about Marlon Fuentes's *Bontoc Eulogy* (1996), a film that tells a fictionalized story of a group of Filipino tribespeople, who were exhibited at the St. Louis World's Fair of 1904, by using archival footage of the fair as well as ethnographic footage of anonymous women in the Philippines in moments of grief and despair. Marks employs Deleuze's idea of the "recollection-image" as a way to understand the relationship between image and gaps in history. As she puts it, "By using these archival images, Fuentes partially redeems them—not by filling in their stories, but by mourning the eternal loss of those stories. They are mediums of distant events that infect the present" (Marks 2000, 53). "Recollection-images," says Marks, are "those floating, dreamlike images that cannot be assigned a connection to history" (Marks 2000, 37). Following this logic, it is less important for us to know literally who/what/where these people are—*was the Tillmans photo taken in the 80s? 90s? 2000s? Berlin? New York? Were these guys gay? What happened to them? Are they yuppies now? Are they destitute? Are they even alive?*—as instead, much like Fuentes's Filipina elders, to think of them as floating images from some barely hinted-at space and time, *calling attention* to the fact that they are allowing us to fill in the blanks with affective charge by virtue of erasure. This is the generative meaning-space of queer temporality—it is a charged vacuum, a conduit for affect. It doesn't matter what these images are actual documents of—what matters more, in fact, is the "infinite deferral of historical truth" (Marks 2000, 37). It is the displacement and assemblage of these images through an affective archival pointillism that matters for the circulation of Freeman's "queer affect," not their actual place in linear historical narrative.

QUEER REVERB

One queer Tumblr user explained to me that the best way to get followers and reblogs quickly was, in fact, not to post on queer-inclusive politics or blog sexy pictures, but to make simple repeating GIF animations. These are short captures from movies or TV shows, only seconds long, with subtitled dialogue and no audio. Significant moments from *Game of Thrones*, *Parks and Rec*, and the early John Waters film *Multiple Maniacs* (1970), for example, play on endless repeat. Often these GIF animations are comical, the punch line to a famous exchange, a silly moment, or simply an expression of feeling such as disgust or frustration—when Kristen Wiig's character from *Bridesmaids* demolishes an oversized wedding cookie, for example, or Jake the Dog from the cartoon *Adventure Time!*, rolling his eyes, declares, "I never really take anything seriously." One of my favorites is a two-panel GIF of grainy TV footage of Anita Bryant in 1977, looking proper and composed, with perfectly coiffed hair and demure hoop earrings in the left panel, mouth moving as a subtitle reads, "We were going to go on a crusade across the nation and do away with the homosexuals." In the next panel, a hand slams a cream pie into her face. The post has 5,500 notes.

I want to make a case for attention to this smallest and most innocuous of Tumblr practices, for I believe it encapsulates the queerness of time on Tumblr and hints at how users trade in affect across the site. The repeating animation is a perfect moment of refrain, to invoke Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Their explication of the refrain: "It acts upon that which surrounds it, sound or light, extracting from it various vibrations, or decompositions, projections, or transformations. The refrain also has a catalytic function: not only to increase the speed of the exchanges and reactions in that which surrounds it, but also to assure indirect interactions between elements devoid of so-called natural affinity" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 348). Elsewhere Kathleen Stewart, in her essay

"Worlding Refrains" (2010), explains the way we feel and move through the world on intuited and sensed registers; for Stewart, logics of discourse or semiotics are leaky and insufficient systems that do a poor job of capturing the flow of forces that create worlds. In her words, a refrain is "a scoring over a world's repetitions. A scratching on the surface of rhythms, sensory habits, gathering materialities, intervals, and durations. A gangly accrual of slow or sudden accretions" (Stewart 2010, 339).

Lorne Bertelsen and Andrew Murphie (2010) also explore the concept of the refrain in their analysis of the Tampa affair, in which more than four hundred refugees remained in stasis on a huge red tanker bound for Australia, halted in international waters as the Australian government deliberated over what to do with them. For Bertelsen and Murphie, the constant presence of the image of the looming red ship as it shot around Australian mass media itself was in itself world-making. Instead of thinking about the hulking red ship on the horizon as a part of a unidirectional semiotic formula, their assertion is that the incessant refraining of the ship was a locus of affective intensity that fed back upon itself: "The repetition of this image did not just illustrate a complex political event. It helped bring it into being" (Bertelsen and Murphie 2010, 138; emphasis in original). The ship's simple immanence, constantly refrained, created a thing.

Refrain is repetition, a scoring of affect fed back on itself, a way of apprehending that is not beholden to straightforward formulas of signification. To use Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, it is a territorializing, an intensity that encrusts and dissolves. It is in concert with but exceeds, or has the potential to slough off, discourses and systems of signs, thus it is not the same as a simple semiotics. In this way, an analysis through attention to refrain—that is, the dynamism and procreative sensibility of evocation, often clustered around feeling or affect—opens up the potential to fill in the blanks in leaky or

insufficient systems of sign. This is the tie-in to the kinks of queer temporality. In other words, if queer temporality is the condition, then refrain is the mechanics.

Refrain, as it applies to Tumblr: user-created emotional/temporal prisms that span its multiplicity and simultaneously help define it as a set of urges, wants, and hurts, refracting affect through the rhizome in a nonlinear and hardly literal way. Anita Bryant getting pied over and over and over is a perverse queer temporality that has a catalytic function—bringing Tumblrs together by means of a shared affinity.

The most resonant image I have encountered during my time on Tumblr came to me in early October 2010. It was a photo collage of six adolescent boys' faces, most of them smiling broadly, on a purple background. The boys were already famous through most national news media, which had covered their suicides in a rare display of mainstream attention to the plight of bullied queer youth. This collage also carried text:

> "SPIRIT DAY. It's been decided. On October 20th, 2010, we will wear purple in honor of the 6 gay boys who committed suicide in recent weeks/months due to homophobic abuse in their homes or at their schools. Purple represents Spirit on the LGBTQ flag and that's exactly what we'd like all of you to have with you: spirit. Please know that times will get better and that you will meet people who will love you and respect you for who you are, no matter your sexuality. Please wear purple on October 20th. Tell your friends, family, co-workers, neighbors and schools."

Within several days the image garnered over thirty thousand notes. "Spirit Day" became a phenomenon in the United States, gaining national media attention in its own right when it occurred on October 20th, prompting major celebrities, such as talk show host Ryan Seacrest, to wear purple (Miller 2010).

This post, and the way it framed the suicides of these boys, did more than simply channel anger, grief, disgust, and frustration (though it certainly did do that). I want to move through platitudes of "tragedy" to think about the way the post operates as refrain,

like Bertelsen and Murphie's red ship: it is a territorialization of a stubborn negative queer affective charge, constantly resurrected.

There are multiple refrains going on here. The text of the post demands that the occasion of these boys' suicides be refrained into productive public neoliberal logics of state-sponsored individual rights, gathered in a simple semiotics of purple on a single day, rather than attention to or intervention in systems of micropower that infiltrate every second of young queer peoples' lives. The image, however, works on a different refrain. The bizarre, almost perverse arrangement of smiling portraits of these young boys, probably uploaded to their Facebook pages at happier moments, is poignant on a whole other register for precisely what it masks—the duplicitous nature of systemic homophobic abuse, which demands that one keep a smiling public face because "it gets better," at the same time that it eats away at one's will to live. Heather Love states that we have not been able, under the recuperative impulse (e.g., Spirit Day at its most trite level), to allow for "sustained engagement with the stubborn negativity of the past: critics have ignored what they could not transform" (Love 2007, 147). This is the energy of the affective charge in circulation here, hidden behind the recuperative agenda of Spirit Day: a "stubborn negativity" (to put it mildly) that leads nowhere but the end of the road. I see this second refrain, in the words of Elizabeth Freeman, as a "queer hauntological exercise," a longing, in the sense that it "produces modes of both belonging and 'being long,' or persisting over time" (Freeman 2010, 13). These boys and their bad feelings persist on the refrain on Tumblr, skating on affective charge, weaving the network between users. One wonders if the creators of Spirit Day realize their double entendre: not simply honoring these boys' youthful spirit, but also regarding them as spirits, continually haunting us.

My final suggestion has to do with value, or force. If refrain is repetition and encrusting, a bringing-into-being and then dissolving, and if queer temporality describes the general character of the practices of queer Tumblr users described above, then how do we account for direction, force, and intensity? How do we describe the way in which some posts take off, while the vast majority linger with little circulation? Or the fact that some Tumblr users have inordinately large reach, whereas the vast number of Tumblrs I've observed and spoken with have small-to-medium reach at best? It is no coincidence that many people I've spoken to about Tumblr employ this same language, unprompted, when speaking about why they decide to follow someone or reblog an image. "Resonate," "immersion," and "strong reaction" are all frequent terms, though they seem like containers that can't quite carry what has already been felt. This phenomenon has been explored by Paasonen (2011, 16, 18) as "resonance," in terms of online pornography and its dynamics of "force and grab" with audiences who feel "sympathetic vibrations."

I offer "reverb" to further tweak this fruitful concept and posit it as a way to understand how intensity interacts with refrain over *time* and as a function of *repetition*. Though it is not a central focal point of her argument, Paasonen (2011, 185) hints at this ground in her use of terms such as "tempo." In my conception, reverb is refrain that has the additional quality of amplification or diminishment (intensity) through echo or refrain; in this sense, it can be modulated to serve a purpose. Reverb is a quality and a process, a way to understand the direction and intensity of the flows of affect. It has been startling to watch this pattern over the years: a post lingers until it hits a popular Tumblr blog, then takes off, dies down again, and takes off again, almost like a breathing thing. We can view any individual Tumblr page, or any one of its posts, "as if an echo of irreducible excess, of gratuitous amplification, piggy-backed on the reconnection to progression, bringing a tinge of the unexpected, the lateral, the unmotivated, to lines of

action and reaction"; in other words, affect is the irreducible excess, a "system of the inexplicable" (Massumi 1995, 87), always in emergence. Thrift (2004, 62) describes it similarly: "Affect [is] defined as the property of the active outcome of an encounter."

This is in keeping with Massumi's bottom line, and much of contemporary affect theory: that structural and poststructural analyses are all predicated on a static structural referent, and that, therefore, we need to understand relationality through a different vocabulary, one that accounts for movement and potential. I posit that we can think of reverb as a shorthand way to describe this potential as well as its observable traces: certain posts could be said to possess a high degree of reverb, and Tumblrs that have many followers enable or possess a high degree of reverb. Reverb describes a quality as well as a process, attention to movement rather than the fixed—this is another way of understanding Massumi's invocation of the suspense of the event, or as he would term it, the "virtual." It is "the pressing crowd of incipiencies and tendencies, [it] is a realm of potential" (Massumi 1995, 91). Like the movement of iron filings on magnetized paper, reverb is the directed territorialization of this affective charge. It is the encounter, prime. It is the multitude of notes that coalesce around a popular post, the saturation and flow of images in the dashboard feed, the pulsations and traces your own picture leaves behind as it traverses the Tumblr space, the wake of the affective charge.

INTERLUDE

Yesterday I had to wake up very early to take my friend Julie to the airport. I stood in front of my bathroom mirror with tousled bedhead, grey T-shirt, and squinty eyes. Sounds unsexy, but at that moment, at 5 a.m., it seemed cute. I would want to wake up next to me, I thought. I took a picture in the mirror. I posted it to Tumblr. It wasn't even GPOYW (gratuitous picture of yourself Wednesday). When I arrived back home I decided to go back to sleep. A few hours later, I woke up and checked Tumblr. Ursa had liked my photo. MathewMack reblogged it. Springeve liked it. And Claggwagg did too. It's bounced around the Tumblr sphere six times, as far as I can tell. I was surprised. I joined, for a brief blip, the Tumblr cute guy club. Technovalidation.

**

Anthony and I have texted often but only just recently spoke on the phone. A phone call seemed like a graduation of sorts. Another level. We might have never spoken on the phone, in fact, if it weren't for the fact that I wanted to do a proper interview with him for this study.

We talked for a long time. He was really curious to hear about my life post-college, how I worked in media in Los Angeles, how I got there, what steps I thought were important. He is deciding on being a sociology or media studies major. I tell him to do what he wants to do, he'll never have a better chance, but then I cringe because it sounds like the lamest advice ever. I implore him to move to the city after he graduates because, again, I'm projecting—it was only after I graduated that I began to feel more comfortable with my own identity, and I want him to have similar experiences. I am also taken aback because he sounds so California, and living in Texas for years has made me forget how California kids talk: a slightly emphasized and outstretched final syllable of each sentence, like a hold-over inflection from the days of groovy.

After our conversation, he texts me:

"You sound different than I thought lol"

I suddenly feel insecure. Not masculine enough.

"Why, did you think I would sound like some deep bear?"

"Kinda."

"Haha well sorry to disappoint."

And a few days later, he texts me again:

"I found a video of you online."

I know which one he's talking about. I did an interview for the MacArthur Digital Media and Learning summer fellow program in 2013, and it's one of the first things that comes up when you Google me. I hate it because a) I hate the way I talk and b) I had shaved my beard because I wanted to seem professional, but I hate how I looked clean-shaven. And the angle they filmed me at made me seem like I have no chin. I say:

"Oh yeah. I don't like the way I look in that one."

There is a pause in our exchange. Then he texts:

"Facial hair frames your face better."

I chortle.

"Gee, thanks."

I realize that he has been clearly sussing me out as much as I have him. Which is to be expected, I think. I don't expect him to text me much anymore.

Chapter 3: Attunement and Passion

Figure 5: My post of a photo of actor Sean Astin.

Sean Astin, sex symbol? Who would have thought? I posted the image in Figure 5 after coming across this sweaty promo photo for a new low-budget horror movie the actor starred in, *Cabin Fever: Patient Zero* (2014). Astin is known for playing sexually

neutered characters like best hobbit buddy Sam in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003) or the diminutive football player in the film *Rudy* (1993). Yet, I knew that the gay male -networks I am a part of on Tumblr would get a kick out of seeing this new photo of Astin, ragged and bearded. I added the caption, "Since when did Sean Astin turn into a bear/daddy?"

After I posted this picture, it received nine "notes" (likes and/or reblogs). One queer-of-color Tumblr user who is a "mutual" reblogged this photo to his own Tumblr and captioned it with following simple command, ostensibly to Mr. Astin:

"Colonize my b hole."

I laughed out loud. He does this a lot. He'll post or reblog pictures of big white men and add a caption or tag the photo with comments like "unf" and "mayo" and "just fuck me up." He's a mutual, and we sometimes like and reblog things back and forth. The funny thing is, we've never messaged each other and I know very little about him except for his blatant sexuality and his politics. He recently reblogged this (Fig. 6), for example, right after a shirtless picture of newly-hunky actor Zac Efron:

Figure 6: "13 Things that Cannot Happen Under Capitalism."

The specifics I know about him are listed on his Tumblr sidebar. He's a 23-year-old black student at a large university in the South. He identifies as "queer" and a "Beyoncé stan."[16] To an outsider, his combination of posts may seem strange—a reblog touting the perils and shortcomings of capitalism alongside a request for Sean Astin to "colonize my b hole" and a shirtless picture of Zac Efron—but this makes sense to me on a level that is difficult to describe. If I were to try to do so, I would say that his Tumblr basically sums up an entire liturgy of queer of color theory and postcolonial critique, including the conflicting urges to resist overdetermined white standards of beauty and the persistent hierarchies of settler colonialism while simultaneously embracing the *realpolitik* of a burned-in, psychical, inescapable hegemonic desire. But in addition to "reading" Tumblrs in a textual way, I am also interested in understanding the tenor of

[16] "Stan" is Internet slang for "obsessive fan," ostensibly taken from the Eminem song "Stan," about a crazed fan.

relationships like the one we have: it seems like we "get" each other, but we've never talked directly to each other. I know very little about him, yet I know *a lot* about him. We connect across a very tangible political erotics, one that is always in motion and alive. How does this work? How do people share and relate in this way?

This chapter continues the discussion about the flow and transmission of affect in the Tumblr networks I am involved in by thinking about two concepts: "passion" and "attunement." As discussed in Chapter 1, Benkler and Shirky invoke the concept of "intrinsic motivations" in their explanations for participation in participatory cultures, but they do not explore it much. This chapter is inspired by that lacuna: an unpacking of "motivation." This chapter asserts that the Tumblr users I have interacted with in this study actively cultivate their Tumblr presence in a way that allows for "attunement" with others (sympathetic affective mirroring), which allows for safe(r) expressions of "passions" in a zone of collective politics (following Chantal Mouffe's understanding of the term). Furthermore, it suggests that Laura U. Marks's Deleuze/Guattari-inspired understanding of the "haptic" can be used as a way to think about how users quite literally "feel" each other out, and asserts that this term should be included in existing understandings of the properties of networked publics.

THE PROBLEM OF PASSION

The question of emotional investment is a question that matters both to scholars and to industry. When prompted by reports that Facebook might be losing members, especially young ones, social media researcher danah boyd put it like this:

> "I don't think people are quitting Facebook. There's quitting Facebook and there's just not making it the heart and center of your *passion play*. I'm of an era where I grew up and the notion that "You've Got Mail" was exciting. Everything about email — we would race home after school and be like, "What's on email" and this is great. It was like little gifts from the heavens. My relationship to email

> is not like that these days. That doesn't mean that I've left email, but it's not a place of *passion*, even when awesome things like a birth announcement come in. That's awesome, but that doesn't make me love email. That makes me love my friend who just had a baby. The weird thing about Facebook and the dynamics of it becoming a utility — which [teens] really despise — is the fact that it becomes this backdrop. It's not the place of *passion*. It's really valuable when you want to reach everybody, it's really valuable when you don't have somebody's cell to text them, it's really valuable when you need to contact somebody in a more formalistic structure." (Hamburger 2014, n.p., emphasis added)

"Passion play" is a loaded term. Though boyd may have been speaking off-the-cuff in this interview, we should pay close attention to this use of words, for it is unintentionally revealing. A "passion play": a ritualized reenactment of Christ's trial and death and rebirth that operates on the dynamics of the refrain (see Chapter 2). This is shorthand for affective investment—an intensity that (re)circulates (Stewart 2010; Bertelsen & Murphie 2010). In other words, boyd is hinting here at another property, something that is excessive and intense, something that motivates not simply participation, but a *passionate* mode of participation.

Tumblr is a place for passions. One Tumblr user I follow posted a diptych of teen star Ariana Grande—on the left, she is dressed up as a proper and polite schoolgirl, with full length floral print dress, hair in tails, looking every bit the image of a respectable Disney star (Fig. 7). The caption on the left side is "Me on Facebook." The photo on the right is a still of Grande in a barely-there minidress, white thigh-high boots on, hair trailing over her shoulders with her hand in a flirty twirl of a few strands. She is sitting with her legs crossed so that we can see the bare expanse of her thighs, facing the camera. The caption on this side of the image is "Me on Tumblr." This diptych is meant to portray that the performance of self on Tumblr is a self that is more risqué, more in tune with sexuality, less beholden to adult or even peer surveillance. A community of drives laid

bare, the original poster is fully acknowledging the different negotiation of self here in terms of social media context—it is an Erving Goffman thesis waiting to happen.

Figure 7: "Me on Facebook / Me on Tumblr."

Political theorist Chantal Mouffe argues forcefully for attention to the role of affects, or as she also terms them, "passions," in the formation of group identity, especially in an "agonistic" manner. For Mouffe, "agonism" is a constructive, constitutive oppositional dynamics necessary for the foundation of democracy. She defines "passions" as follows: ""[P]assions" refer to the various affective forces which are at the origin of collective forms of identifications" (24).

Mouffe claims that political theorists—especially contemporary liberal political theorists—in their overemphasis on the "individual" and the "rational," fail to account for the *passionate* in their attempt to pave over disagreement on the road to universal consensus. Drawing on an unlikely alliance of theory between Freud and Carl Schmitt,

Mouffe advocates for a democratic outlet for passions in a structure that allows for an agonistic mode, realizing they are at the core of group identity and action.

