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Embodied Participation in Digital Publics: Somnambulance, Surveillance, and the Construction of Identity

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EMBODIED PARTICIPATION IN DIGITAL PUBLICS: SOMNAMBULANCE, SURVEILLANCE, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

by

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To my mother, who has loved me, encouraged me, and convinced me I could do big things. Thank you for helping me fill the gaps in our memories (as much as we could) about the picture in the first chapter and giving me useful feedback for that section. You told me that you never thought you'd have the honor of sharing a page with Plato. But that's not really the case. Plato has the honor of sharing a page with you. I love you to the moon and back.

ABSTRACT

In our current information landscape, routine surveillance has changed the nature of rhetorical engagement in public spheres. Scholarship in publics theory have done productive work to map out the complex field of discursive participation. Michael Warner has demonstrated how, through the circulation of common texts, people no longer have to be in public in order to participate in publics. However, in the wake of ubiquitous surveillance, this focus on publicness has offered little attention to privacy in publics theory. I argue that legal and postmodern theories of bodies-as-texts is problematic for reading and writing bodies online. Intersecting with embodiment and authorship theories, I take a new materialist approach to ethically reading bodies mediated by surveillance technologies. Building from circulation theory and publics theory, I propose a theory of somnambulant participation where bodies online non-autonomously participate in a variety of publics without their awareness or consent. The concept of somnambulance illustrates how simply being in the presence of technologies like smart phones, cameras, smart speakers, wearable technologies etc. effectively collapse the distinction between the public-private binary, which poses certain ethical problems for public participation. I then analyze a viral meme to demonstrate how reddit's community-based algorithmic moderation system co-constructs subjectivities caught within its purview. Finally, I argue that teacher-scholars of digital rhetoric should fold an intentioned empathy into critical digital literacy pedagogies. I argue that empathy can be a productive avenue for critiquing institutions of power that surveille and mediate our everyday digital practices.

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The Risks of Remembering

I love this picture of me. My mom (who is a wonderful mom!) thinks that when I say "love" I mean "traumatized by." She also says, with good humor, that it's time to get over it. There's nothing to get over, I tell her. Honest! I think the picture is a funny metaphor for the thirty-something years of life that are to unfold for this kid grasping at a bright pink balloon someone stuck to his back. I'd like to think that I got at least one of those two balloons unstuck, all on my own—maybe a hopeful extension of the metaphor? The adults standing around, drinking, smoking (indoors!), and laughing—and definitely

not helping—has a misguided kind of optimism that is very 80s. For my mom, the memory was a pleasant gathering of friends, celebrating an occasion (of what, no one seems to remember). She remembers this moment as a playful and joyous one, rather than the struggle for power it appears to be. For me, I only know the memory as a decades-old picture. And, the picture really *is* funny. The picture seems to have materialized at some point long ago from some mechanically reproduced memory, now imbued with new meanings and new potentialities. Outside the image itself, I don't remember this episode at all. I don't remember who these people in the picture are either. My brother does. He has a remarkable memory for faces and their names, especially the ones from long ago. For me, there is just a grinning anonymous face. And, by the distributive property of laughing-at-people, the other two jean-legged figures are surely grinning as well. I'd like to think that I was too focused on solving the problem at hand to be embarrassed. Besides, there'd be plenty other public displays of shame later on down the road.

As instructive as this picture may be all these years later, I've long hated having my picture taken. Having come of age before the selfie generation, I never really quite figured out how to pose or hold my face for the camera. In family gatherings, there was always someone brandishing a camera, duty-like. To not participate in picture-taking was to be a bad sport. While I do understand the value of documenting life, I'd much rather have everyday moments exist and then evaporate or otherwise live on as a fuzzy memory. I sort of have the opposite concern as Plato, who thought that writing would make our memories fade from disuse. My concern is that we will never forget *anything*. Not embarrassing blunders. Moments of real spontaneity. Or ill-timed blinks. Rather than a fear of forgetting, maybe I'm describing a fear of remembering particular things in

particular ways. Perhaps we'll remember something we'd rather not remember. Perhaps the image will constitute new meanings or new realizations about ourselves that we'd rather it didn't. Naturally, "there is no way," Susan Sontag writes, "to suppress the tendency inherent in all photographs to accord value to their subjects" (22). Sontag wrote this in the 1970s when taking pictures was a bit more costly and effortful than they are today. But there is still power to digital pictures, even the ones that don't get a lot of likes—in some cases, *especially* the ones that don't get a lot of likes.

Again, I do love this picture of me. And not in an ironic way either. I love the coloration of the old image and the carpeted kitchen. I love the everydayness of it. I love how bored these people must have been to stick a balloon to a kid's back. I love how I, as an adult, profoundly identify with the image. I also love how the image had stayed in a box for decades, rife with all its anachronistic potential. I love that I can remember this moment without actually remembering it. It tells a story and certainly not a full one. It is as much a psychoanalysis of me thirty-plus years later as well as just a random, largely harmless (right?) thing that happened thirty-ish years ago. The image complicates the very idea of authoring. These adults authored a situation by attaching balloons to my back. As a four-year-old, I was the co-author of my own struggle with the balloon. Someone, of course, shot the original picture. The camera itself materially authored the image. As we can see, authorship emerges from distributed agencies within a techno-cultural assemblage. Since the advent of the polaroid, pictures have only gotten easier to produce quickly, cheaply, and impulsively. They are a product made available for a wide network of audiences to potentially be consumed or remixed and republished. But we have to be good sports about these things, don't we?

Of course, there is danger to all this convenience. There is *risk* to on-the-fly picture-taking. In digital contexts, what do we risk when we take pictures? When we or someone else publishes them? For one, embarrassment or humiliation. We might risk remembering. We risk having our image recomposed for other purposes. We risk having our very identities recomposed or misunderstood. Or, perhaps worse yet, understood perfectly. As the authors of our own embodied performance, we lose a good deal of authorial agency when we are unknowingly publicized. In this way, Ede and Lunsford's synthesis of audience addressed and audience invoked[1] still seems to belie the complexity of digitized embodied discourse. That is, when we pose for pictures, I'm not sure what kind of audience analysis we might develop to manage risk when our image can circulate into un-anticipatable contexts.[2] We quickly discover the limits of autonomous authorship. In the 1960s and 1970s, postmodernism thoroughly dismantled the concept of the author, leaving behind *force* and *context*. In "Signature Event Context," Derrida describes force and context as essential predicates for the concept of writing. He elaborates, "a written sign carries with it a force that breaks with its context, that is, with the collectivity of presences organizing the moment of its inscription" (9). That is, compositions travel

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[1] "all those whose image, ideas, or actions influence a writer during the process of composition" ("Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked" 168).

[2] In "Signature Even Context," Derrida critiques Austin for ignoring the point that the infelicity between sr/sd might be a law of signification. He writes, "Austin does not ponder the consequences issuing from the fact that a possibility—a possible risk—is *always* possible, and is in some sense a necessary possibility" (15). In other words, for Derrida, the possibility of (the risk of) infelicity *constitutes the structure of signification*. For digital images of bodies, I'm talking about a similar kind of "risk." However, when images of bodies are published online, any attempt at an audience-centered strategy takes Derrida's notion of "risk" to it its limits. Remixers may very well take our image and use it for very nearly any reason and any context, and sometimes these (re)compositions are compositions of public shame or (re)compositions at the level of identity and/or violations of privacy. Further, there are technologies of recomposition that have yet to be invented—like a polaroid taken in the 1980s that remerged on Facebook 30 years later. When we participate online, it becomes uniquely important that we strategize for those audiences whom we can't possibly strategize for.

through contexts and are further constituted by those contexts it encounters. A composition's infelicity to context is brought into sharp relief when we consider how pictures of bodies rapidly travel online, unwedded to the moment the picture was taken.

The circulation of bodies and identities poses a number of key ethical questions for rhetorical studies. In recent years, there has been growing attention in the field on the subject of surveillance and privacy in the wake of new technologies. However, this research is fairly new and under-theorized. Walls and Vie's insightful edited collection, *Social Writing/Social Media* explores a range of concerns, including algorithmic surveillance, digital publics, and online identity at the level of pedagogy and practice. Estee Beck's work on digital identity reveals how online behavioral advertising co-constructs identity at the level of computer code ("Invisible Digital Identity"). Lauren Cagle's recent article studies a genre of picture-taking that Cagle calls "strangershots," which are "photographs taken of strangers without their knowledge or consent and then shared online, where they become powerful actants in digital networks" (68). Outside the field of composition and rhetoric, legal scholar Daniel Solove has been quite prolific in his work on privacy, reputation, and the internet.

Drawing from theories of Bruno Latour and Deleuze and Guattari, I contribute to this line of research by offering a new materialist approach to embodiment, digital publics, and circulation theories, which answers Laurie Gries's call to trace how compositions emerge and "live" beyond their initial moments of production and delivery. I will analyze how public discourse and public participation is changing amid surveillance technologies and routine publicity, particularly as it pertains to publicized images of everyday people. I explore how the internet's high degree of public digital

circulation complicates the ownership and authorship of bodies; how it complicates

discursive participation at the level of the body and the level of personal data; and how it

complicates our concept of "audience" if our bodies and our identities can quickly and

suddenly emerge without our awareness or consent in nearly any other context. So, when

we live our everyday lives, it becomes nearly impossible to anticipate where our bodily

performances can travel in a surveillance economy. In short, this dissertation investigates

the rhetorical fallout of routine surveillance and digital context collapse. Before we go

too far, it might be useful to look at an example of what I mean.

The Risks of Publicity

Consider the well-studied and well-documented "Star Wars Kid" meme. In

November of 2002, a 15-year-old from a small town in Quebec, Ghyslain Raza, recorded

with a camcorder a video of himself, alone, in the privacy of his high school's

audio/video studio, where he twirled around a golf ball retriever as though defending

against an imperceptible enemy. Ostensibly, the video was not meant to be shared or

viewed by anyone else.[3] However, around April of 2003, three of his classmates found

the recording on a shelf in the school's media room, digitized the video and shared it via

email with fellow students at the school (Wei) and ultimately uploaded it to Kazaa, a

peer-to-peer file sharing application popular at the time. In a matter of weeks, the video

had amassed hundreds of thousands of views ("Star Wars Kid Dislikes His Fame").

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[3] In a 2003 *New York Times* interview (Harmon), Raza's mother indicates that the video was made for a
school project, but she also said that the video was "not intended [for] anyone to see." In either case, Raza
himself never shared, distributed, or gave permission to distribute the video.

*Figure 1.2 Screenshot of the unedited "Star Wars Kid"
video.*

Dubbed the "Star Wars Kid," Raza's story was quickly picked up by blog sites,

having understood him to be acting out a lightsaber battle in the stylings of Darth Maul

from the Star Wars franchise. Shortly thereafter, the original video and remixes appeared

on several humor web and blog sites. The first significant remix emerged about two

weeks after the original video began circulating. The remix added a Star Wars-like

opening crawl, which transitioned into the video of Raza with a golf ball retriever edited

to look like red lightsaber blades along with lightsaber sound effects. Overtop the video,

the iconic "Duel of the Fates" song plays to imitate the drama from Episode I. Toward

the end of the video, in a reference to Raza's performance, a caption reads disparagingly,

"Wow, Talk about being screwed." Other remixes built on top this remix, adding other

features like seeker drones, lasers (being deflected by the saber blades), using different

colors for the saber blades (some red, some yellow, some green, some blue), and different

background music (like "Magic Carpet Ride," "You Should Be Dancing," or "Yakety

Sax"). Some remixed the original video with audio and video from the *Matrix* films, The

Hulk (remixed as "The Bulk"), *Lord of the Rings* (entitled "Lord of the Onion Rings"), and with video games like *Tetris* or *Fruit Ninja*.

Figure 1.3 A screen capture from one of the remixes, "Drunken Jedi," with green lightsaber blades and red blaster fire digitally added.

More mainstream sites like *Wired* began covering the story, further circulating the original video and its remixes (Kahney). In fact, the Star Wars Kid meme garnered so much attention that a 2003 *New York Times* article writes, "this [video], known as the Star Wars Kid, has traveled farther, faster and commanded more attention than any in recent memory" (Harmon).

After receiving considerable and largely negative attention, Raza dropped out of school, was diagnosed with depression, and spent the remainder of the semester in a children's psychiatric ward (Luce-Kapler, Sumara, and Iftody). By July of 2003, Raza's parents sued the parents of the three classmates who uploaded the original video for around $250,000 USD (Wei), which they ultimately settled. According to Raza, whenever he was in a public place, strangers would say, "Hey! It's Ghyslain Raza! Star Wars Kid, hey!" ("'Star Wars Kid' Gets Revenge..."). Online, users even encouraged

him to kill himself (Trudel). According to Raza, the torment was "simply unbearable, totally. It was impossible to attend class" (Solove, *Future of Reputation* 47). By 2006, according to the viral marketing company, The Viral Factory, collated page impressions from a variety of websites (including YouTube) indicate that the original "Star Wars Kid" video had been viewed 900 million times just three years after first appearing online ("Star Wars Kid Is Top Viral Video"). Understandably, as Raza laments in an interview with *L'actualité*, it felt as though the whole world was laughing at him.

The 2003 virality of the "Star Wars Kid" predates YouTube and the ubiquity of social media. So, the digital travel of Raza's likeness is noteworthy considering the mechanisms and limitations of sharing at the time. Several sources suggest that the Star Wars Kid might be the first (or one of the first) viral videos in the way we tend to mean "viral" today. In either case, what we can observe here is the resilience and tenacity of memes in digital networks. We can also observe a new ethic of composing. That is, viral internet memes, like the "Star Wars Kid," should challenge the ethics of postmodern theories about authoring everyday people. For instance, what happens when we do away with intentionality? No doubt, Raza was the author of his own embodied performance. However, Raza certainly didn't intend for his video to find its way to 900 million other computer screens. And, at the time of the recording, he might reasonably have expected that it would safely remain as a single-copy videotape. Raza's offline life, his very identity, had been recomposed to include the new moniker, "Star Wars Kid." We can see how real harm can come to individuals and their reputations when their image is recomposed and circulated for purposes and contexts that the individual in question cannot possibly anticipate or control.

While it is exceedingly unlikely that most people will suffer the level of virality

that Raza had suffered, the ease with which images can be reproduced and remixed and

how widely and quickly they can circulate raises a lot critical, ethical questions about

authorship, privacy, and discursive participation online. In some ways, this project

describes particular processes bodies undergo when they are surveilled, regulated, and

co-constructed. These processes overlap with Michel Foucault's concept of bio-power.

That is, a continuum of regulative apparatuses that "distribut[e] the living in the domain

of value and utility" (*History of Sexuality* 144). In other words, human bodies are valued

insofar as they are *useful* for a given situation. The collective shaming of Raza's

embodied performance, for example, was useful for a network of users. In this way, bio-

power functions, in part, on internalized shame reproduced from processes embedded

within institutions. While Foucault largely describes bio-power functioning at the

institutional level, *sous*veillance[4] technologies (like smart phone cameras) have entered

the fray. So, instead of simply institutions surveilling and regulating us, we are also

surveilling each other *as well as surveilling ourselves* in coordination with these

institutions, (nearly) at all times. These provocations into bio-power pose obvious

problems for privacy and agency. Insofar as our image stands to be captured by

surveillance technologies, we can't really be guaranteed the kind of privacy we think of

when we talk about "privacy." In this way, my analysis does not stop at pictures or

videos. Following the scholarship of Estee Beck, I also include other modes of watching

like data collected from social media accounts based on our behaviors in order to

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[4] Coined by computer science scholar, Steve Mann; from the French "*sous*," meaning "from below."

generate a profile of our preferences. What then are the consequences for participation in the public sphere? In a surveillance economy, is a non-participation even possible?

Throughout this dissertation, I will use these concepts to argue that, because of routine surveillance and publicity, both on and offline identity is continually (re)constructed through remix practices and a remix ethic derived from the very technologies that mediate those practices. While many scholars focus their study on the transformation of digital products, scholars should also attend to the particular processes—via technological mediations and user practices—bodies undergo by a network of on and offline actors. The remaining sections of this introduction will outline two classical rhetorical concepts that are key for my framing of surveillance and digital culture: *kairos* and the enthymeme. I will begin by first reviewing Ridolfo and DeVoss's update on the canon of delivery with what they call, "rhetorical velocity," and how it has destabilized the concept of *kairos*. Second, I show how the enthymeme, through probable and implicit cultural premises, leverages an unstable *kairos* to circulate digital artifacts and construct an ethics of rhetorical engagement. Third, I will conclude with the implications these concepts pose for digital publics as I preview the subsequent chapters of this project.

The Risks of Rhetorical Velocity and *Kairos*

Recently, scholars in digital rhetoric have repositioned the rhetorical canon of delivery in the context of digital circulation and distribution. While Cicero and Quintilian locate delivery in the body, the relationship between the rhetor and the audience in ancient Rome differs considerably from their relationship in digital networks. For Cicero, delivery is "the language of the body" (III.222). In *Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian,

following Cicero, also locates the canon of *delivery* in the body. He writes that delivery is "often styled *action*," citing voice and gesture as delivery's primary forms, and pointing out that, for Cicero, it is a kind of physical eloquence (XI.iii.1). Delivery, in this way, is committed to a rhetor-audience relationship largely interested in the moment of performance. James Porter's 2009 article, "Recovering Delivery for Digital Rhetoric," positions delivery as a *techne* in digital rhetoric. For Plato, "*techne* is a pure knowledge of form or standard" (Wild 257), as opposed to merely blind procedure or blind technique. In this view, *techne* involves *understanding* a procedure, not merely mechanical reproduction (Wild 264). For Porter, "making a *techne* decision [considers] delivery, distribution, timing, and audience impact" (214) to achieve particular ends. Unlike Cicero and Quintilian's take on delivery as fixed, embodied physical presences, Porter illustrates how in digital contexts rhetors can "design [their] discourse to achieve a high degree of circulation, or [they] can design it to limit circulation, depending on [their] wishes" (214). In other words, delivery-as-*techne* involves understanding and leveraging the particular procedures of how compositions travel and persuade audiences.

However, Porter's take on delivery doesn't fully account for circulation by appropriation and remix, which poses problems if the thing being remixed is an individual's body, data, and/or identity. So, where Porter considered digital circulation and delivery at the level of production, Ridolfo and DeVoss coined "rhetorical velocity" as a consideration of digital circulation and delivery at the level of *re*production. That is, when rhetors publish material online, they should assume that that material has a strong likelihood of being copied and remixed into other newer compositions. Ridolfo and DeVoss use a PR statement as a useful example where rhetors should *expect* their work to

be appropriated and recomposed in other contexts. For example, in her article on hashtag activism, Caroline Dadas points out, in 2014, when "Michelle Obama posed with #bringbackourgirls written on a sign, users remixed the image by altering the writing on the sign[. …] In one striking example, the new text read, 'My husband has killed more Muslim girls than Boko Haram ever could'" (31). In other words, "the representatives of the Obama administration responsible for this photo failed to account for rhetorical velocity" (32). While the Obama administration could have more carefully strategized how the First Lady's photograph might be remixed into political counterarguments, strategizing for rhetorical velocity is a difficult proposition. In fact, it seems impossible for political figures or even everyday people to avoid having their image (mis)appropriated and remixed for *any* unforeseeable reason—whether it's posing with a collection of *Goosebumps* books (i.e., the "Ermahgerd" meme), or leaving behind an embarrassing video in the audio video room in high school.

Like the image of me at the start of this chapter, our embodied performances, *either on or offline*, risk being unmoored from their original time and place. So, rhetorical velocity can't be adequately accounted for without a more nuanced understanding of the classical rhetorical concept of *kairos*. As most scholars have pointed out, *kairos* is a difficult concept to pin down. However, it is more or less commonly understood as leveraging the optimal moment for rhetorical action. Often split into two slightly different definitions, *kairos* can be understood as: 1) the opportune time or 2) the *appropriateness* of a given situation,[5] the latter of the two functions similarly to Aristotle's rhetorical appeal to *ethos* or Cicero's notion of propriety. In some Hippocratic treatises, diseases

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[5] See the *Phaedrus* 272a for *kairos* as propriety of time.

could be cured if remedies were applied at the right moment (Atwill 57). James

Kinneavy's 1986 study revived *kairos* as a neglected concept, constructing a model of

kairos akin to Bitzer's rhetorical situation or Burke's dramatistic pentad. Similarly,

Isocrates's sophistic version of *kairos* involves adapting to and responding to situations in

the moment of the situation.[6] This version operates on a slightly different register

compared to the Platonic sense as an *opportunity* which we can leverage (Rickert 95), but

closer to the sophistic version of *kairos*, which is, as Susan Jarratt defines it, "essential

[for the orator] to judge the circumstances obtaining at the moment of an oration" (Jarratt

11). In other words, for Isocrates, *kairos* involves doing the best with what you have.

However, rhetorical velocity in a surveillance economy dislodges *kairos* from a

particular moment of delivery in favor of a wider, far more unstable *kairos*. In this way,

delivery and *kairos* are irreducible to the linearity of *chronos* time. For instance, a private

conversation recorded and disseminated in public forums challenges any presumption

about the appropriateness of that conversation. The conversation had one kind of *kairotic*

exigence in a private context and a different kind of a *kairotic* exigence in a public

context. This brings to mind "hot mic" moments in politics, like Joe Biden privately

telling Barack Obama, "This is a big fucking deal," upon passing the Affordable Care

Act. More recently, scholars have moved *kairos* onto more ontological, materialist

grounds.[7] That is, beyond merely timing, *kairos* is constitutive of the technologies of

(re)composition, the digital networks that share/circulate those compositions, and the

screens that deliver those compositions. In this way, *kairos* presents itself as an

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[6] See *Panathenaicus* 30.

[7] Thomas Rickert, for example, moves to "embed *kairos* more concretely in place, […or toward a] material emplacement" (76).

"emergent context" and establishes a "living present" for a "purely circumstantial activity of invention" (White 13). In other words, we are subject to the caprice of a number of potential moments, to the accessibility of cameras, to the arrangement of the physical environment, the incentive structure of social networks, and untold other ambient forces that materially grant digital (re)compositions the velocity to travel.

In complex networks—a consideration for human and nonhuman actors inter(intra)acting—rhetorical velocity loses its quality of strategy. Or at least leveraging *kairos* as rhetorical strategy loses some of its power. Put another way: *logos* is not a prerequisite for *kairotic* invention in a surveillance economy. As Eric Charles White's *Kaironomia* argues, *kairos* is a dynamic moment that requires adaption and improvisation on the part of the rhetor, qualities that do not necessarily presuppose rational forethought. That is, "*kairos* counsels thought to act always, as it were, on the spur of the moment" (13). In digital contexts, *kairos* may very well counsel the conditions for a text to reemerge or be remixed. Critically, however, *kairos* seems to be a poor advisor for surreptitiously surveilled public bodies. In this way, *logos* becomes even less relevant than previously thought. According to White, "Gorgias would have been inconsistent ever to have codified his views on kairos; […] Since kairos stands for precisely the irrational novelty of the moment that escapes formalization, any science of "kaironomy" would find itself incoherently promising foreknowledge of chance" (White 20). Rhetorical velocity, in this way, is shaped by unpredictable circumstances for the delivery of public bodies for future purposes—delivery without *techne*.

In either case, as we can see, *kairos* is a greater force external to the rhetor. In antiquity, the mythical figure of Kairos is depicted as a muscular winged figure, holding a

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set of scales, with one finger surreptitiously weighting one side of the scale (Hawhee). The theologian Paul Tillich attributes a divine quality to *kairos*, which Kinneavy finds interesting but ultimately rejects (Thompson). I, on the other hand, am not so sure these divine qualities of *kairos* should be so readily dismissed. Rather, they speak precisely to the very problem of rational strategizing for velocity, especially in the context of near-ubiquitous surveillance technologies. That is, there are often imperceptible figures monitoring our activities with a finger on the scale (i.e., surveillance of user data or an individual sharing a picture of a stranger). In this sort of economy, it would probably require an unhealthy level of day-to-day vigilance to monitor our embodied performances for unforeseeable *kairoi*. Rhetorical velocity, in some respects, is entirely predicated on this caprice. However, a consideration for these unknowable, external forces shouldn't take away from the fact that the rhetor *can* adjust their strategy for circumstances beyond their control. However, regularly strategizing our bodily performances for routine surveillance and unknowable future recompositions sounds nearly maddening.

Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel contend that, when students learn to compose for recomposition, they, "are better equipped and more likely to participate in the public sphere" (79). This dissertation extends these aims by asking: How can rhetors adequately "theorize their own situated decisions about public participation" (Sheridan et al. 17) within complex networks, where the boundary between on and offline is often ambiguous? How can we strategize if our images can be taken by anyone when walking down the street? Or where our embodied performances can reemerge in an entirely different place and time? How do we prepare for rhetorical velocities that we can't

possibly strategize for? As I explore next, understanding *how* and *why* digital artifacts

travel might help us to begin to answer some of these complex questions.

The Ethical Risks of Memes and Enthymemes

If an unstable *kairos* is the condition that makes rhetorical velocity possible, the

enthymeme is the logic that propels memes and meme-practices forward. In the

scholarship, however, there seems to be considerable confusion regarding precisely how

to define the enthymeme.[8] Modern takes have typically understood the enthymeme as a

syllogism with an unstated premise. This unstated premise is usually some cultural

commonplace, not unlike Toulmin's concept of a "warrant" in constructing arguments.

While he tends to hold the enthymeme as essential to persuasion, Aristotle gives us a

mixed bag of definitions, referring to the enthymeme as a *kind* of syllogism, usually a

rhetorical syllogism.[9] In several places, Aristotle describes the enthymeme as being

formed from *topoi* (1.2.21), common beliefs (McBurney 63), or "propositions [already]

expressed" (1.3.7). For McBurney, the enthymeme serves a particular role in Aristotle's

two broad provinces of knowing: apodeictic certainty (scientific knowledge) and

reasoning in the realm of probabilities—the enthymeme largely being associated with the

latter. In either case, despite some of this ambiguity, the enthymeme does seem to be

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[8] In his introduction to his translation of the *Rhetoric*, Lane Cooper argued against viewing the enthymeme as *simply* an incomplete syllogism (xxvi). W.D. Ross argued that it is impossible generate a consistent theory in Aristotle's philosophy (*Aristotle's Prior and Posterior Analytics*), and McBurney focused on the enthymeme's association with probabilities and informality. In either case, for Aristotle, enthymemes function as a style of logical persuasion, while perhaps not serving as *strictly* syllogistic reasoning. Thomas Conley argues that *enthymêmata* in Isocrates may mean something like "smart sayings" or "well-turned phrases" or "finely wrought periods" (172). Further, Jeffery Walker points out that, "Isocrates' enthymeme, in sum, arrives (for its audience) as a brilliant, inspirational stroke of insight, a decisive turn that brings suddenly into focus and gives memorable presence to a particular turn of thought the *kairos* of its moment has made possible; it is indeed *apotomos* [abruptness]" (Walker 53).

[9] "the enthymeme is a rhetorical syllogism" (1.2.8) or "the enthymeme is a sort of syllogism" (2.22.1).

essential to Aristotle's rhetoric, writing that "enthymemes are the substance of persuasion" (qtd. in Conley 169).

In 1959, Bitzer (somewhat controversially) upended, or perhaps restored, Aristotelian notions of the enthymeme by arguing that the enthymeme recruits the audience to complete the incomplete syllogism.[10] For Bitzer, enthymemes are rhetorical syllogisms "in which premises *are asked for* in order to achieve persuasion" (405, my emphasis). In this view, the enthymeme generates arguments deductively by relying on (and reproducing) previously agreed upon syllogisms, premises, or conclusions. A key point in Bitzer's argument is that the enthymeme is getting the audience to *do* something, to be an *active* participant in the argument itself rather than passive consumers.[11] In *On Rhetoric*, logical persuasion is enacted by means of paradigmatic inductions or syllogistic reproductions. Aristotle writes, "All [speakers] produce logical persuasion by means of paradigms or enthymemes and by nothing other than these" (1.2.8). In this passage, Aristotle's understanding of persuasion relies on cultural reproduction, whether that reproduction is a culturally established logical proof or by calling upon the audience to infer what is self-evident. Aristotle continues, "It is possible to form syllogisms and draw inductive conclusions either from previous syllogisms or from statements that are not reasoned out but require a syllogism [if they are to be accepted] because they are not

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[10] Citing the pervasive influence of Stoic logic, Conley resists Bitzer's view by arguing that nowhere does Aristotle explicitly describe the syllogism as an inferential process, and nowhere does Aristotle give us an "axiomatic" system for enthymemes that Bitzer's framework seems to require.

[11] Similarly, John Gage views enthymematic reasoning as a matter of choice on the part of the rhetor and what cultural assumptions that are available on the part of the audience. Gage makes the argument that syllogisms are kinds of enthymemes rather than enthymemes kinds of syllogisms. He writes, "What has replaced the logical model of argumentation is something looser and more akin to psychology than to science. [… What] I mean [by psychology is] a sense of rhetorical engagement as an activity bound by the conditions of appeal that exist in audiences and that are *reproduced* in the structures of language but not bounded by the structures of logic" (166, my emphasis).

commonly believed [*endoxa*]" (1.2.13). In this sense, the paradigm draws inductive conclusions, whereas the enthymeme generates arguments syllogistically by relying on (and reproducing) previously agreed upon syllogisms, premises, or conclusions.

Renewed theorizing of enthymematic reasoning has enabled scholars to locate arguments in extra-linguistic spaces. Valerie Smith, for example, has argued that visual genres generate arguments through enthymematic reasoning because "[t]hey call for judgment, and thus appeal emotionally and ethically as well as logically" in order for audiences to make meaning out of them (122). In their recent presentation, "Researching Enthymemes in Digital Social Spaces," at the *Computers and Writing Conference*, Werner and Love argued that rhetorical velocity "represents a collective consensus that pre-exists the artifact and which the artifact partially validates to spread." Like Werner and Love, I find the enthymeme a useful concept not only for analyzing digital artifacts, but also understanding *why* and *how* these artifacts travel. But to extend this line of thinking, I am also interested in, like Smith, how arguments and value systems are embedded and crafted within the very networks, tools, and practices that are (re)produced online. For digital rhetoric, the marriage of probabilistic reasoning by internet users and hyper-rational computer code has a decidedly enthymematic quality to it. Contrasted with, say, the unidirectionality of television, digital networks are predicated on the value of *participation*. In using the tools of digital networks, users actively participate by filling in the cultural gaps through engagements including: liking, sharing, retweeting, or even *simply viewing digital artifacts*. Their engagements tell network algorithms the kinds of content and the values embedded within a network that are good and desirable. So, Bitzer's reframing of the enthymeme gives us an ethical approach to not only writing but

also to reading. If the audience is being recruited as an active participant, then the reader is not off the hook for the ethical dimensions of a circulating digital artifact, including memes or particular meme-practices like picture-taking, remixing, or sharing.

Of course, much of digital life means living in a "meme culture." Digital artifacts circulate rapidly through enthymematic logic: the duplication and, to a certain extent, the imitation of cultural commonplaces. Coining the term, Richard Dawkins describes the meme as "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*" (192). An abbreviation of the Greek *mimeme* (to imitate something) that recalled the word "gene," the word "meme" travels through duplication and reproduction, including, "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches" (192). More than just words or concepts passed from person to person, Dawkins imagines memes as cultural practices that convey value or cultural identification. If we are thinking about "memes" as cultural units that survive through reproduction, [12] the enthymeme seems to be a key rhetorical mechanism through which these internet memes rhetorically reproduce and circulate multi-modal forms of argumentation. In keeping with Bitzer's framing of the enthymeme as a participatory logic, memes and meme-practices (digital behaviors or activities that circulate) reproduce cultural commonplaces through probable and implicit premises that recruit audiences to fill in the cultural gaps. In other words, *readers are never passive consumers but always active participants in the circulation of digital artifacts.*

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[12] Apparently, Dawkins felt his concept of the meme was inappropriately "highjacked" (Solon) when it was used to describe the genre of imagetext we now call "internet memes." When people use the term "meme," they are typically referring to, more specifically, image-macro memes (or the image-texts that circulate on social media). Regardless, I think the concepts are similar enough. Besides, memes, meme-practices, and internet memes all circulate based of the same kinds of *doxic* and *kairotic* modes of persuasion. So, I don't see the need to make the same rigid distinction Dawkins makes here.

A new materialist perspective helps us understand how values and practices are enthymematically reproduced within digital technologies. Drawing from Latour, it's useful to think of technological mediation not simply as a terministic screen, but also as an agent rife with the capacity to create new assemblages. In "Morality and Technology," Latour argues that tools have the capacity to materially change the actor that uses the tool. He writes, "thanks to the hammer, I become literally another man, a man who has become 'other', since from that point in time I pass through alterity, the alteration of that folding" (250). Tools have the capacity to change a person's relationship to other actors and make available new ways of being in the world. By carrying a gun, for instance, a good person is "transformed" into an entirely different actor. A good person without a gun may simply be an angry person. But a good person with a gun may very well become a criminal. In other words, the gun in and of itself is not a neutral tool: it has agentive affordances that transform both the person and the object ("On Technical Mediation" 31). In Lauren Cagle's framing, Latour views the "technologies available to us [as actors that] shape us, our choices, and our actions" (Cagle 71). Similarly, the ubiquity of cameras has changed the ethical paradigm. Having one's picture taken is no longer remarkable and the value of privacy has adjusted to accommodate this new technological milieu. In other words, the tools made available to us inform the implicit ethical premises users assume within a given ecology.

I argue, then, that digital culture is enthymematic insofar as it is a *participatory culture*. Memes and meme-practices are the traces of that participatory culture. That is to say, memes are copied and travel from one type of memory storage (like brains or computer servers) to another, but the cultural values embedded in our practices explain

precisely how and why these compositions travel[13]—practices like our tendency to take pictures of each other or ourselves; or sharing, liking, and retweeting images or videos we find compelling or significant; or users' tendency to remix, republish, and circulate content. Jeffery Walker has described the enthymeme as a highly adaptable force and subject to the caprice of the moment. He writes that the enthymeme is "kairotically opportunistic" and "foregrounds an inferential and attitudinal complex[,...] an architectonic principle for both the invention and structuring suasive discourse" (63). To echo Walker's point here, it might be useful to think of the enthymeme as *architectonic* in that institutional infrastructures reproduce cultural assumptions while also reshaping and rebuilding those values.[14] In this view, knowledge is co-constructed between rhetor and audience, between rhetor and discourse community, and, between *practices and the technologies that mediate those practices*.

The Risks of Bio-Politics and the Circulation of Identity

As the forthcoming chapters of this dissertation will illustrate, enthymematic, *kairotic*, and *doxic* modes of discursive participation reaffirm that, for much of the digital world, we are always already engaged in public spheres in one way or another, always plugged into some kind of information network. Throughout this project, I attempt to

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[13] In his book, *Memes in Digital Culture*, Limor Shifman reviews three common approaches in the scholarship regarding the nature of memes. They are, mentalist-driven, behavior-driven, and inclusive memetics. Mentalist-driven memetics are ideas or pieces of information that reside in the brain (37). Behavior-driven memetics are behaviors and artifacts rather than ideas (38). Inclusive memetics are "any type of information that can be copied by imitation" (39). When I reference "memes" or memetics in this project, I'm don't feel the need to make a distinction specifying any of these three approaches. When I refer to memes as distinct from "internet memes," I am understanding memes as concepts that travel through language, visuals, and practices.

[14] DeVoss, Cushman, and Grabill make a similar point about how an infrastructure relies on embedded cultural values to solve problems, particularly in new media. They write, "a tool is […] given meaning as a tool by specific users working on particular problems in specific situations" (22).

understand: how might we rearticulate public spheres when surveillance technologies have moved into private spaces? Recording devices in our classrooms? Cell phone cameras in our homes? Over the last twenty years, participation in the public sphere has radically changed in the wake of surveillance capitalism and the embodied ethical-rhetorical engagements surveillance has consequently produced. These instruments of surveillance have, for instance, entirely destabilized the concept of *kairos*, where bodies can distantly participate in publics without regard to time, place, or context. Digital surveillance has crafted a new economy of bio-power. That is, the tools of surveillance have embedded within digital culture the commonplace premise that bodies are reducible to objects: they are pictures to be shared and data to be profited from. Foucault writes that bio-power was essential to the development of capitalism, that capitalism "would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production [...] their availability and docility" (*History of Sexuality* 141). In digital publics, bodies are mediated through a "sphere of economic processes" that optimize for social hierarchization and sustaining docility. So, it seems incumbent upon teachers, scholars, and students to defamiliarize ourselves with these often ambient, suasive, and potentially oppressive invisible forces so that we can advocate for their change.

Over the last two decades, scholars have focused on reframing publics with an emphasis on discursive participation and circulation. In *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner studies publics as both a collection of individuals gathered at a physical event and the wide-reaching network of participants who read and circulate particular texts. Warner gives us a theory of *publics* where *being public* isn't a requirement. Nancy Welch and Jenny Rice have taken up publics theory from a political-activist orientation,

studying specific political movements and deriving a theory of public engagement. In a similar vein, Nancy Fraser, Christian Weisser, and Frank Farmer have considered how subaltern counterpublics, comprised of like-minded individuals, collectively discuss and nurture counterarguments to prepare for broader, hegemonic public discourses. In her work, *Still Life with Rhetoric*, Gries traces the complex network of actors that circulated and remixed the famous "Obama Hope" picture, consequently forming a variety of digital-visual publics. However, many of these discourses conceive of publics as conscious and deliberate participation. In a surveillance economy, where our image or our data can be appropriated almost any time, how might we retheorize publics? As I'll demonstrate throughout this project, living in a surveillance economy, our image or our personal data are unbound by space and time and can be used to participate in a wide variety of discourses without our awareness or consent—an ethical dilemma scholars, rhetoricians, and composition teachers must reckon with.

In Chapter 2, I address this dilemma by intersecting embodiment and authorship theories in order to examine how a digital remix culture recomposes images of bodies under an ethic of fair use, which poses particular problems for the identities and reputations of individuals featured in those pictures. Generally, individual rights of publicity have been handled as a matter of intellectual *property* instead of *privacy*.[15] What we can see here is a conflation of publicity as sellable/tradeable private property. Jennifer Rothman has recently moved to correct this shift, arguing that it is a mistake to handle "the right of publicity" as a matter of intellectual property instead of privacy,

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[15] In 1953, the "right of publicity was recast […] in *Haelan Laboratories, Inc v Topps Chewing Gum, Inc.* as a property right rather than a privacy right because privacy law couldn't protect the interests of celebrities who wanted to endorse products and the companies with whom they did business" (Lemley 1154).

where privacy is better understood as "self-ownership." In other words, the right to own oneself (and therefore public participation) should be inherent to the identity-holder, not a commodity external to the individual. I extend this thinking by arguing that legal and postmodern theories of authorship pose ethical problems for reading and writing bodies in digital spaces. I offer a new materialist take on authorship, which affords us a better understanding into how bodies are composed online and provides renewed insight into privacy and ownership rights.

In Chapter 3, I show the ways in which individuals can be recruited into digital publics without their awareness or consent, a phenomenon I refer to as "somnambulant participation." At the level of the body, we participate distantly and affectively, both in the "real world" and online. At the level of personal data, information about ourselves has become commodified by tech companies like Google and Facebook. Privacy seems to have much to do with what we can control, which, in a surveillance economy, can be difficult to come by. The price of public participation comes in the form of our privacy—a privacy that we relinquish after consenting to those user agreements, likely without reading them first. By working through a variety of cases, I demonstrate how, as Papacharissi phrases it, privacy has become a "luxury commodity" in our present information ecology.

Chapter 4 presents a case study of a viral internet meme, "Hipster in the Park," to illustrate the theories Chapters 2 and 3 engage with. The meme features a private individual, Christopher Hermelin, whose image was captured without his awareness or consent. I begin my study with two reddit boards to which the meme was initially published in order to show how the identity of an individual was constructed by human

actors (reddit users) and non-human actors (reddit's community-based algorithm). I go on to show how discourses on hipsterdom rely on *doxic* and *kairoic* modes of argumentation to construct identity across various media platforms, including radio interviews and even my own interview with Hermelin. This case study demonstrates, in stark terms, the unknowable rhetorical velocities of an everyday person and how their identity is algorithmically (and enthymematically) co-constructed by human and non-human actors.

Finally, much of this dissertation examines the ways in which the human actors in digital networks are frequently dehumanized, reduced to mere data to achieve purely capitalistic ends. Chapter 5 addresses this dehumanization by extending Todd DeStigter's concept of a *critical empathy* for a digital writing classroom. Here, I merge research on empathy and affectivity with Paulo Freire's approach to critical literacy. In this chapter, I propose that teachers of digital writing should attend to dispositions of empathy in their digital writing classrooms as a lens through which students can criticize institutions of power amid an ecosystem of routine surveillance. I conclude with writing assignments that facilitate developing empathetic dispositions and how to use empathy as a mechanism for critiquing surveillance systems to better advocate for digital privacy rights.

CHAPTER 2

CONSTRUCTING BODIES UNDER "FAIR USE":

DISTRIBUTED AUTHORSHIPS AND WANING OWNERSHIPS

"Representation mingles with what it represents, to the point where one speaks as one writes, one thinks as if the represented were nothing more than the shadow or reflection of the representer. A dangerous promiscuity and the nefarious complicity between the reflection and the reflected which lets itself be seduced narcissistically. In this play of representation the point of origin becomes ungraspable."
(Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 36)

"To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed."
(Susan Sontag, *On Photography* 2)

Introduction

Sometime around 2008, Adrian Smith, submitted an image of himself from the

third grade (circa 1992) to a Tumblr blog specializing in old laser-themed photos called,

"We Have Lasers" (@DrAdrianSmith). About a decade later in December of 2020, now a

biologist at North Carolina State University, Smith stumbled upon that old image of

himself circulating around a completely different social media platform, an Instagram

account called, "Teenage Stepdad." Twelve years after sharing his school picture to the

laser-themed blog, the image that otherwise hung "on a wall by [his] grandma's

backdoor" (@DrAdrianSmith) appeared to have generated an entire digital life of its own.

Apparently, Teenage Stepdad found Smith's third grade laser photo circulating online,

copied the photo, and remixed it to create an original character named "Grayson" in a

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series of memes. It seems that Smith's third-grade picture had been living an online meme-life for three years before it came to his attention.

The character, Grayson, is often portrayed as an intractable stepson getting into trouble in one way or another. In one instance, he is portrayed as a "bedwetter" and in another as a "rockabilly." Of course, these memes are also accompanied with plenty of comments from Instagrammers. In the bedwetter meme (see figure 2.2, top left image), many (if not most) comments were actually (even if ironically) affirmative, like "Peein your pants is cool." However, a few might be construed as mockery, like, "FUCK GRAYSON," or "a pillar of the bedwetting community." In either case, here we can observe distributed authorships that have collectively co-constructed a variety of identities with Smith's likeness—or his third-grade likeness anyway. In total, I counted nine unique memes on the Teenage Stepdad Instagram account, and many of these memes have been reproduced onto t-shirts sold on their website. What is notable about the Grayson memes is that they raise critical questions about the ownership and authorship of the likenesses of everyday people and the ease with which likenesses can be appropriated and remixed.

*Figure 2.2 Four Grayson memes from
@teenagestepdad.*

Yes, Smith submitted his image of his own volition, thereby relinquishing (and

unleashing) his image to be remixed for other purposes. Smith may have mistakenly

assumed that he was *only* submitting his third-grade image to a collection of other laser-

themed images, not necessarily to be remixed for other purposes—perhaps an oversight

on his part, but certainly a failure to account for rhetorical velocity. However, the

affordances of new media have opened up the possibility of distributive authorships and

also raises critical ethical questions about how distributed authorships are, can be, or

ought to be.

Teenage Stepdad is a satirical publishing outlet, focusing on social media content.

Their Instagram account has over 300k followers that generates high-quality memes,

satirizing politics or popular culture in the stylings of 80s or 90s movie posters, video

game covers, or VHS boxes. They frequently remix of the likenesses of famous people or

characters to compose their memes, satirizing reoccurring themes such as: CEOs of big

tech companies, conservatism, neoliberalism, capitalism, God, or even the idea of memes

in itself. Some of the common reoccurring famous faces include Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff

Bezos, Britney Spears, Joe Biden, Donald Trump, and the McDonaldland character

"Officer Big Mac."

Figure 2.3 A collection of memes from
@teenagestepdad.

Generally speaking, reproducing the likenesses of famous people (i.e., "public" figures)

or repurposing copyrighted material is protected so long as those images or copyrighted

materials are being satirized (see the Mickey Mouse meme in figure 2.3) or criticized.

This is how television shows, like *Robot Chicken* or *Saturday Night Live*, are able to use

Star Wars characters without too many legal problems.[16] In either case, it's not entirely

clear what the privacy and/or copyright terms for images submitted to a Tumblr blog

were at the time Smith submitted his image and if he'd relinquished copyright by merely

the act of submitting it. Further, it's not entirely clear if Smith's image entered into

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[16] It's worth noting that these kinds of shows risk litigation and are sometimes disincentivized from
reproducing copyrighted material out of the fear of simply going through expensive legal trouble, even if
they are well within their legal right to reproduce that material. So, when they do parody or satirize
copyrighted material, they tend to do so judiciously.

something we might call—to use copyright parlance—"fair use" since it was freely circulating online. However, Teenage Stepdad seemed to have very few qualms about remixing and selling Smith's image, all without his knowledge or consent.

So, Teenage Stepdad has taken the image of an everyday person, in the same way it uses the images of famous people, and *has created an entirely new character and persona* based on that original photo. A key difference between famous people and everyday people is that, because of their relative obscurity, the implicit premises of everyday people rely a bit more on generalized cultural commonplaces as it pertains to superficial qualities of their appearance. For example, the Donald Trump meme above (figure 2.3) relies on well-known, public information about that famous person. The implicit premises constructed by Trump's identity are based on well-documented episodes of unambiguous, gross misogyny. In the case of the "Grayson" memes, however, audiences have to do a bit more enthymematic work to construct the unspoken premises of his identity based on superficial qualities of Smith's third grade picture. For instance, *Slate* writer Aymana Ismail calls the original third grade picture a "particularly bad picture" (Ismail) and describes the Grayson character as having "a gawky, hopeless vibe to him." In an interview with Ismail, Smith, with a good sportsmanship-like attitude, describes his picture as, "me pre-braces, pre-glasses, just 100 percent raw power, blazing through life as a glorious 8 year old" (Ismail). So, the humor/irony embedded in the Grayson memes is that the original image of Smith projects the identity of "a gawky, hopeless" third grader who has been remixed into this Grayson character who *behaves* in ways that are not considered gawky or hopeless while perhaps still *looking* gawky or hopeless. Regarding his meme experience, Adrian Smith tweeted out, "here's a Q&A: Do

you care? No. But also yes, a lot." (@DrAdrianSmith). So, while Smith seems to maintain a good sportsmanship attitude about this ordeal, his experiences isn't altogether innocuous either.

Figure 2.4 Merchandise featuring the Grayson character sold by Teenage Stepdad (@DrAdrianSmith).

Much of the research on these kinds of anecdotes about everyday people going "viral," like in Daniel Solove's work, has been discussed largely in the context of privacy, public shaming, or cyber bullying. This chapter necessarily takes up these issues as well. However, what hasn't been taken up in the field of composition and rhetoric is the idea of the *authorship* of bodies in online spaces. I argue that, by tracing distributed authorships of digital bodies—as opposed to strictly distributed agency or material responsibility (in the extra-moral sense)—scholars stand to gain an ethical perch upon which to study the rhetoricity of networked composing. In our example here, Teenage Stepdad's remixings of Smith's image echoes postmodern theories of meaning-making in semiotic registers. That is, any hope we might have to maintain control over the meaning of any given communication proves exceedingly difficult. The same is certainly true of

our bodies and the meanings (or identities) we may be attempting to project with them. In this way, meaning is contingent, constructed, and unstable. Problematically, this level of hermeneutic flexibility isn't particularly helpful for constructing an ethics of reading or composing bodies online. From a more materialist perspective, we can trace how Smith's likeness circulated and remixed into a decidedly new and unexpected context, inscribed with new meanings and new potentialities and begin to ask ethical questions about the nature of rhetorical velocity and the infrastructures that circulate bodies online.

In digital networks, "circulation" refers to a kind of reproduction. Anytime an image arrives on a computer screen, it arrived that way by means of reproduction: copied from one device (like a server) and then reproduced on a local device (like a smart phone). This kind of distribution creates a robust, networked record of information, enabling untold potentialities regarding how a digitized body can be interpreted and remixed with new meanings imbued upon the identities and reputations of individuals featured in those images. When Smith submitted his third-grade school picture, he'd submitted it to a collection of dated photographs with laser backgrounds, perhaps with the intention of making fun of an out-of-fashion trend and maybe himself a little. However, he certainly could not have anticipated his imaged being remixed as a "bedwetter" named "Grayson." Not when he submitted the image to Tumblr and certainly not when he posed for the picture as a third grader.

Of course, in digital networks, it is exceedingly difficult to anticipate the rhetorical velocity and trajectory of content once it has emerged on these networks. When we turn our attention toward the appropriation and re-presentation of *material bodies* traveling throughout digital networks, communicative and ethical questions make

themselves readily apparent. Can we really adequately anticipate the rhetorical velocity of our embodied selves? When material bodies are within proximity of tools of digital reproduction (like cameras), there is no way to anticipate when or if those bodies will be reproduced. Lloyd Bitzer's rhetorical situation of audience/writer/purpose becomes a less useful heuristic when bodies can be recomposed by audiences for unpredictable purposes and reemerge in contexts that can't possibly be anticipated. Further, individuals are highly limited in their capacity to predict even the technologies of reproduction that have yet to emerge—like a polaroid taken in the 80s appearing on social media.

Since we are no strangers to internet memes, we know that Smith's story is not a unique one. More broadly, our practices regarding digital bodies raises critical questions about what can and can't be owned as it pertains to representations of our material selves. For Susan Sontag, "photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing" (1). Here, Sontag addresses the responsibility on the part of the photographer to wield the power of representation. *How* we re-present. *Who* we re-present. And for what purposes? While much has been written about the ethics of remix and mash-up culture, about the meaning of authorship at various levels, what has not received much attention is this idea of an ethics of bodily authorship and ownership. Can we own our bodies in the same way we can own texts? Or, more to the point, can we *not* own our bodies in the same way that we can*not* own texts? At present, use of individual likenesses are predominantly regulated on the grounds of privacy torts and not in terms of ownership or copyright. This gap in the discourse might have much do with the fact that,

as legal scholar Tatiana Flessas points out, "the [legal] question of property rights in the human body lacks a clear answer" (qtd. in Ridolfo and Rife 231).

So, where might our material bodies belong in this framework? James Porter identifies two poles of intertextuality in collaboration theory: "Romantic," the autonomous author; and "intertextual," the non-autonomous author, constrained by the intertext (*Rhetorical Ethics*). By existing in a heavily camera-ed world, we regularly subject ourselves to potential digital publication, often without our knowledge or consent. We have taken our smart phones and collectively created a self-imposed panopticism of sorts, but more significantly, we don't seem to mind all that much. I argue, then, that legal and postmodern theories of authorship are insufficient in providing an ethics of reading and writing bodies online. We have limited autonomy in terms of how bodies mean and how they are composed. This postmodern orientation toward composing and meaning-making poses a number of legal and ethical questions about common digital practices as it pertains to composing bodies online, how we construct embodied arguments, and even just reading bodies online. In this way, I confront the legal and ethical problematics of copy-and-paste and the digital (re)presentation of bodies as they are composed and recomposed by human and non-human actors.

It seems to me that, as the field has taken the post-human turn, theorizing authorship has been out of vogue for some time. Because of this, there really hasn't been a concerted analysis on how bodies are read, composed, and interpreted—in a word, "authored"—specifically within digital surveillance ecologies. Using case studies of appropriated and (re)composed bodies, this chapter engages authorship theory and theories of embodiment (queer, feminist, and disability) in order to more clearly illustrate

how bodies are authored via the complex relations of human and non-human actors in digital ecologies. What is at stake here is the identities and reputations of everyday people. We've grown quite accustomed to publicizing others and being publicized ourselves. Our relationship to bodies has engendered a sort of *laissez faire* attitude toward publicized bodies. That is, as postmodernism would affirm, we tend to treat bodies like remixable texts. However, in the context of surveillance technologies and social media platforms, treating the bodies in the same way we treat texts is problematic. So, rather than committing to a strictly postmodern treatment of bodies, a material and distributed model of authorship affords us a better understanding into more precisely how bodies are composed and interpreted online and also provides insight into how we might assemble an ethics of composing bodies online.

Throughout this chapter, I will argue that by liking, sharing, or simply viewing digital bodies—we are participating in a "fair use" or "public domain" *ethos* for composing bodies in terms of how identities and reputations are constructed in digital, public spheres. That is to say, we treat pictures of virtual bodies as though we can do whatever we want with them because they are separate from actual bodies, which poses ethical quandaries for identity-construction and privacy more generally. First, in order to make this claim, I will review and update postmodern theories of representation and embodiment through a materialist lens in order to complicate the ethics of bodily authorship. Second, I will use two case studies to show how a fair use *ethos* toward authorship *transforms* bodies in these digital networks to more clearly illustrate the legal and postmodern limits of authorship. In this study, I consider authorships of appropriated bodies digitized, (re)composed and circulated for purposes outside the purview or

permissions of individuals whose bodies have been appropriated. These tracings will

ultimately underscore the ethical complications of these kinds of digital activities that are

prevalent in day-to-day composing practices.

Representations and Interpellations of Bodies

In order to work through how bodies and identities are authored online, we should

begin with a discussion of bodily representation on at least two plains: First, actual

material bodies in the world; and second, representations of bodies in images, or what

Barthes would call the "*Spectrum* of the Photograph" (*Camera Lucida* 9)[17]—be they

digital photographs, printed photographs, remixes or mosaics, still pictures or videos: the

re-presenting or rendering of bodies in one way or another.[18] This distinction is

admittedly a dicey one, since making such a distinction implies that "actual" bodies are

somehow originary. In some ways, they are. They are a starting place. If we consider

bodies in strictly semiotic registers, there is of course nothing *intrinsically* meaningful

about the material body. The meaning that does exist comes from historical, cultural

agreements people have invented as a means to organize and label the world. This might

indicate, like Plato with his Forms, that one level of representation is closer to truth than

the other, which naturally poses a few complications. Is there a true body? A true

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[17] Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, makes a distinction between photography and painting. Barthes's primary
concern in *Lucida* is that of images capturing existence through a lens rather than a painter's brush. We
could also view this as a distinction between *resemblance* and *representation*. Courtroom sketch artists, for
instance, paint individuals in a courtroom that *resemble* those individuals but might be limited in how they
adequately *represent* those individuals—a visual rendering of the artist's particular perspective with the
tools at her disposal. On the other hand, King Francis I of France was represented by a salamander, but did
not resemble one (see Birdsell and Groarke). For my purposes, I don't feel a need to get into the weeds on
this distinction. However, I would point out that the photographs and cameras are special in that they can
more easily duplicate the unmistakable likenesses of individuals, particularly when one considers the ready
access the average person today has to cameras and publication platforms.

[18] We could easily generate more than two plains. For example, like Plato, we could look at bodies on an
ontological plain; we could consider representations of bodies and then representations of representations
(pictures that have been edited/remixed/recomposed). For simplicity, we'll stick with just these two.

identity? A transcendental signified at any level of bodily representation? For my purposes, I will commit to discussing just these two basic levels of bodily representation: actual bodies and virtual bodies. Synthesizing postmodern embodiment theories and contemporary materialist theory, what I hope to show is how virtual bodies are interpellated by the wider network of actors (human users and non-human digital platforms) that work together to co-construct bodies, digital practices, and the values that inform those practices. In short, I hope to show the ethical limitations of remixing bodies with a "fair use" *ethos*.

Bodies in the Flesh, Bodies-as-Texts

To read a thing is to co-construct and co-author that thing. In this way, a hermeneutics of the body is simultaneously a co-authoring of that body's identity. Much has been written, particularly in feminist theory, queer theory, and disability studies, about the idea that bodies are socially constructed. Or at least the meanings we associate with those bodies and the performative actions caused by those bodies are constructs. Through this theoretical lens, we can consider bodies to function like texts or discourses. The body *in itself*, on the other hand, is not imbued with *a priori* signification. Dresses and limped wrists can signify femininity. Trucker hats and deep voices can signify masculinity. The body, in that sense, is a citational practice where meaning is generated from a series of socially sanctioned repetitions and imitations. In Judith Butler's words, "the body is understood to be an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities, a complicated process of appropriation" ("Performative Acts" 521). Similarly, Elizabeth Grosz offers a particular view of corporeal feminism by arguing plainly that "representations and cultural inscriptions quite literally constitute

bodies and help to produce them as such" (x). In other words, bodies are constituted in the act of inscribing meaning. If dresses signify femininity, then feminine bodies will wear dresses: concepts literally construct bodies. Discourses in corporeality and embodiment generally agree, in one way or another, that bodies are socially constructed, either in how they signify or how bodies performatively affect the world around them.

So, what might the implications be, then, for the authorship of bodies if bodies, like texts, are collections of appropriations and/or the result of complex material assemblages? Throughout this chapter, I assume three answers to this question. First, the body serves as a canvas for appropriative activity, where its constituent parts have been copied from other bodies (via imitative practices) and constructed by a wide-ranging ecology of material and social forces. Second, consciously or not, bodies always already participate in discourses and corporeal politics, whether they choose to or not. Third, considering the first two answers, bodies and the meanings signified by bodies are not entirely the autonomous constructions of a singular expressive individual. In other words, even bodies that are being deliberately ironic or subversive still operate within a system of social expectations and material conditions, and therefore we are never the sole, fully autonomous authors of our bodies. While holding these three assumptions, perhaps despite these three assumptions, I also argue that treating bodies *purely* like texts leads us to ethically problematic places.

Following postmodern logic of authorship, treating bodies like texts brings an end to the supposed "author" of a body and instead empowers readers to make of that body what they will. Barthes, for example, brings about the birth of the reader, arguing that "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (148). In this way, the text loses its

expressive qualities and asserts, rather, the reader's role as a co-constitutor of meaning. The idea that a text (or a body) can stand in place for some kind of transcendental signified is problematic for poststructuralism, especially when the reader's subjective experience is not taken into account as a co-constitutor of meaning. Indeed, this is true of bodies just as it is true of texts. In more hermeneutic contexts, meaning, then, is infinitely deferred because subjects produce a text and subjects interpret that text.

Barthes's treatment of the fluidity of material representations is well-rendered in his analysis of Balzac's novella, *Sarrasine*. In *S/Z*, Barthes is especially interested in dismantling artifice and then, to one degree or another, reassembling that artifice. In his comprehensive analysis of *Sarrasine*, Barthes identifies three routes of entry into the symbolic field: 1) rhetorical: erasing the difference between oppositions (the Antithesis); 2) castration: separating the signifier from a stable signified by dismantling gender as a strict binary, critiquing the idea that reproduction is the essential criterion for designating gender; and 3) economic: the realization that currency is representative of nothing (certainly not gold). He writes,

> These three routes are all conducive to stating the same disturbance in classification: it is fatal, the text says, to remove the dividing line, the paradigmatic slash mark which permits meaning to function [...] By abolishing the paradigmatic barriers, this metonymy abolishes the power of legal substitution on which meaning is based [...] in a word, it is no longer possible to *represent*. (215-6)

For Barthes, *Sarrasine* transgresses common symbolic structures, presented as binary oppositions or empty metonymies, in order to disrupt the apparent stability of these

symbolic structures. In other words, Barthes attempts to erase the difference between antitheses and dismantle metonymic representations that construct reality. The route of castration, for example, disrupts the male/female binary when Sarrasine becomes infatuated with Zambinella, a castrato, where reliance on strict oppositions to understand gender might, problematically, indicate that a castrato is neither male nor female and is therefore insufficiently human.[19] In the case of currency, Barthes demonstrates that these metonymic structures are a fiction. Behind representative structures are nothing and signification has no origin (signs without a referent).

To complicate things, as Barthes also points out, the emptiness of signification, the artifice of representation, is necessary for constructing an intelligible reality in the first place. As Seán Burke argues, *S/Z* is about the death and rebirth of the author. But more significantly, *S/Z* reasserts the importance of cultural metonymy to make meaning at all. In other words, we rely on cultural commonplaces to organize the world, which on one hand is useful for meaning-making and on the other hand is always an incomplete representation of the world. In his analysis, Barthes acknowledges the ethical limitations of this metonymy. By understanding the body through strictly symbolic registers, we routinely reassemble the narrow scope of what a body means or is culturally permitted to mean. Which includes matters of identity or reputation.

While postmodern treatments of bodies have liberated some, particularly sexual minorities, it does have ethical limitations for others. For instance, gender experience isn't *simply* something that we wear. Conceptualizing race as *purely* a fiction ignores the historical-economic realities of marginalized groups. For disability theorists, the

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[19] "the neuter must not lay claim to the human" (*S/Z* 215).

particularities of suffering has epistemological value for understanding the body beyond signification. Feminist perspectives, like Kristie Fleckenstein, challenge the notion of bodies-as-texts in her critique of poststructuralist theories. Taking a more materialist approach, she argues that poststructuralism *reduces* bodies to that of texts. She writes, "poststructuralist theories displace bodies as thoroughly (although perhaps less explicitly) as do Descartes and the Romantics. Whereas Descartes brackets the materialism of *res extensa* from the rationalism of *res cogitans* and Romantics embrace the material as subjective consciousness, poststructuralism transforms bodies into discourse, corporeality into textuality" (282). Fleckenstein continues, "By eliding bodies and denying the language of blood and bone, a poststructuralist orientation amputates physiology from meaning, crippling its own transformative critique" (283). Fleckenstein's primary concern here is by reducing bodies to discourse, reducing bodies to signs, it reduces our ability to confront "cultural truths and material conditions" and enact social change (284). Reducing gender to a fiction, for example, would render feminism as obsolete. Citing Hélene Cixous, Fleckenstein argues, "writing with the white ink necessary for the linguistic liberation of women requires that breasts and bodily fluids be something other than discourse" (286). That is, by ignoring the material make up of bodies, people stand to become complicit, like in Foucault's panopticon, in their own subjugation. Indeed, by reducing bodies to text would be to indicate that bodies are reducible to unwedded signifieds and therefore threatens, not only autonomous authorship of our own bodies but also individualistic identity as well.

Queer and feminist theorists in particular have been critiqued for hypertextualizing material bodies and ignoring the materialist scene that Fleckenstein

argues is critical for the politics of bodies. According to Althusser's notion of interpellation, by answering the phonic "call" (that can't go unanswered) from some sort of authority, we confirm our place in world and the identities that social and political institutions have decided for us. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler does make a move toward the material. However, she avoids questions of biology because of problematic essentialist arguments about the relationship between gender roles and biology, like "women ought to be fully restricted to the reproductive domain" (8). However, as Jay Prosser argues in *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, if the body is merely a discursive product, Butler's performativity forecloses on the possibility of transgender bodies. Queer theorist, Sam Bourcier, has offered a particularly full-throated critique of Butler for disempowering trans bodies by reducing the "theater" of Althusserian interpellation to a hyperdiscursive phonic call. He argues that Butler effects a radicle dematerialization that aims to "get rid of this public scene" (238). For instance, to reduce transgender bodies to that of a social construction (that we can simply shape them however we'd like) ignores biological and material realities and, therefore, enables regressive arguments, like: members of the trans community are merely "attention-seeking," or men who dress like women are duplicitous.[20] From a disability perspective, Tobin Siebers echoes a similar critique, arguing that Butler's hyperdiscursive logic indicates that the "physical condition of the body is not a factor in political repression" (77). That is all to say, the logic of social constructivism alone is insufficient to generate a useful ethics of reading (thereby authoring) bodies.

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[20] These regressive arguments are also reminiscent of author JK Rowling's recent, somewhat incomprehensible, anti-trans manifesto, where she seems unable make a distinction between "sex" and "gender" and likens the trans community to those who commit sexual assault.

Indeed, ideology isn't always expressed through speech. In this way, a reaffirmation of the Althusserian "theater" broadens the scene of interpellation to consider the performative force of the material circumstances that bring bodies into being, that construct and compose bodies, and that make bodies obedient. While I certainly do not discard Butlerian social constructivism—just as Butler doesn't totally disregard the "scenography" of interpellation (*Bodies that Matter* 4)—an ethics of reading and writing bodies online necessarily requires acknowledgement of complex and material dimensions of embodiment. As Siebers argues, "[w]henever anyone mentions the idea of social construction, we should ask on principle to see the blueprint" (32). For Siebers, this inquiry into "the blueprint" might include asking why handicapped entrances are built in the back, next to the garbage cans. For me, this inquiry into blueprints might involve asking questions about surveillance technologies, cultural practices, networks, or algorithms that continually publicize bodies. In this way, new materialism insists that we prod the full "scenography" of a rhetorical space in order to investigate the ethical dimensions of embodied authorships.

Because authorship (on or offline) is distributed thanks to a complex material ecology of fleshly and non-fleshly actors, we run into an ethical dilemma if bodies are *simply* (re)inscribable texts. Otherwise, the body itself is rendered irrelevant, a floating signifier to which a signified is constituted depending on the performative influence of the rhetorical situation of a given culture, network, or community. Reducing bodies to fluid (recompose-able) texts affirms, for example, regressive stereotypes of race (Nakamura). It perpetuates oppressions of other-gendered bodies. It enables injurious, hegemonic discursive paradigms to persist within a particular milieu. In the context of

digital reproduction, what is at stake is more than simply appropriations of bodies, but (mis)appropriations and (re)compositions of identities. Writing tends to be a context-dependent activity, and in open digital networks, context becomes highly unstable. In digital networks (i.e., social media networks), identity is subject to a radical dualism, an ethics that separates identities from corporeality. In this way, bodies are rendered as recyclable and re-inscribable material under an ethics of fair use.

Bodies on the Screen, Bodies on the Scene

Ethical authorship in a new materialist framework demands that we ask critical questions about the mechanisms that are actively co-constructing virtual bodies online. Thanks largely to an emerging read-write culture,[21] actors/authors on the digital scene have a different set of tools for publicizing, constructing, and interpellated virtual bodies. A photographer, for instance, captures and frames actual, material bodies in a particular moment, in a particular place, in a particular way. Remixers (re)compose virtual bodies by simply sharing and reproducing the original image. Even simply posting a comment beneath an image of a body on Facebook constitutes a kind of remix.

Of course, photography and social media has hypostatized the postmodernist theories of "bodies-as-texts" and reinforced the concordant values of "fair use" or "public domain" in how we compose with bodies. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes writes, "the person or thing photographed is […] the *Spectrum* of the Photograph, because this word retains, through its root, a relation to "spectacle" and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is

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[21] Coined by Lawrence Lessig, I would extend read-write culture to include sharing or retweeting—recontextualizing a composition is participating in its recomposition. Similarly, Tapscott & Williams and Ritzer & Jurgenson use the concept "prosumption" and Bruns uses his term "produsage" to describe the same basic activity. Jenkins theorizes with his concept of "convergence culture" and Aram Sinnreich theorizes with his "configurable culture."

there in every photograph: the return of the dead" (9). Barthes's anxiety here understands the virtual body as a terrifying specter. Terrifying largely because of how easily our own bodies can become other through the camera lens and the ease with which cameras can reinscribe bodies and identities. Due to this ease, these comparatively cheap and accessible surveillance technologies have *authorized* users to pluck bodies out of their contexts and hurl them into new ones. In this way (and for this reason), Butler's theorizing of bodily performativity *as well as* materialist orientations toward interpellation (not just one or the other) are essential for theorizing about authorships of bodies online. In summarizing Althusser, Butler explains that the authority of the police officer's call "has the effect of binding the law to the one who is hailed" (*Bodies that Matter* 81). In digital contexts, that authority is located in the technologies that take pictures, digital platforms that publish those pictures, and the network of users who remix those images. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, surveillance technologies authorize everyday people, *in coordination with institutions*, to watch each other. So, the Butlerian performative call, which co-constructs obedient bodies, occurs online too but in slightly different registers. We take pictures of each other, post them online, we like them, share them, comment on them, and algorithms sort out which ones we should or shouldn't pay attention to. Of course, if an individual's image is remixed into a viral meme, that kind of interpellative call occurs on a much larger more distributed scene than the single police officer calling "Hey, you!"

In part, this question of authorship in a new materialist framework turns into a question of responsibility of rhetorical action: who and/or what are responsible for the digital representation that comes into being in the particular way it has. In *Still Life with*

Rhetoric, Laurie Gries writes, "I worry that speaking about images and pictures in terms of discourse places too much emphasis on signification and too little emphasis on materiality, transformation and consequentiality" (Gries 11-12). I'd like to partially echo those sentiments here. My inquiry into composing bodies with a fair use *ethos* isn't meant to be a critique of postmodernism. If anything, composing practices in digital networks actualizes postmodern theories of authorship. We really can't fully own content online— or at least we can't prevent appropriations of content—but we *can* be responsible for (co)authorships. Scholarship on remix, prosumerism,[22] and digital authorships largely argue that identity is constructed within contexts, individual performances, and social constraints (see Beck "Sustaining"; Buck; Dadas "Hashtag"; and Potts). However, online, context is splintered, unstable, and in a constant state of flux. Nakamura, for example, critiques how the use of online avatars and fluid identities perpetuate regressive stereotypes of offline bodies. My interests, then, are to study how bodies become digitized and proliferate and generate their own online lives, which stands to affect those offline bodies, completing the interpellative call.