The myriad participatory cultures that Web technologies have afforded us have been explicated as containing a democratizing potential (Benkler 2007; Shirky 2008; Castells 2011). If we take Mouffe's thesis—that democracy must contain channels for agonistic passions—then an analysis of social media's participatory democratizing move must make some room for the analysis of the role of the passionate.

This is especially if we consider groups of people, such as queer people of color, who are particularly and routinely denied inclusion in *demos*—if we also allow for *demos* as a forum by which, following Mouffe, drives and desires are played out in a public way. If your desires are not publicly allowable, where do you turn? Without accounting for passions in the spaces of participatory culture, we aren't seeing the whole picture, we aren't fully understanding how group formations work online, we aren't understanding the drives at work.

I understand passion, drive, desire to be stars in the same constellation. As generations of feminist and queer theorists have clamored to prove, one's politics is related to one's erotics (Lorde 2007; Anzaldúa 1987; Rubin 1993; Alexander 2006). This is why it is fruitful for us to look at the practices of queer people of color on social media—Tumblr, particularly, with its intertwining of erotic and political, is a generative zone of this sort of affective play.

FOSTERING ATTUNEMENT

Attunement, definitions: The quality of being "in tune" with something (Wordnik). Being or bringing into harmony; A feeling of being "at one" with another being (Dictionary.com). An attuning or bringing into harmony (OED). I am interested in

thinking about relationships across social media (and specifically here, on Tumblr) as affective architectures of attunement between beings. As will be evident through this dissertation, I draw upon sonic metaphors to explain how beings connect across social media. I think that registers of sonic as well as haptic sense making explain the flow of affect in these spaces better than the optic, to be discussed below. These are, in fact, related—the sonic has the ability to be haptic—indeed, it is a haptic sense. Guttural, waves, tensile; these are words that have bandwidth to describe connection and flow.

What makes attunement happen? How do people find attunement; how do they fine-tune attunements? What is the register that people are attuned to that resonates across beings? These are questions that I would like to bring into the discussion regarding social media and passion, participation, and affect.

Attunement has a history in the psychological literature. Psychologist Daniel Stern, an important writer on infant psychology, introduces the idea of "affect attunement" (2000 [1985]) between mother and infant as a kind of pre-language series of transactions of visceral affective mirroring that starts at about nine months of age. One example:

> "A nine-month-old girl becomes very excited about a toy and reaches for it. As she grabs it, she lets out an exuberant "aaaah!" and looks at her mother. Her mother looks back, scrunches up her shoulders, and performs a terrific shimmy with her upper body, like a go-go dancer. The shimmy lasts only about as long as her daughter's "aaaah!" but is equally excited, joyful, and intense" (2000, 140).

Stern elaborates in detail on the properties of behaviors of affective matching, or attunement: Absolute intensity, intensity contour, temporal beat, rhythm, duration, and shape (146). Elsewhere, he distills this further to three important facets of affect attunement: Intensity, time, shape (153). One key to Stern's understanding of attunement is that is emphatically *not* the same as imitation; often these affective transmissions have

little actual imitative quality, such as in the example above, which occurs "across sensory modes" (148). Stern's analysis is based in observational research between mother and child and subsequent interviews. His vocabulary is refreshing; his is an analytic world where jiggles, nods, up-and-down arm motions, and guttural "uuuuh"s and "aaaah"s are valid and robust points of evidence. He sums up affective attunement: "[W]hile affect attunement, like empathy, starts with an emotional resonance, it does something different with it. Attunement takes the experience of emotional resonance and automatically recasts that experience into another form of expression" (145).

This is a good jumping-off point to understand the affective exchange in networked publics like Tumblr. Attunement manifests through a tripartite scheme of intensity, time, and shape. Tumblr modulates all of these in weird ways (see Chapter 2). Attunement, the way I deploy it here, is a shared sensibility, a thing-in-common, that extends across identity category. Attunement is rhizomatic affective matching. I see attunement as a conduit for political potential. Far from thinking of affect as an apolitical lens with which to understand the world, I am invested in the flow of affect between attuned beings as something that can carry immense political heft. Attunement happens within and between what we usually characterize as identity politics. You can be a black cisgendered straight woman and be attuned with a gay Latino man. Attunement is spreadable (Jenkins et al. 2013). Attunement is what Cathy Cohen rallies for in her essay, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" in which she demands a definition of "queer" that accounts for a "shared marginal relationship to dominant power" (2005, 43). The point is not to flatten specificities in how different bodies are hegemonically managed; the point is to highlight the germ of a shared political potential that extends between static conceptions of category.

Below I offer two observations based both on my interactions with people on Tumblr as well as interviews with queer youth of color in Austin. They are hints at potential—painting the edges of attunement, asking how people come together, what infrastructural concerns may facilitate or hinder attunements.

CONCEAL/REVEAL

Ixchel and I are having coffee. She is an 18-year-old Chinese Mexican American from El Paso. She identifies as pansexual and also demisexual (I had to ask her what this meant), and tells me she has questioned her gender all her life. She possesses a vocabulary about race and gender issues that extends beyond mine. When I ask her where she learned all of this, she explains that it was mostly from following trans* bloggers on Tumblr, as well as bloggers who talk about race theory. Her mother has a Ph.D. in Borderland Studies; however, she explains that Tumblr was her real education: "I got the basic terms from my mom. I was trying to figure out more about myself, and there were personal blogs [on Tumblr] by people who were trans*. They knew a lot about gender theory." I ask her if she has learned more on Tumblr or more from her professors at the University of Texas. Without hesitation, she says, "Students have better knowledge than professors."

What makes Tumblr such a locus of activity for queer users of color? What influences queer users' of color participation in this space, and how is there so much learning going on? Why not on a space like Facebook? I have some hints. One very important factor is the ability to be anonymous on Tumblr and/or carefully curate one's audience based on the anticipated and observed potential for a matching sensibility—an attunement.

Queer young people of color have a lot to lose by being public with their lives, wants, desires, and viewpoints. Rachel, a 20-year-old queer Mexican American college student, also from El Paso, heavily negotiates what she reveals online. She has high stakes—her mom recently cut her off completely, financially. Although she hadn't officially come out to her family by the time we first met, she suspected it was because she was living with her girlfriend. To top it off, they recently went through a bad breakup, leaving Rachel—who, despite all this, remains preternaturally bubbly and positive—having to find a place to live and figure out how to support herself. She says she got loans from UT and a job to support herself on her own going forward.

When I asked Rachel how she felt about Tumblr as opposed to Facebook, I asked her to describe each platform in a few words. She said Facebook was "superficial" and "easy"; Tumblr was "an outlet" and "more personal," a place to "express myself." Her use of Facebook is particularly revealing: she uses Facebook to keep up to date on the organizations that she belongs to, such as her school's queer of color group, but she doesn't actually signify that she will ever attend their events, because if she "joins" them, that action will show up on other peoples' news feeds. "On Facebook I have more family," she said to me. "I'm not out on Facebook—there are too many people I know on Facebook." Rachel must do a daily dance in terms of the activity she negotiates on Facebook for fear of revealing her sexuality to people she knows in real life that she would rather not have know. She has already felt life-altering consequences as a result of her sexuality—who knows what else could happen if the wrong person found out?

In contrast, Tumblr is a space of things-in-common with little at stake for Rachel. She described Tumblr as a "space of comfort" where "nobody knows you," where "you're not as exposed [as Facebook]." On Tumblr, she expresses her feelings, her thoughts on her breakup, her current mood—she expresses herself, generally, with far

less of an internal censor than on Facebook. Though she told me that she does indeed know many people on Tumblr from her real life friend circle, it is a highly curated group of friends that she feels comfortable sharing her deeper personal feelings with.

This is the same sentiment echoed by Adam, a 21-year-old Mexican American student from the Houston area who identifies as bisexual. He is not out to his extended family, many of which are "friends" on Facebook. Accordingly, he negotiates what he posts on Facebook, while he feels much more free to express his more inner feelings and erotic politics on Tumblr. He said,

> "I usually go on there when I'm frustrated or angry, or want to vent. It's always about queer things. Just like anger towards white supremacy and Grindr or something. Or like being rejected by somebody or being led on by somebody and them rejecting me. Something silly."

When I asked Adam to describe Tumblr to me, one word he kept using was "secluded":

> "I know that it's a very secluded environment I guess. Like, all of my other social media platforms, like Instagram and Twitter, I have a lot of followers, or a lot of connections on… particularly a lot of family members too."

Interestingly, Adam's connections on Tumblr, much like Rachel's, are comprised of many people he knows in real life. However, this is a carefully curated group of people with whom he knows he shares a radical left politics, those who will support him when he feels vulnerable, those who get his erotics, those who sympathize with his frustrations.

How do we reckon with the implications of "seclusion"? Across the board, the queer youth of color I have talked to view Facebook as a dangerous space. It is discordant with the breadth of expressions they wish to make on social media. Take, for example, Dev, a 19-year-old multiracial black, Native American, and white gay man. He is still unsure of how his mother found out he's gay. He is from a very conservative, very religious town in west Texas. His outing happened his first semester at college. He took a

lot of precautions, and still someone—or something—leaked it. His negotiation of reveal and conceal on Facebook is particularly telling. When he was in high school, he established a Facebook profile over which his mother demanded strict supervision. While he and I were talking, he called it a "fake" profile—not because he was using a fake identity, but because he knew he couldn't express his identity to its fullest, including his sexual orientation and personal politics, for fear of the extreme social surveillance in the space. He heavily self-censored. Then, unbeknownst to his mother, when he went to college, he set up a second Facebook account, in which he used a slightly altered name, and was careful to use this account only for the new friends he made at college. On *this* Facebook account, he was comfortably out, he posted musings about the queer politics of his favorite comic book characters. He also used it whenever his classes demanded he use Facebook, or to RSVP for queer student group events. He was careful to make sure his Facebook worlds didn't overlap, but somehow they did. When he went home for a birthday celebration his first semester of college, his mother confronted him about his sexuality. He admitted to me that they haven't treated him the same since; his mother has cooled to him, and his father simply doesn't know how to deal with his son's gay identity. They are scared, he told me. They don't want him to go to hell.

The dangers of being out-of-tune on social media are very real. These sentiments echo a long standing reality for queer youth in the Internet era. Since the days of text-based chat rooms, queer people have used the Internet to forge connection across geography and the boundaries of the closet (Alexander 2002a, 2002b; Campbell 2004; Egan 2000). In this way, we can use the experiences of queer youth as a reflective lens to look back on the structural politics of different Internet and social media spaces. At the same time that Facebook has increasingly forced users to adhere to a unilateral approach to Internet identity, such as clamping down on users using false names (Cauguiran 2014),

Tumblr is a more malleable, personally-crafted, carefully curated space that gives users agency in how they express their identities and with whom they share their wants, desires, and frustrations. This is a hint at how Tumblr, as opposed to Facebook, may be structured as a space that involves more investment of passion—a better venue for danah boyd's "passion play"—a space that allows for a more careful attunement.

DEALING WITH BAD FEELINGS

Figure 8: "I'm Trying."

Bad feelings are a hallmark of queerness (Edelman 2004; Love 2009; Halperin & Traub 2010; Cvektovich 2012). From gay shame to feeling backward to the "anti-social thesis," queer studies has ruminated at length about the shape and form of bad feelings, as well as the political potential of mobilizing bad feelings. During my time on Tumblr, I

have noticed that a large part of the affective traffic on the site, especially with queer people of color, has to do with negotiating—coping with, declaring, sympathizing with—bad feelings (Fig. 8).

By "bad feelings" I mean a range of things: simple negativity, the sting of racism, internalized homophobia, being fed up, just plain not wanting to deal. Tumblr is a space of venting. I am interested in this investment in bad feelings and its side project of reparation as it plays out on Tumblr. This is an exercise and exchange of passions, in Mouffe's usage. I am less interested in these posts as discursive phenomena, and more interested in the transmission of a felt sense of posture-in-common, one that territorializes around static notions of identity but also deterritorializes beyond them, a force that moves and flows through the network that matches people together; in other words, an attunement.

Figure 9: "Tumblr taught me so much."

This is nothing short of a life and death endeavor for the queer youth of color Tumblr users I have interacted with and interviewed. Accordingly, the affective politics of these spaces is a *vital* politics, aimed at sustenance and survival in the face of an oppressive hegemony of institutional racism and homophobia, daily microaggressions,

and symbolic violence through a long history of negative representations of brown/black/queer bodies (Fig. 9).

Queer people of color on Tumblr actively circulate posts that call attention to racialized homophobia, hegemonic whiteness, white regimes of beauty, or any combination of these. These posts are often tongue-in-cheek, relying on a language and style that decenters default white authorship. This is a key component in cultivating a space of attunement and its corollary properties, such as safety, freedom to express, and ultimately the ability to invest passionately. Figure 10 is a screengrab from the TV show *Reno 911*, with the character Deputy Raineesha Williams (Niecy Nash) looking knowingly at the camera, with the subtitle (which is internet convention for on-camera dialogue) that reads "White people is crazy." This post came across my feed because it was reblogged by Jonathan, a queer Latino user I follow. This image of Deputy Williams, with a smirk, and captioned in African American Vernacular English, does a lot of work. The image and caption can be "read" a number of different ways; read by an unsympathetic observer, this could be seen as a blatantly racist post in and of itself, an example of "reverse racism." But if we understand this post as living within a larger queer of color and people of color ecosystem, its nuances are slightly different: it is part of the cultivation of an attunement that involves a felt politics that implicates hegemonic whiteness as crazy-making, something that all white people, whether knowingly or not, take part in. With hyperbole comes tongue-in-cheek; with tongue-in-cheek comes a sense in common, an attunement.

Figure 10: “White people is crazy.”

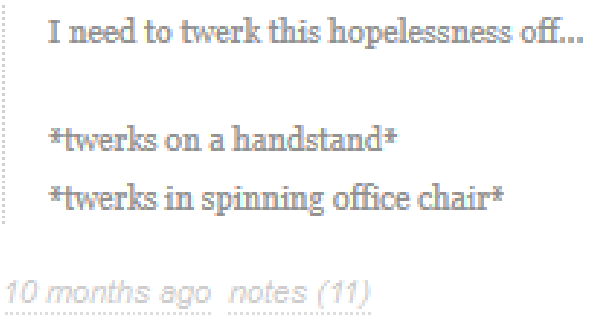

Figure 11: "I need to twerk this hopelessness off…"

Figure 11 is another example of racially-nominated irreverence. The author invokes "twerking," a specific contemporary African American dance style, in trying to erase "hopelessness." Twerking in a handstand, twerking in a spinning office chair; the latter is especially unlikely and thus signals a moment of culturally-specific connection and quotidian empowerment, signaling the arrival of a non-white coded behavior in a predominantly white-coded space (signaled by the spinning office chair).

Figure 12 is a more serious example of the intersections of race and sexuality in queer of color Tumblr spaces. It is a screencap of a dialogue on the gay male geolocative hookup app Grindr—notorious for the blatant racism and white hegemonic beauty standards that users perpetuate. What is implied in this screengrab is a racist comment in the profile of the person with the blue dialog bubbles. The conversation quickly turns antagonistic, with the person with the yellow dialog bubbles retorting, "White supremacy is a disease. Get well soon, bitch." The image is accompanied by a caption that reads: Stop white gays.

Figure 13 was posted by a gay male Latino 20-year-old I have been friends with for a while on Tumblr. The subtext of this image is a critical read of the racial politics of the legalization of marijuana, especially the sentiment that legalization is a maneuver for white-controlled capital to make a large amount of money off the same practice that, under the "war on drugs," sent countless black men to jail (Short 2014). The sign that a Latina woman holds up reads, "Fuck Weed – Legalize My Mom," implicating hegemonic whiteness's skewed priorities.

Figure 14 invokes the same tension expressed by the commenter on my Sean Astin post explained earlier in this chapter. The text reads: "When you hate white boys but the white boy thirst be strong and you disappointed in yourself." The post is an intentionally sardonic, self-deprecating indictment of internalized white regimes of beauty. The picture of Justin Timberlake looking forlorn works on two levels. He is a living symbol of the ideal crossover white boy—he also is embodying with his body language the resigned realization of having to deal with a level of internalized racism that pervades even one's most carnal desires.

Figure 12: "I'm not into self hating racists."

Figure 13: “Fuck weed. Legalize my mom.”

Figure 14: "When you hate white boys but the white boy thirst be strong…"

Sometimes posts resonate with queer of color Tumblr users that do not immediately call attention to the interplay of race and sex, but still carry with them an affinity that is politicized along these lines. Figure 15 is a diptych of screengrabs of Eartha Kitt in performance. I Googled the dialogue subtitled on the images and discovered that she is introducing the song "Santa Baby"—and lamenting the fact that Madonna stole it. Kitt, known for her outspoken anti-racist politics, is something of a recurring presence in queer of color Tumblr. Madonna is, as well—often criticized as being a master appropriator of other cultures (see Figures 16, 17, and 18, all part of the same long post).

I am interested in these examples as evidence of a thing-in-common, a shared sensibility, a shared outlook, living moments of transmission. This is an attunement that is passionately critical of dominant regimes of race and sex.

Figure 15: Eartha Kitt.

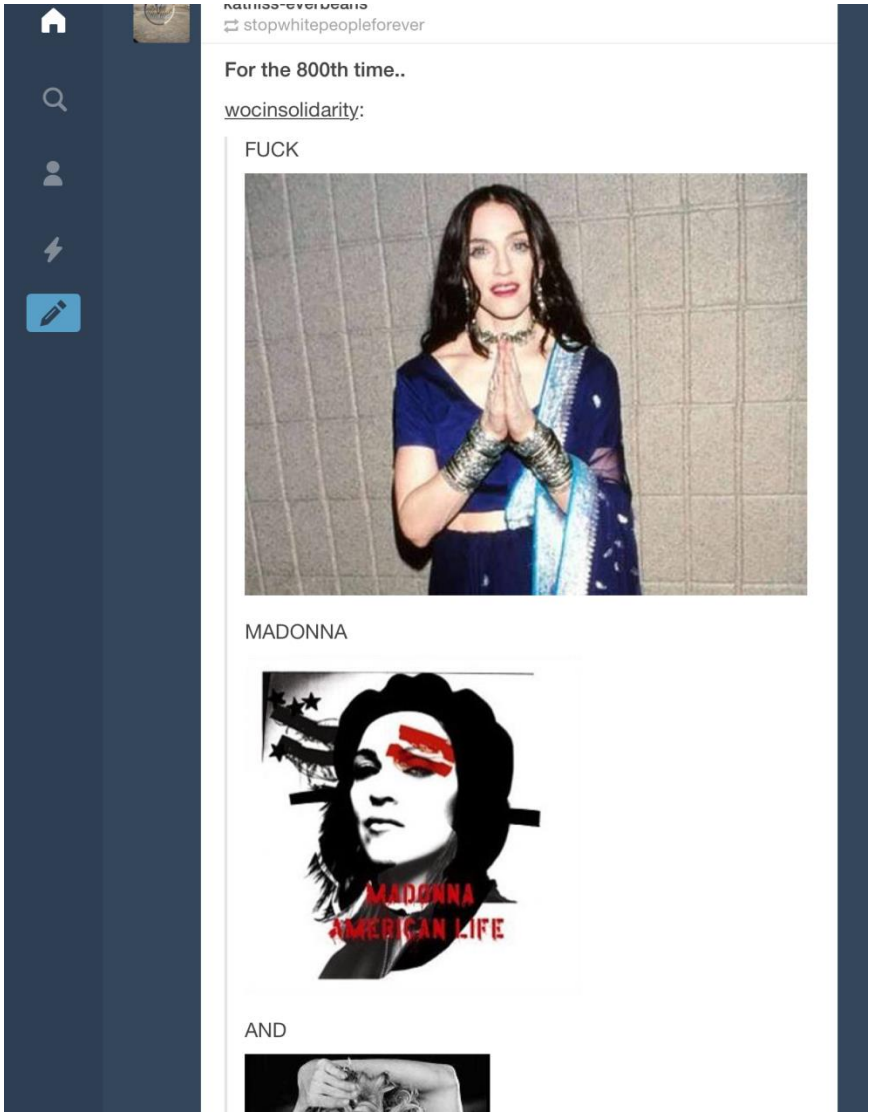

Figure 16: Madonna as appropriator.