Virtual bodies can even be co-constructed by digital platforms themselves. For instance, platforms may attempt to auto-generate alt text for an image in order to bring definition or clarity to an image for readers with a visual disability. The introduction to this dissertation featured an image of me at four-years-old with a balloon attached to my back and one adult standing there laughing and two other adults with obscured heads. After I pasted that image into an open document, Microsoft Word auto-generated the

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[22] A portmanteau of Marx's "production" and Baudrillard's "consumption," a prosumption is when someone "produces labor to consume goods and services that are also available on the marketplace" (Beck "Sustaining Critical Literacies" 39).

following alt text, "A picture containing person, indoor, standing, floor"—an odd and confusing syntax that seems curiously focused on perhaps the least important aspects of the image. Similarly, after posting the same image to my social media account, Facebook suggested the following alt text, "May be an image of 1 person"—an inaccurate description. At first blush, this kind of technology appears either largely innocuous or entirely useless. However, as Safiya Noble points out in her study of sexism and racism embedded in Google's search results, artificial intelligence has the power to generate imprecise or even problematic text attributions to images and can certainly play a powerful role in co-authoring and co-constituting virtual bodies. In either case, the authorships of virtual bodies occupy a complex field of human users and autonomous technologies that reproduce, co-construct, and interpolate bodies. Further, the rhetorical velocity of digital images enables infinite potential iterations of these (re)constitutions of bodies and identities—interpolating and co-constructing the same body in different ways and different contexts, *ad infinitum*.

In this analysis of distributed co-authorships of bodies, to invoke the Lacanian "floating signifier" as a kind of "fair use" composing practice might risk indicating a sophistic lapse in moral judgment on the part of the composer, remixer, circulator or whomever is a participant in the network of digital circulation, particularly in the context of constructing identities both on and offline. Rather, I am interested in bringing to the forefront critical questions about the kinds of cultural commonplaces that we reproduce as participants in digital circulations. So, it's not so much that we're remixing bodies, but more precisely the particularities of what and how we're remixing bodies. Memes often function this way, as cultural in-jokes. Because meaning-making is always contingent

anyway, readers and remixers traffic in shared value systems—and occasionally problematic value systems—that everyone must buy into in order to participate in such an activity, especially as it pertains to the transformation and co-construction of identities in digital publics. In *How We Became Posthuman*, Katherine Hayles describes "how information lost its body" (24). She contrasts floating signifiers with what she calls "flickering signifiers." That is, in the context of digital composing, striking a single key can "effect massive changes in the entire text" (26). For me, this is precisely what is at stake here: in what particular ways are we effecting change in the text (the virtual body or even the actual, material body) when we like or share images of people?

Similar to Derrida's framing of speech as deceptively present and writing as promiscuously absent, any rendering of bodies amounts to a simulacrum of the real thing. That is not to say that one (*res*/*verba*, speech/writing, material bodies/digitized bodies) is more true than the other. Just as Derrida argues that the advent of writing is the advent of a particular kind of play (*Of Grammatology* 7), the advent of social media and digital reproduction has enabled new kinds of play. What is at stake here is how digital technologies and cultural digital practices have engendered a kind of "fair use" play of identities, reputations, and (violations of) privacy. In other words, I'm not interested in preserving an individual's "true" identity. I am interested in the individual's lost agency in managing their own identity and the emotional pain that results from irresolvable public damage done to reputations. The representation of the material body, for all practical purposes, stands to become an object that doesn't seem to belong to any one individual, effectively presenting itself as an un-ownable, material object—as a collection of anonymous 1s and 0s. An ethics of fair use *without limits*. Because context is highly

unstable in digital networks, representations of bodies have the potential to reproduce *ad infinitum* as new meanings are inscribed onto each iteration by a variety of discourse communities. Any resemblance of originary meaning or intended meaning (say, the identity of an individual captured in a circulated photo) risks vanishing as soon as the user's cell phone clicks out a simulation of a camera shutter. The referent of the digital image (the material body) also vanishes as *the moment itself*, the spaciotemporal origin of the material body's performance, has moved on and doesn't exist anymore.

In the next section, I would like to look at a few concrete examples of what happens under this kind of erasure, when composing bodies under a fair use *ethos*, and what the stakes are for identity.

Incorporeal Transformations and the Problem of Identity

This kind of "fair use" fluid identity isn't simply a matter of a misunderstanding or a mis-authoring of bodies. Rather, these kinds of postmodern reconstructions stand to transform on and offline identities and reputations and their basic lived experience, a transformation of their very subjectivity. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes describes photography as having "transformed the subject into object" (13). While we might expect from Barthes an eagerness to discount the subject as object much in the same way he laid the author to rest, this transformation of subject to object isn't one he necessarily celebrates. With some anxiety, he writes, "the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it, according to its caprice. […T]he Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity" (*Camera Lucida* 11-12). Barthes's concern over identity disassociation is most salient here, particularly when considering contemporary treatments of bodies in pictures.

The material conditions of digital sharing and composing have enabled, what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as an *incorporeal transformation*. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they define incorporeal transformations as "the expressed of order-words, but also the attribute of bodies" (108). In this framing, incorporeal transformation is a performative change at the level of sense. Gries summarizes, "Incorporeal transformation occurs when an entity experiences a transformation in identify, sense of purpose, position in society or relations" (63). When an individual's image is appropriated and circulated, we can observe two kinds of incorporeal transformations. From one view, we can see wholesale transformations of identity. From another view, as Barthes points out, the subject has transformed into an object: un-ownable material to be circulated and reproduced. For this section, I would like to unpack two ways incorporeal transformations can occur when an individual's image gains the sufficient rhetorical velocity to be appropriated, remixed, and circulated widely for purposes beyond the intention of the individual in the image. The first, a transformation of identity, and the second, a transformation from subject to object.

Transformation of Identity

If the material body (prior to meaning) acts as the referent to the re-presented body, as the image circulates, a host of potential incorporeal transformations proliferate into producing a host of potential identities and reputations for the referent. Material bodies and digitally re-presented bodies, in this view, have unfixed meanings and unfixed identities. Identity and reputation, in this view, are not things owned. In *The Future of Reputation*, Daniel Solove writes, "reputation is a core component of our identity" (33), and legal scholar Robert Post claims that reputation is a form of property. While

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postmodern arguments might push back against Post's claim, reputation is certainly a kind of currency. It is a currency that can be coopted and, in digital networks, can transform into infinite possible identities given the infinite potential contexts. All of this is to say: yes, identities matter to us; they are co-constructed by us and outside actors beyond our control; and because of this, they belong to us while also belonging to no one. In this way, identities, like a constellation of concepts, are unstable constructs.

So, it seems postmodernism was right. Our identities are whatever a particular context makes them out to be. Summarizing this postmodern view, Seán Burke writes, "the author is merely the conduit […]. […T]he purely mimeticist text could certainly do without the author; indeed its greatest good might be something like the *self-effacement of the author* in the act of writing" (44, my emphasis). If we think of bodies as texts, identities serve as one of many possible outcomes of signifying bodies. However, these inscriptions of bodies have profound consequences for how we experience our bodies and our identities. Revisiting the case of the "Star Wars Kid" from the introductory chapter, Ghyslain Raza transformed from being just another teenager at a high school (with whatever identity had been imbued upon him there), to "Ghyslain Raza, Star Wars Kid." This new identity brought with it a variety of performative consequences, like strangers shouting at him in public and the stress and anxiety caused by the embarrassing nature of this particular type of celebrity. Raza's identity in this was quite inscribable in both off and online spaces. Like a judge (an institutional authority) issuing a judgment of guilty, thereby *transforming* a person from innocent to guilty, the verbal utterances of strangers (collective authority) calling out, "Hey! It's Ghyslain Raza! Star Wars Kid, hey!" enacted a change at the level of sense. That is, his position in society and *relation* to others had

been fundamentally changed. To compose the body is to indicate that bodies are reducible to unwedded signifiers and can mean whatever they need to mean to satisfy the demands of nearly any rhetorical situation. The body (or re-presented bodies) in this way functions as a compellation of floating signifiers with no discernable origin with contingent destinations to be determined by a given culture, community, or social network. Further, these recompositions materially transform the affective experience of living in our bodies and our position in society.

As a matter of legality, the ability to own compositions (intellectual property) is a legal and cultural construct, not a reflection of how compositions actually come into being. In a re-rendering of Foucault's author-function, copyright scholar Siva Vaidhyanathan writes, "an 'author' does not precede the 'work' […], but comes into being only as it functions in a legal and cultural environment" (10). The author's ability to own is not a presupposed proposition, and there is no clear precedent in US laws or in cultural practices that indicates what level of bodily representation we can or can't own. Whether that would be our likenesses, identities, or our reputations—never-minding that there isn't a singular version of any of these. Whether it would entail the individual ownership of bodies or if bodies belong to the public domain. Nevertheless, our routine digital practices would indicate that we tend toward latter.

From Subject to Object: The Cases of Alison Chang and Naruto the Crested Macaque

These kinds of authorships are possible in the first place because of a fundamental change in the relationship between readers and bodies. Put another way, when remixers encounter bodies, they have the ability to transform those bodies to that of mere objects. However, these remixers shouldn't be limited to human actors. Cameras have authorial

agency in themselves. Social networks and algorithms have authorial agency too. Objects

authoring objects. In other words, the authoring object also participates within an ethics

of fair use. In *Reassembling the Social*, Latour makes very clear that there is indeed a

distinction between social and material action. He does not make an attempt to create a

symmetry between the two, nor is he interested in assuming an *a priori* asymmetry

between the two. He states plainly that "the apparently reasonable division between

material and social becomes just what is obfuscating any enquiry on how a *collective*

action is possible. Provided of course that by collective we don't mean an action carried

over by homogeneous social forces, but, on the contrary, an action that collects different

types of forces woven together because they are different" (74-5). So, Latour is

uninterested in reconciling distinctions between the subject/object dichotomy. When

framing actor network theory, he argues for how these different forces intra-act within a

complex network of actants and how these actants engage in mutual transformation.

What is of interest to our discussion here is how the various actors in digital

networks (human and non-human) contribute to affecting these kinds of mutual

transformations. In this case, how bodies—especially anonymous ones—are re-presented

and transformed into non-human objects. As Barthes's anxiety highlights for us, the

camera turns the body into an object with different kinds of rhetorical potentialities.

Barring long abandoned notions of soul-stealing or an invasion-of-the-body-snatchers

type of situation, the material body is, generally, non-appropriable. However, the camera

renders the body as an appropriable, un-ownable, and capriciously re-inscribable object

that can travel through unstable contexts and then continue to be transformed by other

human and non-human actors. The re-presented body can then, too, re-inscribe meaning upon the identity of the referent: the material body in the world.

Take, for instance, the case of Alison Chang. In 2007, Justin Ho-Wee Wong, a church youth counselor in Dallas, Texas, took pictures of a church-sponsored carwash. Weeks later, Wong posted the pictures he'd taken on the image-hosting and image-sharing service Flickr. One of Wong's photos he posted "[caught] the eye of an ad agency in Australia" (Cohen). Before long, 15-year-old Alison Chang's image would be reproduced on a billboard in Adelaide, Australia "as part of a Virgin Mobile advertising campaign" (Cohen). Four months later, Alison Chang and her family sued Virgin Mobile USA and Creative Commons for damages. According to the *New York Times* article, "Her image [was] accompanied by a mocking slogan—according to the ad, Alison is the kind of loser 'pen friend' [British-Australian for "pen pal"] whom subscribers will finally be able to 'dump' when they get a cellphone" (Cohen, "pen pal" brackets are mine). The ad even went so far as to tell audiences to "DUMP YOUR PEN FRIEND" (Chang v. Virgin Mobile).

Chang's case might have been appropriate for a publicity claim. However, the photograph, taken by Justin Wong was posted on Flickr under a Creative Commons "Attribution" license, allowing anyone to repurpose his photographs for any reason, commercial or otherwise, so long as the original author of the photograph received credit (Gagnier 262). At a very basic level, a company exercised a remix *ethos* in order to generate a new composition for new purposes. These cases have been litigated under the premise that they are violations of privacy, largely because legal recourse was only really available through claims of privacy rather than that of ownership. That is, the idea that

Alison Chang had any apparent authorial ownership over representations of her body was not at issue. According to the *New York Times* article, at the time Wong uploaded his pictures of the carwash to Flickr "those photographs carried a license from Creative Commons, a nonprofit group seeking alternatives to copyright and license laws. The license he selected allowed them to be used by anyone in any way, including for commercial purposes, as long as Wong was credited" (Cohen). In other words, because Wong was the author of the photographs, he had ownership over the images (the digital objects) and the representations of the bodies (again, digital objects) therein. Notably, Lawrence Lessig served the papers on behalf of Creative Commons. In copyright and remix studies, Lessig is known as a pro-remix activist and scholar who has advocated for revising and updating our aging copyright laws in order to keep up with a rapidly changing digital culture. According to the *NYT* article, Lessig said

> he was sympathetic to Chang's plight. But, added that, "the part about us [Creative Commons] is puzzling. It says we failed to instruct the photographer adequately, but the first question is, 'do you want to allow commercial uses?' […] Lessig added, "this photographer did nothing wrong when he took this photo of this girl, and posted it on his Flickr page. What he did wasn't commercial use, which triggers the legal issues. If there was a problem here, it was by Virgin" (Cohen).

Indeed, Wong, the photographer, did not intend his image of Alison Chang for commercial purposes. So Lessig is clearly correct on that point. However, it is also clear that Lessig places the ethical (and legal) burden on Virgin rather than the photographer

himself. In other words, the appropriation of a body (a 15-year-old's no less) was not at issue. Not at *legal* issue, anyway.

Judging by our routine digital practices in a remix culture, online bodies are handled as if they are entirely *un*-ownable, especially by the individual who inhabits the corresponding offline body. The Creative Commons license that Alison Chang's pastor agreed to on Flickr assumed this remix *ethos* and the un-ownability of bodies. Virgin assumed a remix *ethos* when they appropriated Chang's image as an object for other purposes she (or her pastor) could not have possibly anticipated, a rhetorical velocity few could have possibly strategized for. However, this isn't the only transformation Chang experienced. As a matter of identity and reputation, Virgin decontexualized the original image of Alison Chang, then recontexualized and recomposed her identity from a youth group member washing a car to a "loser 'pen friend'." These kinds of transformations of identity have further problematic implications for individuals in their offline lives.[23]

Legally speaking, when an individual takes a picture of someone else, the picture-taker is the author and therefore the owner of that image. In cases of "revenge porn," the picture-taker of those images is the owner, and the individuals in those pictures do not have rights to those intimate images.[24] Of course, the legal authorship/ownership of images of bodies is a clunky legal construct. In 2011, a crested macaque monkey (named Naruto) took several selfies with a camera that belonged to photographer David John Slater, who later published the selfie photos of Naruto in a book. What followed was a

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[23] Ultimately, the case was dismissed for a lack of jurisdiction.

[24] Because of this, these kinds of cases can be litigated as a matter of privacy. However, implied consent to be publicized complicates claims of privacy infringement.

lawsuit, filed by PeTA, to decide whether the macaque had the rights to his own selfies or if the photographer who owned the camera had the rights to the selfies.

Figure 2.5 A selfie of Naruto the macaque.

Ultimately, the 9th Circuit Court of appeals dismissed the case, stating, "the animal had constitutional standing but lacked statutory standing to claim copyright infringement of photographs known as the 'Monkey Selfies'." However, before this ruling, "Slater agreed to donate 25% of any future revenue derived from using or selling the monkey selfie to charities that protect the crested macaques' habitat in Indonesia" (Cullinane). So it seems that, on some kind of ethical principle, Slater acquiesced that Naruto (or perhaps crested macaques generally) had some degree of ownership in his selfie. Or at least 25% of that ownership. As a matter of rhetorical agency, however, the authorship of Naruto's selfie can't be attributed to a single machine, human, or human-adjacent subjectivity. In this view, once an image has entered a digital public, the image is consequently made, practically speaking, *un-ownable*. As a matter of legality, the camera renders its subjects as decidedly *ownable* material with contingent and fully transferable property rights.

As we can see, our particular legal system has a tendency to reduce bodies to commodifiable and tradable things. Alison Chang had, by means of reproduction and circulation through various contexts, ceased to be a subject with a relatively stable identity and became an object with an unfixed, unstable identity, appropriated and reappropriated with dramatically new meanings inscribed upon her image. In this particular system, there doesn't seem to be much space for authorial ownership at the level of the body, the level of the image, or the level of the remixed meme. Chang's likeness was captured/appropriated without her knowing or consent; the original image was also appropriated and recomposed and recirculated without *the photographer's* knowing. In fact, *any* notion of authorship or ownership seems to be entirely absent or irrelevant here. What is interesting to me is that representations of bodies especially seem to have fallen into classifications of "public domain" and "fair use" in much the same way an excerpt from a novel might be used in a book review or how a copyrighted character might be satirized on the television show *Robot Chicken*.[25] Bodies-as-texts creates an ethical problematic that digital and remix cultures have yet to reckon with. If we treat material bodies and representations of bodies as pure material, we necessarily compose and recompose the identities of individuals, often those of strangers we see on the internet.

Conclusion

The question of ownability is an important one in this conversation about material distributed authorships. Ownership is not a requisite condition for authoring bodies, clearly. As we've discussed, socio-historical institutions play their part in authoring our

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[25] Satirizing copyrighted material (usually) falls under "fair use" in US copyright law.

bodies without owning them. However, flexible ownerships certainly make it easier to author representations of bodies in particular ways. Some (legal) schools of thought suggest that merely being in "public" implies consent to be recorded. The trouble is, of course, that in this kind of remix culture, everyday bodies are available as though they are in some sort of public domain, particularly if those bodies are in public places. In their article, "Rhetorical Velocity and Copyright," Ridolfo and Rife write about a case involving a Michigan State University student (pseudonymously named "Maggie") "whose image [was] taken in 2005 on university grounds during a student protest for fair trade apparel, [and who] was unknowingly appropriated and remixed by the university in 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2009" for various, online promotional and advertising purposes (223). "According to Maggie, this appropriation wasn't something she had anticipated" while protesting in a public space (226). Maggie reports: "They [the university] didn't contact me. Nobody ever got my name. Nobody ever asked anything. The reporters I don't think even got it but university officials definitely didn't. They didn't get my name or the name of the other person in the picture. And I was like the main person, focal point of the picture" (228). Ridolfo and Rife point out that the major legal problems in this kind of situation includes, "When someone appears in a public space, as Maggie did, the general legal standard asks whether or not a reasonable person would have a right to privacy in such a space [...] this is the rationale that photojournalists rely on to report the news" (231). What I think is key here is how these new surveillance technologies challenge the argument that "being in public" means "consent to publicize." In other words, to remix representations of public bodies is to poach content from some kind of "public" domain.

As Maggie's case demonstrates, authorships and ownerships of likenesses remain unclear as a matter of legality and are often dealt with as a matter of privacy rights rather than the copyright (or ownability) of likenesses. The very idea of remixing digital bodies presupposes an ethics of the un-ownability of bodies and even reputations online. In her recent book, *The Right of Publicity*, Jennifer Rothman outlines how the right of publicity has been co-opted and lost in discourses of intellectual property rights. The right of publicity in the United States has a long and complicated history, and "because of the variability across states of what the right of publicity encompasses, defining the right of publicity is challenging" (4). Publicity is often contrasted with privacy in that privacy is about individuals who want to be left alone and the right to publicity protects famous people. But I think it's pretty clear, in the age of social media, those who participate in online public discourses have to (or probably should) treat those interactions as a kind of public relations strategy, as if the average person is now some degree of famous.

However, to separate privacy from publicity isn't quite right. As Rothman elaborates, "[p]rivacy laws in the United States were first championed to stop unwanted 'publicity.'" (7). However, the "right of publicity got off track when it transformed from a personal right, rooted in the individual person (the 'identity-holder'), into a powerful intellectual property right, external to the person, that can be sold to or taken by a non-identity-holding 'publicity-holder'" (7). The problem with treating the right of publicity as a fully transferable property right (i.e., that we can somehow *own* our likenesses) is that it can be sold to someone else. As Rothman points out, people in the entertainment industry sign their rights to managers or companies that can use their likenesses without additional permission. For average folk, "Social media sites' ever-changing terms of

service (which you agree to simply by continuing to use their services) could do far more than this if the right of publicity is transferable—Facebook could become the owner of your own name and image in all contexts, not just on its website" (6). While licenses of most popular media still operate on the logic of a copyright system based on a print culture, the logic of digital media seems to be a quasi-public one, one where private ownership rests in the hands of a corporation, and their customers collectively pay for access to their products rather than own them outright. Indeed, as Rothman warns, everyday social media users could be giving away their privacy so that large companies can sell access to their publicity.

Much of the discussion here has been focused on questions of legality and questions of ownership and, in some ways, questions of humiliation. Surveillance, and shame for that matter, can be useful like, for instance, when people in positions of power abuse that power. However, this kind of public, routine surveillance is a somewhat new and emerging consideration for everyday people. In some ways, we've commodified images of ourselves in order to gain access to these digital networks, like a price of admission. Surveillance technologies and our routine practices have actively and dramatically shaped our attitudes toward owning and authoring our bodies and the bodies of others. As the next chapter will cover, these technologies and practices also have very real consequences for how we participate in digital public discourse as well. Rothman's project is an important one interested in ending the notion of publicity-as-intellectual-property in order to rethink privacy and identity and enable more control of an individual's identity for the individual themselves (or the so-called "identity-holder"). As we observed with Alison Chang-Virgin Mobile Australia case, explicitly agreeing to the

terms of service of a given social media platform matters little in an ecology where

picture-takers own images and international (and even state) boundaries matter little or

not at all. However, as postmodern theories of authorship have indicated, reproducing

representations of bodies recontextualizes those identities and reaffirms the non-

autonomous, signifying body. We copy and remix bodies, circulate, and redistribute

them, storing them, as Daniel Solove puts it, "in Google's unforgiving memory" (*Future*

of Reputation 8).

CHAPTER 3

SOMNAMBULANT PARTICIPATION:

THE PROBLEM OF "ATTENTION" IN DIGITAL PUBLICS

"Humanists are natural Luddites and have become so used to regarding technology—and especially the computer—as the enemy that it takes some temerity to call the personal computer a possible friend"
(Richard Lanham, *The Electronic Word* 23)

Introduction

Context has always been a flimsy thing. However, over the last decade and a half, the ubiquity of social media and smart phones have significantly collapsed the boundaries between contexts, between our notions of public and private, between what constitutes on and offline activity. This collapsing should adjust the assumptions we make about our participation in digital publics. As we discussed in the previous chapter, our bodies are always already engaging in corporeal politics. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, mask-wearing became a sign of embodied political engagement, especially during the transitory periods of mask mandates (i.e., during the early months of the pandemic and toward the latter months when wearing a mask was a matter of personal choice rather than state mandates). While bodies may always already participate in embodied discourse, they were, until recently, limited to the spacio-temporal constraints of our physical location. As we have discussed thus far, our bodies can quickly and easily travel, which includes transposing bodies from a private sphere to a public sphere without our knowledge or consent. I often think of the strangers in the backgrounds of our

pictures. What alternative discursive situations might their bodies participate in once they've traveled to digital networks and new contexts? Amid constant surveillance, is it even possible to *not* participate in digital publics?

Much of the scholarship in publics theory over the last few decades has largely responded to Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Habermas's concept of the liberal bourgeois public sphere was a hopeful one where private people could gather in public spaces and talk about matters of public concern that "tended to be ongoing." These publics "preserved a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether" (Habermas 36). Ideally, for Habermas, the "public opinion" generated from these social intercourses would translate into some manner of political influence upon the state through public, collective use of reason. In some ways, an analogy between a democratized digital publics of social media and the ideal Habermasian commons seems to hold up quite nicely: a coffeeshop where a public has equal participatory access regardless of status, where private individuals publicly reason out the issues of the day. Of course, Habermas has been roundly critiqued on his presumption of participatory parity within public spheres. Most notably, Nancy Fraser critiqued Habermas for not offering a post-bourgeois theory of publics that takes economic and social inequalities of capitalist democracy into account. Indeed, not everyone has equal access to these digital networks. Not everyone has acquired the adequate digital literacy to be full, participating members of these networks. Social status, in terms of social influence, certainly matters. A new class of people, called "influencers," has emerged. The rhetorical weight of their posts

holds significantly more than mine do. So, the idea that pure reason in itself will enact

social progress is reflective of naïve Enlightenment-era optimism.

Indeed, while power relations in publics have certainly been overlooked by

Habermas, what contemporary scholars of publics theory have also overlooked are the

inequalities embedded within the socio-material power relations of surveillance in digital

publics. Consider, for instance, Lauren Cagle's concept of "strangershots." Cagle's recent

article, "Surveilling Strangers," features a case study about a trans woman, Balpreet

Kaur, who had her picture taken, surreptitiously without her consent, while waiting in

line at the airport. The image of a trans woman—middle eastern and wearing a turban—

was subsequently posted to reddit, drawing comments featuring slurs against trans people

and Muslims (even though she was Sikh not Muslim). Obviously, Kaur was generally

aware that her embodied performance (i.e., embodied gender and religious expressions)

had some sort of performative force on the world around her. However, Kaur could not

have possibly anticipated or been aware of the *digital* public she was unknowingly

recruited into by having her picture taken without her awareness or consent.[26]

Troublingly enough, this sort of picture-taking practice is not uncommon across other

social media platforms like Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, and the like. Kaur, for example,

had limited autonomy in the digital discourse she participated in. What we can observe

here is a power imbalance of participatory agency rather than the parity of the

Habermasian public square.

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[26] According to Cagle, Kaur eventually discovered the reddit posting and participated in the discussion board. Cagle writes, "Kaur created a reddit account and wrote a lengthy response to the original poster and subsequent commenters, patiently explaining her Sikh faith and how it shapes her outward appearance" (68).

In *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner extends Habermas's view that society is fundamentally structured by a public sphere (43) while focusing on "the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to the texts and their circulation" (66). For Warner, a "reading public" is constituted when a given text is encountered by a subject during the text's circulation. In digital networks, these encounters are often expressed by remixing, sharing, liking, or simply scrolling across compositions in the form of images or videos. In this way, the boundaries of Warner's textual public are wide-reaching, and in digital contexts, more wide-reaching than he could have anticipated in the early 2000s. In his book, Warner outlines seven criteria for what constitutes a public—the fourth criterion being, "a public is constituted through mere attention" (87). However, I argue that in a surveillance economy individuals do not require the kind of "attention" Warner's framework entails in order to participate in a public. Like in the case of strangershots, individual discursive autonomy becomes a new question amid routine surveillance as offline lives bleed over into online publics.

The banality of everyday surveillance not only challenges Warner's criterion of attention, it also challenges the very idea of autonomous discursive agency. This chapter, then, is interested in expanding our understanding of non-autonomous participation, not simply in terms of appropriated human bodies, but also in terms of a broader ecology of user practices and machinic processes that form embodied discourse online. In his 1890 *The Laws of Imitation*, sociologist Gabriel Tarde writes, "*Society is imitation and imitation is a kind of somnambulism*" (87, italics in original). Tarde's project engages theories of crowd behavior and reconsiders concepts of the so-called autonomous individual and, rather, asserts a model of a determinism of social collectives—the

conscious (voluntary) individual verses the unconscious (involuntary) crowd. That is, individuals in crowds tend to imitate behaviors, generally on unconscious levels. Tarde, however, does not see the need to subscribe to one view of autonomous agency or whether or not we are truly autonomous actors or non-autonomous actors simply following crowds. According to Tarde, there are various forms of imitation that can be understood as a difference in *intensity* rather than type. Tarde's project on imitation anticipates Deleuzian concepts of agency as distributed action occurring at various levels of intensity. Tarde's work is useful for thinking about how publics form in these (un)conscious imitative, affective registers. For this chapter, somnambulism will serve as a way of viewing participation in a distributed field. It is a particular kind of rhetorical force that compels discursive participation, especially at the interchange of online and offline life. For example, as ideas and practices (i.e., "memes") enter into a network, they imitatively proliferate at various levels: as a matter of specific user practices like picture-taking and hashtagging; through copy-and-paste and remix; or algorithmic mediation as humans and non-humans work together to generate and collectively reproduce cultural memes and meme-practices.

Throughout this chapter, borrowing and extending Tarde's concept of somnambulance, I argue that bodies do, indeed, *somnambulantly participate* in digital publics. I define somnambulant participation as a non-autonomous, unconscious discursive participation mediated through surveillance technologies. Somnambulance, then, is constitutive of *meme-practices* (like taking pictures, publishing/sharing those pictures, remixing those pictures, or even sorting that content through algorithmic procedures) and technologies of reproduction and surveillance. For somnambulance,

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"attention" or even awareness are not prerequisites in order for digital publics to come into being. In the second chapter of his book, Warner argues that a nation "includes its members whether they are awake or asleep, sober or drunk, sane or deranged, alert or comatose. *Publics are different*" (87, my emphasis). Of course, I'm not so sure publics are so different. At least not in *digital* publics. For me, this is precisely the kind of participation I'm interested in: the kind we don't have much of choice in, the kind we engage in whether we like it or not. Perhaps this means that I'm carving out a discursive space for, in Warner's terms, the drunk, the sleeping, and the deranged.

So, given the inevitability of somnambulant participation, rhetoricians should be encouraged to rethink key concepts in the discourse of digital publics, including surveillance, circulation, human and non-human composing processes, and the very distinction between public and private. To carefully illustrate how somnambulance reshapes these concepts, I begin this chapter by analyzing how the *collapse* of public and private spheres have given way to non-autonomous, somnambulant participation. Then, drawing from de Certeau's concept of "the panorama-city," I use the social media platform Snapchat to illustrate how the public-private collapse enacts collective, unconscious "poetic world-makings" of digital cityscapes. Second, I elaborate on somnambulism's affective dimensions by showcasing how *identities in themselves* distantly contribute to cultural poetic world-makings. Finally, I turn my attention toward the human and machinic processes that constitute somnambulant participation and allow digital publics to self-organized through imitative practices occurring at various (somnambulant) levels of intensity.

Ultimately, this chapter seeks to update Warner's assertion of "attention" as a necessary criterion to form a public and argues that subjects are routinely recruited into digital publics, as active *somnambulant* participants, without requiring their knowledge, awareness, or explicit consent. As we will see through a few brief case studies, somnambulance has obvious ethical implications for our notions of privacy and publicity and the everyday technologies that continually dismantle the distinction between the two.

The Collapsing of Public and Private Spheres

There is, of course, not one singular actor—individual human, digital platform, or surveillance technology—responsible for public and private spheres collapsing into the other. These are all actors working teleologically and non-teleologically in complex networks with an apparent will to publicize. *Collapsing* is an apt metaphor that I and others use to describe how routine surveillance should challenge how we understand the distinction between public and private spaces. A collapse is messy, disruptive, perhaps violent, and often it is difficult to distinguish between the pieces. In her study of online trolling, Whitney Phillips describes how the internet "collapses the boundaries of reality and fantasy" (116). Marwick and boyd observe a "context collapse" in social networks as content travels across audiences, alternative networks, and histories. New media theorist Zizi Papacharissi observes a "collapsing" of private and public spheres thanks to what she calls, "convergent technologies." For Papacharissi, private activities with a public scope (like watching the 24-hour news cycle) are able to occur in the private spaces (like our living rooms). Likewise, publicly oriented activities (like posting on a blog or actively tweeting political opinions) are "increasingly enabled within the locus of a digitally equipped private sphere" (21). However, Papacharissi largely discusses public

participation as an autonomous action: we turn on the television, inviting it into our homes. Extending Papacharissi's observation of collapsing spheres, I argue that the proliferation of new and various social media over the last decade or so have created a *non-autonomous* collapsing of public-private spheres. In other words, relatively private activity has the potential to be non-autonomously captured, recomposed, and distributed in relatively public spaces. These convergent technologies complicate the idea of clearly definable loci or common understandings of "space." The public sphere is no longer limited to actual, physical spaces of communal gatherings. Rather, it can also be virtual, everywhere and nowhere.

Not only have these virtual technologies collapsed distinctions of publicity and privacy, but this kind of behavior generates an ecosystem of discursive participation that is, as Warner appropriately points out, very difficult to track in digital contexts. And much of this content is fairly unremarkable. It is daily and mundane. Consider, for example, Snapchat's "Snap Map." The Snap Map enables users to view videos published publicly on Snapchat's platform within a specific physical, real-world location represented on a map. Users can tap a location on the map and view videos or images recorded from that geo-location by other Snapchat users. Often times these are somewhat trivial videos of individuals living out their everyday lives: like getting dressed up for a night out, or more mundane events like watching a dump truck move gravel from one side of a construction site to another. I once saw a video posted on the Snap Map where a user had recorded another person sleeping on a train. This person was literally somnambulantly participating in a social media network: sleeping and traveling (virtually and actually) to some destination. While the train is undoubtedly a public place, there is

an assumption of privacy (or at least limited publicness) within the spacio-temporal constraints of the train. Individuals retain an amount of privacy due to the relative obscurity of their public performance. Ideally, an individual's embarrassing snore, let's say, would be observed only by those on that train in that particular point in time. What interests me about Snapchat is that it literalizes what we mean by living in a "surveillance economy." There is a for-profit platform that capitalizes on the idea that private individuals document their lives or the lives of others, publish it, and invite voyeuristic participation from a broader public unbound by traditional spacio-temporal constraints, thereby collapsing our notions of public and private.

These surveillance technologies we are intertwined with should challenge the argument that "being in public" means "consent to publicize" (see the case of "Maggie" in Ridolfo and Rife). Perhaps it might be best to think of privacy or publicity in more nuanced terms. Falling asleep on a light rail train, for example, probably should not be an invitation to publicize my embarrassing snore. Another critical question might be: does the risk of publicity disincentivize individuals from participating in public political action? As we will see next, as public and private spheres collapse, our offline embodied performances not only travel online, but play their part in constructing the very world in which we live.

Sousveillance as Poetic-World-Making

I use the term "surveillance" as a catch-all for technologies that watch and record human activity. However, surveillance implies watching human activity from some institutional authority. *Sous*veillance, on the other hand, is sort of the inverse of *sur*veillance; a term that comes from the French "sous," meaning below, and "veiller"

meaning to watch (Mann, Nolan, Wellman 332). Rather than the blackened surveillance camera in a local Target store, sousveillance typically involves portable or wearable devices that record activity from below: participants recording participants. A term initially coined in his 1998 article "'Reflectionsim' and 'Diffusionism,'" Mann understands sousveillance as a "reflectionism" that aims to equalize the power differential between the surveiller and surveillee. In other words, the surveilee surveils the surveiller. An early instance of sousveillance at work would be the 1991 recording of Rodney King being beaten by the LAPD. Of course, more contemporary sousveillance has created new kinds of power differentials, including peer-to-peer monitoring seen in digital vigilantism (public shame by cell phone recording). However, as we will see throughout this chapter, sousveillance is not necessarily individuals watching each other so much as it is individuals *working with institutions* to surveil each other. For example, documenting public shame for entertainment is a business model, rendering surveillance and sousveillance nearly indistinguishable from the other. Importantly, the banalization of everyday sur/sousveillance has cultivated the conditions for the more viral (and virulent) kinds of somnambulant participations that occur in digital publics.

Snapchat's "Snap Map" feature is paradigmatic of this kind of banal sousveillance. Through small collective acts of watching, individual users cooperatively co-construct digital cityscapes within particular windows of time using Snapchat's "Snap Map" feature. Snapchat is a powerful platform for observing how collective action can somnambulantly recruit bodies as participants in digital publics. Snapchat is especially useful because it relies, more than most platforms do, on a picture/video-sharing approach to social media. While other platforms, like Instagram or TikTok, also produce

visually oriented content, Snapchat has a self-deleting feature, creating the sometimes-false impression that much of the content produced on the platform is temporary and automatically vanishes within a 24-hour period. So, Snapchat relies on and perhaps endorses more of a sousveillance *ethos* than other platforms typically do.

Because of the Snap Map, users are able to document on-the-ground, active social movements, like the 2020 nation-wide police brutality protests in the wake of George Floyd's death, who was killed while in police custody on May 25, 2020. After Floyd's death was recorded by cell phones and distributed to a wide network of media outlets, Snapchat's "Snap Map" served as a window through which onlookers could watch the related protests in nearly real-time from a safe distance. The same was certainly true of other, somewhat related protests, like the Breonna Taylor shooting protests in Louisville, Kentucky. Thanks to the free-roaming cameras of everyday people, viewers gain access to a particular scene at a particular location as camera-wielding users have framed (and thus composed) their experience. Through this feature, bodies on the scene could have their images captured and circulated through Snapchat's map feature, with or without their awareness or consent. According to Snapchat's support page, snaps posted to the Snap Map can appear "on third-party platforms—like on the jumbotron while you're at a game! […] and other places, too!" ("What Are…"). In this way, acts of sousveillance become indistinguishable from surveillance. Through Snapchat, audiences get access to embodied discourses that are unmoored by physical locations and digital platforms. And according to the exclamation marks, this should be an especially exciting proposition.
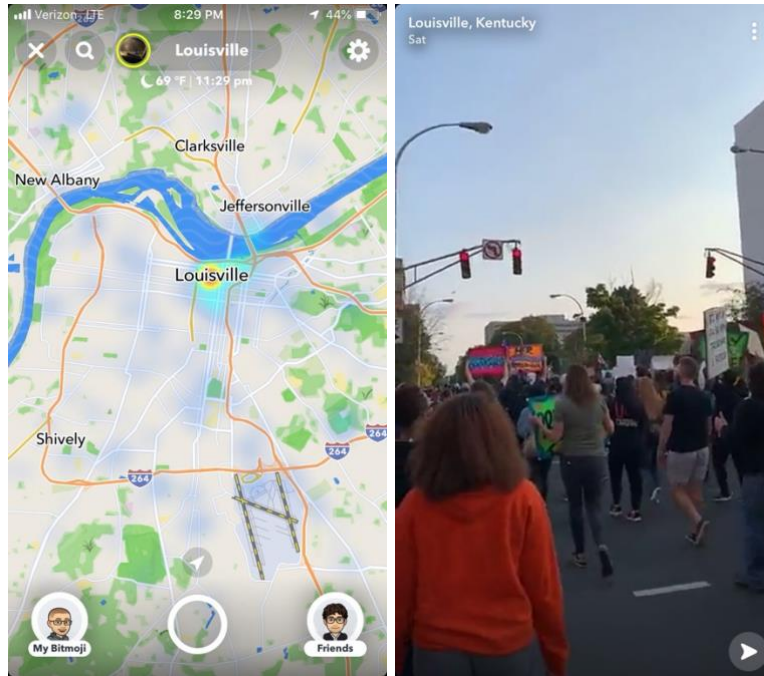
Figure 3.1 Screen capture of the Snap Map (left) during the Breonna Taylor shooting protest in Louisville, KY on September 26, 2020. Tapping the heat-mapped hot spots opens images or videos other users have shared publicly to the "Our Story" function. The protest image (right) is a screen capture of a video (composed by an anonymous user) posted to "Our Story" that was summoned by tapping on the red zone of the Snap Map.

Notably, the aggregation of this kind of sousveillance—including the

somnambulant bodies therein—co-constructs a digitized cityscape. Warner's seventh

criterion of publics understands a public as "poetic world making," where he claims that

"[t]here is no speech or performance addressed to a public that does not try to specify in

advance […] the lifeworld of its circulation: not just through its discursive claims […]

but through the pragmatics of its speech genres, idioms, stylistic markers, address,

temporality, mise-en-scéne, citational field, interlocutory protocols, lexicon, and so on"

(114). Here, we can observe Warner committing to linguistic and print-based modes of

communication with the "lifeworld" of the speech specified "in advance." However, we

can see a very similar kind of poetic-world-making in the pragmatics (so to speak) of

Snapchat's Snap Map. The digital map-view of a particular locality is routinely

composed and recomposed by an aggregate of Snapchat's userbase. De Certeau makes a

similar point about the composition of cities while describing his view of New York from

the top of the World Trade Center. The Snap Map (and de Certeau's view of the city)

serves as a "simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion

and a misunderstanding of practices" (93). From de Certeau's perch, the view of New

York City belies the complex relations that have brought the cityscape into being and

belies the everyday activity (on the street) that continues to shape and change the city.

To view the city as a text, as de Certeau does, is to say that the city-as-a-

composition emerges through the aggregate of activity. The people down below are

"walkers," whose "bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write

without being able to read it" (93). To be clear, individuals in the city certainly do

contribute to the aggregate with particular intentions. In Louisville, the protesters on the

street—who can be viewed within the Snap Map on video or in images by tapping the hot

spots—are certainly protesting with a particular intention. They know they are working

toward social action. Some of them probably even know that their protest is being

captured on social media somewhere. It is important to point out, though, that individuals

have very little impact over the aggregate. The Snap Map most clearly illustrates this

with a particular perch that re-presents collective activity as splotches of color: a

constructed narrative, a narrow window of Louisville during a specific moment of social

unrest. As you can see in figure 3.1, the locus of activity has been represented on the

Snap Map as a bright red circle, indicating that this activity is significant activity. At least

on this day, it is. And the protesters are participating in that narrative, in constructing the story of the city, as one of many actors working to generate that narrative. Similarly, at present, I live in Reno, Nevada. The Snap Map of Reno, most nights, indicates a locus of activity around the downtown area, telling stories of nights out gambling, late-night drinking, tourists taking pictures of the flashing lights, and the colorful buildings, especially that of the famous Reno Arch. So, the aggregate of this activity contributes to building a particular view of the city's character.

However, the picture is much bigger than what the Snap Map gives users voyeuristic access to. The protestors on the street cannot possibly anticipate, in advance, all the potential publics their performances might engage with in the future. Their protest might have "stylistic markers," as Warner says, that imply the kinds of discourse to which it belongs. However, and more to the point, their stylistic markers do indicate that their performance has a high degree of rhetorical velocity. That is, protesters might assume that their public bodily performances and the slogans written on their signs have the potential to be captured, recomposed, and distributed to other publics, but the extent of their rhetorical velocity remains *unknowable* and therefore somnambulant. In digital networks, qualities of address, temporality, and *mise-en-scéne*, are not requirements for the success of a digital public. A digital, networked composition can't really be contained by any specific lifeworld at its outset. Digital networks enable chaotic and highly variable *kairoi* (opportune times *and* places) for a given discourse.

The Problem of Recognition and Address

In Snap Map's digital cityscapes, people routinely enter in and out of public spheres, a lot of times without their knowledge or consent. Going to an LGBTQ+ bar, for

instance, is no longer the relatively private space for marginalized people that it used to be. A closeted person, let's say, could be unwittingly outed into public spheres of shame as their barstool neighbor publicly snaps an image or video of their exciting night out. A public's "success," according to Warner, "depends on the recognition of participants and their further circulatory activity." He tells us to "Run it up the flagpole and see who salutes" (114). In this framework, in order for a public to work, it needs to be both recognized by its participants (the "salute") and continue to circulate. In some ways, it makes sense that Warner was concerned about publics being unable to successfully form in digital spaces because it can be very difficult to trace a discourse that is highly variable and iterative. Afterall, how can we make meaning if the discourse keeps shifting and evolving beyond recognition? However, as on and offline contexts collapse into the other, an individual does not need to be "addressed," "recognized," or even be aware ("attention") in order to be recruited into a networked, digital public. In an ecology where these expressions can be made out of remixed bodies that can emerge in wildly different contexts, these re-presented bodies can circulate through a network of interrelated publics that the "identity holder" could not anticipate or control, even if they knowingly and deliberately had their image recorded for circulation.

Take, for instance, the "woman-yelling-at-a-cat" meme—which reached peak popularity around the summer of 2019—that mashed up a screen capture from the reality television show *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*. The meme featured cast member Taylor Armstrong during a particularly emotional moment with the image of a grimaced white cat sitting on a chair before a plate of what looks like asparagus. We can observe an embodied discourse of a privileged white woman over-reacting, over-emoting (hysteria),

about something relatively small or insignificant. The major premise of "white female privilege" is copied and coupled with alternative premises and conclusions. While Armstrong did knowingly participate in a television show whose major premise is "the day-to-day concerns of wealthy housewives are frivolous," she certainly could not have anticipated the possible alternative remixings of her bodily performance during that specific moment on the show, and she certainly didn't need to be addressed in order to be recruited as a participant in these alternative digital, networked discourses. Further, for the rhetorical success of the meme (measured by its virality), audiences did not need to visually recognize Armstrong or the television show in order to understand the major premise of the meme. In fact, knowing the origins of a remix is not necessary for making meaning out of and then sharing a particular instantiation of the remix. Rather, memes rely on some kind of cultural touchstone or commonplace, like an in-joke, for rhetorical success. In other words, the meme needed only to enthymematically reproduce a recognizable-enough cultural value. At the level of the body, readers might fill in cultural assumptions about that particular body (about class, privilege, entitlement whiteness, female irrationality/hysteria, etc.). At the level of digital reproduction, readers might recognize familiar memes or meme-styles and whatever discursive meanings are imbued within those meme-styles when they reproduce those images by sharing, liking, or remixing prefabricated styles and/or content.

Figure 3.2 Example of the woman yelling at a cat meme, found on reddit. ("It's a Sneaker").

Figure 3.3 A political version of the woman yelling at a cat meme shortly following President Trump's first impeachment trial, tweeted by @CJArndt2, a pro-Sen. Mitch McConnell account.

Figure 3.4 A political remix of the woman yelling at a cat meme following the 2020 election after President Trump questioned the official vote count, from tweet by @tatoosandbones.

Thanks largely to this remix *ethos* that often forms online discourses, different

iterations of the same or similar embodied discourses can easily and quickly proliferate

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online, often without the address or recognition of some of its participants. Warner argues that "people do not commonly recognize themselves as virtual projections. They recognize themselves only as being already the persons they are addressed as being and as already belonging to the world that is condensed in their discourse" (114). Warner is arguing that identity isn't necessarily tied up in their so-called "virtual projection." That is, people understand themselves in the context of how they are addressed and who they are addressed as being in relation to a particular discourse, especially at the moment of discursive participation. There is something deeply problematic with the restrictions Warner is placing on ideas of "recognition" and "address." These restrictions are most clearly problematized in digital publics. His fundamentally Hegelian understanding of identity as dialogically constructed by how people are addressed within a discursive context is a bit outmoded. As we have already seen, like on the Snap Map or viral internet memes, digital bodies—virtual projections of individuals—are frequently recruited into discourses and then used as a kind of discursive piñata. Whether it's the Star Wars Kid or the various Scumbag Steve memes, these individuals have been unwittingly recruited into fairly robust and enduring discourses, and those discourses have the potential to loop back into those individuals' offline lives.

In this section, we have seen how bodies can somnambulantly participate in discourses they could not possibly have anticipated. Next, we will see how somnambulance complicates identity politics and the notion of self-expression in online spaces.

Sockpuppetry and Non-Autonomous Expression

Somnambulance is nothing new, of course. There are innumerable possible discourses, politics, and conceptual edifices in which we engage *by mere presence alone*. In *Distant Publics*, Jenny Rice blurs the lines between public and private by arguing that even distant, disaffected, disengaged or otherwise politically silent subjects are shaped by their feelings (a feeling public subject) when put in relation to a constellation of discourses. She argues, "certain rhetorical technologies of production (lodged in commonplace patterns of vernacular discourse) simultaneously produce people who are eager to participate publicly and people who are eager to remain politically and publicly quiet" (48). People do not join a public sphere, *because they are already a part of it*. In other words, we don't really have a choice but to participate. As Foucault reminds us, the subject does not preexist the discourse(s) that constructs it. When subjects enter into public spheres (which is becoming increasingly more difficult to *not* do), they enter from and within a complex web of relations (of discourses, images, institutions, histories, etc.).

However, most takes on discursive participation presuppose some degree of autonomous expression. In "Rethinking the Public Sphere," Fraser remarks that "participation means being able to speak 'in one's own voice,' thereby simultaneously constructing and expressing one's cultural identity through idiom and style" (69). Here, Fraser still privileges autonomous expression. In the context of embodied discourse, I'm not entirely sure what it would mean to "speak in one's own voice," especially for circulating digital bodies. Similarly, Rice builds on Warner's concept of publics-as-poetic-world-making with her own concept of "public subjectivity." By which she means, "the role(s) we inhabit when we speak and act about matters that put us into relation with

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others. […W]hen I speak in the role of 'pro-choice mother,' I am stepping into webs of discourses, images, affects, and histories that have been circulating for ages" (45). These ongoing discourses give definition to a subject's identity and that identity itself then contributes to the lexicon of interrelated discourses and politics. However, to the extent that bodies indicate something about a subject's identity, *the body might not necessarily speak for itself* in order to contribute to the lexicon of interrelated embodied discourses. When we share memes, for example, we frequently express ourselves through the bodies of others, using others as a kind of surrogate for our own expression, not unlike puppetry.

So, what does it mean to "speak" if public participation is enacted by mere presence alone (by movements and encounters)? What does it mean to have "one's own voice" if our sense of ourselves is constructed by a combination of technologies, appropriations, and even our feelings in relation to a constellation of discourses? The ethical problem here is using bodies as *mere means* in order to achieve our discursive ends. When we reproduce imagistic internet memes, we necessarily reproduce cultural values and in-jokes (some more ignoble than others). In this way, somnambulance complicates Fraser's claim about "voice" and "expression." In this section, I am interested in examining the ways bodies somnambulantly express the political interests of others through practices of appropriation. To illustrate this, I examine three cases: digital blackface, sockpuppetry, and embodied racial activism. Here, bodies in digital networks are made to express meaning beyond the intention of the identity holders.

Digital Blackface

Perhaps the most common way to express ourselves online is by sharing a meme or a GIF featuring the bodies of people we don't know (usually famous people). In this

practice, we compel the bodies of others to somnambulantly participate for our own discursive ends. In her *Teen Vogue* article, "We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs," professor of English and African American studies at Northwestern, Lauren Michele Jackson discusses the idea of "digital blackface," where people—specifically Meghan McCain in her example—have a habit of using black gifs to express some sort of exaggerated emotion. She argues that "Digital blackface uses the relative anonymity of online identity to embody blackness" and that these nonblack users reproduce black bodies to express "their most exaggerated emotions" (Jackson).

Figure 3.5 Meghan McCain making use of "digital blackface"; gif features actress, Tiffany Pollard.

In the above example, there are a couple things going on. For one, McCain plays her part in co-constructing discourses in popular media of the "emotional, angry black woman" trope. Second, we see McCain attempting to appropriate some of those qualities and incorporate them into her own sense of identity and self-expression. Undoubtedly, as an actress and television personality, Tiffany Pollard (featured in the tweeted gif) was well aware that her image was being recorded and surely must have been aware—on some

level—that her image could be circulated for a number of alternative purposes. But I think it is fair to say that she couldn't possibly anticipate the specific discursive trajectories of her image. Such an appropriation, as in the Meghan McCain example, can muddy the distinction between reverence and exploitation. Much like the old *Amos 'n' Andy* radio show of white voices telling black stories, digital blackface taps into and exploits cultural assumptions about race through a white perspective, thereby advancing a specific kind discourse on race. So, is Meghan McCain expressing in her own voice? Well, I think she is, insofar as any expression is constituted from a constellation of others' expressions. However, to express oneself through the body of another necessarily borrows and reproduces historical and cultural commonplaces conventionally associated within those bodies. So, should people avoid expressing themselves through the bodies of others? Especially bodies with identities decidedly different from their own? Jackson argues no. It largely depends on what sort of dubious credibility the remixer is striving to appropriate or what sorts of regressive commonplaces twitterers promote by posting such images. In either case, we can see how a racial identity can somnambulantly contribute to an ongoing lexicon of interrelated embodied discourse without the conscious awareness or consent of the participants in question.

Digital Blackface and Sockpuppetry

Similarly, in November 2020, would-be congressperson Dean Browning tweeted out, from his verified account, a rather curious retort to a pro-Obama Twitter user. Browning, a white male Republican, tweeted out that he was "a black gay guy and [he could] personally say that Obama did nothing for [him], [his] life only changed a little bit and it was for the worse" (Jennings). By all outward appearances, the former

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commissioner of Lehigh County, Pennsylvania is neither black nor identifies as gay. In fact, his Twitter profile claimed that he was a "proud pro-life & pro-2A Christian conservative dedicated to enacting common sense solutions to Keep America Great" (@DeanBrowningPA). So, the identity that he publicly and unambiguously asserted for himself was a far cry from the supposedly black and gay conservative identity he claimed in a tweet. Understandably, Dean Browning's tweet caused a bit of confusion.[27]

Most Twitter users couldn't say for certain why the former Republican candidate would tweet about being black and gay, but there's no question that the tweet certainly had political aims of one kind or another. A couple hours after Browning's initial tweet, he tweeted out an explanation that he was simply quoting a message he received from a follower and that the context was not clear. In that same tweet, Browning claimed that Trump had won "record minority votes & record LGBTQ votes" without evidence for these claims.

Figure 3.6 Screen captures of Browning's curious tweet, where he claimed to be a black gay guy (left) and from the subsequent follow up tweet (right).

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[27] As of July 2021, Browning seems to have deleted his Twitter account, and a parody account has repurposed the abandoned @DeanBrowningPA twitter handle.

Later that same day, Twitter users unearthed a pro-Trump Twitter account, Dan Purdy (@DanPurdy322), who seemed to enjoy commenting on Browning's tweets. The Dan Purdy account self-identified as a black, gay man, using a bitmoji-like avatar rather than an actual profile picture. A popular theory on the internet is that Dean Browning may have used a bogus "burner" account on Twitter (a practice called "sockpuppeting") to appropriate the credibility of a fictional black, gay identity in order to make counterclaims against pro-Obama or pro-liberal arguments. According to this theory, Browning may have intended to switch to the burner account and simply forgot to do so before posting that he was "a black gay guy," accidentally using his actual account rather than the burner account. The veracity of this theory is uncertain. However, what I think is clear is that Browning attempted (at the very least) to serve as a proxy to communicate a black and queer voice to leverage whatever credibility he felt that voice might lend him.

Stranger still, the Dan Purdy account eventually tweeted out a video of a man claiming to be Dan Purdy, where he explains, "Hey, guys. My name is Dan Purdy, and I am indeed a gay black man. The message that you saw on Dean's Twitter was posted… I don't actually know how it was posted, but I did send it to him."[28]

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[28] This since-deleted video, was saved and reposted by Vox reporter, *@alex_abads*.
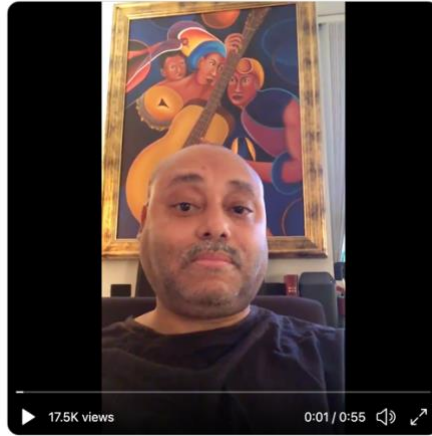
*Figure 3.7 Screen capture of
video from the since-suspended
Dan Purdy account.*

Later, Twitter users unearthed images of a man named William Holte, who looks

remarkably similar to this Dan Purdy individual. Holte happens to be the son and nephew

of Patti LaBelle. Holte has published several articles on *Medium* railing against the

mainstream media, feminism, and writing a generally pro-Trump blog posts.

*Figure 3.8 Screen capture tweeted by celebrity
chef @PadmaLakshmi.*

So, the facts on the ground remain unclear.[29] In either case, whether or not Dan Purdy is a real person, we can observe how identity in itself (i.e., a generic black/queer identity) can be used as a mouthpiece to somnambulantly participate in digital publics. That is, using an intersectional identity by recruiting/leveraging that identity for purely political ends in the interest of persuading through, what Kenneth Burke calls, identification. As Burke writes, "[y]ou persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his" (55, emphasis in original). For Burke, rhetoric is a *body of identifications*, an autonomous activity that achieves persuasion through repetitive and reenforced interactions. Much of Burke's project on rhetoric is interested in transformation through identification. "Identification," Burke writes, "at its simplest is also a deliberate device, as when the politician seeks to identify himself with his audience" ("Rhetoric" 203). That is to say, the politician hopes to dialectically build a consubstantiality, a mutual transformation between rhetor and audience. However, in this case, a political actor attempted to engineer a consubstantial communion between frequently opposing identities (a conservative identity and a black/queer identity) to potentially expand a constituency or establish his legitimacy. However, he does so by recruiting, through sockpuppetry, a minoritized identity that may or may not actually exist—a "hortatory" without granting autonomy or address to the identity in question.[30]

The political tactic of sockpuppetry with supposedly Black Twitter accounts is not an uncommon one. The *Washington Post* has reported on "[a] network of more than two

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[29] Rebecca Jennings's *Vox* article further elaborates on these details.

[30] In a *Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke describes rhetoric's nature as "addressed, since persuasion implies an audience" (38).

dozen [Black pro-Trump accounts], many of them using identical language in their tweets, recently has generated more than 265,000 retweets or other amplifying 'mentions' on Twitter, according to Clemson University social media researcher Darren Linvill" (Timberg and Stanley-Becker). Sockpuppetry is also a key strategy for the Russian-funded "troll farm" called, the Internet Research Agency (IRA). In a study by Freelon et al., they analyzed available data on IRA sockpuppet accounts. Among their typology of sockpuppet troll accounts, Freelon et al. conclude, "despite there being substantially more conservative-presenting accounts and tweets than liberal- or Black-presenting ones, when considered on a per-tweet basis, Black-presenting IRA accounts attracted more retweets, likes, and replies than any other identity category" (13). In other words, there is a highly effective rhetorical strategy to be leveraged by tapping into the complex cultural commonplaces of a particular identity. The available data suggests that a pro-Trump account can (mis)appropriate the *ethos* of Black identity in support of their political interests and stand to generate, at the very least, a high number of social media engagements (retweets, replies, followers, likes, tweet clicks, etc.)—a kind of world-making in itself.

Somnambulant Counter-Narratives

As the previous two examples illustrate, identity can be coopted to participate as a mouthpiece by actors outside that identity group—not unlike the philosophical dialogs of antiquity. In this way, somnambulance can occur in more traditional, analog modes of communication. For example, in the summer of 2020, in the wake of George Floyd's killing at the hands of police, a series of protests erupted across the United States. At the same time, there were a number of stories circulating in the media about "white agitators"

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who were, presumably, interested in causing more disruption in an effort to paint the Black Lives Matter movement as more violent and disruptive than it actually was ("Authorities Suspect White Supremacists…"). Many of these stories involved episodes of vandalism, like broken windows or spray-painted buildings. Many of these white agitator stories suggest the coopting of a movement's identity in an effort to circulate political counterarguments. In this way, these vandalistic engagements attempted to non-autonomously recruit an identity for alternative rhetorical ends.

However, several of these alleged white agitators were caught on camera and published to social media. On May 31, 2020, a video emerged on Twitter of a pair of white people—dressed in non-descript clothing with masks obscuring identifiable parts of their face, ostensibly because of the concurrent coronavirus pandemic—spray painting the letters "BLM" on the side of a Starbucks during the George Floyd protests in Los Angeles. The videographer, a black woman (also wearing a face covering), comments, "[when] the news come on, they gonna say we did that. We didn't do that. […] We out here, standing together, peacefully protesting without any problems. You got people of all races spray painting on buildings, talking about 'black lives matter.' That ain't even us" ("Black Protestor Caught…"). Several Twitter users commented on tweets of the video, believing the video served as an example of the "white disruption" reported in the media, and others giving them the benefit of the doubt. A selection of these tweets include: "Those aren't allies. Nope"; "They may think they're helping"; and "They are not protesters. They are agitators."

First, what is striking about this video is that there are individuals (the white spray painters) participating in an embodied discourse with their specific identities obscured by

a facial covering. The facial coverings help inoculate these individuals from the consequences of vandalistic public participation, an impunity possibly granted to them by virtue of their whiteness and almost certainly granted to them by the anonymity afforded to them by socially sanctioned cloth face coverings (due to the coincident COVID-19 pandemic) obscuring their specific, individual identities.

Figure 3.9 An apparently white woman spray-painting "BLM" on the side of a Starbucks (screen capture of a video tweeted by @gryking).

Second, much like the mysterious Purdy account, their embodied participation occurs at the level of racial identity. Because of their masks, the spray painters are deindividuated. They are only understood (by audiences and the videographer) and identified as "white people" committing an act of vandalism that might have otherwise been attributed to black supporters of the protests if not for the surveillance technology recording the act. So, embedded in their whiteness are discourses of emboldened white privilege and a kind of discursive, expressivist blackface. However, once their act of vandalism was recorded and circulated, their whiteness non-autonomously changes the

nature of the "BLM" spray-paint. Their whiteness then enters into a complex web of relations by their presence, thereby building a counter-narrative of problematic white agitators. During the tumultuous summer of 2020, information seemed to travel around like a game of telephone. Our near-limitless access to information did not really grant us the clarity the internet has long promised. Unfact-checked videos, images, and memes circulated around social media in a way that became quite dizzying and produced these collisions of identity narratives. While we can't discern their intentions (whether they were white agitators or mis-guided allies), we can observe how surveillance dislodged the vandalizers' whiteness out of obscurity and how their whiteness non-autonomously (re)composed the nature of the black identity they were attempting to appropriate in the spray paint.

The previous three cases serve as sites for critical inquiry not only into bad actors attempting to coopt identity but also into the very networks that co-construct identity and then *express* using that identity for rhetorical ends. In other words, these case studies should encourage us to ask critical questions about how algorithms prioritize certain hashtags; how users might like, share, and retweet hashtags in order to game Twitter's mysterious algorithms; and how popular memes and gifs (which rely, enthymematically, on shared cultural premises and in-jokes) circulate around digital networks. Who shares them and for what purposes? In advancing the concept of a *digital-race assemblage*, Sanjay Sharma views race as emergent through relations and processes, rendering race in machinic terms: "Understanding race as an 'assemblage' acknowledges the oppressive force of racial categorization and the violence of racism, yet seeks to activate the potential of race to become otherwise" (Sharma 54). Online, rhetors are able to leverage

(in this interchange of politics) images, affects, and histories to *express themselves through the bodies of others*. Following Sharma's lead, the remaining sections of this chapter will theorize how publics, like in the preceding cases, *self-organize* through a kind of machinic imitation: through reproduction in human and non-human registers. In this way, we can more clearly observe how digitized bodies are (re)(de)constructions of the remixer's identity and the identities of somnambulant bodies unknowingly caught in the interchange.

Publics as Self-Organizing through Machinic Imitation

Throughout this chapter, I have defined somnambulism as a non-autonomous participation mediated by surveillance. I have largely made this claim at the levels of the body, identity, and reputation. In this section, I work through some of the ways that publics somnambulantly self-organize through human and non-human *processes*. In Tarde's *The Laws of Imitation*, he begins his project by identifying three forms of universal repetition: vibratory motion, heredity, and imitation. While vibratory motions involve largely non-human kinds of repetitions and heredity involves intra- or extra-organic reproductions, the thrust of his project investigates resemblances of social origin, that of *imitation*. His theoretical sociological project is interested in how inventions spread through imitation or contagious collective behavior. He argues, "Both the somnambulist and the social man are possessed by the illusion that their ideas, all of which have been suggested to them, are spontaneous" (77). Pushing this thinking further, he suggests that somnambulism and hypnotism are not altogether different—an imitation that is irrational and not altogether conscious but also not altogether *un*conscious. In more digital contexts, social interactions—and publics for that matter—are far more meditated

by non-human machinic processes and often occur at greater distances than they have before.

Online, we can observe how a flurry of contagious and affective encounters organize publics at conscious and unconscious levels. Warner's first criterion for the formation of publics is that publics are self-organized. However, Warner makes this claim in more humanistic registers rather than in material, distributed registers. While elaborating upon Deleuze's model of change in material systems, Byron Hawk gives the example of a hurricane, which involves elements of intensive differentiations. For Deleuze, these rhythmic patterns illustrate how change comes about through difference and repetition. Habits establish a territory (reterritorilization) and breaking habits establish new ones (deterritorilization). A public is manifest through these kinds of movements and encounters, repetitions and differences: bodies in the presence of cameras, actively or passively engaging those cameras; users (human and non-human) uploading those encounters to digital platforms; those encounters reproducing (with differences) through views, likes, shares, retweets, replies, clicks, hashtags; algorithms circulating embodied discourses from one context and into a variety of alternative contexts. Digital publics, in this way, seem decidedly self-organizing—and not entirely in the human way.

Unlike Warner's claim that "[a]ttention is the principle sorting category by which members and nonmembers are discriminated" (87), I argue that publics self-organize in digital networks through a concert of somnambulant, imitative practices occurring at various levels of intensity. Since bodies are frequently in the presence of potential publicity (thanks to the material conditions of digital publicness and human actors' access

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to digital composing tools, digital networks themselves, and trending algorithms), publics do not require the awareness of all of its participants in order to self-organize. Algorithms, for instance, are not politically disinterested. They tend to reproduce our biases, cultural commonplaces, and political proclivities often beneath the surface of consciousness via, what I am calling, a *machinic imitation*. My interest here is in the concert of human and non-human actors that compel certain kinds of publics to self-organize and circulate, in some cases teleologically and in others non-teleologically.

Understanding imitation as a kind of somnambulance, this section considers a few ways *how* a somnambulant participation can be mediated through machinic, imitative processes in complex digital networks.

Self-Forming through (Un)Conscious Imitation

A key focus of study here for somnambulant participations is the tendency for mimetic activity to quickly and (non)autonomously organize a variety of digital publics. Machinic[31] imitation, then, is not necessarily just human bodies reproducing content but machines working *with* those human bodies to reproduce and even co-construct the very kinds of content and values that users find persuasive. So, in this way, the machinic is not simply a matter of production but the ongoing working relationship between heterogenous actors. Memes, for example, are kinds of automated and somnambulant reproductions that occur through this ongoing interplay of relations.

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[31] I'm deriving the term "machinic" largely from Deleuze and Guattari: "We think the material or machinic aspect of an assemblage relates not to the production of goods but rather to a precise state of intermingling of bodies in a society, including all the attractions and repulsions, sympathies and antipathies, alterations, amalgamations, penetrations, and expansions that affect bodies of all kinds in their relations to one another" (90).

According to Richard Dawkins, memes are cultural units reproduced through imitative practices similar to how genes reproduce through natural selection. In this neo-Darwinian rendering, memes seem to possess a nearly autonomous agency that, as Sanjay Sharma phrases it, "[use] passive human brains as mere vehicles for their propagation" ("Black Twitter?" 60). Embedded within Dawkins's concept of the meme is a suggestion that a cultural idea's survival is transmitted and reproduced successfully through competition with other ideas and cultural acceptances and adoptions. Of course, the concept of "meme" has changed slightly since Dawkins coined it in the 1970s. Now "internet memes" typically refer to the image-texts we see circulating on our social media feeds. However, for this discussion, I am interested in the broader understanding of memes as Dawkins first presented it. Like Limor Shifman points out, there are many genres of internet memes that need not be relegated to stable images with interchangeable text. Memes certainly travel through human brains, but they also travel through a variety of machinic processes. Rhetors should consider, then, how memes reproduce through the interplay of human memetic practices and the reproductions enabled by the machines those memes pass through.

For instance, consider the "I can't breathe" slogan from the Black Lives Matter movement. The origins of which could be traced to the 2014 video of the death of Eric Garner, who pleaded, "I can't breathe," while dying in a chokehold by New York City police. Protesters, following Garner's death, carried signs with Garner's words. The hashtag #ICantBreathe consequently proliferated online. Athletes, notably LeBron James, wore t-shirts with the slogan as well. About six years later, we can observe a similar pattern of reproduction after the eerily similar 2020 videos of the death of George

Floyd—by a knee on his neck, also by the police—which recorded Floyd pleading, "I can't breathe." Like the Garner event, a similar reproduction and circulation of the slogan emerged with a comparatively amplified virality given its status as the *second* significant occurrence of the identical plea from a black man dying in a nearly identical way.[32] The slogan appeared on signs, hashtags (#icantbreathe), facemasks (common during the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic), t-shirts, and elsewhere. An alternative slogan, "I *still* can't breathe" began trending on social media. Google Trends shows that searches of "I still can't breathe" peaked around mid-summer of 2020 (with no available data of the phrase before November 2019). Soon, alternative uses for "#icantbreathe and #istillcantbreathe crossed over into counter-discourses of mandated mask-wearing during the COVID-19 pandemic.[33] Considering Deleuze and Guattari's metaphor of one virus that has jumped from one species to another and spreads in an "*aparallel evolution*" (10), one can also observe how a cultural meme can emerge, amplify, and iterate within a particular technocultural assemblage. If we think of memes as pattern replicators and imitations, internet memes can encompass any number of digital viral trends—whether the meme is simply information embedded within a composition or *the meme is the practice itself*—circulating around digital networks.[34] What is clear, however, is that memes proliferate through imitative practices and processes, imitations that occur in both human and non-human registers.

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[32] According to GoogleTrends, the phrase "I can't breathe" spiked in December of 2014 and June of 2020 in the United States. The June 2020 spike was approximately 11% higher than the December 2014 spike.

[33] The argument being, mandated mask-wearing was government overreach and an infringement on personal freedom.