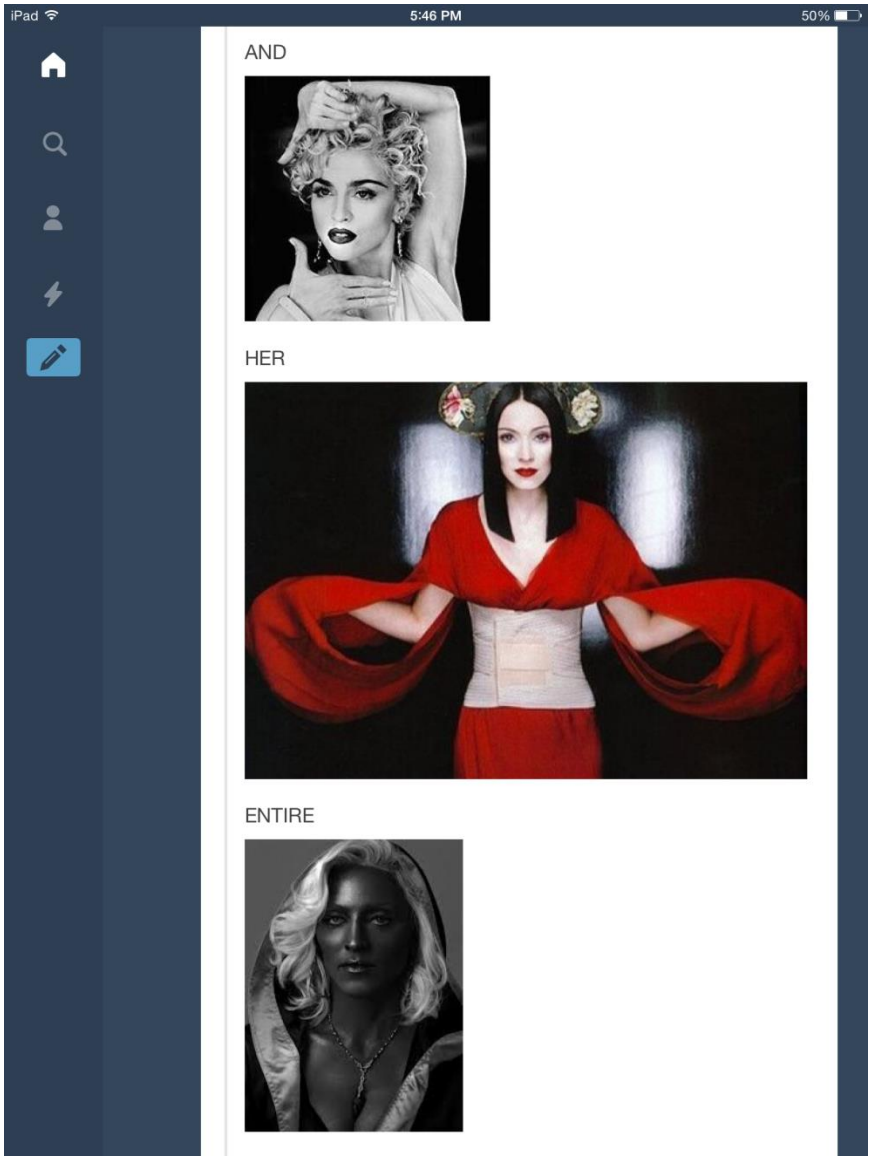

Figure 17: Madonna as appropriator (cont'd).

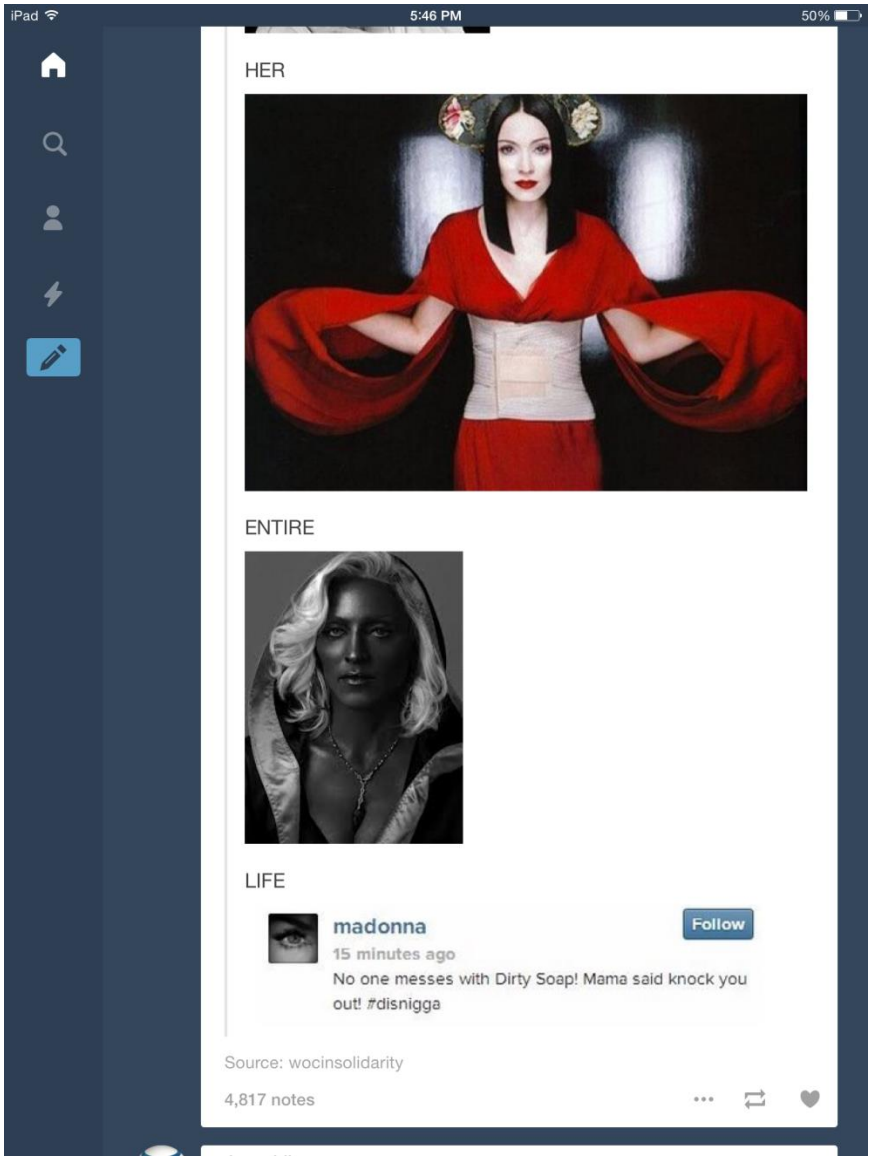

Figure 18: Madonna as appropriator (cont'd).

AFFIRMATION

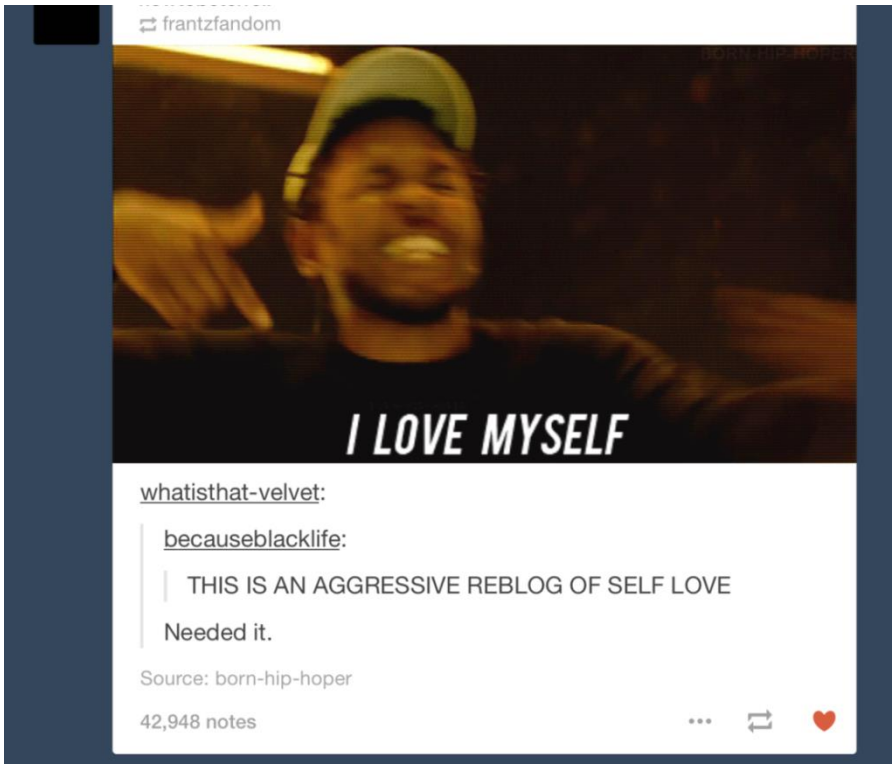

Figure 19: "This is an aggressive reblog of self love."

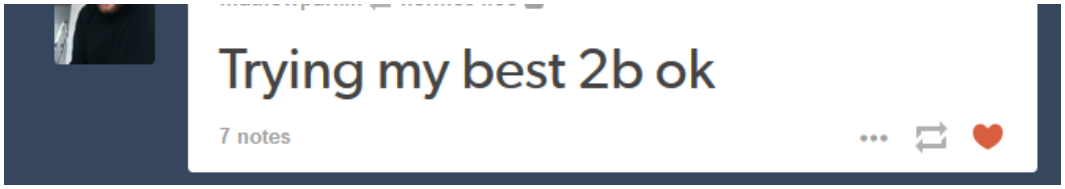

Figure 20: "Trying my best 2b ok."

The other side of the coin from negative feelings is affirmation, the active practice of trying to *feel good*. A large affective component of the queer of color and people of color networks I have participated in on Tumblr over the years traffics in affirmation, positivity, and self-care. I am interested in the consistent efforts that I have observed among queer of color and people of color Tumblr users that promote affirmation because

of the inherent politics tied to a felt sense of affirmation as a pointedly political act for queer people of color. There is radical political potential for queer people of color in simply *feeling good* about oneself. José Muñoz memorably emphasized the dire emotional/political stakes for queer youth of color when he wrote:

> "I always marvel at the ways in which nonwhite children survive a white supremacist U.S. culture that preys on them. I am equally in awe of the ways in which queer children navigate a homophobic public sphere that would rather they did not exist. The survival of children who are both queerly and racially identified is nothing short of staggering." (1999, 37)

I am interested in the circulation of affirmation as an act of survival. By "affirmation" I mean a cluster of affective and emotional registers. In invoking "affirmation," I am fully aware of the term's ability to be deployed as an on-the-nose emotional moment of cognition, one that has a long history of tilting into triteness and self-help. I am aware of critical endeavors that justly indict the "happiness duty" as an example of neoliberal individualist positivity that, by design, draws attention away from larger structural forces that consolidate inequity (Ahmed 2010; Berlant 2011).

While holding this critical approach in one hand, I would also like to train my ear toward a more sympathetic understanding of "affirmation." This is an understanding that acknowledges macro structures of geopolitical power but also—and more pointedly—aims to excavate the survival potential of micro moments of dealing, coping, not even necessarily "feeling good" but perhaps just "Trying my best 2b ok" (Fig. 20) within an oppressive regime. I am invested in understanding this affirmative register of relation on Tumblr as an passionate act, one that carries embodied political heft. In this way, users create attunement.

I invoke Deborah Gould's recent work on the political potential of feel-good, affirmative erotics in the ACT UP movement as a hint at the productive possibilities of

affirmation (2009). Quoting one former ACT UP member, Gould writes: "Ferd Eggan described ACT UP meetings as filled with 'a lot of sexual feeling and validation…'" (192). I think this is an apt description of the erotic politics in queer of color and people of color communities on Tumblr, as well. Greg Bordowitz, also quoted in Gould's account, invokes the radical possibility of joy in the political atmosphere of ACT UP: "'I had heard about revolutionary joy…I just loved it…It was life-saving" (184). As well, Gould also points to camp and humor as vital components of the politics of ACT UP—this is also a facet of Tumblr affective exchange. Figures 21-26 are a small sample of the range of feel-good (or at least feel-OK) practices that I have observed on Tumblr. Recent queer theory has also pointed to the radical potential of "utopia" and positive futurity—especially for queer people of color (Muñoz 2009)—with the hint that negativity and "shame" are the last vestiges of a receding white gay male academic positionality that invokes denial of subjective embodied potential within a rising tide of brown and black bodies (Halberstam 2005b).

I am afraid, in the formal context of the dissertation and with clinical, impersonal captions such as "Figure 12," that some of the wry humor of these posts will be lost—but I present them anyway, and suggest that we understand them in a manner that holds focus on the politics of representation but also tilts toward a felt register, a thing-in-common, an attunement.

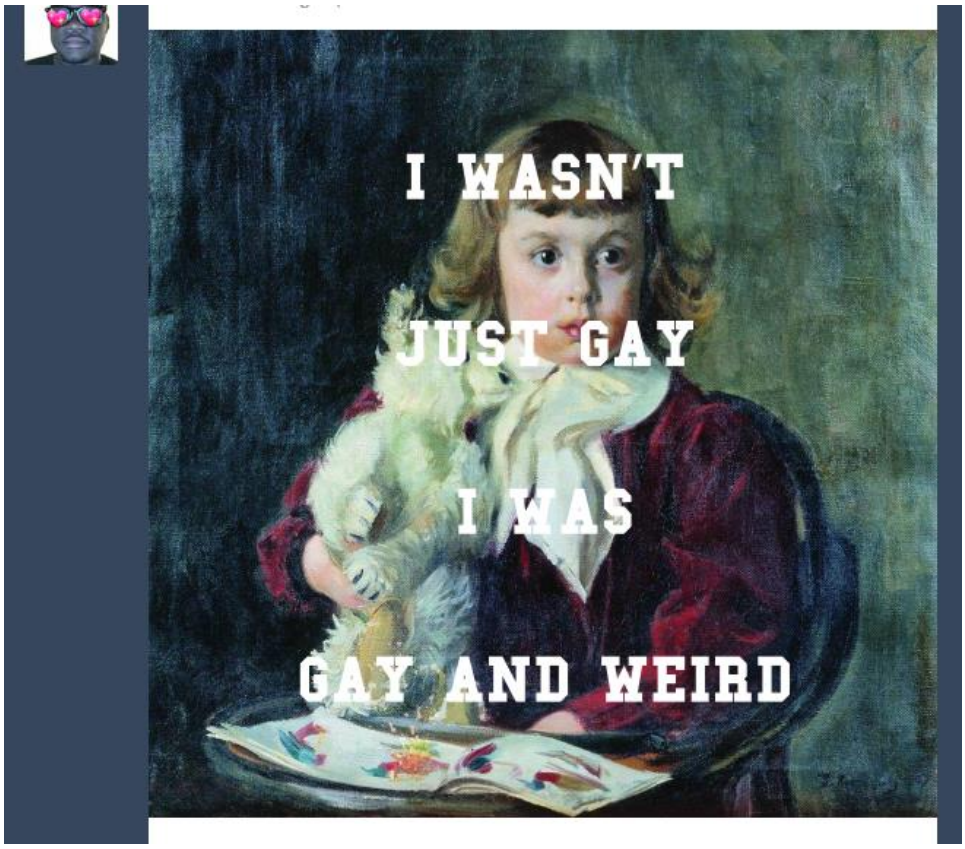

Figure 21: "I was gay and weird."

Figure 22: "Are you proud to serve it?"

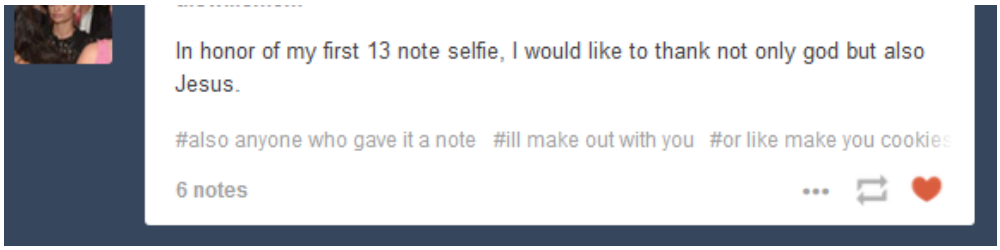

Figure 23: "In honor of my first 13 note selfie…"

Figure 24: "Don't let dumb boys control your emotions."

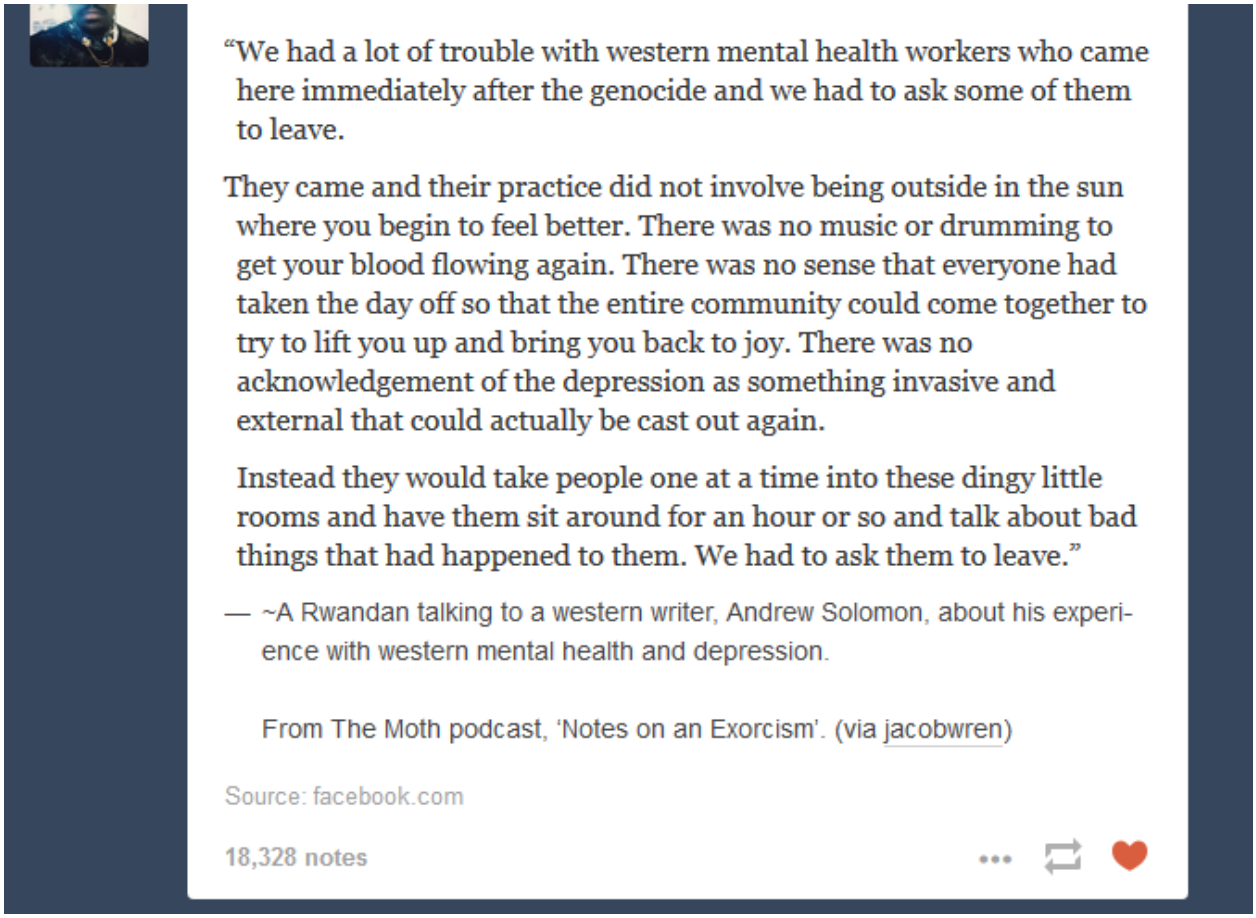

Figure 25: "We had a lot of trouble with western mental health workers…"

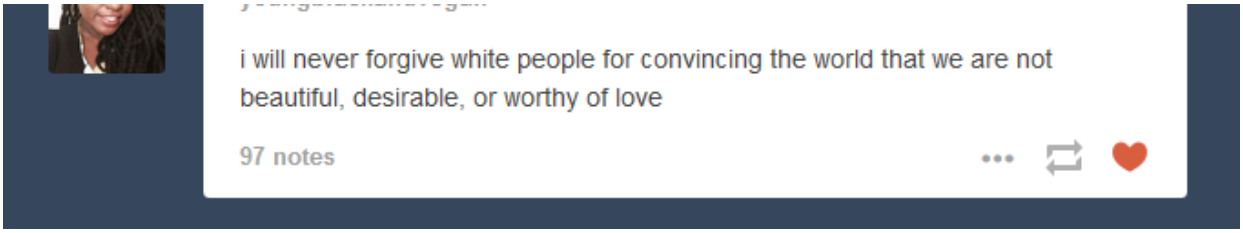

Figure 26: "I will never forgive white people…"

As articulated by Muñoz, above, being a queer youth of color is an experience that is doubly implicated in white supremacist, heteronormative cultures. You get attacked (often, literally) from all sides—from the oppressive regime of gender/sex as well as the oppressive regime of race. Figures 23-26 are quotidian micro-moments of affirmation, which I understand as a radically political act. This is akin to Mouffe's understanding of passions, collective affects that have the potential to mobilize. Though it may be tempting to read these posts as neoliberal moves toward feel-good incorporation and the "happiness duty" (Ahmed 2010), I want to push back on that strain of critique. Affirmation is not the same as happiness. Affirmation understands the skewed tilt of structural forces, understands hierarchical positionality, and decides to go on anyway, because what else are you going to do? Not show up to work? It is a vital, quotidian strategy.