[34] See Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*

This flurry of memetic activity (retweeting, sharing, hashtagging) machinically self-organizes a wide range of publics and potential publics, all of which doesn't and couldn't possibly occur with all participants' awareness. There's no question that sharing and hashtagging are *conscious* memetic practices—to retweet a hashtag is to do what others are doing. What is *unconscious*, however, are the alternative discourses that are mechinically circulated, reproduced, and coopted by other actors. Once the hashtag "#icantbreathe" had been coopted, dueling discourses intertwined at either conscious or unconscious levels. In this way, somnambulance is ultimately enabled by contagion at an *affective* level. As Jenny Rice puts it, "a rhetoric emerges already infected by the viral intensities that are circulating in the social field" ("Unframing Models" 14). In a heavily surveilled world, bodies stand to be reproduced so long as those bodies are in the presence of these technologies of reproduction and are therefore primed, or "already infected," for viral circulation. According to Tarde, "[r]epetitions are also multiplications or self-spreading contagions" (17). The contagion metaphor that Tarde and crowd theorists make use of should not imply exact copies of content or behavior. Yes, content itself is reproduced, but the things that make it reproducible are far more embedded in the network and in the complex socio-material sphere it occupies. The problem of *containment* in terms of embodied somnambulance and contagion should ultimately provoke ethical questions. When a meme breaks from one context and enters into another, what precisely is being reproduced and why? What cultural values and practices are being reproduced? What are the incentives that inform these reproductions? The very practice of sharing a meme for likes and attention is a part of the meme-practice. In other

words, the contagion in question is not content, *per se* (although, yes content is a part of this), but *a rhetoric of processes, events, and bodies*.[35]

While meme content is an important site for inquiry, the meme-practice can easily be overlooked in favor of content. In his compelling article on hashtags on the so-called Black Twitter, Sharma considers how these hashtags (which Sharma considers "micro-memes") rhetorically operate within digital networks. He argues, "Analytically we can characterize hashtag propagation as formative in structuring Twitter as an *imitative* network, that is, both as a social network made up of 'intentionally' acting individuals *and* as a 'crowd' of affective contagions" (61). As we might guess, in a competitive marketplace, businesses, or subgroups often attempt to game Twitter's trending algorithm in order to promote certain hashtags to the top of Twitter's trending list thereby gaining more attention for a particular discourse, usually accomplished through aggressive tweeting or retweeting of certain hashtags. We can see levels of imitation occurring, in concert, at different levels of intensity. In this way, the individual subject attempting to game the system in order to trend a hashtag is "neither an autonomous agent imitating others, nor dissolved into an aggregation without agency" (61). In other words, these trending algorithms tend to be mysterious things, a black box where a group of users collectively (but not necessarily in conscious coordination) decide to input data and hope for a particular outcome. But often these attempts at gamming trending algorithms is much like putting users' faith in a desired outcome dictated by a mysterious non-human actor attempting to reproduce—or produce an imitation or simulacrum of—the tastes of a platform's userbase.

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[35] In the italics, I've borrowed language from Rice's "Unframing Models of Public Distribution."

So as we have seen, a somnambulant participation in these networks can be quite extensive. There is a complex system in place that operates through practices of imitation (e.g., sharing, retweeting, hashtagging, algorithmic reproduction, etc.). However, the human participants are not without agency either. Consider an individual at an academic conference posing for a group picture, *mostly because everyone else is doing it and it would be awkward or even disruptive to not participate* (but chose to participate nonetheless). That image then appears on Twitter under a hashtag that might represent some sort of organization with a clearly stated value system—let's say, #CCCC. That image receives a series of clicks and likes and retweets as professionals in the field imitate the practices and values of the discourse community, imbuing their accounts with the values of the original tweet. The popularity of the image rapidly grows within this professional discourse community. Soon, new alternative hashtags are added to retweets of the image, indicating a variety of other compatible ideological values—say, #queertheory or #pedagogy or #intersectionality. The image then appears on the feeds of individuals who might have an interest in that image or those hashtags, as Twitter's trending algorithm decides which tweets or hashtags are well-matched with the users' other engagements, attempting to imitate the tastes and proclivities of those Twitter users. As the CCCC conference comes to a close, the virality of the image slows but remains in a variety of digital locations on Twitter, with the potential to reemerge at any point in time for whatever reason. In this fairly innocuous hypothetical, the individual who decided to pose for a picture, because everyone else did, somnambulantly participates in a variety of alternative discourses at conscious and unconscious levels as machines attempt to reproduce a simulacrum of the conference's values. As the digital gears of the

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network turn, we can witness publics forming through a kind of machinic imitation, occurring at different levels of intensity.

Self-Forming through (Un)Conscious Consumption

If imitation is a kind of somnambulance, our media diet is surely also a kind of somnambulism. Since we tend to reproduce the media we consume, what is also important in this discussion about machinic imitation is how publics self-form through passive *consumption*. De Certeau renders consumption as a form of production that manifests "through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order" (xiii). Using television consumption as the paradigmatic example, this kind of consumption occurs when an individual becomes "dislodged" from the product because the viewer cannot "write anything on the screen of his set" (31). However, this dislodging shouldn't imply a non-participation. Instead, the critical question de Certeau asks is: when we internalize these images, what do we *make* of them? For de Certeau, "consumption" is characterized by "its poaching" and "its tireless but quiet activity" (31). In other words, participation is not defined so clearly as an active doing (e.g., protesting, blogging, live streaming, or even actively remixing political memes). Rather, participation can emerge from how the things we consume shape our thinking and shape our practices. What emerges out of our daily practices and habits are, in part, the discursive products of our media diet. De Certeau gives the example of a colonized group not reproducing the culture of the colonizers, but rather producing a variation (of art for example) of both the colonizers and the colonized, a repetition with differences. He calls this the "lexicon of users' practices" (31). Of course, in a lot of ways, de Certeau's discussion here resembles how digital publics tend to organize. Users consume a

composition—with meaning enthymematically embedded in dominant cultural premises—and then recirculate it within a particular milieu through fairly passive practices (e.g., liking or sharing or even just viewing), creating variation and building a serviceable lexicon of practices.[36]

As we consume certain styles of rhetorical engagement (the particularities of our practices), we internalize them and then reproduce—or produce an imitation of—those particular engagements. Comparing "consumption" to the use of language, de Certeau writes, "In the case of consumption, one could almost say that production furnishes the capital and that users, like renters, acquire the right to operate on and with this fund without owning it" (33). In digital publics, users build with the materials they consume, and what users consume is not ownable but a thing borrowed and returned back to the network. As we have seen in our case studies, users enact cultural commonplaces embedded within representations of bodies in order to engage in certain kinds of publics. Users build realities, arguments, art, concepts, styles of rhetorical engagement, and the rest with these unownable "funds," which certainly include copying and reproducing representations of bodies. In other words, by living in a heavily surveilled world, we are immersed in a cornucopia of practices that we regularly consume and consequently reproduce. Also, this particular ecosystem generates a set of expectations. That is to say, we *expect*—like the individual getting sucked into a conference photograph—that we ourselves will be consumed.

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[36] Digital "engagements" like simply viewing a tweet, for example, contributes to the metadata of that tweet, thereby creating a slightly different version of the tweet and constituting a kind of passive, somnambulant participation.

Informational Logics and Self-Expression

Obviously, many of these discursive practices occur on conscious levels, usually in the form of self-expression: selfies, hashtagged tweets, or snaps. However, these self-expressions can also contribute, machinically, to somnambulant participations. That is, publics can unconsciously, affectively self-organize, in part, by the input of human actors into the black box of non-human agents, particularly social media platforms and the algorithmic logics that decide what discursive values to imitate and reproduce. Users, for example, might include common or newly emerging hashtags to their digitally composed selves. On Snapchat, users may "snap" filtered selfies for their followers or friends. Or, on Instagram, users might take selfies "at" community accounts they want to publicly associate themselves with. However, these participations enter into distributed machinic processes. These practices of self-expression should invite questions about *how* we express and inquire into the "*technocultural assemblage that is put into motion when we do express ourselves online* [… and] not only the content of a message online, but the *informational logics* that make such a content more or less visible" (Ganaele Langlois qtd. in Sharma). In these media spaces, users tend to make their own bodies material for recomposition, a very particular kind of discursive consumption, whether we're talking about a newly emerging political movement or the practice of eating Tide Pods.

Frequent users of social media, generally, have a sense of what they are doing. If they use hashtags, they probably have a sense of what hashtags do and how these tools can disseminate their message, picture, or whatever else to wider audiences. However, even when users attempt to cleverly game trending algorithms, they are still inputting data into a black box of networked relations, taking wild guess, not really knowing the

consequences they are actually effectuating (although they might have a vague idea). The process of publics-formation is always ongoing and complex. There will be publics that we will deliberately participate in and publics that we don't intend to participate in but participate in nonetheless. But the situation is a bit more sticky than this. If we consider memes as units of cultural reproduction, these memes, like cultural humor, are embedded within the informational logics of these networks. According to Sharma, Blacktags (or micro-memes) are not merely social representations. Rather,

> They are 'real' in the sense their materiality emerges through how the bodies of particular groupings of users machinically connect with the technocultural assemblage of Twitter, constituted by the informational logics of: user names and profile pictures, hashtags and trending algorithms, software interfaces and processes, data flows and networked relations, inclusion and exclusion, racial dis/ordering, contagious vernacular humour, meanings and affects, etc. (Sharma 55)

Sharma's analysis speaks to the *process* of how digital publics self-organize through wide-ranging distributed networks of actors. Social media platforms can exploit user input to predict user behavior and/or user predilections. The cultural logic of software code mediates the nature of a self-forming public. As users express their predilections (via likes, shares, followers, etc.), they input data, and then software code attempts to reproduce cultural values and cultural logics. This machinic reproduction of cultural value is a power relationship between participants and a given network. Algorithms function, as Sharma puts it, as "hidden magical processes" that mediate online, digital experiences and stand to materially mediate offline lives. Through veiled processes, these

software codes arrange user input in a variety of configurations in a variety of contexts in order to present content to a variety of alternative users. In other words, online participation is not quite as self-expressive as we might wish it were. Algorithms participate in a kind of networked hermeneutics, constructing content for a given user in relation to other inputs and networked actors.

Conclusion

As Baudrillard might affirm, as the media we consume attempts to replicate and imitate our preferences, those imitations (perhaps in the form of an Amazon recommendation) stand to engineer our preferences and views of the world. Absent any particular regulation, these kinds of listening/surveillance tools certainly have the potential to become more and more efficient data-gathering agents, further shaping our preferences, perceptions, and even our practices. In either case, because of technologies of reproduction, our notions of discursive participation needs to be considered very carefully. That is, an attunement to somnambulance is an attunement to the participations we aren't and even can't be aware of. The scope of this chapter has largely been interested in how bodies and identities regularly, publicly circulate and participate in discourses of identity in digital publics. However, somnambulance occurs in non-bodily registers as well. With only minimal hyperbole, we can confidently say that our toasters are, indeed, listening to us. Smart technologies are tools for gathering data about who we are and craft identities for us in order to monetize that data. We already see this kind of algorithmic curation in our newsfeeds on social media or whatever news aggregating application we might be using.

What is at stake here for participation is the loss of a private sphere, or at least in the way we typically mean "private." For Zizi Papacharissi, the private sphere is the place where "citizens feel more powerful in negotiating their place in a democracy via the nexus of a private sphere" (24). In this way, the retreat into the private sphere can serve as a political act of dissent. It is a place where individuals can negotiate their relationship with the status quo. However, if the distinction between public and private is collapsing, it is difficult to see what "retreat" really looks like. To my mind, this collapsing would stand to limit this sense of "power" that Papacharissi argues people feel in negotiating their place in a democracy. Surveillance technologies are certainly changing what privacy looks like. Perhaps, privacy looks a little more like "obscurity." That is, we occupy a private sphere only insofar as no one cares enough to circulate our embodied performances to a level we might eventually call "public." If we occupy real-world spaces in ecologies where digital technology enables *the mere possibility* of being publicized, I'm not so sure a "retreat" is really possible.

As Fraser argues, public and private are not *a priori* designations but rather "cultural classifications and rhetorical labels" ("Rethinking" 131). In our private homes, we are open to public discourse through our televisions, the internet, social media, smart devices, and the like. Further, some of these technologies are recording and collecting our data, which can be sold to a variety of for-profit entities (identities composed in metadata). It would take a good deal of self-quarantining from the ubiquity of modern digital technology to adequately retreat. As the public-private distinction collapses in the presence of convergent technologies, the so-called private sphere that people are

retreating into are spaces saturated in curated digital publics rather than a fully private sphere where individuals are able to escape the hubbub of public life.

A good deal of this chapter has critiqued Warner's framing of public participation. Considering that Warner's *Publics and Counterpublics* was published in the somewhat early days of the internet, and just before the dawn of social media, I think it is understandable that he had not anticipated the ubiquity of digital composing tools and digital networks that would mediate and recruit members into a public with or without their awareness and with little if any need of address. However, it seems clear to me that people still think of public participation in Warner's terms: as an active doing rather than somnambulant. Digital appropriations that enable somnambulance are not limited to human actors—like facial recognition search tools, datamining programs, security cameras. That is to say, human and non-human actors can teleologically and non-teleologically recruit members into a public, remix their image, and circulate it with or without a subject's knowledge. Further still, these complex networks can form and dissolve publics with little to no awareness for (or address of or attention from) its participants. An attention to somnambulance reminds us that "space" is not a matter of physical presence or absence, virtual or actual. Rather, there is a complex overlapping of physical spaces moving in and out of virtual spheres and unstable temporalities, with spaces rapidly and routinely shifting from private to public and, conversely, from public to private.

In the next chapter, we will investigate a case study that makes these overlappings abundantly clear.

CHAPTER 4

HIPSTER IN THE PARK:

IDENTITY, IDEOLOGY, AND COMMUNITY-BASED ALGORITHMIC MODERATION

Introduction

On August 18, 2012, a digital photograph was surreptitiously taken of Christopher Hermelin—an MFA student at the New School—while he sat on a park bench in New York City's The High Line park with an old-fashioned typewriter resting anachronistically atop his lap. Shortly thereafter, the photograph was anonymously posted on the social media website, reddit. Eventually, the image algorithmically worked its way onto reddit's front page, or what reddit has dubbed: "the front page of the internet." Within a short period, the image received millions of views. Perhaps not unsurprisingly, reddit users soon reacted to this image of Hermelin with a variety of pejoratives and disparaging comments, including: "fucking hipster" and "I have never wanted to fist fight someone so badly in my entire life." The image was then appropriated by another user and reemerged as a meme, with thick, white Impact font, reading: "YOU'RE NOT A REAL HIPSTER UNTIL YOU TAKE YOUR TYPEWRITER TO THE PARK." The following year, *Buzzfeed* even assembled a listicle, asking readers, "Can You Make It Through This Post Without Blacking Out From Rage?" The original image of Hermelin (without the meme-text) is featured as #18 with the caption, "This fucking guy" (Notopoulos).

Figure 4.1 Original image from "Spotted on the Highline…"

Figure 4.2 Meme that emerged later in subsequent reddit boards.

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Figure 4.3 Image of Hermelin with his busking sign clearly in view (image published in The Awl*).*

Hermelin later wrote and published an essay detailing his experience as a living meme entitled, "I Am An Object Of Internet Ridicule, Ask Me Anything" in *The Awl,* a general interest website for "curios and oddities." In his essay, he reveals that the real-world context was notably absent from the meme that had gone viral. According to Hermelin, as a new resident of New York City and a fresh MFA student, he thought up an idea to make a few extra dollars. He would sit at a park bench with his typewriter and, in his words, "write stories for people, on the spot—[he] wouldn't set a price. People could pay [him] whatever they wanted" (Hermelin). To his left, he had taped a sign to his typewriter case, explaining to passersby what the typewriter was doing resting curiously on his lap, reading: "One-of-a-kind, unique Stories While You Wait. Sliding Scale— Donate What You Can!" (Hermelin). He called the endeavor "The Roving Typist" and, at the end of the day, only made enough money to buy a slice of pizza. For the most part,

he'd written stories for children and tourists, and, in one case, he played a part in an elaborate marriage proposal (Cersosimo). As you can see above, the first photograph omitted Hermelin's context-crucial sign. Regardless of his intentions, Hermelin's image had been decontextualized, digitized, and disseminated by a camera-wielding pedestrian and later remixed by third parties, thereby circulating his image beyond his control and recontextualizing it into a new rhetorical, digital space where new meanings could then be inscribed upon his likeness.

An inquiry into ethical reading and writing practices, especially online, should necessarily be an inquiry into the value system that networks tend to reproduce. On social media, this inquiry involves the human users behind the accounts, user input, and the algorithmic logic that prioritizes certain kinds of content over others, or the algorithmic logic that censors or moderates content (or the content it *doesn't* censor or moderate). As we have discussed so far, routine surveillance technologies have effectively collapsed the public/private distinction (Papacharissi). In this way, individuals stand to have their bodies unconsciously and non-autonomously recruited into a wide variety of digital publics. For this chapter, I will use the "hipster in the park" meme as a case study to showcase how an otherwise private individual has been made into a public one and consequently engaged (both autonomously and non-autonomously) in a variety of public discourses surrounding his identity. First, I review some of the more recent research on algorithms and how they mediate online discourse. Second, I analyze two of the most active reddit discussion boards that featured the image of Hermelin on the High Line: the earliest board that featured the text-less image of Hermelin (figure 4.1) and the latter board that featured the full-text meme (figure 4.2). I focus my study on comment trends

throughout the life of these discussion boards and reddit's karma point system that informs reddit's algorithm for a community-based approach to moderating their platform. Then, I consider how reddit's algorithmic moderation system performs a hyper-rational approach to on-the-spot *kairotic* invention. Finally, I analyze other media outlets in which Hermelin subsequently appeared, especially a set of interviews Hermelin participated in regarding his meme experience. In studying these interviews, including my own interview with Hermelin, we gain insight into how identity, initiated from a single picture, can be coopted, negotiated, and interpellated in real time. Through this study, we get a better understanding of specifically how identity is negotiated and how participants are unwittingly recruited into publics in a surveillance economy that has effectively dismantled traditional boundaries between public and private.

Following the theories of bodily performativity, authorship, and somnambulance that we've discussed in previous chapters, we will see how Hermelin's digitized body entered into a public network and participated in discourses mediated by both human and non-human actors regarding his identity and hipsterdom in general. Using the "hipster in the park" meme as a case study, I will argue that rhetoricians should consider ethical reading and composing practices as a matter of enthymematic reproduction. Understanding the enthymeme as an incomplete logical structure that recruits the audience as an active participant who completes the line of reasoning, rhetors should ask themselves: what unstated values inform an algorithmic moderation system? What cultural assumptions are readers reproducing when they read content from or participate in these algorithmically moderated systems? When they simply read bodies online? As we will see through this study, community-based algorithmic moderation works to

reproduce a value system embedded within a particular community rather than functioning as a panacea for ethically problematic online discursive practices it purports to be.

Algorithmic Mediation

In this section, I'd like to offer a brief overview of algorithms as mechanisms for mediating online discourse. Generally speaking, algorithms are a set of established procedures that accomplish specific tasks. For example, Rubik's Cubes are solved by implementing memorized algorithms. A single set of movements (turning the sides of the cube) constitute an algorithm. After completing an algorithm, the smaller "cubes" will be rearranged in very specific ways. The fastest solvers (or "cubers") have memorized a set of algorithms and can discern within moments which algorithms to implement to solve certain states of the cube and have the dexterity to complete those algorithms very quickly. In other words, algorithms are sets of procedures designed to complete particular tasks. Computer code, then, is the implementation of algorithms executed by computers (Brock). Code Implements a set of instructions in order to produce specific output. In social media networks, these platforms take user input (likes, shares, views, clicks, etc.) and implement a logic that generates specific kinds of desirable output like the content that appears on a user's social media feed.

In social media scholarship, algorithms are commonly discussed on two plains, 1) how algorithms curate content, and 2) how algorithms help moderate online content. In this section, I will outline the humanistic value of studying algorithms as enthymemes and as a tool for content moderation.

The Humanistic Value of Computer Code

Recently, there have been growing scholarly calls to study the ethical, humanistic dimensions of computer code. In her book *Algorithms of Oppression*, Safiya Noble argues that "artificial intelligence will become a major human rights issue in the twenty-first century" (Noble, 1). Considering that much of our online discourse and information ecology is algorithmically mediated, Noble's prediction here is likely a safe one. Kevin Brock has argued that "the algorithm most central to Western rhetoric is the *enthymeme*" (p. 40). Because algorithms are quite procedural, as Brock points out, they might seem more machinic than humanistic. However, the "plausibilistic script-based reasoning" (Walton, qtd. in Brock, 42) of artificial intelligence is enthymematic insofar as artificial intelligence uses a logic that generates desirable outcomes that its users are *plausibly* looking for. The very idea that algorithms produce desirable outcomes is a critical point of inquiry for researchers. For instance, what does "desirable" even mean? For a Rubik's Cube, desirable means a solution to the puzzle. For a Google Image query for "CEOs," desirable might mean populating the front page with images of predominantly white men. It is these cultural biases embedded in the algorithms of big tech companies that is the focus of Noble's book. There, she investigates "the impact of what an unregulated commercial information space does to vulnerable populations" (29). Taking an especially close look at the search results produced by Google's search engine, Noble reveals how algorithms can imbue sexist or racist cultural values into the very structure of these digital tools that we use every day. In this way, enthymematic algorithms are logical

structures that compel audiences to supply data or unstated premises[37] in order to generate plausibly desirable outcomes. Critically, the cultural logic embedded in algorithms have consequences for how users understand and interpret information about the world.

Social media companies have famously held the specific nature of their algorithms pretty close to the vest, presumably to keep a competitive edge, sort of like a secret recipe. They also enjoy a certain level of plausible deniability when their trending algorithms prioritize or actually *produce* controversial or problematic content. For instance, in 2017, *ProPublica* uncovered a few problematic categories in Facebook's self-service ad buying platform designed to help advertisers target users with white nationalist interests. Categories included, "Jew hater," "how to burn Jews," and "History of 'why jews ruin the world'" (Angwin et al.). These categories were autogenerated by an algorithm, imitating user preferences based on user activity and user input. Upon discovery, Facebook promptly took down these categories. However, about a year later, *The Intercept* uncovered another white nationalist category in Facebook's ad buying platform called, "white genocide conspiracy theory," a category they discovered about a month after the October 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue shooting (Biddle). In other words, algorithms in part reproduce the politics of users that participate in the network. In this way, algorithms are non-human actors that co-produce content and meaning, but further, generate an ethics and then imbue a network with that ethics.

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[37] Here, instead of the familiar definition of the enthymeme as an incomplete syllogism, I am drawing from Bitzer's notion of the enthymeme that actively recruits audiences to supply unstated premises. See Bitzer's "Aristotle's Enthymemes Revisited."

Moderating Speech Online

During the four years of the Trump administration, scholars, the news media, tech companies, and consumers of media have been faced with the hard reality of the internet's status as the "wild west of information" and the lack of regulation of (mis)information and harassment on the internet, even though the "public airwaves" have been thoroughly regulated by the FCC for nearly a century. In the meantime, we've been operating with the hope that, under pressure of market forces, these companies will responsibly self-regulate their content. Free speech purists oppose any obstruction to an individual's right to express themselves online, usually appealing to slippery slope arguments in the face of any proposed regulation. Free speech moderationists advocate for reasonable government intervention as it pertains to online harassment and misinformation. Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act—which shields social media companies from the consequences of their user's content—has recently emerged as a possible site for better regulating information on the internet. Out of a concern of intrusive government regulation, social media companies have taken a harder look into how to better moderate their users' content and problematic expression. As they've discovered, self-regulation is a difficult proposition. Namely, because ideology is necessarily embedded within any kind of regulative apparatus.

The problems with self-regulation are many. For one, it is costly. The larger these media networks become, the more cumbersome it is to moderate the massive amounts of content that routinely appear online, including revenge porn and homophobic, sexist, racist, and violent language. To maximize efficiency, the tool of choice for these tech

companies has been the algorithm. Of course, the problem with algorithms is that ideology is always already embedded within those logics, and companies (namely, Facebook and Twitter have taken the most political flack for pulling the plug on former President Trump) can't really avoid this complication, try as they might. And try they do. To curtail these political complications (and thus their bottom line), companies like reddit, and more recently Twitter, have looked into or have implemented community-based algorithmic approaches to moderation. The theory being that if large amounts of people get together and decide on an ethics of content moderation, then a "good" ethics will emerge and win the day. These companies would also enjoy an amount of plausible deniability and abdicate themselves from the broader ethical-political quagmire of censoring irresponsible speech.

Community-Based Algorithmic Moderation

Reddit tries to avoid the ethical complications of user behavior by factoring in what they call "karma points" to semi-autonomously moderate their discussion boards. If users generally approve of a given discussion board post, these users might "upvote" the post. If users disapprove, they might downvote it. The net votes generate a "karma point" total. In addition to individual comments accruing a karma point total, user accounts also generate karma based on the total up and downvotes derived from the sum of their comment history. The objective here is to incentivize good behavior and have the broader reddit community self-moderate discussion boards, as opposed to tasking reddit administrators with policing the vast network of forums that make up the social media site. Theoretically, the karma points should serve as an indication of the reddit community's general attitude toward certain kinds of online behaviors. On reddit's

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"Help" page, they encourage users to not "set out to accumulate karma; just set out to be a good person, and let your karma simply be a reminder of your legacy" ("What Is Karma?"). This system is a combination of human and non-human actors working together not only to regulate a public discursive space, but also to make meaning and assert a value system. Users with negative karma, for instance, risk having their comments moved to the bottom of a discussion board and therefore receive less attention. Or, they risk becoming censored by reddit's algorithm by limiting the user's participation within a particular subreddit, flagging or deleting that user's comment by an AutoModerator[38] setup by a subreddit's human moderator, or simply banning that user altogether.

Historically, reddit has declined to completely censor its users in favor of a "free speech" *ethos* that social media companies have generally espoused, despite growing racist, misogynistic, homophobic, and explicitly violent kinds of communities emerging on these platforms. In more recent years, facing the prospect of government regulation, some of the social media platforms, including reddit, have moved toward banning problematic content (Copland). In either case, it seems the karma system aims to incentivize users to be "good" in order to garner approval from a given community of users. In other words, *approval* seems to be a key motivation for many redditors. A value built into the label itself, "karma" should indicate a kind of good Smartian-like *ethos* across the platform. However, as we will see in the following analysis of two reddit

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[38] "AutoModerator is a system built into reddit that allows moderators to define 'rules' (consisting of checks and actions) to be automatically applied to posts in their subreddit. It supports a wide range of functions with a flexible rule-definition syntax, and can be set up to handle many common moderation tasks automatically" ("What Is AutoModerator?").

discussions, analogizing this kind of community-based algorithmic moderation to "karma" is highly imprecise.

The reddit Discussions

The two most significant reddit discussion boards regarding the "hipster in the park" meme are the very first August 2012 thread featuring the non-memified image, "Spotted on the Highline" (figure 4.1), and the January 2013 board featuring the full-text meme, "You're not a real hipster until..." (figure 4.2). The plain image and the meme emerged on other reddit discussions[39] as well as on other social media platforms. I focus on these two discussion boards because, first, they are still published and easily accessible, and second, they have by far the most content and therefore data to work with. For example, the six other publicly available reddit discussion boards were comparatively small, ranging from zero to 23 total comments per discussion. By comparison, the two discussions I explore here have 216 and 390 total comments available, respectively, as of this writing. In analyzing these two discussions, we are able to see a microcosm of how such discourses develop, how humans and algorithms co-construct a discursive character for these boards and consequently co-construct identity and the politics surrounding identity.

"Spotted on the Highline"

Published on August 18, 2012, the first reddit discussion, "Spotted on the Highline" was originally posted by a reddit user called carlaas, a Brazilian tourist

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[39] I found eight different reddit discussions where the original post was the image of Hermelin on the High Line.

apparently by the name of Carla.[40] The "original post" (or "original poster," reddit parlance for the first post that initiated the discussion) involved the image of Hermelin sitting on the High Line without the meme text that would appear in later iterations. According to carlaas, she hadn't seen Hermelin's context-crucial sign. In the moment, she quickly took the picture and moved on, presumably to explore the rest of the city. The day the image was posted, the "Spotted on the Highline" discussion board quickly grew quite popular on reddit, making it on the so-called "front page" of reddit. A big deal in terms of circulation potential, rhetorical velocity, and simply in terms of the sheer number of eyeballs encountering the image.

After the viral image came to Hermelin's attention, he understandably felt the way a lot of people probably feel when they realize they've inadvertently gone viral. In *The Awl*, he writes, "the overwhelming negativity towards me, and the 'hipster scum' I represented, was enough to make me get up from my computer, my heart racing, my hands shaking with adrenaline" (Hermelin). Generally speaking, redditors worked together through a discourse of affirmation, collectively agreeing on and reiterating Hermelin's identity as a hipster—in one case, he was a "fucking hipster piece of shit" (-1 karma points). Of the more negative comments, navybro gives us the most insight into where some of this anger could be coming from, writing, "I see this [image of Hermelin] as pathetic. If this was some sort of performance art, it would be one thing, but it'd be the worst piece ever. This is just some asshole trying to look ironic. I mock him and other people because of the ridiculous set of standards they set for themselves" (+9 karma points). By virtue of his clothing and perhaps the anachronistic behavior he is engaged in,

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[40] Her name and origin are indicated in Hermelin's essay published in *The Awl*. A quick glance through her reddit profile seems to confirm this information.

Hermelin seems to have made himself a target worth attacking. According to navybro, he was "pathetic" and an "asshole" and "trying to look ironic." These seem to be, for navybro anyway, the hallmarks of a hipster.

Essential to experiences of internet virality is a lack of control, and that lack of control comes from the incalculable fragmentation of a given discourse. By fragmentation, I mean once anything is published on the internet, it can be quickly and easily copied and pasted elsewhere, and then these kinds of discussions (like the comments section of a Facebook post) start all over again. Regardless, Hermelin attempted to take control of his own narrative. A little less than 24 hours after the original post, he intervened by participating in the reddit discussion under the handle, cdhermelin. He writes,

> This is a surprisingly angry thread!
>
> This is a picture of me. The angle obscures the sign on my typewriter case, which says, "Stories composed while you wait. Sliding scale, donate what you can."
>
> […]
>
> I bring nice paper, envelopes, and some stamps onto the High Line and write stories for people. I started it because I like writing flash fiction, and I like talking to people, and while I could hand-write them, the typewriter is more eye-catching, and a lot more fun. And my hands don't get as tired. I write a story in about 7-10 minutes, and if people would like to ask for specific themes or characters or situations, they are more than welcome.
>
> You can follow me on twitter: @rovingtypist. I go out to the High Line once a week or so.
>
> (and for those who mentioned it, I did indeed have an iPhone with me. AND an iPad. But those don't really matter for what I was doing.)
>
> (Oh, and someone mentioned they saw me in Starbucks - I would never do this inside a cafe. Typewriters are super loud.)

(cdhermelin, "Spotted on the Highline" +142 karma points)

Indeed, Hermelin is attempting to control the narrative here, or at least steer it in a new direction. His first aim was certainly to salvage, adjust or otherwise correct the record— to persuade the thread that he had not simply carried his typewriter to the park in order to be deliberately (and therefore annoyingly) counter-cultural. But rather, he was writing stories for passersby to earn extra money. When I interviewed Hermelin for this article, I asked him if he ever felt that his reputation was at stake. He answered, "Absolutely. This was about me as a writer as much as it was about me as an image. I wanted to make sure that my reputation as a writer and a good natured person shone through in my responses to the attention." So, it's pretty clear that Hermelin was interested in preserving particular identities he'd cultivated for himself, including his writerly identity as the "The Roving Typist," a moniker he'd given himself for his story-busking project. Within the context of the reddit thread, he seems to have been somewhat successful. We can observe some of this success in reddit's "karma points" system—that is, his comment earned the most karma points in this discussion board with +142 points.
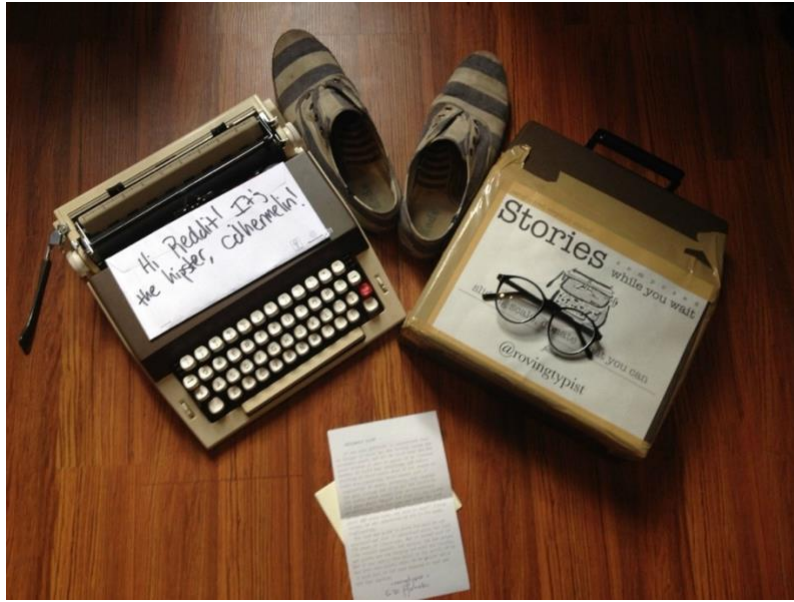
Figure 4.4 Image posted to the "Spotted" board by Hermelin to verify his identity.

In his *The Awl* article, he writes, "After I posted, the message board thread's climate changed immediately. Not unlike real life, people were complimentary and kind. Many people deleted their mean comments—one person was so embarrassed for threatening to smash my typewriter that he apologized to me" (Hermelin). Indeed, with the available data, we can see some degree of a measurable sea change in the discussion board. For the most part, the negative comments on the discussion board received negative karma points and the positive comments netted positive karma points. For example, according to bubbles0luv, "I came here to be all 'What a douche bag!' but I take it back...I would love to have someone type out a story just for me. I'll have to stop by sometime" (+8 points). The rest of the comments that followed Hermelin's intervention were quite positive and affirming. A user by the handle gniv wrote, "I don't know if carlaas [the original poster and apparent author of the original image] saw your sign, but if she did, she should have mentioned it in the post. This is a very different (and

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much better!) story than the one told by just the photo" (+3 points). While gniv assigns moral responsibility to carlaas, they recognize the original image as a composition telling a particular story. The aptly named empathogen wrote, "I think what you're doing is awesome. Keep it up!" (+22 points). On its face, it does seem that the culture of the discussion board indeed shifted in Hermelin's favor.

I was curious, though, about Hermelin's claim that this intervention changed the tides of the reddit discussion. In order to assemble a clearer narrative regarding the climate of these reddit discussions, I coded their respective comments according to the following types: 1) comments clearly ridiculing Hermelin, 2) comments defending or sympathizing with Hermelin, 3) comments on the topic of Hermelin on the High Line but were neither ridicule or sympathy, 4) off-topic or unintelligible comments, and 5) comments posted by Hermelin himself under the handle "cdhermelin." Some off-topic comments include discussions arguing for or against the virtues of typewriters or about the overall quality of PBR beer but were not about Hermelin, *per se*. On-topic comments that didn't qualify as ridicule or sympathy would occasionally straddle that line, like myzkyti's comment, "You need to put a bird on that typewriter to be a real hipster" (a reference to the TV show *Portlandia*). Also, I considered each post as a singular comment; so even lengthy posts with numerous comments of ridicule were counted and categorized as one "comment." I was far more interested in observing the general makeup of these discussions, especially in terms of ridicule and sympathy. Also, these data points are my interpretation of the essential point or intention of any given comment, a methodology with obvious limitations. Because these discussions are online, they are dynamic. In other words, the total number of comments available might not reflect the

total number of comments indicated on the discussion board. For example, comments removed by the community (human) moderator might be counted on reddit's total comment-count, but those comments might not be available or accessible to outside readers.[41] In either case, the number of comments indicated here reflect the total *available* comments.

Table 4.1 Types of comments in the "Spotted on the Highline" reddit board.

"Spotted on the Highline" Original post: August 18, 2012		
	Number of Comments	
Ridicule	59	27.3%
Sympathy	33	15.3%
neither	20	9.3%
off-topic	87	40.3%
cdhermelin	17	7.9%
Total	216	

Before Hermelin intervened in the discussion, approximately 48 comments of ridicule accumulated in the discussion. Following Hermelin's intervention, only 11 or so additional mean-spirited comments emerged thereafter—about a 77% decrease in this specific type of activity. At the time of Hermelin's intervention, the discussion board was still quite lively. So, this dip in ridicule-laden commentary could be attributed to Hermelin's contribution, adding new context through which redditors could construct new meanings and disincentivizing users from continuing the barrage of ridicule. The slight rise in more affirmative comments seems to confirm this change in attitude. The

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[41] About 14 comments had been deleted by the users who posted them, indicated on the board with the note, "Comment deleted by user." Hermelin mentions in his article that several negative comments had been deleted by the user. That data is lost. Regardless, if all 14 of these comments were ridicule, these lost comments would likely not change my analysis very much.

following histograph of the discussion board illustrates this change over time, with

Hermelin's intervention indicated in gray.

"Spotted on the Highline" | Histograph of Comments

■ Ridicule ■ Sympathy ■ cdhermelin
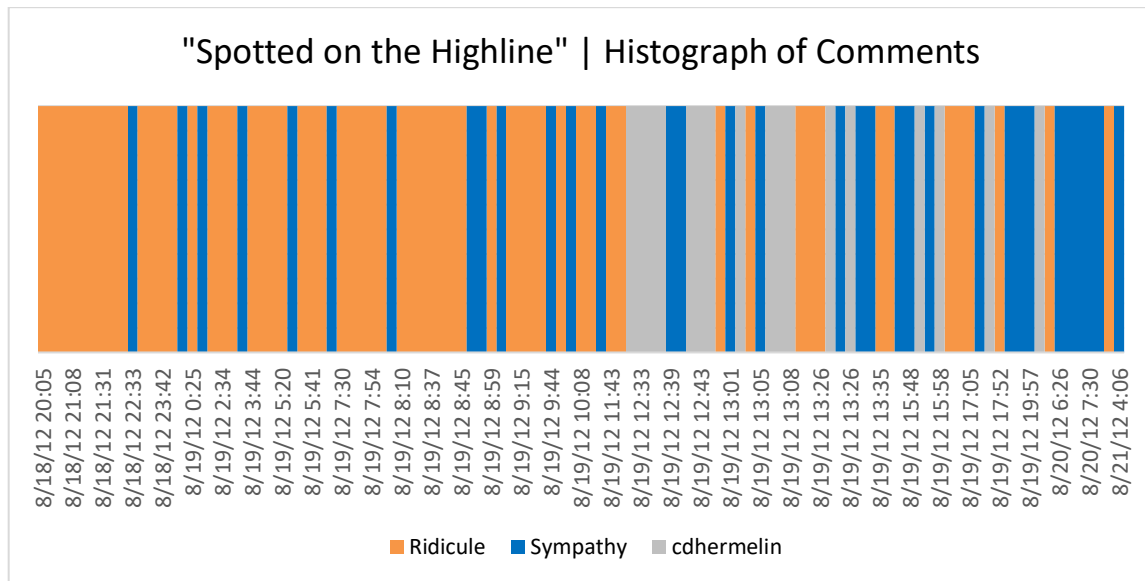
Figure 4.5 A histograph of the "Spotted on the Highline" reddit board, showing a shift of comments of ridicule declining in favor of comments of sympathy after cdhermelin's intervention.

As Hermelin suggested in his *The Awl* article, there was indeed a tide change in the

make-up of the discussion board, but the shift is not quite as dramatic a change as one

might hope. Before Hermelin's intervention, approximately 13 comments of sympathy

had been posted, and after his intervention, about 20 sympathetic comments had been

added—an increase of roughly 53%. The slight uptick in sympathy seems largely

correlated to redditors interacting directly with Hermelin on the discussion board.

However, I think the more significant data point is the 77% *drop* in ridicule rather than

the moderate uptick in sympathy. That is, the initial appeal of the discussion board

seemed to be lambasting hipsters. After learning more information about the real-world

context, it became no longer fun to ridicule the picture of Hermelin on the High Line.

Further, in the following line chart, we can see Hermelin's intervention occurred a little

more than halfway through the lifespan of the discussion board. Shortly thereafter, the overall activity sputters out, with a few pulses of activity until the reddit board falls dormant. In this visualization, it does look as though Hermelin's contribution was something of a buzzkill. An embodied discourse, rife with all the cultural assumptions and prejudices that embodied discourses enthymematically reproduce, carried on well-enough until Hermelin's intervention introduced a new context into the discussion board.
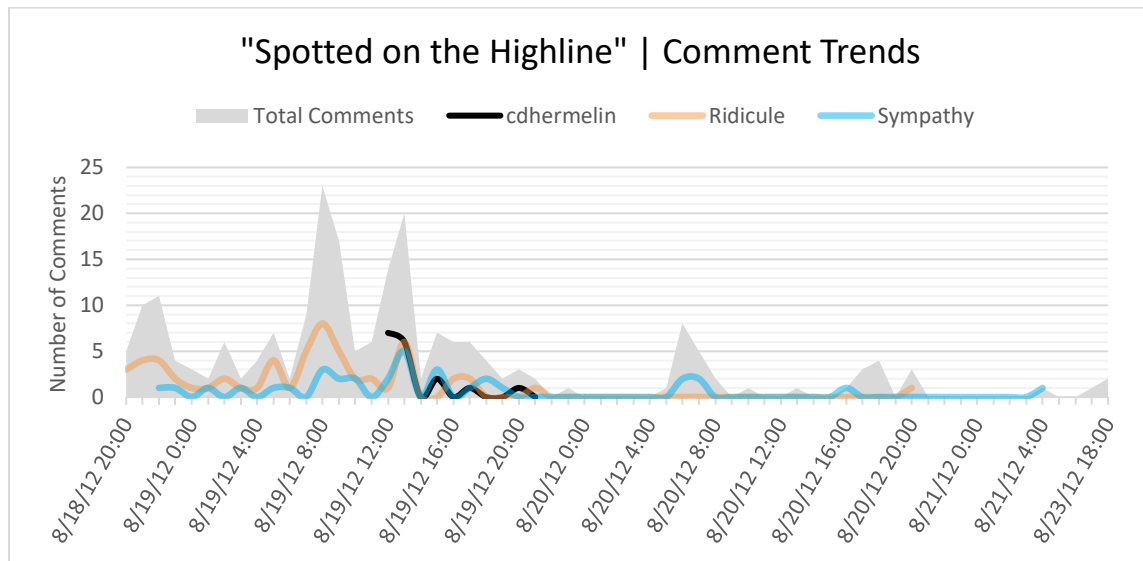
Figure 4.6 A chart of the "Spotted on the Highline" reddit board, showing the trends of the types of comments throughout the life of the discussion board.

If we were to analyze the discussion board by karma points, we get a slightly different view of this particular community's character.[42] Reddit's point system allows enough transparency to show users which kinds of behaviors are to be rewarded and which stand to be punished. In "Spotted," there were far more total comments of ridicule. However, much of the purely mean-spirited ridicule was punished with negative karma

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[42] While users can no longer comment or vote on these boards, the total karma points continually fluctuate by a few points to obscure the actual totals to thwart would-be "cheaters" that might want to manipulate or game the karma totals. So, the karma value of a comment is always inexact. Regardless, this data still gives us a general snapshot of the climate of the discussion board.

while some of the more clever attempts at ridicule were rewarded. (The ridicule with the most karma read, "He can't mean it, he's obviously doing an ironic parody of hipsters. What we have here is a meta-hipster" with +85 points; while the ridicule with one of the least amounts of karma read, "Please go back where you came from" with -15 points.) All the comments coded as ridicule collectively netted +229 karma points, the comments of sympathy collectively netted +192 points, and Hermelin's comments netted +273 points. By the time the board closed to further discussion, the karma system seemed to ultimately side with Hermelin, and if we were to add up the karma of sympathetic comments and Hermelin's comments, that karma would eclipse the ridicule karma by more than twofold. Further, if one were to sort the discussion board comments by the "best" comments first, readers will find largely hipster-affirming comments prioritized at the top.
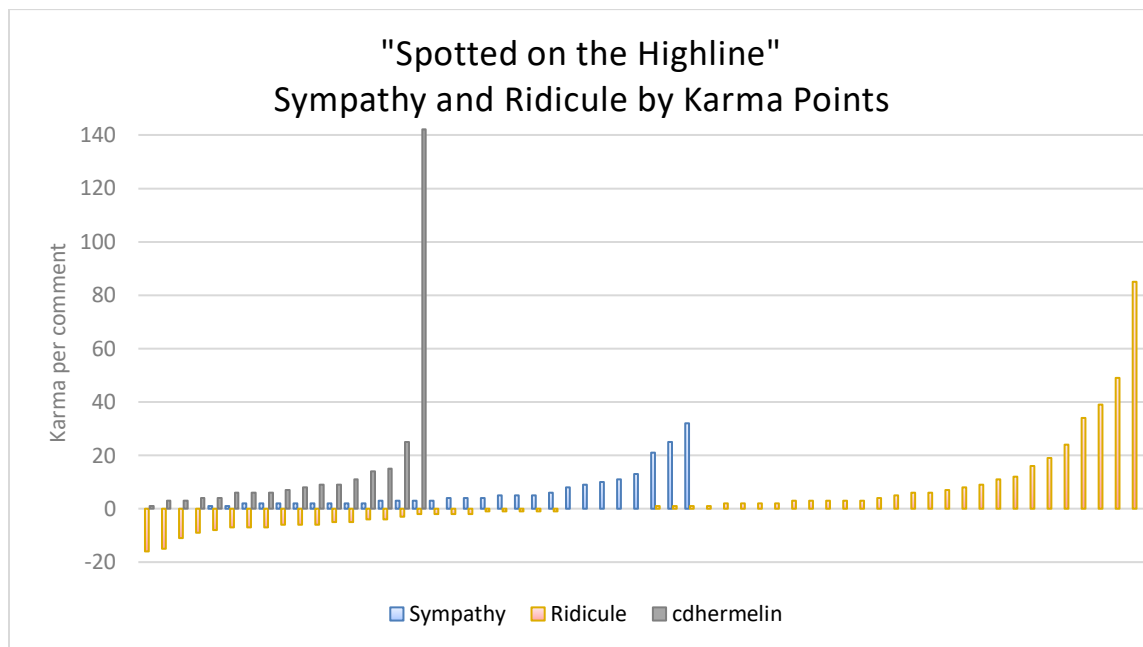
Figure 4.7 A bar chart of the "Spotted on the Highline" reddit board, showing the amount of karma each comment received, arranged and color-coded by comment-type.

However, the takeaway here isn't necessarily how Hermelin's intervention turned the character of a discussion board for the better and that if only people had a little more context the internet would be a friendlier place. Rather, the key observation is how this particular community-based algorithm rewarded the reproduction of cultural agreements. In this case, the general culture of "Spotted" ultimately shifted toward a more sympathetic and generous character. The karma in this discussion board co-constructed an embodied discourse based on a reward system incentivized by the *attention* the participants received rather than any notion of a "good" moral imperative. Sure, once Hermelin provided the discussion board with the context that he was story-busking, this new context may have provided a moral imperative that discouraged further ridicule. However, the algorithm doesn't make that distinction. In other words, the redditors may have responded to the moral imperative provided by Hermelin's context-crucial intervention, as evident by the overall drop in ridicule. However, the central value of the algorithm is still to reward activity that receives the most *attention* not necessarily the kind of good behavior community-based moderation purports to incentivize. The extant ridicule still received overall positive karma. Those attempts at clever ridicule received quite a bit of positive karma, while the more mean-spirited, not-so-clever ones received more downvotes. The data here demonstrates that, to borrow from Crawford's analysis of algorithmic mediation, algorithms on social media amount to information contests that aim to produce clear "winners" (77).

In the next discussion board, a community of users responded quite differently to a very similar image of Hermelin (this time in the form of a full-text meme). As we will see, these kinds of community-based algorithms perform essentially how they were

intended: a community of users ultimately decide what content is desirable and good. "Desirable and good" is, of course, highly contingent and very much dependent on the exigencies of the moment and interests of the community in question.

"You're not a real hipster until…"

Unlike the "Spotted" discussion board, the much more active, "You're not a real hipster until…" discussion that emerged five months later began with a more clearly stated premise. The original post of this board featured a full meme-text of Hermelin on the High Line, reading "YOU'RE NOT A REAL HIPSTER UNTIL YOU TAKE YOUR TYPEWRITER TO THE PARK" (figure 4.2). The meme-text helps to more concretely establish a semi-stated, semi-implied premise that connects much of the discussion to follow, which seems to be: the individual in this image is a hipster. A more implicit premise being: hipsters are malignable people. Generating around 400 comments (of which I had access to 390), it is not entirely clear why this particular discussion board caught on more than the first. At least seven other reddit discussions featuring either the textless image or the full-text meme of Hermelin on the High Line are still published to reddit. These minor discussion boards ranged from zero to 23 total comments per discussion. However, the "Spotted" board was published to the r/nyc subreddit and the "You're not a real" board was published to the r/funny subreddit, a *significantly* more popular community than the former. Also, the high comment count in "You're not a real hipster" could be chalked up to good timing. In either case, it gives us quite a bit more data to work with. Proportionally, the 2013 board had overall less ridicule than the original 2012 discussion board and about the same amount of sympathy.

Table 4.2 Comparing the types of comments in the "Spotted on the Highline" to the types of comments in "You're not a real hipster until…" reddit boards.

"Spotted on the Highline" Original post: August 18, 2012			"You're not a real hipster until" Original post: January 19, 2013		
	Number of Comments			Number of Comments	
Ridicule	59	27.3%	Ridicule	76	19.5%
Sympathy	33	15.3%	Sympathy	60	15.4%
Neither	20	9.3%	Neither	81	20.8%
Off-topic	87	40.3%	Off-topic	163	41.8%
cdhermelin	17	7.9%	cdhermelin	10	2.6%
Total	216		Total	390	
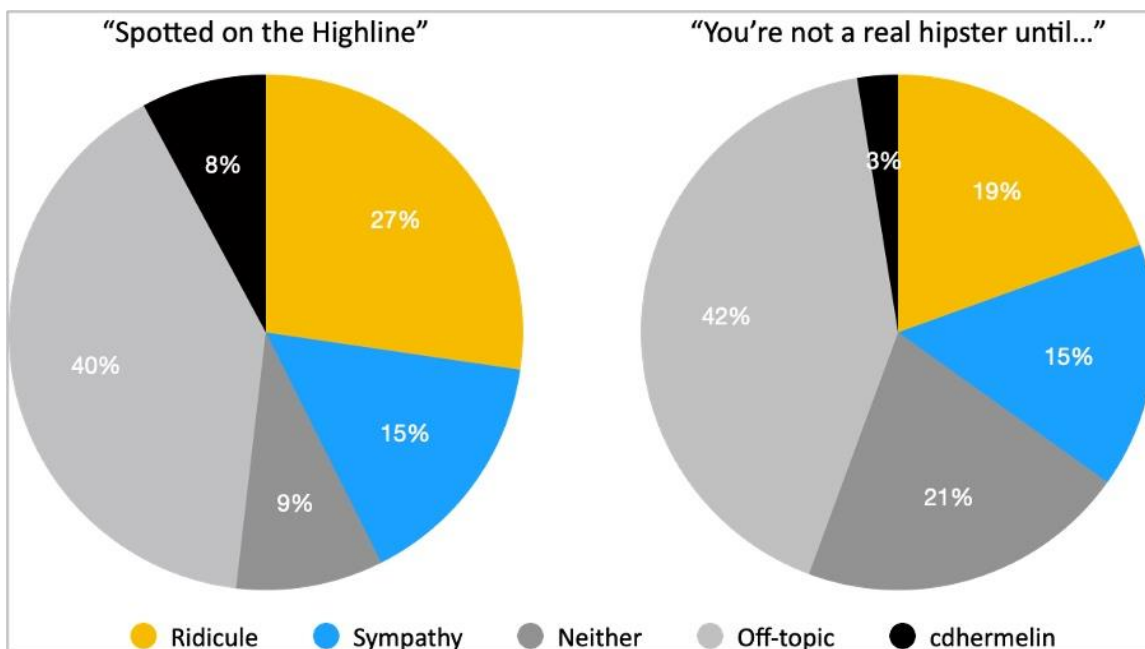
Figure 4.8 Pie charts comparing the data in table 2. Percentages are approximate.

It's worth pointing out that the sympathy in this latter discussion board was slightly

inflated by a user named Semajal, a person who claimed to have met Hermelin on the

High Line and seemed to be on a kind of crusade to defend him on this discussion board.

Semajal wrote a total 12 sympathetic comments, constituting about 20% of the sympathy

on the board. Their highest scored comment was, "Met this guy in NYC last year. He

writes short stories for donations […] He was really cool, and my friend got a short story from him. It was actually not bad, and makes him another interesting character out there" (+183 points).

Like in the "Spotted" board, the raw numbers of sympathy and ridicule don't speak fully to the character of the board. Compared to the "Spotted" discussion board, the comments of ridicule were rewarded with significantly more karma than were comments of sympathy. Consequently, reddit's moderating algorithm prioritized comments of ridicule when sorted by the "best" comments. That is, if one were to visit the discussion board now, one would need to scroll through several comments of ridicule before finding any other types of comments. Interestingly, the "Spotted" board and the "You're not a real" board are actually quite similar in terms of content. The users relied on the same basic cultural logic in order to participate. However, the reward system responded differently to the same basic kinds of comments. Comparing a few of the more similar comments of ridicule, we can see a notable difference in how the ridicule on these boards were handled per the karma system.

Table 4.3 A comparison of karma points of similar comments all by different redditors in different reddit discussion boards.

"Spotted on the Highline"	"You're not a real hipster until..."
"So when will the Sumerian clay tablets be resurfacing the streets of hipster nyc?" (+37 karma points)	"Pfft. How mainstream. I write on wet clay, then bake it." (+435 karma points)
"I don't know why anyone is defending this guy, it's clear he's doing it for attention" (-2 karma points)	"He clearly wants attention for being all hipster and edgy." (+6 karma points)
"Some days, I really want to be a bully." (-5 karma points)	"It's because of these guys that bullying is so hard to stop." (+5 karma points)
"Clack clack clickety clack clack click click clack clack KA-DING clackety clack clack pause clack clack claketty clack clack. Clack." (+3 karma points)	"click clack clack clack clack CLACK clack DING! Clack clack clack clack clack clack..." (+17 karma points)

Both discussion boards tapped into cultural commonplace criticisms of hipsters—i.e., needing attention, dedication to irony for irony's sake, etc. There were also especially mean-spirited comments that bordered on threats of violence—punching him in the face, smashing his typewriter, etc. A culture of one-upmanship developed on both boards, but it especially developed on the "You're not a real" board. The most clever attempts at ridicule seemed to garner the most attention. The sum karma of all ridicule added up to +1146, the sum of sympathy was +588, and the sum for all Hermelin's comments added up to +80. Interestingly, even some of the sympathy was *punished* with negative karma. The lowest sympathetic comment read, "dear diary today i got 41 internet points for assuming another person was a bad person with negative qualities based on their appearance and interests simply because they differ from mine" (-27 points). This user came to Hermelin's defense and criticized the point system that

incentivized bad behavior and was consequently punished by that very point system. So,

the algorithmically constituted character of this discussion board rewarded those who

could dunk the hardest on hipsters and had little generosity for those who might attempt

to do otherwise.
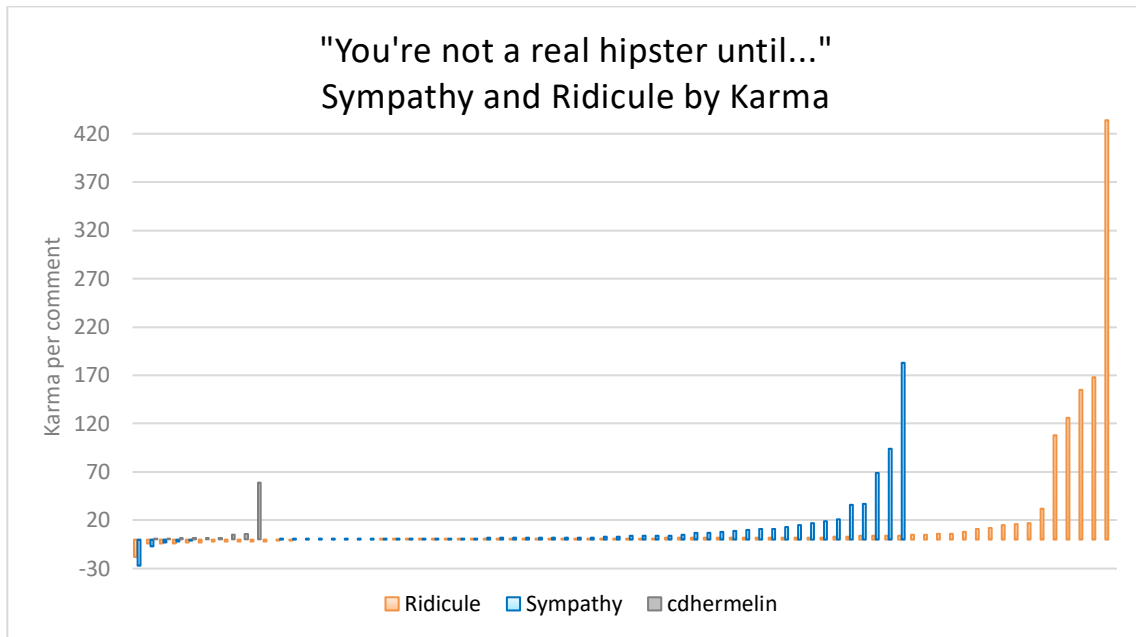
Figure 4.9 A bar chart of the "You're not a real hipster until..." reddit board, showing the amount of karma each comment received, arranged and color-coded by comment-type.

Similar to the first reddit board, Hermelin attempted an intervention in order to

provide fuller context. However, his intervention seemed to have far less of an impact on

the direction of the conversations. His primary intervention reads,

> Hey y'all!
>
> This is me!
>
> Thanks for all the nice things that you said here - some people already mentioned, but this is from a project I do around NYC. I write stories while you wait (it takes about 5-7 minutes) on small pieces of paper. It's not summer anymore, though, so I haven't gone out in a while. Typing is difficult when your fingers are cold...
> You can follow me, @cdhermelin, or my typing project, @rovingtypist.

And some of my other short fiction is up here [a link to a creative/professional website].

(cdhermelin, "You're not a real hipster until…" +55 points)

For a discussion board that accrued more than 390 comments, Hermelin's +55 karma points here seems paltry compared to the +145 he earned in the much less active "Spotted" board. This could be for a number of reasons. For one, cdhermelin entered this conversation while its activity was already trending downwards, as evident in the chart below. Also, the sheer number of comments in this discussion board likely drowned out his presence, limiting his chance to garner much attention. Also, the culture of this discussion board had already been firmly established. Some of the earliest comments were mean-spirited and so were at a temporal advantage in terms of generating more karma and being prioritized at the top, thereby better positioned to set the discursive tone. Once the ridicule train built enough momentum, it would be very difficult to turn things around. Hermelin's comments didn't really play well into that culture, whereas in the first reddit board, he entered the discussion about mid-way through its activity and so had the opportunity to affect change. Also, Hermelin's intervention in this discussion board seemed more geared toward promoting his project rather than setting the record straight, a move that might have inspired less sympathy from this group. The karma point system in this specific discussion board seemed to incentivize clever hipster-related putdowns over all else (especially mean-spirited comments were still downvoted, but not to the extent as in the former discussion board, as the above karma charts illustrate). We can see this information contest playing out, one that relies on, as E.C. White puts it in his study of *kairos*, "The provisional character of the logos of the moment" (White 20).
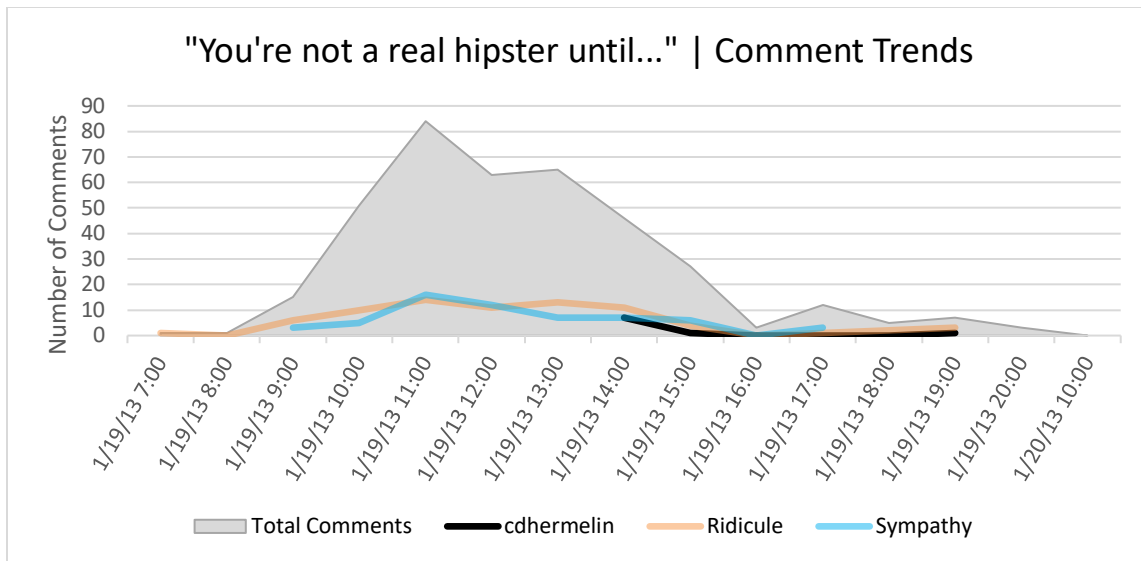
Figure 4.10 A line chart of the "You're not a real hipster until…" reddit board, showing the trends of the types of comments throughout the life of the discussion board.

Of course, these networks are part of a larger ecology: the surveillance technologies that captured these images of Hermelin, both with and without his awareness; the algorithms that encouraged and promoted certain kinds of online behavior; and of course, these reddit discussions. The rhetorical success of a comment in these discussion boards initially depended on reproduced cultural commonplaces (*doxic* and enthymematic reasoning) regarding hipsters. This user input implemented by an algorithmic logic generated an ethics of rhetorical engagement. So, reddit's mission to design online discourse around a *karma*-inspired community moderation algorithm is misleading at best. While the "Spotted" discussion board eventually made a turn and rewarded sympathetic comments—seemingly validating reddit's broader objective of moderating content based on "good karma"—much of the ridicule in that board still received a lot of positive karma. Further, the latter "You're not a real" discussion board *overwhelmingly* rewarded the ridicule over all other types of comments. In other words, a community of users and algorithmic logic improvisationally responded to and changed

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course for the exigencies of a particular moment, not necessarily toward the better angels of our nature.

As much of the scholarship on embodied discourse has demonstrated, individuals have limited control over whatever identity(ies) they attempt to project or signify with their bodies. After the "hipster in the park" meme had garnered attention, Christopher Hermelin read the inevitable barrage of hipster-hating comments on reddit. In *The Awl*, Hermelin writes that the first time he'd ever been labeled a "hipster," the label never really bothered him. He continues, "But with each successive violent response to the picture of me, I realized that hipsters weren't considered a comically benign undercurrent of society. Instead, it seemed like redditors saw hipsters and their ilk as a disease, and I was up on display as an example of depraved behavior" (Hermelin). Reflecting on his experience as a member of the generation that inaugurated "sharing" on social media, Christopher Hermelin writes, "I still felt thrown when I was presented with an image of myself that I couldn't control. Yes, I know that I am pretty much always being watched (especially at a beautiful tourist attraction in New York City, doing something partly designed to attract attention) but that didn't prepare for me for the reality of seeing myself taken out of context" (Hermelin). Hermelin experienced a kind of transformation from an individual *being* a story-typist in one context to an individual actively *being* a hipster in another context. And according to the reddit comments, a particularly ignominious one.

Of course, many copies of Hermelin on the High Line have circulated around the internet on Facebook, Twitter, Imgur, and elsewhere; each instantiation generating its own threads of comments and discussions; each time building anew distinct discursive

cultures and value systems in a new time and (digital) place. That is to say, the rhetorical velocity (Ridolfo and DeVoss) and the *kairotic* instability of digital compositions are the precise qualities that make these kinds of viral fires exceedingly difficult to stamp out. In the next section, I consider how the classical rhetorical concepts of *kairos* and improvisation enable this kind of virality in the context of community-based algorithmic moderation.

Kairos, Improvisation, and Enthymematic Reproduction

The genesis of the "hipster in the park" meme emerged from a kind of non-rational, improvisational rhetoric. Hermelin himself was certainly subject to a specific time and place as he sat at the park bench with his typewriter. Before the original image on the High Line came to Hermelin's attention, and before his deliberate participation, he had been unconsciously and non-autonomously recruited into a discourse on hipster identity thanks largely to the unforeseen *kairotic* opportunity of another actor, the photographer who took the original picture. The publicness of the internet essentially took the story out of Hermelin's hands, and the construction of this new alternative identity seemed to eclipse his professional one (at least that seemed to be the case on the latter reddit board). Hermelin had, at the time, begun to build a specific public professional identity based on his story-busking project called, "The Roving Typist." On one hand, the Roving Typist is a creative professional who enjoys "typing stories for strangers" ("The Roving Typist"); on the other, the "hipster in the park" is something far more egregious and, perhaps, threatening for some of these redditors. When carlaas, the photographer, saw Hermelin sitting there on the High Line she hadn't considered these contexts because the moment hadn't provided those contexts. Rather, she was simply

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improvising with the moment she was given. On the discussion board, she writes, "yeah I didn't see [Hermelin's busking sign], unfortunately. I was just walking fast and I took that picture." According to her account, she saw an opportunity and quickly acted before she lost out on that opportunity. In other words, she improvised with, as Quintilian writes, "the gifts of the moment" (10.6.6).

While Hermelin did subsequently and deliberately interject himself into these discussions, the merging of his non-digital life (a private sphere) and the circulation of a publicized digital image (a public sphere) was as imperceptible as it was inevitable. For example, in that final reddit discussion, a redditor recognized Hermelin in the meme as, apparently, a former co-worker. The comment reads, "I USED TO WORK WITH THIS GUY! Not someone that looks like him, but actually 'this' guy" (+110 karma points). In a sub-thread, this same user published three pictures of Hermelin they had pulled from another coworker's Facebook page, further contributing to the overall narrative that Hermelin's identity resembles that of a hipster identity. One of these pictures featured Hermelin in a bowtie (earning +85 points), prompting one user to write, "Oh god. A bow tie. Oh lord. A fucking bow tie" (+11 points). Hermelin then contributed to this particular sub-thread, explaining, "That was for a 20s jazz weekend they do on Governor's Island. It's awesome! You should go if you're ever around" (+0 points). There's no doubt that Hermelin could not have anticipated, when he posed for 20s jazz weekend on Governor's Island, the rhetorical velocity of that moment would end up on a reddit discussion board about the virtues and faults of hipsterdom. These images waited within the bounds of Facebook's network with dormant and unknowable rhetorical velocities, unbound by *time*

and space or whatever privacy settings may or may not have been enabled on some anonymous person's Facebook account.

Reflecting on Georgian conceptions of *kairos* and improvisation, Sullivan writes, "If we accept Gorgias' claim that logos is a powerful lord […] we can surmise that he believed that inspiration would occur during impromptu speech" (Sullivan 325). In this view, rhetors interested in improvisational *kairos* put a tremendous amount of faith in the *logos* of the moment. Which is to say, an irrational or reflexive approach to *kairos*. Further, Sullivan writes, "the logos created is not something that can be produced by techne. It has a clear link with romantic concepts of genius and vitalism or divine madness" (319). We can understand this version of *kairos* as a concept that does not presuppose strategy, *per se*. Rather, *kairos* is a spacio-temporal condition in which rhetorical actors simply respond, reflexively, to situational context. For the subjective material body under surveillance, these *kairotic* moments are potentially present at any time, unbeknownst to them when those exact moments might be. The only thing they can really do is smile for the camera. For the photographer on social media networks, on the other hand, picture-taking opportunities abound. Networked actors operate, improvisationally, in the moment, relying on a reflexive knack for generating compelling and persuasive compositions—the same kind of attunement Quintilian refers to, "a certain *mechanical knack*, which the Greeks call ἄλογος τριβή [*alogos tribe*]" (10.7.11, my emphasis). In other words, social media natives know a good Instagram moment when they non-teleologically encounter one.

However, to reduce mechanical knack to an irrational improvisation might be the wrong approach here. That is to say, in online discourse, algorithms enable a far more

calculated adaptation to change. According to Wild, Plato makes a distinction between *techne* (understanding a procedure) and *tribe* (meaningless repetition).[43] Similarly, as I just mentioned, Quintilian conceptualizes good improvisation as a mechanical knack (*alogos tribe*) for eloquence (Holcomb). However, Quintilian also argues, "what is irrational in itself will nevertheless be founded on reason" (10.7.11). Indeed, an attunement for complex rhetorical circumstances is not entirely irrational, *per se*. However, what algorithms bring to the table are calculated procedures based on user input. Machinic improvisation, in this way, still has an investment in rationality and performance, in flexibility and adaptability, for what the moment has to offer, especially as the circumstances of the moment change, even if it is a more machinic kind of adaptation as the circumstances of the moment change—in other words, a computational, hyper-rational leveraging of *kairos*.

For instance, once the initial "Spotted on the Highline" discussion board ran its course, it would only take time and a copy-paste function to restart a new iteration of this conversation, with a new character and a new value system, co-constructed by a new algorithm informed by slightly different user input. Reddit's algorithm sorted the comments, and thereby responded to and adjusted to the available input in the moment. Further, the algorithm likely sorted the discussion board comments differently depending on the particular moment. Many of the early redditors who commented didn't likely pause for more information before offering their ridicule or sympathy (especially before Hermelin intervened). The same could be said for the readers who up/downvoted the comments, contributing input for reddit's community-based moderation algorithm to

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[43] Also see Porter, "Recovering Delivery…" (210).

adjust its logic for sorting comments. The redditors probably voted either in accordance with their genuine feelings about the comment or as an attempt to game reddit's algorithm, for whatever reason they'd want to do that. Once the algorithm established more concretely the reward system of the discussion, these algorithmically mediated discourses rely on irrational improvisation (hasty human input) and hyper-rational improvisation (computational, algorithmic logic implemented to reprioritize and rearrange the comments on the board).