In this way, I would rather invoke Eve Sedgwick's imperative toward psychic reparation for queer people (1997). According to her argument, queer people spend a lot of their youth developing a "paranoid" posture—this is a posture of anticipation of harm or danger, one that recognizes homophobic structures and heteronormative vectors of power from a young age. Sedgwick calls for a learning of how to repair that paranoia. For example, though a criticism as normative, incorporative hegemonic *fait accompli* could be levied against the "wildest fantasy" outlined in Figure 27, I am more interested in

understanding its expression as a *realpolitik* of survival, of relief from the stress of structural disadvantage in terms of both access to capital as well as access to contentment. Unlike a top-down, paranoid critique such as the "happiness duty," an attention to attunement—the fostering of a shared sensibility that allows for passionate expression—allows us to locate, describe, and appreciate the affective energetics involved in this statement without foreclosing its political potential.

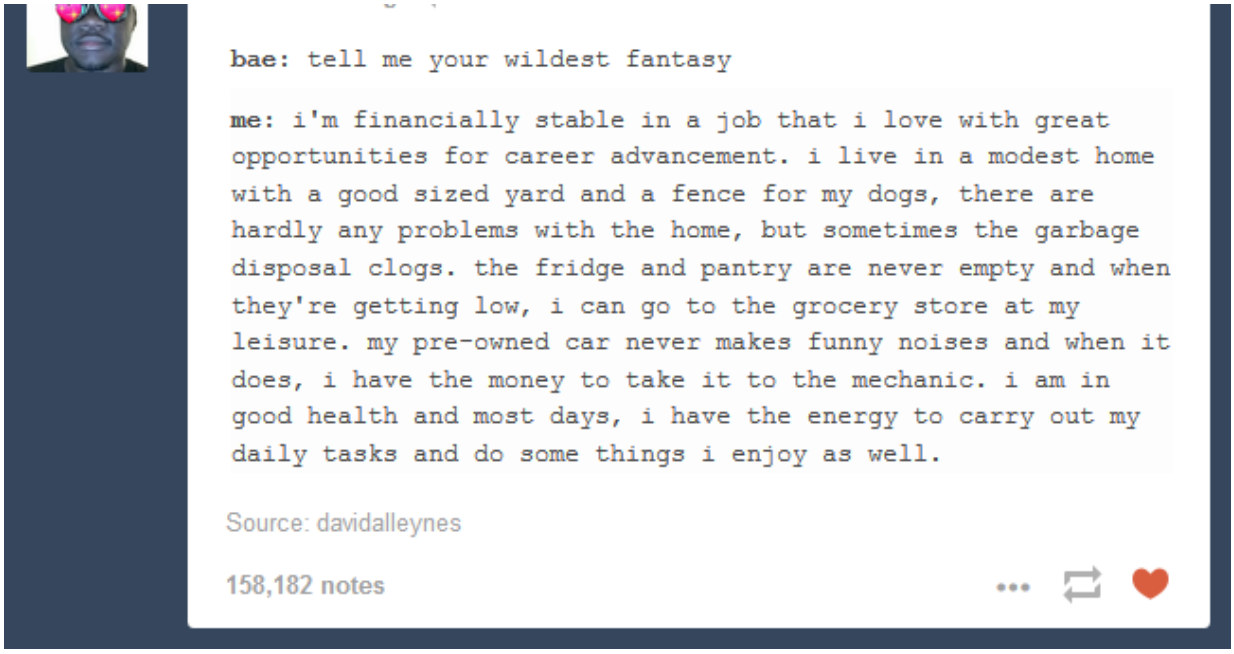

Figure 27: "Tell me your wildest fantasy."

I close this section with another snippet of an interview with Dev. We sat at an outside patio table on a grey, muggy day talking about race, social media, and being gay. His coming to college in Austin coincided with his coming out. Unfortunately, his expectations didn't match his reality. He told me a story—he was infatuated with another gay guy in his extended friend circles. He let it be known to some of his friends. A friend

of his quickly reported back: the guy he was crushing on told him that he confessed that he "isn't into black guys." Dev—who prefers not to use his full first name, Devon, because it reminds him of his hometown—then went on to describe a quickly intuited hierarchy of gay male desirability:

> "With gay men, it seems to be like, white guys. And then, like, Latino guys are conditionally white. Perhaps because they have more European features and they can fit into the beauty standard a little bit more ideally. And then, Asian, or at least South Asian, and then black men at the bottom of like…we're lucky if people of our own race want to date us because this is so ingrained…"

He elaborated: "I've heard things… from pretty much every race of gay guys. About not dating black guys. Like, 'They're fun, but like, for like one time.' So just, like, very frustrating."

Furthermore, even when he does encounter someone who appears to be romantically attracted to him, he now wonders whether or not the person is "fetishizing" his blackness. He seemed visibly frustrated when he told me this.

I asked him about Tumblr and he told me that he was late to the game; he had just set up an account the weekend before we met. A friend at school who was also "social justicey" told him he needed to do it. He told me he quickly started following a lot of "queer, people of color, and queer people of color" Tumblr blogs. He was excited. In fact, he was up until 2 a.m. the night before we met, exploring these new connections on Tumblr. He presaged an attunement when he told me: based on what he's seen on the site so far, "Tumblr is becoming really, really important to me really, really fast."

SENSUOUS PARTICIPATION AND NETWORKED PUBLICS

Film theorist Laura U. Marks has advocated for a materialist approach to film criticism, advancing what she calls "sensuous theory" (2002). In sensuous theory, the disconnect between the haptic and the optic – the felt and the observed – attempts to be

reconciled by close attention to the felt properties of the object being written about. She invokes Walter Benjamin's writings on translation to point to a "third thing," the profound meaning that exists somewhere between two systems of language, or symbols. As a translator of Baudelaire, this is what Benjamin was trying to access in order to convey meaning that is lost between two languages. For Benjamin, this is nothing short of "God"; Marks calls it a "plane of immanence," following Deleuze and Guattari (x).

Sensuous theory is one that is built on the haptic; this is what comes closest to the third thing. "Haptic criticism is mimetic: it presses up to the object and takes its shape," explains Marks (xii). "Haptic criticism cannot achieve the distance from its object required for disinterested, cool-headed assessment, nor does it want to" (xv). It moves through the space of the thing in question by placing primacy on one's "sensory impressions" (xiii), writing not to interpret, but to insinuate.

I hope to insert this language and mode of inquisition into the discourse regarding participatory cultures. The notion of the "haptic" seems particularly appropriate to use to think about the felt energetics that form attunements on Tumblr because it offers a way to think about a guttural mode of expression and connection. "Haptic," in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, is a way of navigating "smooth space"—Marks uses the metaphor of an expanse of snow or sand, or a blind dinner party—by close-range feeling and touching. Smooth space is a feeling space; nomads are good at traversing smooth space. Striated space, its converse, is a place of hierarchy and scaffolding. We are much more used to striated space in our daily lives; Marks calls it the logic of "postindustrial capitalism" (xiii).

Close haptics may be one way to intuit the tendrils of connection on Tumblr, especially with regard to the process of cultivating an attunement. We can marry this Deleuzian vocabulary with the properties of networked publics, referenced in Chapter 2:

> "Persistence: online expressions are automatically recorded and archived.
>
> Replicability: content made out of bits can be duplicated.
>
> Scalability: the potential visibility of content in networked publics is great.
>
> Searchability: content in networked publics can be accessed through search." (boyd 2008, 27)

In the examples in the previous section, I aimed to demonstrate how attunement manifests for queer youth of color. It is worth stating that many of them juxtaposed their experiences on Facebook with their experiences on Tumblr without my prompting them to do so. Here, I would like to reflect back on components of networked publics to attack the question of affective investment from a structural angle.

While neither boyd nor Ito apply the networked public concept to affect or public feelings, there are rich possibilities here. We could describe Tumblr, for example, as a space that has very low searchability (it is almost non-functional, and most of Tumblr isn't indexed); extremely high replicability (the massive churning of reblogging, over and over); high within-network scalability that is at the same time contained to the Tumblr universe and is hard for outsiders to penetrate; and low persistence (sometimes stuff bubbles up from years ago, but most of the time it is a flash-in-the-pan and then it's gone). Could this be a potent recipe for attunement and passionate investment? Can we re-think affinity in online spaces as an embodied set of sensibilities and sensations? This is a hard task because these forces slip and do not stay still. Like trying to hold a wriggling trout in your hands, as soon as you realize the fleeting moment is happening, it's gone, and you're left with the slight slime of the encounter, the tactile memory of living scales on your skin, the sound of the splash as it vanishes back into the water.

Tumblr, with its minimal structure, its anonymity, its high replicability and low persistence and searchability, to borrow terms from "networked publics," feels smooth to

the touch, with itinerant striations. In contrast, Facebook is a highly striated space—you are only bound to people you know, you must follow reciprocally, you are heavily surveilled, your every action broadcast to your contacts, and interaction only takes place in a few proscribed ways (messaging, wall posting, liking). There is not a lot of smooth space to feel around in. This may be what boyd was lamenting when she called Facebook a more "formalistic structure" (Hamburger 2014). Tumblr is a smooth networked public that privileges the haptic; Facebook is a striated network public that privileges the optic. Here, already, we have an evaluative question that may help point us to the elusive "why" of "passion play": Does the social media space in question rely on a close, sudden haptics (such as Tumblr, or even Snapchat) or an overdetermined mapping (Facebook)? Or some mix of them?

In other words: high affective investment results from open form within a simple delimited infrastructure, the need to feel your way through the space, in-group codes of conduct that you need to penetrate to understand, a culture of support, and low traceability IRL. This may be why Facebook offered $3 billion to acquire Snapchat in 2013 (Walker 2013)—it is a smooth space that Facebook is currently lacking.

One word that comes up a lot when my participants try to describe why they reblog or follow someone is "resonance." "It resonated with me," for example, is a common answer to questions regarding why people follow particular Tumblrs. These are the building blocks of attunement, and it is no coincidence that my participants use yet another sonic metaphor. It is an affective urge, one that rings true on a guttural level, one that slides people up against each other in a mode of erotics of spirit, of Benjamin's "third thing." Far from being an obtuse concept, I believe that attunements are very real, palpable, and tangible. This is haptic knowledge; it is sensuous participation, a mode of participating that emphasizes the haptic, where you must navigate via touch in small,

deliberate movements. At some point, you might even feel the fingertips of someone else longing for this touch, too. For queer-of-color youth on Tumblr, to be touched is to feel an attunement that is shaped by anti-statist rage, a proclamation of sexual politics, and the felt understanding that you, for once, are surrounded by kindred spirits.

INTERLUDE

The last time Anthony and I talk, he admits that he's high. He is a sophomore in college. He smokes a lot. I am trying to have a conversation with him but he drifts off into silence or long tangents about pop culture. He loves watching *Real Housewives*. His grades are OK but not the best. He hasn't been posting at all on Tumblr. I ask him about this.

"I'm just not that about it anymore," he says. "It's just kinda…I don't know…I don't really care."

"So, like, are you just not feeling that political anymore? You just don't really care about those kinds of things?" I ask.

"I guess," he says. "I don't know."

He tells me that all he really likes to do is have viewing parties of *Real Housewives* and *The Bachelor* with his girlfriends. They do a spread—nibbly things and wine on a tray. He is really hard to talk to and apologizes that he's calling me while high. I humor him, but after a while I feel like I need to get off the phone. I tell him I need to go.

After the call ends, he sends me a short video over text message. It is impossibly grainy, but it seems like people dancing in an apartment living room. I ask him what it is as I try to decipher it and decode the distorted music among peals of laughter.

"We're all drunk and dancing the Macarena," he says.

"LOL" I reply.

A few days later he texts me and apologizes again for calling me while he was high. I assure him that it wasn't a problem.

A month passes and I text him to see if he wants to do another interview. He never responds.

Chapter 4: Celebrity as Passionate Emergence

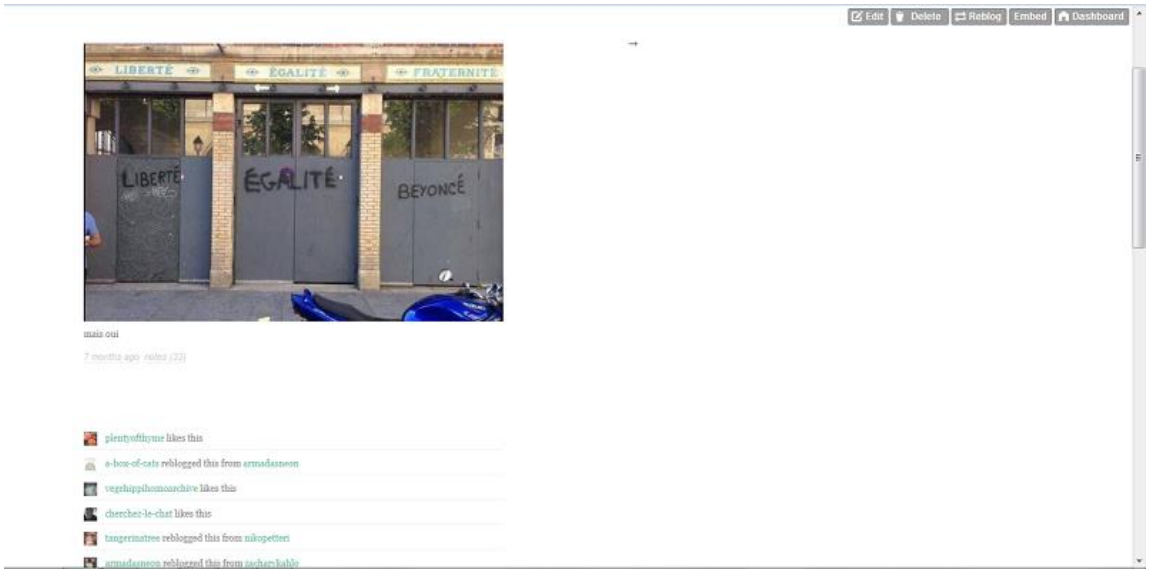

Figure 28: "Liberté, Égalité, Beyoncé."

This chapter is about the multiple passions of celebrity fandom. What do celebrities mean, why are they shuttled around in our daily lives and conversations, what kind of affective heft do they carry? It hints at a politics of collectivity, as well—maybe celebrities, the way they are invoked and, well, *celebrated*, evoke a thing-in-common, something that is a bonding glue.

However, it is not a traditional "case study" of a fan community. I did not go into a Beyoncé or Nicki Minaj fan community, for example, and lurk, identify discourse leaders, ask which songs are peoples' favorites and why, etc. Instead, I form this chapter organically around the ways in which I saw celebrities *emerge* and hold weight of meaning—a meaning that is so invested, it acts like an affective shorthand—and then disappear, rhythmically, in the Tumblr circulations I have been involved in for the last five years. Like talismans, celebrities are objects imbued with an essence—I am

interested here in mapping the identifiable edges of that essence as I saw them play out over Tumblr.

In a sense, what I am interested in with this chapter is documenting, unpacking, and also sympathizing with the *casual* work, the quotidian affective labor, that celebrity does in the Tumblr circulations I have been involved in. A post about #Ferguson followed by a post about *Sailor Moon* followed by a GIF of Nicki Minaj. Here today, gone today. Therefore, I deploy the word "passion" carefully—not only on the register of fanaticism—but also on other levels. What is the play of casual passion? Why are some celebrities the locus for political passions? Can the ways celebrities are deployed on Tumblr be counted not as fanatic, but perhaps as exponents of ordinary affects, those surface-level scorings that manifest in worldly rhythm that moves you (Stewart 2007)—especially when your ordinary affects are inseparable from and intertwined with political freighting because of the sheer fact of the color of your skin?

In the chapter to follow, I present multiple examples of the casual emergence of celebrity and associated passions within Tumblr circulation that I have observed. In particular, I cluster my observations around three celebrities: Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj, and Iggy Azalea. This is not because they are the most circulated celebrities (though they may be—it is hard to tell). This is because they are the celebrities whom I have seen most frequently emerge as politically freighted; they are conduits for a collective passion-in-common, an attunement, that I find compelling because it has the room to accommodate a politics that is people-of-color affirming, critical of white hegemonic regimes of beauty and power, and even radically anti-statist. They are moments of capture of something excessive, passions made crystal.

EMERGENCES

I would like to spend a moment discussing some terms I am employing in this chapter: Emerge(ence) and passion. They are particularly invested terms in my discussion and represent a tack on affective play that I would like to use to steer the thinking in this chapter.

Brian Massumi advocates for an attention to movement instead of an occupation with a static referent as object of analysis. For Massumi, most humanistic criticism is preoccupied with attention to the static, much to its detriment, and therefore—especially in the drive to establish concrete objects and applicable theories misses much. He invokes the ground upon which we stand as an example:

> "The ground is full of movement, as full as the air is with weather, just at different rhythm... Any geologist will tell you that the ground is anything but stable. It is a dynamic unity of continual folding, uplift, and subsidence. Measurement stops the movement in thought, as it empties the air of weather, yielding space understood as a grid of determinate positions." (2002, 10).