The discourses on these discussion boards were constructed, impromptu, in the spur of the moment by both human and machines. In some ways, this community of actors adapt to a *kairos* that better fits the Gorgian approach Sullivan describes. According to Sullivan, Gorgias's brand of rhetoric was associated with epideictic rhetoric. As in Aristotle's three registers of public speech (epideictic, deliberative, and forensic), epideictic is temporally placed as a "present," and as such, epideictic was also associated with impromptu speaking, depending on the inspiration of the moment. Of course, on-the-spot invention for speakers and performers carries with it certain epistemological problems. How does one construct arguments or, say, jokes in the moment? E.C. White explains, "decision[s] made on the spur of the moment, on the basis, that is, of kairos, would resolve the epistemological dilemma by pure force of will, trusting to the fortune of the moment to produce an utterance that truly answers to its occasion" (White 16). Indeed, faith in the moment is what makes improvisational speech so nerve-wracking. The moment may fail the speaker. On-the-spot invention might, then, rely on paths of least resistance: *doxic* appeals to persuasion. However, algorithms have effectively bridged this gap between *doxa* and *kairos*; not only do algorithms produce

probabilistic calculations of *doxa*, but the calculation itself actually co-constructs the

doxic temperature in the room. These reddit discussion boards are, if nothing else,

responding quickly and improvisationally to the discursive demands of the moment.

Algorithms may well have taken out the mysteries of the "fortune of the moment," as

Quintilian says, in favor of hyper-rational calculation. Algorithms take in user input and

quickly calculate what are the "best" comments in order to compose an active, lively, and

appealing discussion board as readers browse the site's front page, clicking around for the

most compelling reddit board in which to participate.

While this kind of study of algorithms here is useful for both understanding how

algorithms work and to present worthwhile critiques of these systems, it is also important

to recognize that the rhetorical effect of these algorithms are not limited to those

discussion boards. In fact, as the next section will show, these algorithmically co-

constructed values of ridicule bled over into Hermelin's offline life, as traditional notions

of public and private further collapse into the other.

Media Interviews and Real-Time Interpellation

In the year that followed the first reddit discussion board featuring Hermelin, a

few significant media events generated renewed attention to the constantly recirculating

meme. At one point, Hermelin's ex-girlfriend wrote an article entitled "It Happened to

Me: I Got Dumped By A Meme," [44] on a website called *xoJane*, which several redditors

provided a link to in the latter "You're not a real" discussion board. The article detailed

her experience of breaking up with someone only to have that person's (Hermelin's)

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[44] Her article is not available since the publication (*xoJane*) shutdown. What we do have access to is Hermelin's reference to it in his *The Awl* article and a few redditor's comments on the "You're not a real" discussion board.

image appear in her social media feeds. Hermelin laments, "Unfortunately, her article ended up casting me in the same light that the picture did—she never explained that I was busking with my typewriter" (Hermelin). According to Hermelin, the commenters in the (now defunct and inaccessible) online magazine, *xoJane*, were apparently sympathetic to his former girlfriend and also laden with further ridicule aimed at Hermelin's image. In April of 2013, *Buzzfeed* published their article, "Can You Make It Through This Post Without Blacking Out From Rage?" While we generally engage in discursive participation at the level of embodied discourse on a day-to-day basis, these participations aren't typically captured and published to an online platform for mass public ridicule. Assuming a sufficient level of virality, the border between our public and private lives stand to quickly erode. So, while Hermelin certainly did deliberately and consciously participate in these discourses, he was unconsciously and unwittingly recruited into this discourse about hipster identity by the carlaas, by his former girlfriend, and by a *Buzzfeed* listicle.

After the publication of his ex-girlfriend's article and the *Buzzfeed* piece, in early September of 2013, Hermelin published his fairly comprehensive first-person account of his experience as an internet meme in *The Awl*. These events seem to have engendered renewed attention to the "hipster in the park" meme. Later that same month, Hermelin participated in two major radio interviews on the subject of memes, internet fame, and public ridicule—one with *AirTalk Radio* and the other with *WNYC Radio*. Also, later in 2015, Hermelin participated in a *CBC Radio* program, detailing his experience. What I find interesting about these interviews is how, as Hermelin interacts with the interviewers, they seem very interested in constructing and agreeing upon Hermelin's

identity by drawing from public opinion and then negotiating among themselves what exactly a hipster is and how Hermelin can fit into that nebulous identity. However, they don't really come to any satisfactory conclusions. Generally, these interviews gather that people on the internet hate hipsters, that Hermelin was a misunderstood and earnest individual, but that Hermelin is in fact a hipster. So, the messaging is somewhat mixed. These radio programs do sympathize with Hermelin's story and attempt to problematize public ridicule and the stereotypes of identity. But rather than eschewing imperfect labels, they hope to preserve the label of "hipster" and change its meaning to something more affirming. Of course, something that's not going to happen over the course of a radio interview. By analyzing these interviews, we can observe how an algorithmically mediated discourse also participated in these external media outlets, thanks largely to the *kairotic* instability and rhetorical velocity inherent in digital publics.

AirTalk Radio

The September 23, 2013 *AirTalk Radio* interview, hosted by Pat Morrison, begins with a clip from Miley Cyrus's "We Can't Stop," with a possible thesis for the interview: "haters gonna hate." The host's first line of questioning for Hermelin involves his appearance in the viral meme. "Okay, you're wearing shorts, you're wearing a striped shirt, from what, American Apparel?" (Morrison). According to Hermelin, the t-shirt came from H&M, to which the host replied, "Okay, much more down market. Sorry H&M." Presumably, hipster culture enjoys cheaper off-brands. However, I'm unsure if H&M constitutes an off-brand. In either case, it's cheaper than American Apparel, and we can see the host actively interpreting how Hermelin's dress indicates something about his identity. She persists in this line of questioning, really trying to solve the riddle: "and

shoes without laces. Maybe it was the shoes that did it?" What is revealing in this interview, is that the host clearly has some sense of what a hipster is and is tapping into some of those cultural commonplaces about a particular sub-culture to which she ostensibly doesn't belong. She does so in similar ways that the redditors had. If we consider the enthymeme as an incomplete logical structure, one where the audience is recruited to be an active participant in completing the line of reasoning, we can see that she can only make meaning out of this meme by reproducing these largely negative cultural commonplaces in order to complete that argument and consequently recruiting *her* audience to do the same. In other words, readers also have an ethical responsibility as co-producers of meaning. The host is largely sympathetic to Hermelin's experience throughout the interview. However, as the host's investigation into hipsterdom unfolds, both she and Hermelin are working together *not* to subvert assumptions about identity, but to affirm them (perhaps, despite their efforts to do otherwise).

Throughout the *AirTalk* interview, Morrison is generally sympathetic to Hermelin's experience, at one point asking him, "Why did people jump to conclusions [about the High Line photograph]?" About six minutes into the interview, the host asks more directly, "are you a hipster?" She continues, "I looked at you and kind of thought more nerd, actually." Since we've had enough difficulty unpacking what exactly a hipster is, it might be further unproductive to launch an inquiry about "nerd-dom." However, in a nearly 17-minute interview about Hermelin's online harassment, the host has stepped unambiguously into this broad network of participants seeking to construct Hermelin's identity in real-time, as nerd or hipster or both. Albeit, in this case, she is doing it *with* him rather than from afar. However, the host's pivot toward "nerd" is notable. In recent

years, the word "nerd" (i.e., a science fiction nerd, a music nerd, culinary nerd or what have you) has taken a slight turn to mean people with a specialized knowledge in and particular enthusiasm for some area of specialized interest (this being a good thing). But I think it's fair to say that "nerd" isn't exactly a term of endearment either. Interestingly, Hermelin answers,

> Uh [laughter], you know, uh, sure, I'm a hipster, yeah. I guess. I don't really, it's such a strange term used for so many things that I just, when people call me a hipster, it's just like, I do like bands, I go to movies, I don't know exactly what it means to be a hipster, but by the trappings people put on me, maybe I am one, I think nerd too, sure. (*AirTalk*)

With an aloof "sure," Hermelin says that he doesn't "exactly know what it means to be a hipster" even though he's been called one before. After some brief verbal reflection and critical questioning about the meaning of the word "hipster," Hermelin ultimately acquiesces and not only accepts the label "hipster" but also adopts the new one posed by the radio host, that of "nerd." While Hermelin was undoubtedly responding on air and under pressure, this particular moment in the interview is significant because we can observe, in real-time, the co-construction of an individual's identity along *with* the individual in question. This co-construction is a negotiated one in some respects. At first, Hermelin lightly challenges what it means to be a hipster before ultimately accepting a label that a broad coalition of actors have agreed upon.

Toward the end of the interview, much like the word "nerd," Hermelin and the host are trying to put a positive spin on the word hipster. Reading from one of the many online comments she's collected (on reddit or elsewhere, it's not entirely clear), the host

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reads, "I have no idea what a hipster means anymore, except as a license to treat the creative underclass to a piñata party," and then asks him if that's how he feels, if he's been treated like a piñata. Here, the host is attempting to change the meaning of hipster while still ascribing some of those familiar commonplaces, repurposing the word hipster as a metonym for "the creative underclass." Hermelin answers her question, "because I was anonymous and because I was doing something a little off, that I was a little bit of a piñata for their comments." Indeed, it seems that the cultural premise the meme enthymematically taps into is not necessarily what a hipster is but how we are allowed to and perhaps *ought* to treat them.

The WNYC and CBC Interviews

A few days after the *AirTalk* interview, Hermelin participated in another interview with *WNYC Radio*, entitled "Stereotyped." Like the previous interview, this one too begins with a discussion of hipsterdom and how Hermelin fits into that discourse. After describing Hermelin's story busking project, the *WNYC* host narrates for the audience, "if this sounds sort of hipsterish, sort of obnoxious and twee, Christopher totally acknowledges that it's not for everyone and that he's a hipster" (Vogt and Goldman). Again, like the last, this host also reproduces a cultural premise, setting the discursive stage by confirming the audience's sense that it's okay to think "obnoxious and twee" as it pertains to using a typewriter on a park bench. With a little more assuredness than in the *AirTalk* interview, Hermelin quickly avers, "Oh, you know, I wear outsized plastic glasses. I wear skinny jeans. You know, these are things that are attributed to hipsters now. When a band gets described as like 'oh, like, hipsters will like this,' I definitely check it out."

Similarly, in 2015, *CBC Radio* broadcast a program entitled, "What did a mistaken identity reveal about the real you?" the host, Sook-Yin Lee, does try to paint the internet commentators as the antagonists to Hermelin's story. After reading some of the ridicule from reddit, she remarks, "and those are the comments I can say on the radio" (LeeSook-Yin). The later portion of the show focused on Hermelin's experience. The host introduced his segment with the following assessment: "CD Hermelin was once just a guy with a typewriter, until he became one of the most hated hipsters on the internet." Here, Lee helps the audience make this move from "just a guy with a typewriter" to "hipster," but not just any hipster, "the internet's most hated" one. While, like the other interviews, she is sympathetic to Hermelin's experience. And, while she doesn't reach for words like "obnoxious and twee" like the *WNYC* interviewer, she also participates in the discourse of Hermelin's hipsterness, and she further contributes to it and reinforces it.

In these interviews, a real-time interpellation of his identity is at work, one that harkens to Althusser's tautological thesis: the subject constitutes all ideology insofar as all ideology constitutes individuals as subjects. Actors (human and otherwise) engage in collective agreement without (or with minimal) negotiation pertaining to a part of Hermelin's essential character. If reading is a kind of composing, there is no real way to have this conversation or even to read the meme itself in an entirely ethical way; the audience has to complete the line of reasoning. In this way, Hermelin couldn't *not* participate either. We can see Hermelin—as both the object, audience, and participant of these discussions—answering the hail by acknowledging on the first discussion board that "It's me the hipster" ("Spotted…"). Hermelin also answered the hail in other ways too. In the *AirTalk* interview, the host asked him if he were ever threatened with violence.

Hermelin answered, "The first time that I went out right after the meme went up on reddit, a couple people came and were just saying, you know, 'I think you're an idiot' and things like that, but they kind of lost their nerve when placed in the reality of it" (Morrison). The real-world address of others in response to the meme has the performative action of interpellating Hermelin's identity as the individual in the meme, reproducing the implicit premise of the meme being: "hipsters are bad and deserving of ridicule."

This digital, public activity pulled him into a media maelstrom in which he had little choice of participating. Sure, he could have declined the interviews or refused to participate in the reddit boards. If he had, he would have saved himself from associating his name to this particular image (thereby making his name and the images mutually searchable). But even discursive disengagement wouldn't have afforded him much. However, a good deal of his initial and subsequent participation was unconscious and non-autonomous in many respects. His image and his digitized body had been appropriated without his awareness or consent for discursive purposes outside his purview. His image had been recognized by friends and acquaintances. An ex-girlfriend had even written publicly about it and about how his image reentered her life just as she was trying to forget about him.

In *The Awl* essay, Hermelin reflects on why he bothered to participate in the first reddit thread. He writes, "the vain part of me wanted to make sure the entire world knew that I wasn't asking for attention because of some base urge to be noticed and photographed. Instead, I wanted people to know that I was nice, approachable, and able to write pretty good short stories really quickly. And that my wardrobe was more a

function of my budget than hipster assimilation" (Hermelin). His motivations for participating in these radio interviews seem similarly motivated. However, despite much of Hermelin's effort to play an active role in shaping his identity, these interviews still seem to acquiesce and draw the same conclusions the meme itself draws: he is a hipster. Perhaps a misunderstood one, but a hipster nonetheless.

Conclusion

In 2015, former-reddit CEO, Ellen Pao, proclaimed that "The trolls are winning" the internet (Pao) and has since begrudgingly advocated for government regulation of these platforms. reddit and other social media platforms have fancied themselves "free speech" platforms. However, many of them, such as Twitter, have adopted the practice of banning or suspending profiles in the effort of slowing the spread of disinformation or incitements to violence or generally bad behavior. Problematically, these kinds of "quarantined" users tend to leave a regulated network for less regulated platforms (Copland). So, the efficacy of self-regulated digital networks is a questionable proposition. However, Twitter's high-profile banning of President Donald Trump for incitements of violence—an exercise of speech that led to his second impeachment—has garnered renewed attention to how these companies should regulate their platforms. Over the last two years, Twitter has been looking more into community-based strategies to moderate their content (Reuters). Reddit has especially prided itself on algorithmic, community-based moderation of their content with their karma system. As noble as this effort might be, as Crawford points out, "algorithms are designed to produce clear 'winners' from information contests, often with little visibility or accountability for how those contests are designed" (77). "Winners" as an outcome, it seems, has little to do with

what we might call good or bad "karma." In this way, algorithms might encourage a sophistic orientation to reasoning: winning for the sake of winning. In either case, social media platforms tend to lack transparency and accountability for their algorithms. So, it has necessarily become a balancing act for these platforms—which are essentially platforms for expression—to both satisfy a user demand for so-called "free speech" and limiting harmful kinds of content, like lude, sexual content or calls for violence. Recent scholarship has shed some light on the relationship between teenagers' use of smart phones/social media and rising rates of depression/anxiety (Anderson and Jiang; Vogles; and Kann et al.). So, this kind of online ridicule isn't exactly innocuous.

Critically, these algorithms co-construct an ethics and co-construct our realities, which informs how we understand the world, how we protest, how we ought to treat one another. These algorithms are also a product of community activity. Reddit enables users to at least see how many up and downvotes comments get. While the upvote might be analogous to the thumbs up icon on Facebook or the heart icon on Twitter (both called "liking"), the downvote feature on reddit enables another set of data and community action: punishment for certain kinds of activity. The problem is that what is desirable and what is undesirable depends on the community and the *kairotic* and *doxic* demands of the moment. Reddit generates these lengthy threads that, by default, algorithmically organizes itself according to the karma point system. Generally speaking, the comments with the highest karma points find their way to the top of the discussion board. So, with this in mind, we need to consider a more complex array of rhetorical actors and ask ourselves why certain comments are algorithmically prioritized as the "best" ones. Also,

what cultural commonplaces are algorithms exploiting in order to "win" the day-to-day

information contests?

The mechanism that gives these discourses life is the reproduction of a relatively

stable enthymematic cultural values. In other words, this kind of fragmentation does not

enable much in the way of change. While Michael Warner has argued that digital publics

are too unstable to maintain cogent discourse, I would argue that digital publics are

actually enthymematically quite stable in that these discourses are so fragmented that

they function by repeating and reiterating a common cultural value as its major premise.

They rely on *doxic* modes of persuasion to generate anything other than these pulses of

emotional response. We can see evidence of this by comparing the two reddit boards. The

first board with the plain image ("Spotted") experienced a tide turn with Hermelin's

intervention. The second board ("You're Not a Real…"), impervious to Hermelin's

intervention, seemed to be a haven for hipster-hating, enthymematic readings of the full-

text meme. In other words, all the arguably productive work Hermelin produced to set the

record straight in the first discussion board didn't really add up to much in the second

discussion board. In both of these boards, redditors actively filled in the gaps of an

unspoken cultural premise that enabled the image or meme to rhetorically function in the

first place.

I don't mean to imply that everyone who manages to "go viral" endures some sort

of trauma. Some individuals who have been featured in memes have reported a good-

sportsmanship-type of attitude toward their experience. Some (young) people even look

upon these viral subjects with some measure of envy or aspiration, hoping for a viral

moment of their own. Of course, in my estimation, this is almost certainly a misguided

kind of envy, given the relationship between social media use and depression among young people. Collectively, people seem to accept this new ethics of being always already public in the world. In my own interview with Hermelin, his attitude seems to reflect this kind of good-sportsmanship. He told me that as time has passed, and the negative feelings have mostly faded, "I'm left with only all the joy my project [The Roving Typist] has brought me." When I asked how he felt about being in public and risking his picture being taken, he responded, "public is public." He may very well be right. This is probably our new reality, our new way of being in the world.

Indeed, the essential problem of "going viral" is that virality is difficult to near-impossible to contain. "You can't control it," Hermelin reflects in his *WNYC* interview, "that's what I realized. I wanted to control it really badly, but I couldn't and it was really hard to let go, and I still probably haven't" (Vogt and Goldman). In his *The Awl* article, he writes, "I still felt thrown when I was presented with an image of myself that I couldn't control. Yes, I know that I am pretty much always being watched (especially at a beautiful tourist attraction in New York City, doing something partly designed to attract attention), but that didn't prepare for me for the reality of seeing myself taken out of context" (Hermelin). As Hermelin discovered, there's no real control over one's image, identity, or reputation. Although, he certainly tried. Perhaps, it's at this point that the "virus" metaphor finds its limit. There is no vaccine that can prevent a digital-social kind of virality (although, I suppose self-quarantining from technology would certainly work). People go viral until the virality has run its course. Unless of course it doesn't. But if it does, the individual in question can only hope to fall back once again into some level of

obscurity they'd enjoyed before. Even then, that person's image is still searchable, filled with unknowable, dormant and potentially virulent rhetorical velocities.

I did ask Hermelin if his attitudes or behaviors toward memes or digital images have changed given his experience. He answered, "Yes, I am always trying to seek context for anything before I react to it, and hope that others do the same."

CHAPTER 5

COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY AND SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM:

TOWARD A CRITICAL DIGITAL EMPATHY

Introduction

In the previous chapters, I've discussed the particular ways that systems of surveillance recruit individuals into digital discourses with and without their awareness or consent. I have explored how somnambulant participation occurs at the level of the body and pictorial circulations. That is to say, a lot of the surveillance we encounter on a day-to-day basis is invisible, routine, and ambient. We have lost a good deal of our privacy to, what Shoshana Zuboff calls, a "surveillance capitalism" that we never really consented to in the first place. Surveillance capitalism poses many complications for composition pedagogy that the scholarship has only begun to study. For instance, when first-year writing students conduct research, they are often using digital services that collect and sell their data (i.e., Google). There is growing interest in composition pedagogy for digital activism, but very little said about how that digital activism puts students at risk of surveillance. Beck and Campos point out in their recent edited collection, *Privacy Matters*, that there is not yet a published book-length project within writing studies on the topic of surveillance. The chapter, then, urges the field to incorporate a critical surveillance literacy in our classrooms. However, it isn't enough to simply warn students that they are being surveilled. I argue that the best way to teach students about

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surveillance is by attending to the way our students *feel* about and *feel* toward
surveillance.

In many ways, this chapter is responding to a broad corpus of academic research
over the last couple of decades regarding the importance of cultivating a *critical* digital
literacy in our courses rather than simply a *functional* literacy (Beck; Cagle; Dadas;
Hutchinson and Novotny; Selber; Toscano; Reilly; Reyman; Vie; Vie and Miller).
Selber's seminal *Multi-Literacies in a Digital Age* urges educators to leverage "the ways
students might be encouraged to recognize and question the politics of computers" (75).
As the previous chapter examined, algorithms can be powerful actors that shape our
realities and discursive engagements in ethically questionable ways. Embedded in any
"critical literacy" is also an insistence for a more ethical way of living and thinking. As
we've seen throughout this project, the internet is a tough place. People are quicker to be
mean to one another, quicker to disregard the privacy of others, and generally treat others
online as digital objects rather than actual humans. It's worth pointing out that
surveillance systems have co-constructed users' assumptions about what behaviors are
and aren't ethical in participating in a surveillance economy (i.e., taking pictures without
consent or ridiculing a stranger featured in a meme).

Many popular discourses have placed the blame on the current polarized and
perhaps mean-spirited nature of our media ecosystem on a diminishing lack of empathy
for others online. Cultural historian Tiffany Watt Smith examines a gleeful kind of
schadenfreude people experience by watching others fail online. Forensic
cyberpsychologist Mary Aiken points to something called "cyber-socialization," which is
when potentially extreme kinds of behaviors, beliefs, and preferences are normalized

online (37). Thanks to the "online disinhibition effect," people tend to be bolder and more willing to engage in extreme behaviors (Aiken 5). Columnist Elizabeth Bruenig has argued in the *Washington Post* and *The Atlantic* that the solution lies in developing a culture of forgiveness. Monica Lewinsky's compelling documentary *15 Minutes of Shame* suggests that the prevalence of online harassment is the result (in part) of regularly seeing digital representations of humans as non-human images—a dehumanization that makes them ethically acceptable to openly harass. I do find these arguments about empathy and compassion (or a lack thereof) to be generally persuasive. It stands to reason that a course in digital composition has ample exigence to include in a pedagogy of empathy and compassion. In fact, it seems that any pedagogy invested in a critical digital literacy would necessitate an emphasis on empathy as a key rhetorical value, especially if a critical literacy asks students to consider the kind of digital landscape in which they want to live. This chapter seeks to fold an *intentioned* approach to empathy into a digital writing pedagogy, particularly as it pertains to systems of surveillance.

While there hasn't been much research about empathy in writing studies (Eric Leake and Asao Inoue have recently argued for compassionate dispositions in writing classes), over the last decade, there has been some momentum in surveillance studies in our field. Over the course of this project, I have mostly discussed pictorial modes of surveilling; however, surveillance-mediated identity construction also occurs at the level of personal data that tech companies collect and sell, or what Estee Beck calls the invisible digital identity. Beck has written about how identity is constructed through metadata we accumulate through surveillance systems (like clicks, views, etc.) and how identity is consequently enacted by algorithms (Beck, "Invisible Digital Identity").

Colleen Reilly has written about research methods that raise students' awareness of surveillance capitalism (a term coined by Shoshana Zuboff), making use of free web browser plugins like Cliqz and Ghostery that provide comprehensive tracking analysis based on various tracking systems that collect metadata as users visit various websites. Similarly, Hutchinson and Novotny have designed autoethnography-like assignments where, under close supervision, students use similar plug-ins to study data trackers as students casually browse the internet and these trackers gather their personal data (limiting their engagements to largely innocuous ones). According to Hutchinson and Novotny, these assignments enable students to "viscerally" experience surveillance in order to develop a critical literacy rather than simply reading articles that criticize surveillance.

What seems missing from much of the scholarship on critical digital literacy is a focus on the kind of *viscerality* that Hutchinson and Novotny describe. If students are going to criticize systems of power, they should actually *feel* these invisible forces for themselves so they are better positioned to adjust their comportment toward surveillance technologies and advocate for their change. Further, because surveillance capitalism is a participatory system where the users being surveilled are also surveilling themselves and other people, we should help our students develop more of an empathetic disposition toward others as both consumers and producers of surveillance content. Put more simply, if students viscerally feel the effects of surveillance, they are better able to develop empathy toward the ways others are surveilled and compassionately advocate for change without eschewing these technologies altogether.[45]

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[45] Social media scholar danah boyd has argued for a non-abstinence approach to how children should engage with the internet, arguing that careful exposure builds resilience.

When I began writing this chapter, I envisioned crafting "critical empathy" as a key learning outcome for an upper-level, digital writing course about social media and surveillance. Here, I am construing "surveillance" broadly to include picture-taking, data mining, content moderation, and other kinds of surveillances. However, a critical empathy need not be limited to an upper division course. Because most students begin their research practice with a Google search, they are already exposed to systems of surveillance in our composition classrooms. So, any composition course has an imperative to include some manner of critical digital literacy and surveillance literacy in its curriculum. My hope is that by understanding and critiquing surveillance capitalism and viscerally feeling that surveillance themselves, students will be better positioned to empathize and understand the surveillance of others. In the following sections, I will first review research on empathy relevant to composition pedagogy. Second, I will review some of the key exigencies for teaching a critical digital literacy and argue why composition teachers should consider teaching a *critical digital empathy*. Finally, I will conclude with some practical assignments that are well-positioned to both cultivate in our student researchers a critical digital literacy as well as an empathetic disposition toward others online.

Empathy and Digital Culture

I am often surprised by my personal conversations with academics at conferences and non-academics alike who have considered viral memes—like the case of Lindsey Stone who jokingly posed for a picture with the middle finger extended and a hand cupped over her mouth, as if shouting, at the Arlington National Cemetery beside a sign that read, "Silence and Respect"—and have argued that this person was responsible for

their own risk mismanagement and ultimately had it coming. Which strikes me as a curious lack of empathy. This argument is what Daniel Solove has called (and critiqued) the "privacy self-management" argument. According to this argument, the onus for privacy management is not on these tech companies or government regulation but on the individual. Without diving too deep into Stone's case, to my mind, she is a person who suffered the consequences of a mistake and, thanks to the internet, is now punished in perpetuity for that mistake.

This decidedly unempathic, cyberlibertarian *ethos* is quite pervasive in digital culture. Philosopher Gordon Hull argues that the privacy self-management argument is the product of "neoliberal governance, by inculcating the belief that subjectivity and ethical behavior are matters primarily of individual risk management coupled with individual responsibility for poorly-managed risks" (90). Of course, individual users of these technologies *do* have a responsibility for managing our own privacy risk, and further, passive consumers of online content also have an ethical responsibility for how they engage with, laugh at, or even exploit the privacy of others on these digital platforms. However, the more expansive these surveillance networks become, the more unreasonable it is to make the personal responsibility argument. A critical digital literacy, on the other hand, argues that the system itself, not simply individuals, ought to be critiqued, and those inclined should advocate for its change. Absent any clear government regulation, digital platforms and their economic incentives have the heaviest hand in setting rules for how users engage online.

I propose that writing courses should attempt to develop an *empathetic* disposition for others as it pertains to the digital tools that surveille us and that we use to surveille

each other. I argue that being aware of our own privacy vulnerabilities opens us up to be more attuned and sensitive of the privacy vulnerabilities of others. This kind of critical approach to empathy, as I will explain, can serve as a starting point for advocating for digital privacy rights.

Empathy and Rhetoric

With a few exceptions, empathy has not significantly been taken up by the field of composition and rhetoric. Perhaps an early study of empathy might include Aristotle's takes on *kharis* (kindliness) or *eleos* (pity or feeling pain for those experiencing pain) in Book 2, Chapter 7 and 8, respectively, of *On Rhetoric*. However, these treatments are quite short, and his discussion of *kharis* focuses largely on how rhetors can make their opponents seem *unkindly*, and *eleos* for Aristotle is a matter of feeling pain by observing pain to avoid pain, not necessarily identifying with the pain of others.[46] Because algorithmically mediated systems produce often dehumanized and hyper-rational ends (Katz), it seems somewhat obvious that the sub-fields of digital rhetoric and digital composition have an imperative to take up empathy as an important subject of study and worthwhile ethical disposition. According to *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, empathy as a concept is of relatively recent provenance, emerging in the English language around 1909, from a German term that means "feeling into" (Stueber). Further, they write that empathy is "central for constituting humans as social creatures allowing us to know what other people are thinking and feeling, to emotionally engage with them, to

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[46] "Let pity be [defined as] a certain pain at an apparently destructive or painful event happening to one who does not deserve it and which a person might expect himself or one of his own to suffer, and this when it seems close at hand; for it is clear that a person who is going to feel pity necessarily thinks that some evil is actually present of the sort that he or one of his own might suffer and that this evil is of the sort mentioned in the definition or like it or about equal to it" (II.viii.2).

share their thoughts and feelings, and to care for their well-being" (Stueber). So, while English has only had the word for a little over a century, empathy seems central to the human experience, how we imagine, and the very nature of persuasion itself.

In terms of argumentation (especially in content online), empathy becomes a key mode of rhetorical engagement with the Other. It is what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca have called "the framework of argument" where the speaker considers the audience's frame of mind (255). Or when Burke writes, "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his" (55). For Dennis Lynch, empathy serves to identify or even "frustrate" that identification with the other, producing a generative friction and enabling something new to emerge (19). Empathy has been used as an invention tool in literary analyses, rhetorical analyses, creative writing, and social justice pedagogies (Bracher; Lynch; Leake). Scholars in composition have even called for a "rhetorical empathy" as a means for better engaging counterclaims. Blankenship, for example, argues that rhetorical empathy can be a strategic move in developing identification ("flattening the difference") between straight and gay people in order to advocate for gay rights more effectively. So, empathy clearly operates as a productive rhetorical vehicle for enacting change.

However, beyond empathy as mere rhetorical strategy (something akin to the Aristotelian appeals), empathy is a disposition that may well grant access for more ethical modes of discoursing. Eric Leake's recent study of empathy in *Composition Forum* offers useful history and insight into how teachers of writing might better forefront empathy in their pedagogies. Social psychologists Batson et al. find that "inducing empathy for a

member of a stigmatized group can improve attitudes toward the group as a whole […
and that] these feelings can be stimulated by taking the perspective of a person in need,
imagining how that person is affected by his or her plight" (qtd. in Leake). Also, African
Diaspora scholar, Carolyn Calloway-Thomas, defines empathy as the "ability
imaginatively to enter into and participate in the world of the cultural Other cognitively,
affectively, and behaviorally" (*Empathy in the Global World* 8). Empathy functions as a
kind of "inner imitation" (Stueber) as individuals attempt to cognitively reproduce the
perceived feelings of another, an affective disposition that enables individuals to imagine
what it's like to be someone else. However, if empathy is the practice of "imagining,"
then this simulation-empathy poses certain epistemic problems. If we are attempting to
simulate the feelings of people who are very much not like us, what sorts of problematic
assumptions are we simulating? It very quickly turns into an exercise in the creative
construction of another's identity. Therefore, it very much matters *how* we empathize
with others not *simply* that we are empathizing with others.

Leake defines two kinds of empathy he has observed in his own teaching practice:
content empathy and *relational empathy*. Content empathy is demonstrated by simply
identifying the social dimensions of issues and the humanity of others, while relational
empathy is demonstrated by expressing self-other overlaps or an inclination toward
altruism. Favoring relational empathy, Leake argues that teaching dispositions of
empathy as a critical approach to analyzing texts stands to produce more ethically sound
ways of understanding and empathizing with the circumstances of others outside
students' own experiences. In his work on incorporating empathy into composition
pedagogy, Leake designed "empathizing perspective-taking prompts" that seemed to

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generate greater "moves of *relational* empathy." That is, rather than stating that "we should not blame the homeless for being homeless" (*content* empathy), students were more productive in generating moves of relational empathy. From this experience, Leake concludes that these perspective-taking activities and active reflection on empathy help students better relate to others in ways that are more productive and perhaps more sincere. He concludes, "With instruction, repetition, and reflection, these ways of relating have the potential to become dispositional" (Leake). Here, Leake is framing relational empathy as an ethical and a more productive invention device and a more ethical disposition. In other words, it isn't enough that students are using empathy for rhetorical invention. Recognizing self-other overlaps of identity is a key value of this practice, even if those attempts result in a failure to empathize, students might at least demonstrate a deeper understanding of a given discourse.

While empathy can certainly have utilitarian functions, I do not wish to reduce empathy to utilitarianism. With respect to pedagogy, it is important to attend to *how* our students empathize. "The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing," published by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, outlines eight essential habits of mind for success in college writing: curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition. At first blush, I am inclined to advocate that empathy be included in this list of habits of mind, but all eight of these seem like they are *already* practices of intentioned empathy to me. Developing a "curiosity," for instance, is an exercise in empathy if we insist that student be curious about the lived experiences of others and be curious about our feelings toward others. A conscious and intentioned empathy requires "openness," "persistence," and "metacognitive reflection." So, to

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forefront empathy as a practiced disposition, rather than merely rhetorical utility, might

be redundant since the WPA, NCTE, and the National Writing Project seem to be

invested in empathic values anyway. The particularities of how we might implement such

a pedagogy remains under-researched. Next, I propose a way forward.

Critical Empathy

As I mentioned in the previous section, empathy as a simple and individualistic

mode of caring may, indeed, be problematic. What oppressive assumptions might the

privileged empathizer have about a marginalized empathizee? If empathy is generative, it

seems that it is largely generative for the privileged and doesn't ameliorate the pain of

those who suffer (Shuman). So, in this way, empathy seems quite toothless. While these

critiques of empathy are important, education scholars do agree that teacher-empathy as a

professional disposition likely improves their teaching effectiveness, particularly with

students of color (Warren; Carter; Dolby). Julie Lindquist has even argued for teachers to

adopt a "strategic empathy" when engaging in difficult conversations with students with

whom they disagree, even if the teacher's empathy is feigned in order to generate more

productive classroom discussions. As Blankenship has noted, empathy can be a useful

way to flatten the difference between apparently differing points of view, to create

productive understanding. So, empathy clearly has both utility and social value.

However, these approaches to empathy risk being a bit passive or even shallow. How

might we rethink empathizing in ways that are useful, socially responsible, and

substantive? I argue that teacher-scholars in digital media should consider incorporating a

critical empathy in their study of digital culture.

In his acceptance speech for the Alan C. Purves award at the 1998 NCTE conference for his research on literacy, Todd DeStigter introduced a concept he called *critical empathy*. According to DeStigter, critical empathy

> refers to the process of establishing informed and affective connections with other human beings, of thinking and feeling with them at some emotionally, intellectually, and socially significant level, while always remembering that such connections are complicated by sociohistorical forces that hinder the equitable, just relationships that we presumably seek. [… It is] at once a unifying condition and a constantly mutable process that includes but goes beyond individualistic notions of caring (240)

Here, DeStigter insists that we investigate our feelings, investigate what it is we think we're identifying with and recognize the limitations of empathy and the messy nature of caring. Critical empathy stands to be a powerful teacherly disposition, a pedagogical strategy, and style of rhetorical engagement. Modeling empathy for students is a key method by which we can instill this disposition in our students without berating them to be empathetic. With this in mind, I am interested crafting courses in digital media that consciously ponder how empathy might be a productive disposition for invention, a powerful and persuasive rhetorical strategy, and a productive *value* for our students' research practices and day-to-day digital composing practices.