Massumi applies this entreaty to social formations as well: "Positionality is an emergent quality of movement" (8). Determinate positions: race, gender, sexuality. Feminism, civil rights, equality. The point is not to throw away these positionalities as hollow or false; the point is to understand them as process, a loop, a cycle: "Gender, race, and sexual orientation also emerge and back-form their reality. Passage precedes construction. But construction does effectively back-form its reality." (8)

In this way, Massumi wishes to train our lens on motion, process, and accordingly, incipience, immanence, emergence, and becoming. Emergence is coming-into-being, the moment of potential before it is crystallized. A famous example is Ronald Reagan: "He was an incipience," according to Massumi (41). He was pure potential devoid of content—everything to everyone. This is evident in the famous example of two groups trying to understand him in a controlled experiment: the ones who could not intuit

meaning through non-verbal cues couldn't understand him; the ones who couldn't take things at their literal value couldn't understand him either. What crystallized Reagan was technologies of capture, stasis, or as Deleuze & Guattari might term it, territorializing:

> "Receiving apparatuses fulfilled the inhibitory, limitative function. They selected one line of movement, one progression of meaning, to actualize and implant locally. That is why Reagan could be so many things to so many people; that is why the majority of the electorate could disagree with him on major issues but still vote for him. Because he was actualized, in their neighborhood, as a movement and meaning of their selection--or at least selected for them with their acquiescence. He was a man for all inhibitions." (41)

I am interested in thinking about representations of celebrity and their shuttling around on Tumblr in this same way. Crystal moments of solidified potential. The capture of a coming-into-being of a vitality that is expressed across Tumblr. A particular kind of vitality, too: one that hits the inhibitory function of the post in a way that expresses a multiply-refracted positionality upon emergence—one that is political, affirms a people of color-centric consciousness, lilts in a queer direction, and simultaneously transcends identity category at the same time that it territorializes, back-forms, according to Massumi.

The second emergence I want to highlight here is the most difficult to capture in a static dissertation chapter. This is the active, vital assemblage as it plays out over Tumblr. It is a living thing that has rhythms. It is the way one experiences Tumblr—as a constant flow of seemingly disparate, unrelated posts. True to its name, Tumblr never ends; it just keeps going. Right now, my Tumblr feed:

A post with the text "Gay conservative/republican" and a response GIF underneath it, RuPaul's Drag Race star Alyssa Edwards, in full makeup and curly blonde wig, mouthing the dialogue, "What the fuck is that? I feel like you just made that up."

A post that is an entreaty to sign up for Amazon Student.

An animated GIF of a male porn star fellating another male porn star and smiling.

An animated GIF of two of the young female characters from American Horror Story: Coven, walking toward the camera side-by-side. They are owning it.

A photo collage of Jeffrey Dahmer and a young victim, 14-year-old Konerak Sinthasomphone. There is a lot of explanatory text—apparently, two officers found the young boy stumbling down the road and "returned" him to Dahmer, who subsequently murdered him. The officers were dismissed but eventually awarded $55,000 in back pay. There are numerous links. Creepy gay history. The most recent poster says: "I went to read further and it didn't get any better."

Tumblr is experienced this way. In chains. In motion. In constant emergence, or as Deleuze and Guattari might understand it, perennial lines of flight. This emergence is not simply random; in fact, it is heavily curated (see chapter 2). Individual Tumblr assemblages whirring across one's dashboard. Celebrities emerge in this context as well, they come in and out, rhythmically, like beats of a heart.

The cluster of participatory culture activity that I have observed on Tumblr regarding the three celebrities I discuss here can function as robust examples of passion-in-emergence, to combine Chantal Mouffe (Chapter 3) and Brian Massumi. They are moments of critique in that they skewer and lampoon with impunity white heteronormative ways of knowing and being, including media representations. These moments of participatory critique channel an agonistic passion, to borrow Mouffe's terms. They are ways of using celebrity to relate to and proclaim a politics that, for those involved in the spaces I have observed on Tumblr, are anti-racist, Black-affirming, anti-statist, empowering, critical of white hegemony, humorous, and traffic in the pleasure of the read.

INTERMEZZO MODES

Queer? Queer of color? People of color? Feminist of color? Black feminist? While I try to retain specificity in my usage of these terms throughout this chapter, it would be irresponsible and inaccurate to think of these identities as discrete and unrelated. In reality, the Tumblr users that I have followed and interviewed traverse categories in their Tumblr practices, and also their own personal identities—a black queer Tumblr user may follow the blog of a black feminist Beyoncé stan, blogs that post gay male erotica, perhaps a funny white queer who "gets it," a group blog about race identity, a blog that posts pictures of cute animals, and more. To say that there is a "queer of color" community on Tumblr isn't telling the whole truth—there are many queers of color, but they each have an individual script, individual experiences that span tastes and affinities, and they possess rhizomatic connections to people who share sympathies but may not actually identify as queer of color as well. As I have explored elsewhere (Cho 2015), Tumblr is a vast exercise in curation that relies on affective modes of resonance and intimacy—these take primacy over simple category in determining one's visceral experience on the site.

Accordingly, while my main locus of investigation in this study is the experiences of queers of color on Tumblr, many points in my archive and several participants do not fall neatly into this category. For example, I conducted an extensive interview with a cis-gendered heterosexual black woman who posted a popular Tumblr post that called out MTV's appropriation of Beyoncé's feminist rhetoric; to exclude her from this study because she isn't queer would deny the fact that queers of color may relate to this post—that it would inform their own queer experience on Tumblr regardless of whether or not the issue at hand is a particularly queer one.

Likewise, the practices that I have observed on Tumblr are not isolatable only to Tumblr. Often, Tumblr users will circulate artifacts from other social media, particularly Twitter. Mobile access is a key factor here in the ease of transmission across social media platforms. What usually happens is that someone will be on Twitter and take a screencap of a tweet from their phone—they will then post this screencap to Tumblr. For example, this is what occurred in the post below:

Figure 29: A Twitter screencap reblogged to Tumblr, as viewed through Tumblr's mobile interface.

Sometimes it gets more complicated. Take this screencap from my mobile Tumblr app (Figure 30):

Figure 30: A multi-layered social media artifact.

I believe that this is a multi-layered, edited artifact that spans multiple social media platforms. Although I'm not sure, it appears that the original content creator was a Twitter user commenting on a picture of a woman in a hijab buying hair dye: "bitch why u looking at hair dye? ain't nobody gonna see that shit". Then what appears to have happened is someone screencapped that tweet and then posted it to Instagram with the

caption “Because she’s gonna look hot for her man and him only not like you hoes who flex for anyone who throws you a bone.” Then someone screencapped that Instagram post and posted it to Tumblr, where it received over 31,000 “likes” and “reblogs.”

Deleuze and Guattari, writing in *A Thousand Plateaus*, invoke the concept of the “rhizome” as a heuristic for understanding flows and connections that works against the static and hierarchical “arborescent” way of apprehending the world. Multiplicity is a unit that is plural at the same time it is singular, like their famous example of the orchid and the wasp. This traffic between social media platforms—indeed, the artifacts themselves—are rhizomal in that they are palimpsestic and multiple. “Rather than narrativize history and culture, the rhizome presents history and culture as a map or wide array of attractions and influences with no specific origin or genesis, for a "rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*" (D&G 25). The planar movement of the rhizome resists chronology and organization, instead favoring a nomadic system of growth and propagation.” (Heckman 2002). In other words, it is less relevant where the originary source of these artifacts lie – the moment of meaning is when it shows up on your dash, or in your Tumblr feed. They hold in them multiple exchanges and interactions – sometimes even edited together at some point by an enthusiastic poster.

“The rhizome is an antigenealogy. It is a short-term memory, or antimemory. The rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, or offshoots.” (21). This to me sounds like a good way to describe the trans-social-media practices that I have observed on Tumblr. They are in instances such as the ones above, in which media is literally captured and funneled into offshoots. While I have tried to unpack the genealogy of the post above, for example, the meaning it is trying to make is made regardless. The genealogy is palimpsestic, and even mildly irrelevant. What is more important is the

intermediate moment that this assemblage locks in, a moment between Tumblr and Twitter, a moment where someone somewhere did some image editing, but that's beside the point. The joke comes to existence through rhizomal, nomad space.

Elsewhere in Deleuze and Guattari, the "*intermezzo*" is invoked as a characteristic of nomad spatiality (380). They address this yet again several pages later, specifically: "Smooth or nomad space lies between two striated spaces: that of the forest, with its gravitational verticals, and that of agriculture, with its grids and generalized parallels[…]" (384). A nomadic, *intermezzo* mode nurtures "close-range" vision or feeling; it is an attunement to "haptic space" as opposed to long-range, optical space (492-3).

While identities are bound by the terms in play (movement) the actual force of connection, or affect, or what D&G sometimes refer to as "speed," exists between and among the individuals that may span different identity categories. A post on Beyoncé does not only resonate with Beyoncé fans, does not only resonate with queer folks, Black folks, queer folks of color, or any other arborescent identitarian permutation. It resonates because of a close sense-in-common, a performative arching of the eyebrow, the play of the corner of a grin.

I choose both of these examples because they are emblematic of the kind of critique that I have observed in my five years on Tumblr. This is a participatory critique, one that is invested in small jabs against hegemonic ways of being-in-the-world, one that affirms a counter-hegemonic, people-of-color-centric politics. Clearly, the original poster of the Tweet regarding the woman in the hijab pondering hair dye did not view her in a totally human way, realizing that, in her private moments, she doesn't wear a hijab at all times and shows her hair color to those she deems appropriate. In its quotidian and small moments, this practice of politics is life-sustaining in the face of daily small moments of

outsiderness and oppression. I also choose these two examples because they exemplify the character of much of this kind of critique—a kind of satire mixed with a general outrage/ous sentiment that is anti-racist and anti-statist at the same time that it is humorous and biting.

NICKI MINAJ: A BODY POLITIC

On September 24, 2014, the popular Comedy Central sketch show *Key & Peele* launched its fourth season with an episode that featured a sketch with a character that lampooned pop/rap star Nicki Minaj, or as they termed her, "Mother Majesty." In this sketch, a towering Keegan-Michael Key, in a pink/multicolored wig and candy-colored dress, is being interviewed by Jordan Peele as "Scratch," a character that is a strong satire of the famous MTV VJ, Sway. Mother Majesty advocates empowerment for young women in her dialogue, but it is clear that the young, ardent fans who are surrounding her are taking her risqué antics and lyrics seriously. When the "audience" of young girls is interviewed, they quickly reveal that they aren't quite as empowered as thought they would be; one claims she followed Mother's Majesty's instructions to "Bend over and celebrate that badonkadonk" and now she has "herpes in the butt." Mother Majesty and Scratch are visibly uncomfortable, and it is revealed at the end of the sketch that Mother Majesty is actually a man, bent on oversexualizing young women so that they can fall prey to men everywhere.

This is, without a doubt, a pessimistic read of Nicki Minaj. What I found surprising upon watching this sketch for the first time is that it is totally the opposite of how Minaj is circulated in people of color and queer of color Tumblr spaces, where she is constantly evoked as an icon of body-positive celebration. In my view, what Key & Peele miss in their sketch is that fan resonance emerges on levels other than mimicry; mimicry

or imitation is a surface-level "read" of a persona like Nicki Minaj, perhaps even the least meaningful register in the circulations I have encountered. Like the old mass communications "hypodermic needle" theory of media effects, this interpretation of Minaj's meaning and influence is predicated on a linear, one-to-one understanding of how people respond to celebrities. Combing Dyer (1998) with Deleuze and Guattari (1987) by way of explanation, Nicki Minaj, as a celebrity or "star text," is always in the process of becoming.

If we are beholden to a hierarchical, top-down, unidirectional classically "feminist" reading of Nicki Minaj's body politics, we would inevitably understand her as a "hypersexualized" object of the male gaze who is profiting from the fame industry and paying lip service to her fans. However, what I am interested in describing here is how Nicki Minaj emerges in Tumblr circulation on a register that is totally different. What I have observed in Tumblr circulations between and among people of color, queer youth, and queer youth of color, is quite to the contrary: the invocation of Nicki Minaj as a resonant icon of self-respect, self-care, self-worth, and self-improvement (Fig. 31). If you freeze Nicki Minaj within traditional "feminist" ideology, she becomes a dissected, positioned body, pinned at the wings like a dead butterfly, robbed of agentic potential, of emergence. However, if we endeavor to understand the emergent resonances that Minaj has in people of color and queer of color circulations (in this case, on Tumblr), we are immediately confronted with something much more complex: a celebratory ambivalence, a guttural understanding of embattled sexual politics, a sense-meaning that is radical in its potential for anti-statist sentiment.

Figure 31: "Who hurt u?"

In another example, Figure 32 is a post that circulated on Tumblr following an episode of *American Idol* that, when I saw it, had accumulated 92,000 "notes."

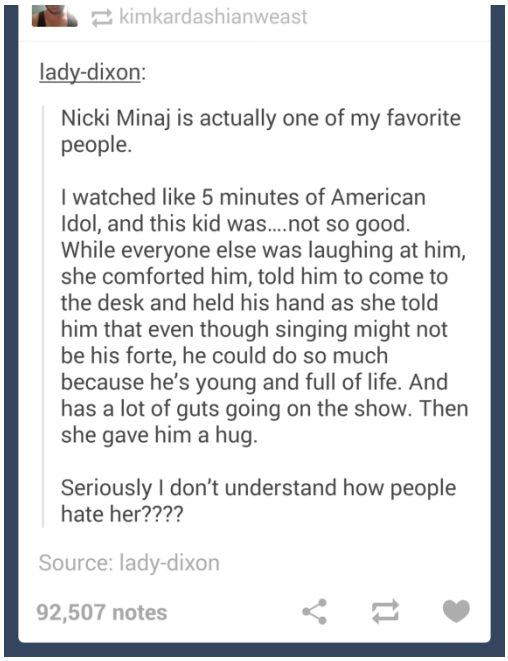

Figure 32: "Nicki Minaj is actually one of my favorite people."

Minaj's resonance on Tumblr, especially in communities of color and queer-of-color circulations, is one that affirms and publicizes the star's small moments of feel-

good intervention, especially in the lives of her young fans. The Tumblr users I have observed seem aware of Minaj's negotiation of her risqué media presence with this effort to engage in a rhetoric of self-sufficiency; for them, these are not contradictory political veins (which echoes the Black-positive feminist situation of Beyoncé's body display). Minaj's uplift rhetoric is one that broaches no complaint with sexual posturing that a previous era of respectability politics would have demonized. In fact, it appears that Minaj is playing both sides of the discursive coin: claiming a female-centric, sexual, Black-celebratory body politics while at the same time earning her stripes as a respectable celebrity by virtue of her fan outreach, especially to young people, and particularly young women. In a widely-circulated example, Minaj is shown to be visibly taken aback when one of her fans shows her her Master's degree, following Minaj's numerous exhortations to her fans to finish their education (Figs. 33, 34).

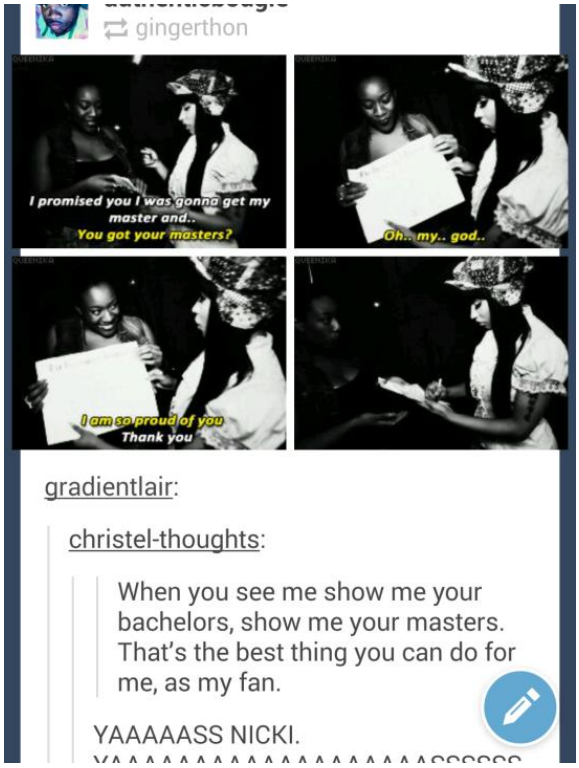

Figure 33: "Show me your bachelors, show me your masters."

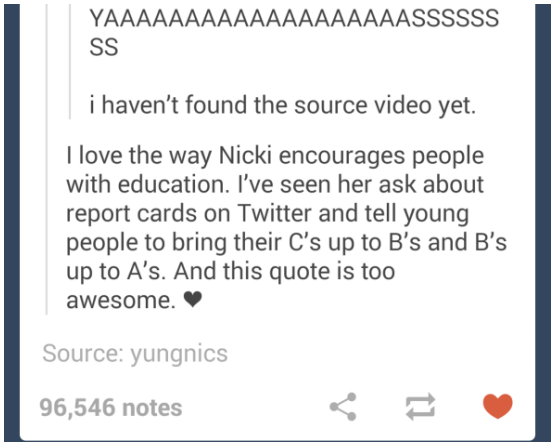

Figure 34: "Show me your bachelors, show me your masters" (cont'd).

The original poster posted this four-piece gif set with the text, a quote from Minaj, saying "When you see me show me your bachelors, show me your masters. That's the best thing you can do for me, as my fan."[17] Subsequent posters have added their support for this, with one commenter claiming that they have seen Minaj tell young people on Twitter to improve their grades.

In another example (Figs. 35, 36), the original Tumblr poster uploaded screengrabs of from Minaj's Instagram account. The first, on the left, is Minaj's own screencap of NBA player John Wall's Instagram account, in which he is in a photo posing with Damiyah (Miyah) Telemaque-Nelson, a five-year-old girl with Burkitt's Lymphoma, whose wish was to get one of Minaj's trademark pink wigs and to meet the star (Sprowl 2014; Steinberg 2014; Highkin 2014). Wall, through social media, was able to broker a meeting with Minaj, and Minaj posted various photos and videos to Instagram with the young girl wearing her pink wig. One segment of the text on the Tumblr post reads, "#nicki is so protective of young girls#this needs to be underlined more#also she gives them edited versions of her albums#magical girls protect other girls#bless nicki". This post, when I saw it, had almost 200,000 "notes." Sadly, Telemaque-Nelson passed away later that year at age six.

[17] I Googled this quote and it led me to a Facebook page titled "Nicki Minaj News," which posted a lengthy version of the quote on August 17, 2012. One of the commenters on this post mentioned that Minaj says this in a live concert performance in New York, though I was unable to trace the original recording.

Figure 35: Nicki Minaj and Myah.

Figure 36: Nicki Minaj and Myah (cont'd).

Feminist women of color have long advocated for a politics that embraces not only multiplicities that destabilize "womanhood," but also a reparative mode of affirmative and holistic self-care and self-love that indicts the daily micro- and macro-aggressions that women of color face (Lorde 2007; Anzaldúa 2007; Alexander 2006; Moraga & Anzaldúa 1984). While she may or may not claim the title of "feminist" herself, Minaj's emphasis on self-sufficiency and empowerment are interpreted by the

people of color and queer of color communities that I have observed on Tumblr as radical acts of care.

**

Rachel's eyes light up when I ask her about Nicki Minaj. We are sitting in two armchairs inside a café and there is a lot of commotion going on around us; I'm afraid that my audio recorder won't pick her up, so I am scribbling copious notes. I am curious to know how Rachel, a 21-year-old queer woman of color, resonates with Minaj—especially given the highly negative reads of her that I have seen in much popular media. She wastes no time:

> "I love Nicki Minaj. I just think she's really, like raw, she doesn't… She doesn't censor herself, her sexuality. I think, for a woman of color, it's really cool. The way that society is, towards black women, society is very racist and sexist towards them, someone who encompasses all those identities and is very successful, I think it's like really empowering."

I ask her what kind of stuff she's seen on Tumblr regarding Minaj. She thinks for a bit. Then she remembers:

> "I've seen on Tumblr… do you know that song, "Loyal," by Chris Brown? Like, it's saying, like women aren't loyal or whatever, and he refers to them as "ho's." There was one post on Tumblr, it was like little GIFs, and Nicki Minaj basically calls him out on it, like, "Oh, well like, what is it that *you're* doing wrong? There must be something that you're doing wrong for these girls to not be loyal to you." There's another one where she's saying that women need to speak out more, or speak up. And I liked that one a lot."

Adam also immediately smiles when I ask him about Minaj. We are sitting at an outside table at a modern coffeehouse in South Austin. He has just braved Austin traffic to make our meeting.

> "I love Nicki. Probably more so than Beyoncé, actually. I love her fucking attitude." *[Laughs]*
>
> *[Laughs] "*What does that mean?"

> "She's like, I'm here, I've done things to my body, I'm curvy, I'm sexual, and I don't care what you think. And I've had an abortion. And I'm going to tell you about it."
>
> "Oh, I didn't know that."
>
> "Yeah, she did an interview, I can't remember on which platform, and she shared with people that she had an abortion. And how important it was for her to share that with people. Like, that it's ok. And that being pro-choice is important. She's showing other black women, and women of color, to love your body. Like, who cares?"

He explains this further:

> "I love the song she has when Drake comes in at the end, in "Anaconda." I don't remember the line but it's something along the lines of, like, "So fat that you're making the room so uncomfortable." And I love that. Because it's not about making people feel comfortable. It's about making people uncomfortable. Because that's when you learn the best—when you're called out, when you are made uncomfortable. At least, that's the times when I've learned the best. All the times I was called out, all the times people have checked me. They were uncomfortable or awkward, but I carry those moments with me forever."

These interview participants read Minaj's body politics totally differently than the *Key & Peele* sketch I describe earlier in this section. Rather than view her as a hypersexualized agent of white patriarchal capitalism through a classic political economics, I am more interested in understanding how *Minaj emerges as a focal point for an incipient politics that is motivated by an affective excess:* the *passion* to celebrate one's body, especially when it makes other people feel uncomfortable. This is a queer position in the most expansive sense of the word; patriarchal regimes routinely allow only for cisgendered heteronormative males the passion of body inhabitance without fear, without double consciousness, without shame. In this sense, the shuttling and traffic of Nicki Minaj holds true with Brett Farmer's unpacking of the dynamics of "diva worship":

> "It is in essence an exercise in queer empowerment, a restorative amendment in which the aberrant excesses and life-affirming energies of divadom are harnessed to variable projects of queer authorization and becoming…" (2005, 173)

I can think of no project of queer authorization and becoming more visceral than the simple fact of inhabiting and relishing one's body.

TRACING AN OUTRAGEOUS ACT OF APPROPRIATION

Mariah Carey shows up sometimes in my Tumblr feed. She's always fabulous. Recently, right after a post about transgender teenager Leelah Alcorn, whose tragic suicide made national headlines—especially after her mother's attempt to cover it up (Barrow, Namako & Vingiano 2014) and her subsequent queued posting of her suicide note on Tumblr—I scrolled to an animated GIF of Mariah Carey twirling across a background of fireworks, blowing kisses and looking fabulous, with the caption "making an appearance at the family holiday party." Odd chainings like these two posts emerge all the time on Tumblr, moments of bizarre queer sense making in strange time. This unintentional pairing seems to ask: How do you locate and deal with queerness within traditional family structures? You either go Mariah or die; these are high stakes.

Figure 37: "Leelah Alcorn has won."

Figure 38: "making an appearance at the family holiday party."

Celebrities pop up like this all the time on Tumblr, unexpected moments that channel an overfill of sentiment. The celebrity used as affective circuit. In this section, I excavate a history of a particular chain of events on Tumblr that had to do with Beyoncé, Emma Watson, and a larger debate over who claims the ownership of the definition of "feminism." I invoke this example and explore it at length wishing not to enter into debates over Beyoncé's feminist credentials, whether or not she is a real "feminist" (whatever that may mean), but rather to explore how Beyoncé, like many other celebrities, is *shuttled across the terrain of Tumblr as an emergent moment of collective passion*—one, in this case, that transits identity categories and wraps queer of color, women of color, and other users into a shared passionate political frustration over long histories of white cultural appropriation and calls into question who owns something so fundamental as a *definition*.

We need to start with an image:

Figure 39: Emma Watson.

This image is a screengrab of a tweet from MTV. Included in the tweet is an image of Emma Watson at a podium superimposed on a background that reads "FEMINIST" that is key art for an article in MTV's 2014 year-end round-up, "How Emma Watson Led the Feminist Charge for Young Hollywood" (Rosenfield 2014). This Twitter screengrab was posted to Tumblr and started a debate—to be outlined below—that fueled this post toward 30,000 notes. I believe that this image and the resulting discourse around it are touchstones that allow us to uncover the kind of agonistic, passionate affects that drive participation on Tumblr.

There are a couple of things we need to know in order to understand this image and why it is controversial. On September 20, 2014, *Harry Potter* actress Emma Watson

delivered what some deemed a "game-changing" (Robinson 2014) speech at the United Nations, formally declaring herself a "feminist," deploring the negative connotations of the term, and asserting that men have a role to play in fighting for equality for women. Others, including some prominent women of color in the media, saw this speech as milquetoast at best. Writing on *Black Girl Dangerous*, Mia McKenzie railed against Watson's speech's naïve understanding of feminism and, interestingly, used Beyoncé as a counterpoint.

> "So, can we please stop trying to make Emma Watson the new feminist icon of the universe? She's not there yet. She's still learning, I think, just like Beyoncé, who, by the way, rarely even gets the benefit of the doubt from white feminists, let alone hailed as feminist queen of all things, when her feminist expressions are less than perfect. (Imagine if Beyoncé got up at the UN and gave a speech that *centered men* in the fight for gender equality. The white mainstream feminist skies would rain down hellfire upon us all. Well, *some of us*, anyway.)" (McKenzie 2014)

The question "Is Beyoncé feminist?" has received much popular and scholarly attention (Sieczkowski 2014; Ostroff 2014). To summarize the debate: While it may be easy to write off Beyoncé's "feminism" as a post-feminist approximation, an ethic of empowerment centered around an unattainable body image and astronomic wealth, this would be a surface-level read, and, according to some critics, an old-fashioned, white feminist read. In fact, this is emblematic of the exclusionary politics of second-wave feminism, which has long been criticized as a project that was defined by white, middle-to-upper-middle class cis-gendered women at the exclusion of all others, insensitive to or even deriding of the body politics practiced by women of color. Others, including many of the queer people of color I have interacted with on Tumblr, regard Beyoncé as empowered for her embodied ownership of her sexuality, her proactive business endeavors that showcase both her own business savvy as well as her creating

opportunities for other women, such as with the Beyoncé Cosmetology Center in Brooklyn's Phoenix House. In short, many queer people of color view Beyoncé as an icon of unapologetic woman-of-color sexuality—which becomes even more meaningful for a population whose body politics, are doubly disenfranchised along the axes of both sexuality and race. Regardless of one's own personal definition of "feminism," the question of Beyoncé's *bona fides* highlights a well-trodden groove in feminist theory, one that supposes empowerment for women but at the same time policies which types of activities and bodies should are included under the aegis of validity and respectability.

However, the question of "Is Beyoncé feminist?" is not what I wish to foreground in this discussion; I do not wish to "read" Beyoncé as a text. What I wish to do is articulate how people of color and queer of color Tumblr users *use* Beyoncé as a locus for agonistic energies, and unpack how this example is less about Beyoncé's feminist credentials and more about what many people of color and queer of color users considered cultural theft, and a long history of giving black women the short shrift. I am concerned less about Beyoncé feminism and more about Beyoncé *agonism*—that is, the mobilization of Beyoncé by people of color and queer of color Tumblr users as a magnet for affective investments that carry a counter-hegemonic sensibility that is highly critical of hegemonic whiteness.

Beyoncé, seemingly aware of the controversy around her "feminist" identity, included in her song "Flawless" (2013) a portion of a TED talk from Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in which Adichie says a feminist is "[a] person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes." Additionally, while performing an extended medley of her songs at the MTV Video Music Awards in 2014, the word "FEMINIST" appeared in large caps pink font onstage behind her (the same font that decorated the cover of her album, "BEYONCÉ" (2013)).

Many, including scholar bell hooks and singer Annie Lennox, disagreed. Lennox called Beyoncé's feminism "feminist lite," and "tokenistic" and "a cheap shot" (Witherspoon 2014). Hooks even went so far as to call Beyoncé a "terrorist" for her complicity in white patriarchal capitalism vis-à-vis her heavy emphasis on sexuality and bodily display. However, MSNBC's Melissa Harris-Perry called the track "Flawless" Beyoncé's "feminist manifesto" (Harris-Perry 2013). Regardless of one's own personal definition of "feminism," Beyoncé's body politics and her manner of feminism highlights a well-trodden groove in feminist theory, one that supposes empowerment for women but at the same time policies which types of activities and bodies should are included under the aegis of validity and respectability.

It is at this point that the Tumblr post included here plays a part in the conversation. Posted by Tumblr user Candicereadsculture, it is a combination of a screencap of an MTV interview with Emma Watson as well as a caption written by Beystan. What is notable, and what sparked the ire of Beystan, is that the backdrop behind Watson, seemingly imposed there by the MTV producers, was the "FEMINIST" lettering that Beyoncé generated in her tour visuals.

The irony of this act of appropriation—using Beyoncé's own tour/VMA visual as the background for Emma Watson delivering her speech at the U.N.—was not lost upon Tumblr user HeathLegered:

> "This is bullshit. Most young people most definitely did not see her UN speech. Want to know what they did see? Beyoncé's VMA performance. Stop crediting Emma Watson with leading the feminist charge when she hasn't done shit besides give a speech that served to stroke male ego."

Daisynewday reblogged this, added a .gif of Drake saying "Hold up. Hold my phone" With his hand up, palm facing the camera and text that reads:

> "They had the audacity the mock the Queen by putting a Feminist sign behind this chick. They knew exactly what they were doing especially since that earth-shattering performance was at the VMAs!!!!! This is low, even for MTV!!!! I'd even go as far as to say that they were throwing shade!!!! Where is the Hive???? MTV needs to be taught a lesson!!!!"

Daisynewday also tagged Candicereadsculture in her response. Candicereadsculture tagged MTV and MTVNews and added:

> "y'all have some real fucking nerve to even say some bullshit like this. For y'all to have the AUDACITY to use Beyoncé's "FLAWLESS" backdrop behind Emma Watson and credit her for being feminism to pop culture/mainstream forefront is straight up bullshit. It's just like y'all and y'all's sister media organizations to credit white people with things black people have done. From the MOMENT BEYONCÉ was released, it's [black] feminist nuances where deconstructed to the bones and Bey's feminism was questioned and she was made to prove herself (thankfully she didn't fall into the trap), despite the fact that Bey has been singing, speaking and writing about feminism for YEARS. Yet, Emma makes one feminist light speech (after she, like others, questioned Bey's feminism and agency over her image and sexuality in said image) and she's credited with leading the feminist charge? Sit all the way the fuck down, mtv, and take anyone who would have the lack of good sense to say the same with you."

Despite the pro-Beyoncé rhetoric at hand, Tumblr user fab-glam-earthling saw this response and decided to critique the critique, saying that Candicereadsculture "made it about race" and that Beyoncé's brand of feminism was not legitimate. Candicereadsculture wrote a lengthy response that called out fab-glam-earthling's casual racism as well as her lack of knowledge about Beyoncé. This circulated throughout the Tumblr communities I am a part of, garnering over 30,000 notes.

I contacted Candicereadsculture and she agreed to an interview. Her name is Candice, and she is a 30-year-old black cis-gendered heterosexual Ivy League-educated attorney. When I asked her to explain why she decided to comment on the Tumblr post criticizing the image of Emma Watson with Beyoncé's "Flawless" "FEMINIST" background on the screen behind her, she explained:

> "A lot of things that people of color do --- women of color do – don't get the same amount of praise or discourse, or if people do pay attention to it, it's not praise, it's critiquing. Like, well, who are you to be saying stuff like this, what are your credentials? So add all of that to MTV praising Emma Watson – which, whatever, if it was just like Emma Watson by herself, I probably wouldn't have said anything. I wasn't going to complain like, "Beyoncé did this first" if it was just her by herself. But what pissed me off was that they used Beyoncé's "Flawless" façade with the "FEMINIST" in the background. … MTV blatantly just took that and put it behind Emma and made her seem like this feminist thing – that's the big thing that really pissed me off. And it just goes to this kind of discrediting of people of color and women of color that is constantly done in the media. So that's why I ranted it that day because I was pissed off. And there's so much stuff going on right now with people of color with Ferguson, Eric Garner, Akai Gurley, which that was the guy who got shot for walking down the stairs. I grew up in that area. The movie theater that I used to go to growing up is right across the street from that housing project. You know, it's just so much going on. And in the grand scheme of things of course, that little thing that MTV did is not as important as what's going on in the world."

Candice connected this to larger themes regarding the historical management of black women's bodies:

> "But it's just coming from a place of anger that, you know, we can't have anything. We can't have life. We can't even have your own little tour background that you did that had everybody talking… And for you to take that and attribute it to this little white girl, on top of the fact that all these black women are having their sexuality policed as they have been doing for hundreds and hundreds of years when you have little white pop girls doing the same thing and getting automatic passes, that's where my anger comes from. That's why I wrote the post that I did."

This angered her for precisely the reasons outlined above – that Beyoncé, despite claiming and activating feminism in ways that are overt and at the same time draw the ire of many white feminists (MS Magazine), gets shortchanged and critiqued for her feminist identity, while Emma Watson, who gave a speech that was viewed by many as an elementary, toe-in-the water, basic feminist declaration, gets heralded as a "game-changer." This was the living image of that tilted discourse—appropriating Beyoncé's own imagery to use as background fodder for Watson, a white feminist who got more

than her share of recognition for a speech that, in the eyes of many cultural critics, was less than groundbreaking.

I want to re-iterate that I am less concerned in this analysis with whether or not Beyoncé is a "feminist." I am much more interested here in the positionality of Beyoncé as a stand-in for what I think is an excess, an overfill of outrage. I believe that Beyoncé is invoked in this instance as a chain in an affective circuit that channels long histories of outrage, anti-statist resentment, critiques of white hegemonic maneuvers such as appropriation, and the very real, dire state of embodied precarity for people of color—an *agonistic* stance.

THE IGGY AZALEA REFRAIN

Viewed as the worst sort of hip-hop appropriator, and not even a good rapper at that, Australian pop/rap star Iggy Azalea is the target of malice and the butt of jokes in queer of color and people of color networks on Tumblr.

Figure 40: Iggy Azalea and *American Horror Story*.

As shown in Figure 40, Iggy Azalea is the target of ridicule—in this case, she is compared to a freakish character on a promo gifset for *American Horror Story: Freakshow*. In Figure 14, we first see a still from a performance with both Jennifer Lopez and Iggy Azalea, where Azalea famously forgot to lip-synch on stage, leaving Lopez looking confused—this is the "YOU." The "ME" is Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj in performance, with Beyoncé looking in the same direction as Lopez, but this time at Minaj, who is undoubtedly on point.

Figure 41: Lopez looking at Azalea with disbelief.

One widely circulated Tumblr is a tongue-in-cheek ribbing of Azalea, poking fun at her generic and un-savvy on-the-nose appropriative moves: FoodthatlookslikeIggyAzalea. She is, in the eyes of some Tumblr users, literally as exciting as white bread. The Tumblr consists only of image posts with a straightforward

caption; each image is a diptych—on the left is a photo of Iggy Azalea, pulled from countless press appearances and promo stills; on the right is a photo of food that shares some of the same visual characteristics of that photo, such as color palette, form and framing. Iggy Azalea with a skin-tight blue one-piece minidress, lily-white legs taking up half the frame, is juxtaposed with the legs of a canned chicken, coated in gelatin, emerging from a blue tin. In another, Azalea, with yellow hair and a blue dress, is compared to a package of Kraft American cheese singles. In yet another, Azalea, blowing a kiss at the MTV Movie Awards in a mauve ornamented dress, is compared to a whole canned ham:

Figure 42: A diptych from FoodthatlookslikeIggyAzalea.

This is not a semiotic relationship. This is not a semiotic formula. What is being channeled here is the affective relationship between a mundane pop star and mundane

food. Yes, Azalea is suggested as being as unattractive and mundane as the canned ham. But there is another register here that channels commodity, mundanity, flesh, consumerism, pop stardom, the asinine.

The trick of the thing is that it is kind of semiotic but kind of not. There is the register of visual similarity, yes – Azalea's speckled appearance in a mauve-ish block dress with cutouts does actually hint at processed ham. It is a sloppy semiotics, one that is by design off kilter. There is the semiotic register of what the ham (and the other food objects) may signify, depending on interpretation—mundanity, the normal, the quotidian, in short—anti bling, anti-celebrity, anti-everything that a rapper ought to be.

I think there is also an affective register here that interweaves among the semiotic meanings. This is a register of a stubbornness as assemblage, a joining that makes a comment that is imprecise and therefore all the more adamant—it exists in the dyptich and is also marked in the blithe, flippant simplicity of the caption: "Iggy Azalea and canned ham." It makes no attempt to explain itself. The images don't belong togther, except for the slightest semiotic tie, and the assemblage works by taunting our knowledge of this fact. This is a stubborn tension; it flows on a register of political resistance to Azalea's overly manufactured, undeserving fame. In the same way that it marks Azalea as an asinine presence, the assemblage itself is also asinine, unrelenting and stubborn in its point.

The Tumblr users I follow are quick to point out Azalea's lack of skill, in addition to her overly manufactured quality and appropriative acts. One Tumblr user I talked to mentioned that Azalea might be let off the hook a little bit if she, like Eminem, were actually good at what she does. However, in the eyes of most Tumblr users I've interacted with and follow, she is an abhorrently bad rapper. This critique was underscored when, in 2013, Azalea made an appearance on Sirius Radio's *Shade 45*

morning show. The DJ host, Sway, a respected figure in the hip-hop music world and a former MTV VJ, asked Azalea to freestyle rap over a backing track. She refused (Tolentino 2014).

Iggy Azalea emerges across people of color and queer of color Tumblr circulations as one big, collective, critical eye-roll. Furthermore, there is a snide edge to this critique—the call-out of the fact that she's not even very good at what she does—that indicts the culture/music industry itself as blasé and asinine appropriators.

In order to fully understand the critical response to Iggy Azalea, we need to also pay attention to the tweets of outspoken black American rapper Azealia Banks (whose name is a cosmic coincidence). In 2014, she engaged in a Twitter feud with Azalea—things were especially tense around the time of the decision not to indict police officer Darren Wilson with the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Banks trolled Azalea hard, calling her "Igloo Australia" on Twitter—the name stuck. Suddenly this name was in circulation throughout the Tumblr communities I was involved in. Here are some of Banks's tweets:

> "It's funny to see people Like Igloo Australia silent when these things happen… Black Culture is cool, but black issues sure aren't huh?" (4:18 pm, 3 Dec, 2014)
>
> "If you're down to ride with us bitch you gotta RIDE ALL THE WAY" (4:20 pm, 3 Dec 2014)
>
> "Don't just be down to ride Black Dick….. If you with us you WITH US!!!!" (4:23 pm, 3 Dec 2014)
>
> "LOL… IM PETTY, but its so true, ugh, that wannabe black girl shit makes me wanna throw a jar of my piss at her LMFAOOOO." (4:30 pm, 3 Dec 2014)
>
> Azalea responded:
>
> "👀 I see all hell broke loose while I was at rehearsals today." (9:25 pm, 3 Dec 2014)

> "we've all read the script 49584068408540 billion times now, find a new game plan." (9:36 pm, 3 Dec 2014)

Though Azalea did her best to sidestep the criticism levied by Banks for being silent about the Michael Brown shooting and ensuing lack of indictment, she inadvertently turned more heads by tweeting: "In other news that actually relates to me: my arena tour is looking nice! Cant wait to release the dates this month <3 ^.^" (7:45 pm, 3 Dec 2014)

Several people I follow on Tumblr reblogged this tweet, citing it as evidence that Azalea in fact did not care about the killing of Michael Brown, though Azalea's subsequent tweets did address the Ferguson uprisings, albeit indirectly.

Later that day, Banks addressed Azalea directly:

> "@Iggyazalea Why do you imitate us in such a way that i feel like you are actually making fun of us? Why?" (11:13 pm, 3 Dec 2014)

Azalea eventually responded to her days later, saying, after Banks's appearance on HOT 97 and further criticism of Azalea's "cultural smudging":

> "You're poisonous and I feel genuinely sorry for you because it's obvious at this point you are a MISERABLE, angry human being. Regards!" (1:03 am, 19 Dec 2014)

Azealia Banks famously called Iggy Azalea "Igloo Australia," and, unfortunately for the Australian-born rapper, the name stuck. A Wikipedia user even managed to briefly alter Azalea's Wikipedia page:

Figure 43: Azalea's temporarily-altered Wikipedia page

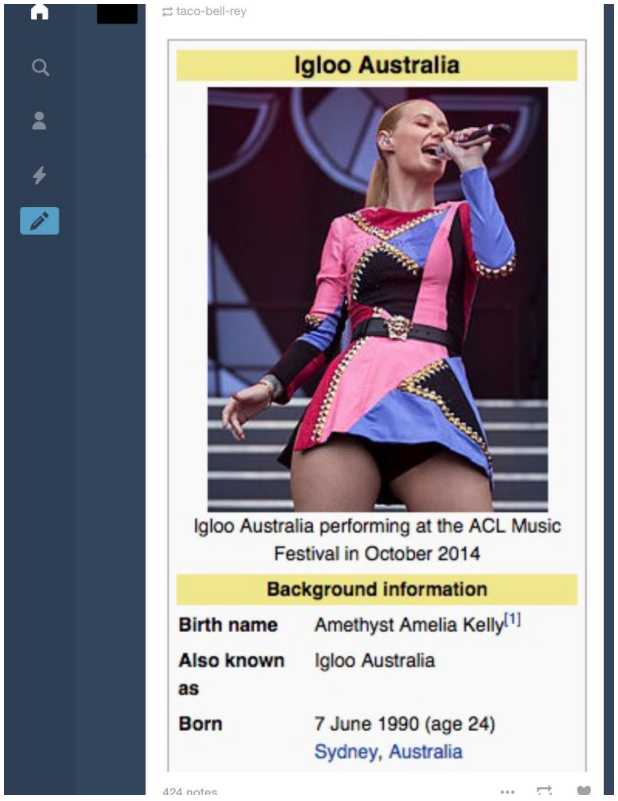

Figure 44: “Igloo Australia.”

In a post that had over 10,000 notes when I encountered it (Figure 18), Tumblr user pocpower posted four horizontal cropped screenshots. The first is the Tumblr "search" bar, empty. The second shows the word "trash" typed into the search bar. The third shows the line of text below the search bar after the word "trash" has been typed in, showing a line of "related searches": "Related: Garbage, Tokyo Ghoul, Iggy Azalea, Selfie, Me." The fourth screenshot is a hyper-pixelated, zoomed in image of the "Iggy Azalea" suggested search synonym. pocpower's caption of this four-screenshot series is "Tumblr knows whats up." This cluster of images was reblogged by yesblackhomo, which is how it appeared on my feed.

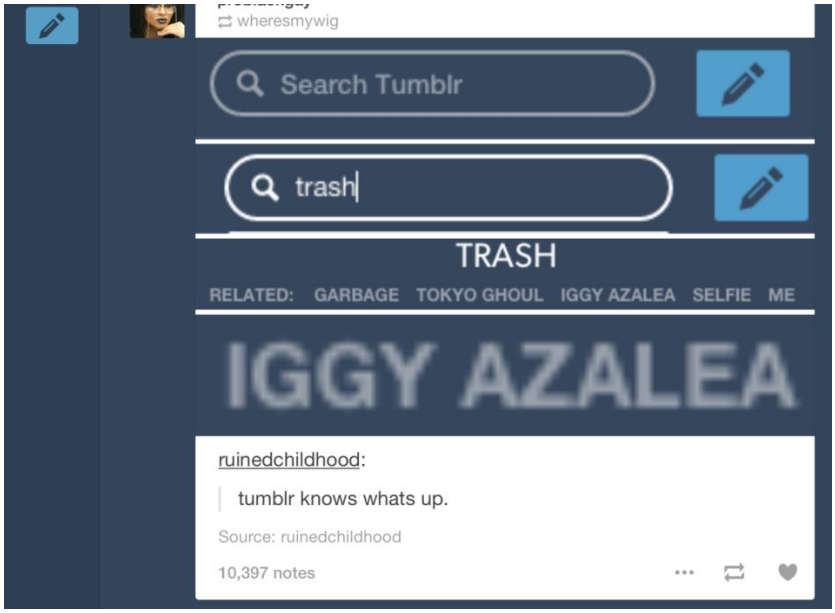

Figure 45: "Trash = Iggy Azalea."

This Iggy Azalea = Trash collage makes meaning on a number of different registers. First, there is the explicit meaning that Azalea is nothing worth noting, that she is disposable, to be discarded. This is an explicit critique both of her musical work as well as her star persona itself; it is as if the post is saying that someone who is such a

shameless appropriator, and a talentless one at that, is not worth anything. There is also the connotation that Azalea is being referred to as "white trash," calling up a storied legacy of American racial politics in which low-income, low-class whiteness is something to be reviled, even further down the racial hierarchy than blackness (Newitz & Wray 2013). "White trash" is white privilege's failure, and thus Azalea, even in all her hyped-up suddenly-on-the-scene manufactured glory, still fails at being a proper hip-hop star.

These are critical *readings*; "Reading" in the sense that they are critically analyzing Azalea's star text as a constellation of industrially-produced media artifacts that deserve deconstruction in light of the racist flows of political economy that produce hip-hop "stars." But it is "reading" also in the sense of the Black gay vernacular meaning of the term. As Dorian Carey explains in the landmark film *Paris is Burning* (1990), "Reading is the real art form of insult." It is insult by attention to minor detail, a critical performative that holds Azalea, and by extension the culture industry that props her up, in a scathing sideways glance. She is being read.

**

In our interviews, Javier, who is a 25-year-old Mexican American Master's student, has not expressed strong opinions about pop culture and celebrity. He is not enthusiastic about Beyoncé when I ask him about her; that's why I'm taken aback when I ask him about Iggy Azalea:

> *[Shudders]* "Ooof. I hate her."
>
> "So you have a strong reaction to her?"
>
> "I do have a strong reaction to her. Like, aside from the fact that it's one of those cases where you can basically make yourself famous off of black culture—especially for someone who's a complete foreigner to the United States and the nuances that African Americans face in the States. That's like, it's disrespectful. I

understand artistic freedom, but you also gotta be sensitive. You gotta have a sense of responsibility about it."

"Do you think she's an appropriator?"

"I think she's a thief. I would prefer the word theft. Cultural mockery, too."

Adam, the 21-year-old student, had similar sentiments:

"What do you think about Iggy Azalea?"

"I… *[Laughs]* Igloo Australia. I can't stand her."

"Why?"

"I just… I'm not here for her. I feel like the majority of her following is gay men—gay white men—from spaces like Tumblr, for example. One of my friends, a close friend of mine, another QPOC person, posted this post on Tumblr and he was saying how he loves Azealia Banks and how he's here for her, and all these white gays came after him and said, like, no, she has these homophobic things and transphobic things…and that's true, and it shows, again that there's room for improvement for everyone and we can be critical, but then they were like, oh, Iggy Azalea, she's so great, blah blah blah, and I'm like no, it's all connected. You have to look at things intersectionally. You can't just be here for queer liberation and not be here for racial justice. For me, like Iggy Azalea, what is she here for? Other than capitalizing on a traditionally black music industry, showing up and saying that she has ownership, that she has a right over this?"

In fact, all of the participants that I interviewed who were people of color whom I asked about Iggy Azalea expressed similar sentiments. What I find interesting about these responses as well as the circulation of related artifacts on Tumblr is not necessarily the critique of Azalea as an appropriator—but rather, the *constant refraining of this political stance* as viewed through these two celebrities in relation to each other. The Iggy Azalea-as-appropriator/Azealia Banks-as-caller-out refrain is so strong that it has a life of its own. As I hope to make clear throughout this chapter, I am less interested in whether or not Azalea is a "good" or "bad" celebrity, whether she "appropriates" what we generally understand to be "black culture" (indeed, this has been largely complicated, see Johnson 2003). I am more interested in thinking about how Azalea emerges as a site of affective

turbulence, how the Iggy Azalea/Azealia Banks refrain channels and also contains an energetics that is politically freighted, a cluster of bad feelings that folds back in on itself and, as Massumi puts it, "back-forms" in its own positional emergence. In this way, she comes into being as a *territory*.

EMERGENCE, PASSION, TERRITORY

For Deleuze and Guattari, the "territory" is something that emerges from accretions. It is a terrain of identifiable expressions: "What defines the territory is the emergence of matters of expression(qualities)" (315). The territory is the end-point of what we might call a materialist hierarchy of being: chaos, milieus, rhythms, territories. Even chaos is not without its directions, but when matter and energy start bouncing around in strata, they are milieus, which behave in rhythmic pattern and are influenced by and influence each other. Their example is the living organism: "[T]hus the living thing has an exterior milieu of materials, an interior milieu of composing elements and composed substances, an intermediary milieu of membranes and limits, and an annexed milieu of energy sources and actions-perceptions" (313). This relation is importantly *not* a simile to conventional biological classification of external/internal, but rather a holistic view of bodily elements and processes as they form functional strata within and without each other. Bone-ness, just like skin-ness, could be an "exterior milieu" of materials, formed by composing elements, and so on. In my understanding, when bone-ness can be labeled as a shaped bone, or when bone becomes the thing we call femur, these are "territory." Fish, which behave in swarms, achieve color-as-territory, "when it acquires a temporal consistency and a spatial range…a signature" (315). Their bodies retain a color and their bodies mark a territory, which, for Deleuze and Guattari, are commensurate with each other.

They explain further: “The territory, and the functions performed within it, are products of territorialization. Territorialization is an act of rhythm that has become expressive, or of milieu components that have become qualitative.” (315). So, here, we realize that these components and actions are simultaneous, or at least non-teleological, in this scheme. It is possible for a milieu to be a milieu and to have rhythm and to territorialize at once. This echoes Massumi’s scheme, foregrounded at the start of this chapter.

Again: “Territorialization is an act of rhythm that has become expressive.” When components become qualitative. If reblogging is rhythmic, if Tumblr itself is a rhythm (Chapter 2), then the circulation of these celebrity-based, peer-produced artifacts can be thought of as territorialization in action. Furthermore, they have a quality—or perhaps multiple qualities. Those qualities are affective, they are political, and they are arch.

From De Certeau (2002) to Martín-Barbero (1993), we know that quotidian and daily practices can carry political heft and agency, and we know from the British school of cultural studies, building on Gramsci, that audience engagement with and refashioning of mass-market pop culture holds the potential for insurgent politics (Hebdige 1979; Hall et al. 2013; McRobbie 2000). Furthermore, we know that queer people are experts at this sort of “disidentification” (Muñoz 1999) and function as an idiom for this sort of re-engagement, as Jenkins shows with Kirk/Spock slash fiction, in “Textual Poachers” (1988).

I posit, based on my interviews and experience in this space, that celebrity invocation is a living, reliable register—a territory—that Tumblr users actively rely on to channel an overfill of personal/political sentiment: *passion.* These celebrity-related posts are rhythmic accumulations and circulations of peer-produced cultural products that 1) hone an anti-statist, anti-racist political sensibility; 2) educate others on this political

sensibility; and 3) seep into everyday, real-world practices and outlooks in ways that are meaningful but not necessarily always manifest.

If participatory culture encourages the crowd to dialogue and create and remix cultural objects, then circulation of this sort is critical cultural production that is a subset of this practice. It is important to note that this sort of critical cultural production is not necessarily new—public satire is age-old, and celebrity culture has a long history. However, what is new is the overwhelming availability, publicity, and low barrier to entry of digitally-mediated participatory cultures.

This criculation and territorialization of celebrity as affective play is "critical" in two senses. First, it is critical of hegemonic modes of representation, of dominant ideology, and often expresses anti-establishment sentiments. In the case of Iggy Azalea and outrageous critique on Tumblr, many queer and people of color Tumblr users refashion media artifacts regarding Azalea to point out her overt Black cultural appropriation in a way that combines affective registers of outrage and satire. This cultural work becomes a comment and criticism of a racist mainstream media that profits on the appropriation and exploitation of Black cultural products. Azalea becomes a focal point for anti-racist critical comment, done with a wry twist.

The second sense of "critical" is that these actions, this participation, are *vital* to my informants' lives. Doing this critical cultural work is an important way for my informants to express a politics that orients them toward a world that is racist, and especially anti-Black. I want to refrain from using the term "outlet" here; this isn't "venting." It is productive, constructive, clever manipulation and re-appropriation of an affective politics that needle and invade the daily lives of those who experience oppression. It turns the quotidian annoyance of seeing one's culture stolen by an incapable white "rapper" into a minor triumph. These minor triumphs –even viewing

them—are critical/vital because they are what makes it possible to proceed throughout the day when the system is tilted against you at all sides.

INTERLUDE

Summer of 2015. I am writing the final version of this dissertation. To my surprise, Anthony has recently started posting on Tumblr again. A pug in a bowtie. A handsome mustachioed hipster guy in a leather jacket. A 1990s-era promo photo of Rose McGowan in a pink pleather two-piece against a pink background with the "DVD" logo repeated diagonally as wallpaper. A photo portrait of David Lynch and Isabella Rossellini from 1986, Rossellini looking radiantly at the camera, Lynch hiding his face in the rolls of an upstretched black turtleneck.

It is about 10:30 p.m. This is the only time anymore that I go on Tumblr. I'll scroll through it on my phone while I'm in bed, about to go to sleep. I reblog a photo of a pink pigeon, head cocked over its wing, looking sassily at the camera. A still from some experimental film (you can tell by the grain)—a woman in white is on her knees in a white room, facing away from us, looking at a wall with a projection of a white woman's face. A GIF, animated black paper cutouts on royal blue, of a silhouette of a woman in a headdress enticing a duo into a shallow pond.

Anthony sends me a message on Tumblr's messaging system. Apparently, he's seen my posts come across his dash just now. Evidence that I'm on. I'm surprised I even see the notification on my phone because Tumblr still hasn't seemed to figure this process out consistently. He asks me "How's it going?" I tell him it's good to hear from him, and I'm tired, and I ask how school has been.

He's back at home for the summer. Things are not very good. He's failed two classes last semester and is on academic probation. I sense that things are better off being discussed over text message because I may miss a notification on my Tumblr app, so I text him.

He tells me he has been trying to deal with severe anxiety and depression. He eventually just stopped going to class last term. To top it off, he is worried that, if he doesn't finish at UCSB, he will have blown his "once chance to be successful" in life.

I think of the quote from José Muñoz that I have repeated at least twice in this dissertation. *Survival*. It is so hard. *Nothing short of staggering.*

A tightness in my forehead. *No. He can't fail out.*

I switch to advice-giver mode. *Get a counselor. Get them to support your appeal.* I am thinking about being an instructor at UT, and how savvy students are able to activate institutional flags that support their case in situations like this at large institutions. A student stops coming to class? Administration: *Too bad.* A student stops coming to class and is seeing a counselor for mental illness and has documentation? Administration: *Uh-oh. Liability!*

He seems like he wants to switch the topic of conversation. He asks me how my summer is going. Good, I tell him. I'm just trying to get the diss done. He eventually tells me that he was seeing a therapist last quarter. *Thank goodness.* I convince him to get back in touch and have the therapist write a letter to support his appeal.

Yeah. I'll call them. I think I have the number still.

Conclusion

#BLACKOUTDAY

If you were on Twitter or Tumblr on March 6th, 2015, you might have noticed something unusual. Scores and scores of black Twitter and Tumblr users were taking, uploading, and circulating selfies. According to one report, by noon, there were over 58,000 tweets with the hashtahg #BlackOutDay (Tan 2015). In my own experience, given the types of networks I am involved in on Tumblr, the saturation was much higher; some selfies that came across my dashboard eventually received over 100,000 notes each.

Many people read the selfie as the consummate act of vanity, and the "millennial" generation has been snidely referred to as the "selfie generation" (Blow 2014). However, this practice, on this day, had a different tilt. According to one widely-read Tumblr, TheBlackout.org, the original impetus for #BlackOutDay was:

> "In a show of community and solidarity, for those 24 hours, we are exclusively posting and reblogging pics, gifs, videos, selfies, etc. of Black people. We want to show that Black History is happening today, right now. That we are all Black History."

This practice was also proposed as an exercise in affirmation, a flooding of blackness in what is normally a popular cultural understanding of beauty being equated with only white bodies. The person widely credited to be the inventor of #BlackOutDay, Tumblr user T'von, wrote this after the fact:

> "I got inspired to propose Blackout day after thinking "Damn, I'm not seeing enough Black people on my dash". Of course I see a constant amount of Black celebrities but what about the regular people? Where is their shine? When I proposed it, I thought people would think it was a good idea, but not actually go through with implementing it. Luckily people wanted to get behind the idea, and @recklessthottie created the #Blackout tag… I'm really sick and tired of seeing the "European standard of beauty" prevail. It's past time for the beauty of Black people to be showcased. I love all people of color, but this here is for *us*."

#BlackOutDay got major media attention, including stories by ABC News (Tan 2015) and *The Washington Post* (Izadi 2015). #BlackOutDay was intense. I don't think people were expecting it to be as emotional as it was. I remember seeing posts pop up on my Tumblr feed a few minutes before midnight on March 5th; people couldn't wait. As it happened—as it really started to materialize before your eyes—it became an emotional thing. Emotional because there were really so many beautiful people out there, emotional because we all knew how white-dominated the idea of what is beautiful is, but it was still jarring and freeing to see, for once, an alternative. It was emotional for the sheer intensity and amount of participation that happened, emotional to see the range of blackness that came through, and to realize how flattened "black" is allowed to be when it does emerge in mainstream representations. It was emotional because, as many people pointed out, we are often only presented with black bodies in mainstream media as corpses.

Figure 46: "Our BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL THROUGH OUT THE NATION."

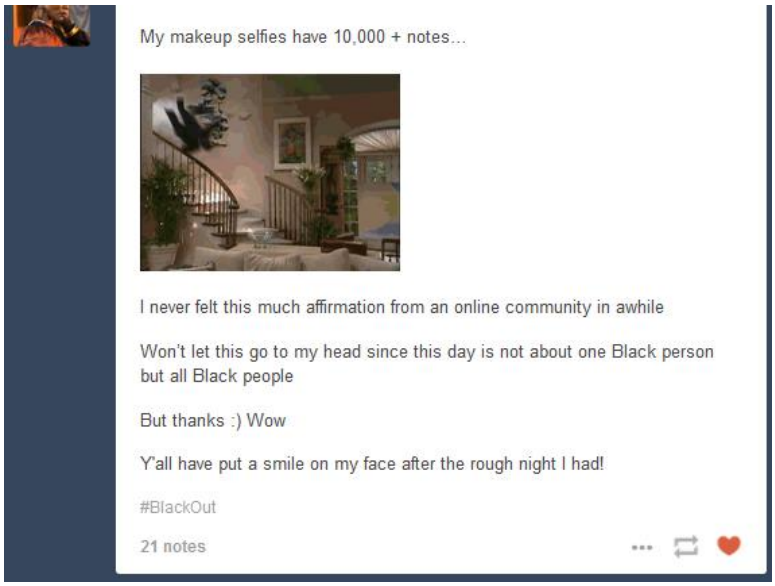

Figure 47: "My makeup selfies have 10,000 + notes..."

The journalist who wrote about #BlackOutDay for ABC News kept calling it a "campaign": "A highlight of the diverse faces of people from the social media campaign #BlackOutDay….#BlackOutDay is a social media campaign today celebrating black beauty and fighting against negative images and stereotypes perpetuated in the media…" (Tan 2015). Yet, "campaign" seems like the wrong word. "Campaign" rings false, like it's propaganda or advertising, masterminded in a small executive conference room and deployed from the top down, with a defined lifespan and quantifiable objectives. That doesn't capture the truth of #BlackOutDay.

If it wasn't a "campaign," what was it? As this dissertation has endeavored to highlight, we are at a loss for words to understand and describe these passionate acts of connection across social media. Not quite a "movement," not a "campaign," and not quite a "subculture," it was something more organic and amorphous, something that came into being, or emerged, folding outward exponentially, by process of refrain. Was it a meme? Something viral? Both of those terms could apply, but seem to hint at something, an

artifact, that is distributed or replicated. “Meme” in particular sounds like a huge disservice, a flattening of the emotional heft contained in #BlackOutDay’s political project.

I would rather call it a highly visible moment of sensuous participation, a synchronizing of networks of passion. If, following the framework I outlined in Chapter 2, Tumblr traffics in queer reverb, then the BlackOut was an alignment, a harmonic resonance that registered off the charts. The collective affirmation of positive representation. It sounds like an old trick, yet it rang so true, across the networked public.

True to Tumblr’s tradition of critical left thinking, #BlackOutDay had its own correctives. Some Tumblr users observed that, even within the critical mass of black selfies flooding social media, there were rhythms of time-old stratifications: colorism, ableism, certain types of normalized hair styles, and the like. Accoridng to one Tumblr user, “We still need to be critical about it and DO BETTER….Some people didn’t feel safe or attractive enough to even take selfies because they were triggered by the overwhelming amount of ‘tumblr aesthetic’ light skinned/loose 3a curls/neurotypical kinds of people getting thousands of notes on their selfies…” (Fig. 3). This critique also got refrained and also became part of the emotional terrain of #BlackOutDay.

Figure 48: "This needs to be said"

#BlackOutDay is also emblematic of the balancing point that I have tried to reach in this dissertation, skeptically regarding late-capitalism's machinic operation at the same time recognizing that institutional channels can carry radical messaging—radically *felt* messaging. Tumblr was surely happy that #BlackOutDay happened; after all, it drove people to post and participate on its platform and it generated major press coverage. But

this is also a moment that is a very concrete way of thinking about how people are using social media as platforms as active sites of resistant politics—in this case, a politics that accumulates from a shared emotional register, an affirmation that is highly charged, a disruption of psychic structures that are so ingrained that we don't even realize how it can affect something as fundamental as attraction, or how we regard beauty.

SENSUOUS PARTICIPATION (REPRISE)

This dissertation is oriented around a concept that I call "sensuous participation." This is a way of understanding participatory cultures that accounts for affective, or felt, investments and motivations for participating. I have based this investigation on my ethnographic experiences with queer youth of color and their uses of Tumblr, and especially the core observation that Tumblr users craft connection based on a shared sensibility. The dissertation pushes this observation further, articulating some of its nuanced properties. Here are some refined hallmarks of sensuous participation:

- It enjoys the process of feeling out smooth space
- It employs a haptic mode of apprehending
- It can be politically freighted

Put another way, this dissertation can be thought of as addressing danah boyd's problem of passion—the question of why some Internet spaces and technologies are settings for a "passion play" (Hamburger 2014) and some don't attract that level of emotional investment. I see a marriage between this question and Chantal Mouffe's understanding of "passions" as affective forces that motivate collective political participation (2005). Both of these things are happening with queer people of color on Tumblr.

In the first chapter, I argued that if we are going to understand participatory cultures from a standpoint of political economy, labor, and production, we must also think about the practices in these spaces from an affective labor standpoint. I also argue that this understanding of practice as production is an understanding that misses nuance, texture, and surface play of affective flow as it transits across Tumblr connections, and therefore that it also misses how users connect based on shared passion to formulate a robust anti-statist, anti-heteronormative, anti-white-supremacist politics.

Chapter two offered an alternative example for understanding affect's transit on Tumblr, one that does not observe the same one-to-one logics of economic production: strange, queer time. Using theories of queer temporalities, I identified examples of how time remains stubborn and flows weirdly on Tumblr, and how that dynamic carries political heft. These examples include recurring GIF animations, nostalgia for an purposefully unspecific but queer-inflected past, and the circulation of images of teens who committed suicide. Stubborn negativity, bad feelings, and cyclical dwelling (Figs.. 4, 5): this is the recipe for what I call "queer reverb," a way of understanding affective flow and how it is modulated on Tumblr networks.

Figure 49: "queer and emotional"

In the third chapter, I started to think about passion using two concepts: attunement and haptics. I examined Tumblr artifacts circulated by queer youth of color to foment a political sensibility and used interviews to understand how the Tumblr space differed from other social media spaces, and how it was used to cultivate an explicitly anti-heteronormative, anti-white supremacist politics. Using this evidence as a jumping-off point, I invoked Laura U. Marks's Deleuze and Guattari-inspired notion of "haptic" space to rethink investment and connection in these networks as one that demands a feel-based, "smooth" navigation. I posited that the properties of "networked publics" could be used productively to think about haptic space and correlated affective investment.

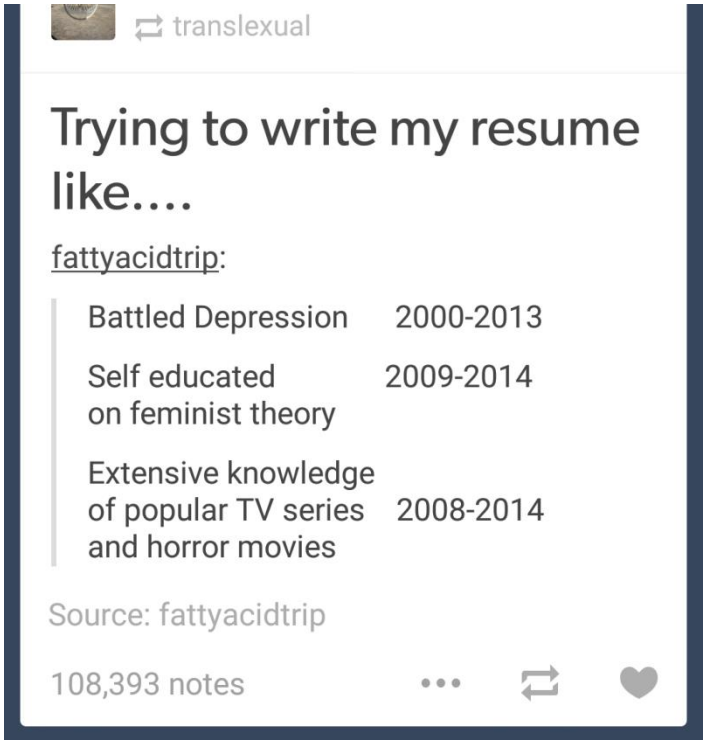

Figure 50: "Trying to write my resume like..."

Chapter four drew in-depth attention to another practice that is widespread on Tumblr: the use of celebrity images and other celebrity media artifacts to generate a politics that is queer-of-color affirming, anti-statist, and anti-white supremacist. Contrary to some mainstream "readings" of celebrities such as Nicki Minaj and Beyoncé as hypersexualized servants of capital, I find that, for the queer youth of color I have interacted with (and as part of a larger ecosystem of black politicized Tumblr users), these celebrities emerge in Tumblr circulations in a way that supports self-esteem, celebrates simple embodiment as a radical political act and ultimately relocates a cluster of cultural values away from hegemonic whiteness.

Sense, sensibility, sensuous, passion, attunement, haptic; these are all words that I use to attempt to paint the contours of feeling in queer of color Tumblr networks. It is tactile and guttural sense-knowledge.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

There is so much to explore within Tumblr—even within queer of color networks on Tumblr—that this dissertation has just begun to scratch the surface. I offer some suggestions for future research in the space that follows.

1. Debunking the "clicktivism" critique. Micah White's term, "clicktivism" (2010), has become shorthand for those who would diminish the activist potential of socially-networked political expression. Writing in polemical fashion in 2010, and with a slew of good examples, White bemoaned MoveOn.org's metrics-based "marketeering" approach to activism. While I appreciate this angle of critique, I also observe that White seems painfully stodgy in terms of what counts as activism. As I have endeavored to show in this dissertation, a critical politics can most certainly be fomented in social media spaces. If we widen our definition of activism to include radical education, and if we appreciate that at its core, activism is about cultivating *a shared sensed attunement* toward structures of power, activism is alive and well on Tumblr. White writes, "Gone is faith in the power of ideas, or the poetry of deeds, to enact social change." I couldn't disagree more. In fact, this potential came to a head while I was writing the final versions of this dissertation. As the news stories of black men being murdered by police kept coming and coming throughout the second half of 2014 and the first half of 2015, we saw a very real, very passionate, very embodied slew of activism around the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag that translated into major disruptive action. I have no doubt that there is a connection between social media and getting out on the streets. Further

study—especially around this hashtag and the police murders of people such as Eric Garner and Freddie Gray—could more clearly elaborate this connection.

2. I am very interested in what a quantitative approach to Tumblr's various networks could reveal. Though I am by no means an expert in quantitative approaches and software, I have an inkling that quantitative mapping of the lifespan of a post could reveal interesting patterns. Put another way: Can we quantify or visualize reverb? This could also begin to answer a question about silos in this sort of social media-based connection. This dissertation has been all about the passion of a sensuous connection, a passion that is sensed and cultivates a sense-in-common. However, it is not concerned with how people connect who *do not* have a shared sensibility. Quantitative methods could map this and reveal more complexity to the dynamics of passion across social media.

3. Holistic media ethnographies. In my Austin interviewing, I got a taste of the different ways that my participants used different social media platforms. It would be significant if we could understand more fully the rhythms of use of different forms of media—across all media—for queer youth of color. What kinds of TV do they watch? What kinds of music do they listen to? I was simply unable to reach this level of depth given the limited time and resources at hand. Also, in the original version of the proposal of this dissertation, there was a component that studied queer artists in Chicago—many of whom had located each other through Tumblr and then moved to Chicago to be physically proximate to each other. Budget and time considerations made this untenable for this study. However, I have kept tangentially in touch with some of these Chicago queer people, and the scene is maturing and diversifying. Also, the story of trans artist Mark Aguhar, who died in 2012 and rose to prominence on Tumblr, still needs to be told.

4. “Sensuous participation” could be expanded into more technical fields such as Human-Computer Interaction, Interface Design and User Experience Design. In these fields it is customary to evaluate experimental models through human trials—I am very interested in what sorts of feelings, investments, and the like could be evoked through differently-designed interfaces. If we were to wed eye-tracking software, for example, with skin conduction measures as a user navigates Tumblr, what sort of information would be revealed in terms of how the body responds? I do not want to offer a somatic area of inquiry as a sort of teleological endpoint to the argument of sensuous participation; rather, I am interested in how these kinds of investigations could be used to both expand and refine the vocabularies we use to describe user “passion.” “Intrinsic motivation,” for example, as used by Benkler and mentioned in Chapter 1, seems like a blunt weapon; surely, we can refine these observations further.

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The sensuous is about feeling, it is about the play of the tactile and guttural. Somewhere along the way, the cognate is wrapped up in it too. As I mention in the introduction, the sensed is both felt *and* known. If it has not been obvious throughout this dissertation, my own life has been impacted by my time on Tumblr, much like the participants in my study. I have looked to Tumblr as an outlet, as validation, as reinforcement, as a reservoir of passions and politics, especially when the world doesn’t seem tilted quite right. Just today, I had some sparks of affirmation and validation as I scrolled through my feed. A black queer Tumblr user I follow posted a picture of a young black woman in a baseball cap and glasses, looking directly at the camera, wearing a T-shirt that reads, “You were brainwashed into thinking European features are the epitome of beauty.” And she’s looking sassy and self-assured to boot. I reblogged this picture to my followers. This one image sums up queer theorist Dwight McBride’s book-length

observation that whiteness occupies the top position in the "gay marketplace of desire" (2005, 88). What a way to literalize and communicate my own confusing years navigating the gay social landscape. What a way to connect the cognate with the guttural—a sense that there is a racialized regime of desire surrounding you, a sense of difference, a sense of unease—but that is hard to put into words without help because it is so ingrained. Tumblr is full of these moments. Connecting via felt-in-common. A sensibility, an orientation toward the world, a turning toward each other. Every day, churning.

Appendix 1: Profiles of Participants

- Adam is a 21-year-old senior at UT-Austin. He is from the Houston area originally and identifies as Mexican American and bisexual. He's extremely politically active, a heavy Tumblr user, and is excited to go to New York City this summer and intern for an organization that tackles issues of social justice. He is a heavy Tumblr user.
- Aileen is a 22-year-old senior at UT-Austin. She identifies as Asian, Taiwanese-American, and Asian American. She says that her sexuality is still "in flux," that she hasn't gotten the chance to explore it in depth, and she views herself as "agender" or "genderfluid." She is a heavy Tumblr user, and credits Tumblr with first exposing her to the idea of gender fluidity.
- Anthony is a 20-year-old sophomore at UC-Santa Barbara. He identifies as gay and Mexican. He is from California's inland San Joaquin Valley, where his parents are middle to upper-middle-class working professionals. He is a heavy Tumblr user (at least when we first met online).
- Candice is a 30-year-old, black, heterosexual attorney from Brooklyn who went to two Ivy League universities. She doesn't claim to be a Beyoncé mega-fan, but she posts quite often about Beyoncé nevertheless. I originally got in touch with her because of her post critiquing MTV's appropriative use of Beyoncé's tour visual in an image that focused on actress Emma Watson. We spoke during the summer and fall of 2014, when unrest and outrage over a series of killings of black men by police officers was reaching a crescendo in the U.S.
- Dev is a 19-year-old sophomore at UT-Austin. He is from a small town in west Texas and identifies as multiracial: black, white, and Native American. He

identifies as a gay male. He comes from a conservative, religious family and played tennis in high school. He is just recently starting to explore Tumblr.

- Harry is a late-30s man-about-town in Los Angeles; we knew each other from my previous career in publishing. He is a stylist, a writer, and a red-carpet fixture. He is white, Southern, and identifies as gay. We chatted about Tumblr in 2009 when I was discovering it. At the time, he had a huge following on Tumblr of teens throughout the world, most of whom were fans of his LA goth-inspired style and candid photos. He hasn't been on Tumblr at all in recent years.
- Ixchel is a 19-year-old freshman at UT-Austin. From El Paso originally, she is a heavy Tumblr user. She identifies as "demisexual" and Chinese-Mexican-American. She loves *The Legend of Korra* and is a classically trained musician. She is an active member of UT's Queer People of Color organization.
- Jackson is a mid-20s white gay man living in Portland. He is a huge Trekkie; his Tumblr is flooded with *Star Trek* references and his username even contains a *Star Trek* in-joke. We met on Tumblr in 2013. Though I am not a Trekkie in the traditional sense, I was a *Star Trek: The Next Generation* watcher when it was originally on, and we bonded over this. Jackson is in a long term relationship with a person of color and is highly conversant in critical race theory and gender theory.
- Jason is a 19-year-old junior at UT-Austin. He identifies as "Mexican," feels like he is defined as "Hispanic" by others, and identifies as gay. He is undocumented and gained admission to UT through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program under new rules from the Department of Homeland Security. He came to the U.S. when he was eight years old because his father was imprisoned in North Carolina. He is a heavy Facebook user and does not use Tumblr.

- Jerry is a 29-year-old white gay male curator and organizer in Chicago. We met originally on Tumblr in 2009 and have been in touch ever since. He is extremely active in Chicago's queer arts community and was formerly quite active on Tumblr (this has decreased in recent years). He recently publicly announced that he is HIV-positive and is curating a series of arts events around the concept of illness.
- Joey was 23 when we first talked in 2011. We met on Tumblr because we both liked each other's selfies and proceeded to start messaging each other. He is a white gay man living in Minnesota. He was not forthcoming when I asked him what he did for a living; he prefers to just talk about his cabin near one of Minnesota's many lakes, and his interest in photography and spiritual imagery.
- Miguel is a 25-year-old UT-Austin graduate student. He identifies as "Mexican born but American raised." He was born in Mexico, but moved to the U.S. when he was 10, to a small town in Idaho, where his dad did agricultural work. He started using Tumblr, but stopped—it was too intense, and he didn't feel he had the time or energy to invest in it. He is writing a Master's thesis that interrogates the concept of "social justice" as it is used in activist communities.
- Rachel is a 21-year-old senior at UT-Austin. She is from El Paso originally and identifies as Mexican-American, Texan, and queer. She is a sociology major and is also involved in an organization that advocates for better conditions for workers in the garment industry. She recently got cut off from her family and is supporting herself through college. She is a heavy Tumblr user.
- Sam is a late-20s artist living and working near Leeds in England. We met on Tumblr in 2010. He is white and identifies as gay. He is also an active Instagram

user, where we are also friends. He frequently posts pictures of things like chairs, shoes, and odd bits of ephemera from daily life. He also has very hairy legs.

- Steven is a 29-year-old white gay man who lives in Brooklyn and works in Human Resources at a digital ad agency. We met on Tumblr in 2014, which he describes as a "great place to share creative work as well as butt pics." He is not an adherent to the Beyoncé-as-feminist line of thinking, and does not believe that Beyoncé actually had her child herself.
- Xander is a 20-year-old junior at UC-Berkeley. We met on Tumblr in 2013—I was intrigued by his username, which alluded to his mixed-race identity. He is originally from Los Angeles, and identifies as gay, male, and multiracial, white and Asian American. He lists his Nintendo 3DS friend code on his Tumblr sidebar.

Appendix 2: Sample Questions

Though I did not have a set questionnaire, and though I approached each interview from a highly individualized perspective, asking in-depth questions about each participant's own particular situation based on what they were revealing to me as we spoke, I did have a very rough series of prompts that I sometimes returned to as I talked to my participants, especially the ones I interviewed in person. Some cover-the-bases questions were as follows:

1. How old are you?
2. How do you identify, racially or ethnically?
3. How do you identify, in terms of gender and sexuality?
4. What do you do for a living? If you're a student, what do you study, and what year are you?
5. Where do you live?
6. Walk me through your day, from start to finish.
7. What social media do you use?
8. How often do you use Tumblr?
9. What kinds of Tumblrs do you follow?
10. What do you like about Tumblr?
11. Describe Tumblr, Facebook, and [other social media you use] in three words each.
12. How does Tumblr, Facebook, and [other social media you use] make you feel?
13. Do you consider yourself politically active?
14. Did you learn anything from Tumblr?
15. Do you know people whom you follow on Tumblr in real life?

16. Do you ever reblog things having to do with race or gender or sexuality on Tumblr?
17. What do you think about the term “social justice”? Do you think Tumblr is a good place to discuss social justice issues?
18. What do you think about expressing political views on Tumblr? Do you do this?
19. Do you post different sorts of things on Tumblr versus, say, Facebook?
20. How much time do you spend on [social media platform] per day?
21. What kind of device do you usually use to access Tumblr? Phone? Desktop?
22. Are you comfortable sharing your Tumblr with people you know in real life?
23. When did you start using Tumblr, and do you remember how you first found out about it?
24. What makes you decide to reblog something on Tumblr?
25. What makes you decide to follow someone on Tumblr?

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Vita

Alexander Cho was born in the San Fernando Valley, a suburban area of Los Angeles, California. He attended Pomona College, where he majored in Media Studies, and subsequently worked in the magazine industry, including editorial posts at *The Advocate*, *Instinct*, and *Frontiers*. While at *Frontiers*, he broke the worldwide exclusive coming-out interview with *Star Trek*'s George Takei. After witnessing the growth of MySpace, he was inspired to go back to school to pursue an advanced degree in order to investigate LGBTQ culture and social media.

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