To consider a critical empathy as an intellectual disposition is to ask critical questions about our affective relationships with the infrastructures that mediate life and culture. For example, when disability theorist Tobin Siebers asks critical questions about

the construction of a building and the location of access ramps (near a dumpster in his

example) for disabled persons, he is implicitly insisting for his abled readers to apply a

critical empathy by analyzing those infrastructures that perpetuate pain. This critical

approach to empathy can work toward ameliorating the suffering of marginalized people

that casual approaches to empathy tend to elide. In this chapter, I am interested in

applying the very same thinking toward digital life and digital culture.

Throughout this dissertation, I have studied the ways that identity has been

constructed and mediated through digital culture and digital infrastructures. DeStigter

describes critical empathy as "a unifying condition and a constantly mutable process."

However, perpetual publicity online seems to enable a decidedly *im*mutable quality of

certain identities (usually that of people we don't know personally) and our relationships

to them and how we empathize with them. That is, the dominate story regarding a

specific identity risks becoming static. Lindsey Stone, for instance, is currently (and will

probably continue to be) known for her middle finger directed at the Arlington National

Cemetery, unless she changes her name (if she hasn't already). In fact, in his bestselling

book, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed,* UK journalist Jon Ronson actually paid a

company who specialized in fixing these kinds of online reputation crises in order to help

Stone's difficult case. The basic strategy is to publish a whole slew of new content online

about the client so that the nasty content in question might appear on the fourth or fifth

page of a Google search. However, try as they might, the reputation scrubbers were

unable to keep Stone off the first page of a simple Google search of her name.

As critical empathizers, rather than focusing all our critique on Stone herself

(although critique of her is certainly appropriate), students might benefit from trying to,

in good faith, better understand Stone's predicament and then ask critical questions about the infrastructures that mediate how we understand and empathize with Stone as an actively circulating meme. Afterall, she is, in all likelihood, a complex person with an identity that is changing and has certainly changed since her 2012 incident. According to Ronson's book, she is deeply regretful of her actions and understands the pain it caused others. In other words, students in a digital studies course should develop "a disposition that urges [them] to understand the powerful structures and ideologies that constrain us to think and act in prescribed (often exploitative) ways, while at the same time challenging us to break free from those constraints" (DeStigter 240). For my purposes, critical empathy can be a productive avenue toward critiquing the systems of digital life and how we might advocate for those systems to change for a more equitable way of living our digital (and non-digital) lives.

Toward a Critical Digital Empathy

To talk about cultivating empathy as a core principle in a digital writing classroom is a risky proposition. First, it risks the appearance of moralizing from the lectern as if it were a pulpit. However, as John Duffy has already pointed out, teachers of writing are "*always already* engaged in the teaching of rhetorical ethics," which facilitates ethical reflection and decision-making (Duffy 230). Cultivating an ethical orientation toward the world and how we ethically respond to the world is ingrained in the very activity of teaching writing, in the very activity of writing itself. Second, a pedagogy of empathy also risks sounding quite impotent: the hippie dreams of yet another liberal academic. If we were all just a little kinder to each other, the world would

be a better place. But this view is a little cynical for my tastes. The world totally would be a better place!

In recent years, there has been some research suggesting that empathy can be practiced and taught. A crop up of studies in psychology have emerged suggesting that simply reading literature increases empathy, develops theory of mind (the capacity to understand the mental states of others), or reduces prejudice (Mar et al.; Kidd and Castano; Vezzali et al.). These studies have caught fire in popular media. However, some of these findings (especially the Kidd and Castano study) have been called into question (Panero et al.; Frankel). In a study by neuroscientists, Helen Weng et al., compassion can be trained through deliberate mindfulness meditation practices. These mindfulness practices, like weight-training a "compassion muscle," can increase empathetic concern and strengthen the motivation to relieve another person's suffering (Weng et al.). Weng even takes the weight training metaphor further by suggesting that we can strengthen empathy by adding more resistance through meditating on people who are more difficult to empathize with (Weng). In either case, there is clear ethical value in teaching empathy in a classroom, not just as an aspirational ideal but as an actual, achievable goal.

There has also been ample exigence for incorporating empathy into a digital media pedagogy that attends to toxic and malevolent dispositions toward others. That is, our relationship to the digital world and the actual world is quite dissonant. For instance, cyberpsychologist Mary Aiken hypothesizes that a kind of "dissociative anonymity" enables users to distance themselves from ethically questionable online behaviors and helps them to depersonalize from those they are hurting (222). A recent study by Harel, Jameson, and Maoz demonstrate how affective polarization and dehumanization are

manifested through the so-called echo chambers on social media, especially on Facebook. In other words, these media platforms create a hospitable environment for us to dehumanize each other. Thanks to a whistleblower, a series of recent reporting from the *Wall Street Journal* has also confirmed long-held suspicions that Facebook (the parent company is now called Meta), has been aware that their platforms' algorithms prioritize conflict and outrage in the effort of maintaining user engagement ("The Facebook Files"). Attending to empathy may very well help with addressing some of these dehumanizing tendencies digital life tends to enable. However, teaching students to simply be nicer to each other isn't quite enough.

Developing empathy for distant, digital humans also positions students to develop a critical literacy for the infrastructures that mediate digital life. In this way, I join a chorus of scholarly calls for a critical digital literacy in our classrooms (Selber; Hutchinson and Novotny; Jones; Reyman; Reilly; Toscano). However, I'm calling for a very particular kind of digital literacy: a digital literacy that attends to how systems of surveillance that monitors and mediates our online experiences cause us to *relate to* and *feel about* one another. What seems to get lost in the scholarship on surveillance and critical pedagogies is an emotional attunement to the *feeling* of surveillance—the particular ways our feelings impact how we reason out our relationship to surveillance. As Micciche argues in her book *Doing Emotion*, teachers may very well need to think about teaching students to *experience* emotion—rather than simply writing/reading as the Aristotelian appeal of *pathos*—as a key learning objective for a writing course. To my mind, learning to feel and to relate seem especially important for students composing in increasingly distant spaces like the internet.

For this section, I'd like to first quickly review some of the recent research and

common ethical concerns regarding surveillance capitalism in order to clearly establish

my exigence for getting students to care about privacy and surveillance. Second, I will

propose, what I'm calling, a *critical digital empathy* for composition courses interested in

or focusing on digital modes of writing. As I will argue, an intentioned approach to

empathy can be a powerful avenue for critiquing these systems of power.

Surveillance Capitalism

Much of this new research in critical digital literacy and surveillance is in

response to a growing industry of surveillance capitalism. In her book, *The Age of

Surveillance Capitalism*, Shoshana Zuboff defines this concept as, "A new economic

order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices

of extraction, prediction, and sales" (i). Largely dealing with surveillance as personal

data, she poses the question: what exactly constitutes a home? Traditionally speaking, the

home is considered a private dwelling for those within its walls. However, the

burgeoning "smart home" market is booming, where appliances as common as the toaster

are collecting data in the name of convenience. Zuboff demonstrates how, for example,

Google's acquisition of Nest—a smart thermostat that gathers data about inhabitants'

activities and automatically modulates and optimizes the temperature of a home—along

with Google's growing portfolio of smart home devices, helps Google create "immense

new stores of knowledge and therefore new power" (6). Each thermostat comes with a

privacy policy that pose "oppressive privacy and security consequences in which

sensitive household and personal information are shared with other smart devices,

unnamed personnel, and third parties for the purposes of predicative analyses and sales to

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other unspecified parties" (7). As one might imagine, this kind of data can be used to persuade us (co-construct us) regarding what our preferences ought to be; it can be sold to companies without our knowledge or consent; it can be used to shape our very subjectivies in ways we can't anticipate.

Much of the ideology of surveillance capitalism can be observed through the so-called "privacy paradox"—the discrepancy between the apparent high-value people express about their privacy and the apparent low-value they assign to their privacy when they readily and quickly agree to the privacy policies without reading them (Hull; Aiken). Accepting a privacy policy or quickly approving cookie settings without reading or adjusting them is the result of competing interests: time, perceived value of personal data, and hasty or poor assessments of risk. For instance, according to 2008 study by Carnegie Mellon, researchers found that it would take, on average, seventy-six workdays per year to read all privacy policies on every website users visited (Reyman "User Data"). Hull argues that individuals cannot sufficiently manage their own privacy because, "(1) users do not and cannot know what they are consenting to; (2) privacy preferences are very difficult to effectuate; and (3) declining to participate in privacy-harming websites is increasingly not a viable option for many" (90). A critical pedagogy that attends to the risks of surveillance—a system we frequently *have* to participate in so we can live, work, and navigate the world—should give students the tools to work within these systems, minimize risk to themselves, and perhaps advocate for digital privacy rights.

Surveillance capitalism has thoroughly immersed all of us in its ideology. This is particularly salient for people who can't remember the world pre-internet or pre-social media or pre-smart phone. Following other historically significant events at the turn of

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the century, like the War on Terrorism and the Patriot Act, big tech companies have played their role in normalizing digital surveillance and sousveillance, co-composing individual digital identity for goods and services. After the Patriot Act was passed in 2001, it wouldn't be uncommon for supporters of the legislation to argue that if you don't have anything to hide, then you have nothing to worry about. That is to say, Millennials and Baby Boomers and Gen-Z-ers probably don't define privacy in precisely the same terms (Aiken). For many, personal data doesn't have resonance, meaning, or a clear sense of value. For example, normalizing the common "data mining" metaphor for selling personal data has given the impression that personal data is a natural resource to be unearthed or a by-product to be captured, a resource that wasn't being used anyway (Reyman; Schneier), which sort of reeks of a "finders keepers" *ethos*. Questioning these metaphors and questioning everyday digital practices is an important and key objective for a critical digital literacy that attends to surveillance (Reilly; Vie; Hutchinson and Novotny). For digital studies, big tech companies are frequently (and rightly) the focus of critique, with much of our day-to-day activity mediated by these massive companies. Much of Freire's work is ultimately interested in teaching students to be critical thinkers in the world, rather than passive consumers of information that stands to reinscribe oppressive hegemonic values.

While Zuboff largely focuses on surveillance in the form of personal data, I consider surveillance capitalism in terms of a broader infrastructure of surveillance practices where everyday users participate in surveillance through picture-taking, commenting, liking, sharing geo-data (like on the Snap Map), in addition to personal user data. In other words, surveillance capitalism isn't *only* about oppressive big tech

companies but also about how we relate to each other. In Porter's *Rhetorical Ethics*, he defines rhetorical ethics as "a set of implicit understandings between writer and audience about their relationship" (66). Ethics, in this sense, serves as a critical inquiry into what is good and desirable in networked composing spaces. However, Porter's framing here for an ethical rhetorical relationship presumes an *understanding* between rhetor and audience, and it's not entirely obvious that platforms and their users have a full understanding (implicit or otherwise) as to the nature of their relationship to one another. A critical pedagogy should move students to better understand and challenge their relationships with tech companies and the relationships we have toward each other online. Students should ask questions like: In what way are these tools shaping and co-constructing our value systems? And are these values good and desirable?

Critical Digital Empathy

While critical literacies encourage us to ask important questions about power relations, current research on critical digital literacy hasn't asked questions about how we *feel* through these technologies. I argue that cultivating empathetic dispositions toward, with, and through these technologies is essential for developing a critical digital literacy in order to effectuate systemic change. Scholars and teachers have theorized and implemented some kind of critical pedagogy since Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In his work, Freire argues that education is freedom, that if we understand systems of oppression, we can enact change to that system. "To exist, humanly," he writes, "is to *name* the world, to transform the world" (61). Indeed, for Freire, the oppressed need to name their oppressors before they can work toward change. So, it might seem strange to invoke empathy as a means through which we can critically examine power structures in

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digital life. What is peculiar about social media, for example, is that the user is simultaneously the consumer and the product. So, we are participating (as opposed to passively consuming) in these institutions of power: contributing content, generating data, providing an audience, etc. (DeVoss). In Freire's terms, it seems critical that we *name ourselves* as members of a complex system of oppression before we can move to change it, which, for my money, involves a great deal of affective attunement.

A key problem this chapter addresses is that we often don't *feel* digital surveillance, which makes it difficult to be sensitive of the privacy vulnerabilities of others. For this reason, I propose we cultivate a *critical digital empathy*. To rephrase DeStigter's definition of critical empathy, I define critical digital empathy as a disposition of affectively interpreting and possibly interacting with digitally mediated humans, while remembering that humans online are heavily arbitrated by techno-social forces that co-construct these distant, digital humans and hinder the equitable and just relationships we might hope to build with each other. In this way, empathy is a way into critically understanding these powerful information networks that we are hopelessly interconnected with. We, as a culture, seem disturbingly content with allowing surveillance to shape our preferences, our realities, and our identities and reputations. If we assume our students are possibly going to be future designers of digital media and almost certainly consumers of digital media, a critical empathetic disposition is essential for ethically navigating digital life.

First, before we are able to cultivate a critical digital empathy, we must attune ourselves by *viscerally feeling*[47] the effects of surveillance capitalism. Of course, as

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[47] "*Viscerally feeling*" is an idea I've taken from Hutchinson and Novotny and Reilly. Campbell also refers to a "visceral identification" with others.

teachers, we are tasked with the burden of persuading our students to care about the same things we care about. In digital surveillance studies, it might be best to address two key arguments that seem to keep people from caring about surveillance: first, the "I have nothing to hide so I have nothing to worry about" argument; and second, the "privacy self-management" argument. These arguments seem to be rooted largely in dispositions of *apathy*. In other words, users don't really care because they aren't viscerally feeling the particular ways their privacy and digital identity is being exchanged for economic and discursive purposes. In order for people to care about the digital surveillances of other people, they first need to care that they themselves are being surveilled. Because much of surveillance is invisible, people tend to not care about their own privacy until they have experienced a breach of privacy themselves (Vie and Miller; Reilly). So, if we are to cultivate a critical digital empathy as a learning outcome, our students need to viscerally feel the effects of surveillance themselves before appreciating and empathizing with how surveillance can affect other people. According to Anderson and Irvine, a critical literacy "is learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations" (82). So, for me, the first step in developing a critical digital empathy is *feeling* the effects of those power relations. This is achieved by teaching students about surveillance, reading stories about breaches of privacy, and using counter-tracking software (like Ghostery, Privacy Badger, or uBlock Origin among others) to see specifically how their personal data is being collected and to whom it is being sold. (In the next section of this chapter, I will review assignments that can facilitate this the kind of viscerality I talk about here.)

Second, once students have participated in assignments that will hopefully induce some level of viscerality, students should be taught to attune themselves to their feelings about surveillance and to use that emotion as a basis for conducting academic analyses. In *Doing Emotion*, Micciche argues that students should be taught to attend to "the extent to which emotion expression and perception are mediated rather than [simply viewing them as] natural responses to a situation" (6). Here, Micciche is responding to common misperceptions that only the best reasoning emerges from the absence of emotion—that reason and emotion are entirely dichotomous. Afterall, as Steven Katz has pointed out, ethics of expediency (hyper-rationalism) can lead to fascistic or authoritarian reasoning. In her book, Micciche uses performance studies as a pedagogical access point into teaching emotion as a critical subject of analysis. She investigates how human beings fundamentally make culture and invent ways of being in the world. Her point is that emotions are produced in collisions, not isolated feelings that are sitting there waiting to be enacted or externalized. Emotions are *mediated* and made visible through the body. That is, knowledge cannot be separated from the sensate. As a pedagogical approach, viscerality positions students to better understand reasoning, make arguments, and feel empathy.

Viscerality can be an incredibly useful tool for bolstering our students' reflection in any composition course. Reflection, obviously, has become a cornerstone of composition pedagogy over the last twenty or so years. However, I have always had mixed feelings about reflection assignments in my own writing courses. My students' reflections frequently come across as procedural, tacked-on, and not particularly substantive (see Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak for a similar observation). I'm often left

unsure or even skeptical about what they're transferring through these reflections. Leake poses some possible answers: "One way to incorporate pedagogies of empathy in the classroom is through the selection of texts that students encounter and how they work with them. The best texts are those that both invite and frustrate identification" (Leake). Indeed, frustrating identification through class readings might be a useful way to exercise intentioned empathy. However, it does seem to me that a lot of critical pedagogies (anti-racist, anti-sexist, de-colonial, etc.) locate methods of change primarily in a course's reading list. While the reading list is certainly a key site to make these kinds of important changes, rather than simply locating that change in the reading list, if we think about how students can viscerally feel a learning outcome (a learning outcome like empathy for example), meta-cognition might have a greater deal of transfer potential compared to more mechanical kinds of meta-cognitive practices.

If empathy is a transferable value, habit of mind, and critical style of thinking, it has to be done through conscious practices. As I mentioned earlier, neuroscience research has demonstrated that mindfulness meditation, geared toward empathy, can help develop more empathy in its practitioners. In composition studies, scholars have more recently considered mindfulness meditation as a pedagogical strategy to develop better meta-cognitive habits in students. Chris Anson argues that *mindfulness*—which D. N. Perkins and Gavriel Salomon define as a "generalized state of alertness to the activities one is engaged in"—is essential for learners to transfer prior knowledge to new experiences, which requires a kind of "reflexivity" (Anson). Also borrowing inspiration from meditation research, compositionist Asao Inoue argues that pedagogies of compassion should be an *active doing* in the writing classroom. In the fifth chapter of his book,

Labor-Based Grading Contracts, Inoue is interested in cultivating a classroom climate of compassion through a charter for compassion in his writing courses. For Inoue, compassion is a learning outcome. Labor-based grading (where numerical evaluations of papers are eschewed, and final grades are instead evaluated on the labor students put toward the class) is itself a pedagogy of compassion: where teachers dispense privileging white, standard English as the metric by which writing ought to be graded on.

Inoue does not view compassion as a passive happening. He writes, "one cannot be accidentally compassionate. Compassion requires intention. Second, compassion is not simply a feeling or an emotion. It is action. We can only *do* compassion, and often we fail at it, so it is a practice we develop over time but never perfect" (174). For Inoue, compassion is a transferable practice, and it has to go beyond a static list of values students might mechanically rewrite in a reflection letter. Inoue incorporates specific practices of empathy in his writing courses such as *metta* meditation; or students producing a list of actionable behaviors that will cultivate a culture of compassion; or simply listening to/reading/discussing the stories of others. According to neuroscientists, Hanson and Mendius, empathy can be habitually practiced by noticing others, noticing the self, and reminding oneself to be more compassionate (Inoue). Through careful and deliberate practice, empathy can be oriented toward the physical presence of others. In this way, empathy is spatial and embodied.

Again, I am aware that teaching empathy as a learning objective smacks of naïve idealism. However, using empathy as a critical lens through which we might better understand digital culture has both practical rhetorical value as well as broader social value that is worth pursuing. For a course in digital writing, a critical digital literacy

would entail the ability to critique institutions of surveillance, critique our everyday practices of surveillance, and understand the value in these critiques. To inflect such a pedagogy with a critical empathy, students should be able to demonstrate a *critical digital empathy* by: reporting on their own feelings as it pertains to their experience with surveillance; understand others' experiences with surveillance through dialoging with each other and reading narratives about surveillance experiences; gather and analyze data from digital ethnographic sites and explain how surveillance constructs subjectivities of those involved; and understand how surveillance affects other people. Of course, as Inoue makes clear, "we cannot force students to feel something for others [. …] I believe that actions come first and feelings of empathy follow actions, not that other way around. Doing leads to feeling" (185).

In the next section, I review potential assignments that enable students to *do* compassion and hopefully feel empathy; review the methodologies that would be realistic for students in a semester's time; and suggest some readings that would facilitate the learning objectives mentioned above.

Assignments for a Critical Digital Empathy

A pedagogy that incorporates a critical digital empathy can work with, really, any composition course, including first-year writing. Our freshmen students have already developed digital research methodologies before setting foot in the composition classroom. By using Google and even browsing reputable news websites, students are already under surveillance at the level of personal data, likely without their knowing. So, by virtue of completing a research writing assignment, we are exposing our students to surveillance systems that they may have limited awareness of or concern for. My interests

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here, then, are to assign projects that first increase student awareness of surveillance, second, position students to *viscerally feel* surveillance through auto-ethnographic study, and third, cultivate empathy for others through digital ethnography of online discourses mediated by surveillance technologies. Ultimately, I would like to enable students to critique the ways surveillance technologies construct identity in ethically problematic ways. This could include the study of pictorial memes as they circulate the internet and shape reputations; this could include corporate surveillance of personal data that construct problematic identities for users; this could include how social media algorithms take user engagements to construct their news feeds, their worldviews, and their politics.

Anecdotally speaking, it does seem that college students have a fairly low level of digital literacy regarding surveillance or at least have very little regard for surveillance. At most, teens may have received a talking-to about their privacy settings on social media and received general warnings about the content they post for the sake of future employment. They also tend to have a very general sense about how algorithms customize their TikTok feeds. But this is usually the extent of their digital, surveillance literacy, in my experience anyway. A recent PEW study claims that "people struggle to understand the nature and scope of the data collected about them" (Rainie). Other PEW research has indicated that teens (about 60%) are generally not too concerned about third parties collecting their personal data (Madden et al.). Recently, I informally polled two of my first-year composition classes (31 total students) about their feelings regarding privacy on social media. About 87% of these students said they think about their online privacy either "sometimes" or "a lot." Interestingly, however, about 50% of also said they had previously taken a picture of a stranger and published it online, and about half of

those students said the picture included the stranger's face. So, it seems that students have mixed, if inconsistent feelings toward surveillance.

The following assignments can work for a variety of writing courses: first-year writing course could fold in some of the more minor assignments to bolster student research practices; an upper-level digital writing course that focuses entirely on surveillance; or even a technical writing course could make use of these assignments to think about the ethics of technical documents, such as privacy policies. So, I have arranged these assignments with a purposeful trajectory in mind: 1) introduce surveillance by reading new research, journalistic reporting, and personal narratives about surveillance; 2) study one's own relationship to surveillance; and finally, 3) adopt ethnographic methodologies to study online communities mediated, in some way, by surveillance.

Finally, these assignments do not suppose that students are computer scientists nor do they suppose students have a sophisticated understanding of code. To be honest, I don't know too much about code. However, they do assume that students have used social media before and probably have a general awareness of privacy concerns for online life. These assignments, then, aim to better enable students to assess their privacy-risks and critique the surveillance systems that potentially threaten that privacy.

Awareness

At the level of awareness, my goal is getting students to value privacy for privacy's sake. Generally speaking, in my experience, students seem aware that they are being surveilled on some level. Most will recall an anecdote where they had a verbal conversation with a friend, and suddenly, their social media ads seem to be tailored based

on the conversation their phones ostensibly overheard. Regardless, they still tend to buy

the argument, "If I'm not doing anything bad, then I have nothing to hide." This *laissez*

faire approach to privacy is no accident. According to Bruce Schneier, Facebook CEO

Mark Zuckerberg once claimed, "You have one identity. The days of you having a

different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know

are probably coming to an end pretty quickly. Having two identities for yourself is an

example of a lack of integrity" (Schneier 148). Of course, this is a fairly archaic

argument. It reinscribes an old Christian morality that insists that shameful acts are

carried out in private spaces, analogizing the private to the shameful and the public to the

honorable or virtuous. As Augustine writes, "Human nature then is, without any doubt,

ashamed about lust, and rightfully ashamed" (Augustine qtd. in Miller 85). For this

reason, I find it important for students to be disabused of these kinds of reductive

arguments about privacy.

So, the first pedagogical move here is to help students better understand the scope

of surveillance through reading personal narratives about breaches of privacy to start

building empathetic dispositions. Daniel Solove's scholarly *The Future of Reputation*

makes use of several case studies of everyday people and how their reputations endure

long-lasting, perpetual damage online. Jon Ronson's journalistic book, *So You've Been*

Publicly Shamed, and Monica Lewinksi's HBO documentary, *Fifteen Minutes of Shame,*

are great sources that tell personal stories of people who experienced significant and

lasting damage to their reputations due to viral images or doxing campaigns (the

publicizing of private information) by bad actors. Further, taking a cue from

neuroscientists Helen Weng, instructors could present students with case examples of

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individuals who experienced damages to reputation that are increasingly more difficult to empathize with. Escalating examples might look something like the following: empathizing with the Star Wars kid; the hipster in the park meme; Lindsey Stone who gestured at Arlington National Cemetery; the case of Justine Sacco (the PR executive who once tweeted, just before departing on an airplane, "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm White!"). Having students answer directed questions may help them to meditate on and empathize with these individuals. Some of these cases, naturally, might prove difficult.[48] However, empathizing doesn't necessarily have to mean without criticism. Courses can both criticize individuals online and empathize with them without letting them off the hook for whatever ill they are guilty of (if anything). In either case, these examples can show how identities are, in part, techno-cultural constructions and highly mediated online. Surveillance constructs perceptions, political beliefs, and sets the terms for how we should or ought to engage with humans (or digital representations of humans) online.

Students may also have a general lack of awareness regarding how big tech companies, especially social media websites, view and value privacy. Estee Beck recommends assignments that involve summarizing and analyzing privacy policy statements from large social media companies or developing a research-based multimodal public service announcements about the effects of surveillance and privacy upon the general public (Beck, "Writing Educator Responsibilities"). In their research practice, students should also be encouraged to follow organizations like the Electronic Frontier

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[48] I recognize that the latter two might be examples of "self-surveillance," perhaps inviting arguments that "they did it to themselves," but this is precisely why they might be more difficult to empathize with and why cultivating an empathetic disposition is important.

Foundation or the American Civil Liberties Union to discover the latest arguments,

activist campaigns, or stories on government and commercial digital surveillance and

privacy rights. A lot of this kind of work can help give students tools to better manage

their own privacy, learn about privacy policies more generally (Vie, "You Are How You

Play"), and will hopefully begin to think about personal data as intellectual property

(Reyman, "User Data on the Social Web"), while dissuading students from adopting the

privacy-as-self-management argument.

After being persuaded that personal data constructs identity, students can conduct

secondary research and produce projects that advocate for self-care. For instance,

Hutchison and Novotny have designed technical writing courses around a feminist

surveillance as care pedagogy that considers the role professional writers have in the

design of technical documents for users of wearable technologies. As Hutchison and

Novotny write, "privacy criticism is often theoretical and rarely takes up *affect*,

particularly when it comes to bodies" (106). In this way, wearable technologies turn

bodies into data to be crafted for commercial and suasory purposes. "By the end of the

course," they write, "students gain [awareness of…] how data is a visual and virtual

representation of the physical body. Students leave the course with a knowledge of the

real risks posed to the body when personal data is not secure" (106). For example,

surveillance can be used to perpetuate gender-based violence, like stalking (Hutchison

and Novotny), or data generated from wearables, like Fitbit, can be used to spy on or

catch cheating spouses (Reyman and Sparby). In these courses, technical writers learn to

design documents that promote agency and care among technology users. A feminist

approach invites scholars and students to scrutinize surveillance's "affects and material

realities for non-dominant bodies, particularly women" (111). A focused attention toward the body stands to raise the stakes for students.

Viscerality

Once students are sufficiently aware of key problems of surveillance, they may remain unmoved to actually care about it. Studying their own digital footprint provides an opportunity for students to see how they themselves are producing data and to viscerally feel the effects of surveillance on their digital practices, ideally without traumatizing them too much. As we've already discussed, part of the problem is that much of surveillance is invisible. Assignments that lead to viscerality can quickly make the invisible visible. To start, Hutchinson and Novotny suggest a short in-class activity where students run a search of themselves on familytreenow.com by entering their first and last names along with their current city and state. The results can quickly reveal quite a bit about the amount of personal information that is actually publicly available. I've done this myself and the public search results revealed my age, immediate relatives, and every address in which I've lived since 1995, including my current one. The experience was, indeed, a little disturbing.

Larger assignments that make use of auto-ethnographic research methodologies serve as a useful avenue for students to *feel* the ways in which they are being watched online. Colleen Reilly has proposed a number of assignments that make use of counter-tracking applications that reveal to students the degree to which they themselves are being surveilled online. While these applications and plug-ins routinely emerge and disappear because developers stop supporting them, there are a few free resources that are reliable and still in operation. Ghostery is one that I have found especially useful and easy

to use. Ghostery is an opensource counter-tracking web browser plug-in that helps block websites from gathering and selling users' personal data and provides users with statistics on how many companies are gathering data, the names of the specific data brokers, and other kinds of data these trackers collect. In other words, students are tracking the trackers. Ghostery offers a free seven-day trail where students would be able to use the application, casually browse the internet, and gather information about who has tried to gather and sell their personal data, which can include cookies placed on their computers and could even include personally identifiable information (PII). In fact, students may even discover websites that they've never visited are also tracking their activity (Reilly, "Reading Risk"). In an auto-ethnographic assignment, students could keep a journal, document their findings, and report of their initial feelings upon discovering how many data trackers are watching and which websites are tracking their activity the most. Further, when these counter-tracking applications block data trackers, the user often loses functionality in certain websites, which can be frustrating. For instance, I used Ghostery during the seven-day trail, which interrupted some of the basic functionality of Canvas, the online learning management system my current institution uses, keeping me from doing my job as easily as I had before turning the blocker on. This experience illustrates the illusion of choice we often face when it comes to opting out of surveillance systems.

To illustrate how perception and identity are constructed through surveillance systems, Reilly proposes a small-scale assignment that attempts to reproduce the big-data experiment by Feuz, Fuller, and Stalder. The assignment shows how search engines collect user data (like search queries, clicks, and geographical location) to generate personalize profiles of users based on common assumptions about identity. Through this

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assignment, students observe, in real time, identity-construction through data by

conducting primary research on how algorithms manipulate personalized search results,

which I'll quickly summarize here. For this assignment, students form groups of two or

three, each creating a new Google account (or perhaps Yahoo! or Bing as alternatives).

Teams would need to collectively design "identities" for their new accounts. For

example, one account could be a climate change advocate while another account is a

climate change skeptic. They would enact these identities by entering a specified number

of search terms (about 100 search queries) that would "teach" the search algorithm the

preferences of their pseudo-account identity. Students would need to produce a research

protocol (that they would work out with the professor) to control for as many variables as

possible, such as running search queries during certain times of the day, their search

terms, and even geographical concerns. For instance, teams would need to agree on a set

of shared "neutral" terms to search for—like "books" or "documentaries"—to act as a

control to compare how these different user identities generate different results based on

these neutral terms. Geography could also be controlled for if everyone is the same

geographical location. Students could also use tools like the Tor web browser, which

"distributes queries over a network to obscure geographical data" (Reilly, "Reading Risk"

30).[49] It is advisable that students conduct such a study with a web browser that they

don't normally use in order to limit other kinds of unintended data that might muddy

search results. Ultimately, students would produce a report on their findings that outline

their research protocol, the data they gathered, and their analysis of how the platform

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[49] It is important to note, as Reilly does, that the Tor web browser also poses ethical questions about bad
actors who might use such a privacy-protecting browser for illegal actions in the effort to allude the
surveillance of authorities.

catered to their pseudo-identities and perhaps the risks involved when searching for information online.

These kinds of primary research assignments afford students a data-driven assessment of the risks that they are exposed to in terms of how these digital tools can alter their perception and expose them to potential security risks. Online, risk can be a difficult thing to assess. "Habituated action theory" suggests that, when people participate in risky behavior with no consequences from that behavior, they begin to feel that behavior to be less and less risky (Reilly, "Reading Risk"; Aiken). Of course, surveillance capitalism obfuscates that risk (Reilly, "Reading Risk"). So, it becomes essential for students to experience, in a non-harmful way, the real-world risks of the technologies they use every day. These kinds of assignments enable students to viscerally experience risk and gives them much better grounds to conduct a risk-benefit analysis in terms of how they think about their own privacy management. More importantly, students will develop an understanding of the "invisible digital identity" algorithms are able to create (Beck, "Invisible") and develop the rhetorical awareness to be able to criticize these institutions of power and advocate for their change (Toscano).

Critical Ethnography and Queer Methodologies

In alignment with critical literacy methodologies, a critical digital empathy should also incorporate ethnographic methods of research. They are interpretive, constructivist, and can, according to Anderson and Irvine, "identify the ways in which institutional arrangements and policies can contribute to illiteracy and inequality" (84). Importantly, Anderson and Irvine make a distinction between strictly interpretive ethnography and, what they call, a more Marxist *critical ethnography*. That is, a Marxist approach is not a

politically neutral one. It seeks to analyze how subjects are historically constructed within power relations and then challenge the policies that maintain inequality. I posit here that digital ethnographic research projects have the potential not only to cultivate a critical literacy in students but also to move students to apply an empathetic disposition toward their subject of study in order to better understand how systems of power perpetuate inequalities through online surveillances.

Ethnographies naturally pose a number of ethical considerations students would need to confront. First, there is the obvious problem that studying the privacy rights and surveillances of online discourse communities simultaneously risks violating the privacy of the communities being studied. In this way, a digital ethnographic study would necessarily require students to wrestle with the public-private distinction. As Susan Gal has argued, "public" and "private" are not just particular places but "indexical signs that are always relative" (qtd. in McKee and Porter, *The Ethics of Internet Research* 77-8). That is to say, ethnographic researchers necessarily need to ask themselves critical questions of what exactly constitutes public and private behavior online and how to ethically study them. These questions, in some ways, disabuse researchers of the supposition that everything published online is always "public." These kinds of ethical questions might involve asking: at what point is an obscure (yet open) online discourse community still a private conversation? Does open and public discourse require the consent of the community members before studying them? As Hudson and Bruckman found in their 2004 study of 2,260 chatrooms, "individuals in online environments such as chatrooms generally do not approve of being studied without their consent" (135). The answers to these questions might not be easily answerable. So, before embarking on a

digital ethnography for a class, students might benefit from writing a proposal and/or an ethics analysis memo of their project and acquire professor approval ahead of time. (I obviously envision this kind of assignment to *not* require IRB approval; so, part of this process is also intended to get professor verification that their project is both ethical and can be conducted *without* further institutional authorization.)

I would argue that the potential ethical problems posed by online ethnographic studies aren't necessarily a bad thing for student researchers. One of the key objectives of this kind of work is to humanize data and bring context to online events that are mediated through surveillance technologies. Such a project demands that researchers consciously develop methodologies that attend the specific ethical questions of a given "public" discourse. McKee and Porter advocate for flexible methodologies to navigate that complex ethical space on internet research. Similarly, Caroline Dadas suggests researchers adopt "messy," queer methodologies for studying the ethically fraught spaces of social media. Messy, queer methodologies are sensitive to moments when attention from a researcher might bring unwanted publicity while also acknowledging the potential benefits of publicity (Dadas 66). The Association of Internet Researchers point out that ethical decision-making in internet research is highly context-dependent and requires attention to practical judgment, or what Aristotle calls *phronesis* (Markham and Buchanan). Developing a *phronesis* for navigating online life is, after all, the whole point here. For Dadas, queer epistemologies resist normative Enlightenment-era notions of replicability, reliability, or objectivity. Queer theory, like the public/private continuum, dismantles false binaries and individuates and humanizes context.

Messy, queer methodologies afford researchers the ability to analyze "small data" to carefully study online behavior and give attention to the depth of context that big data or positivist methodologies are unable to do. That is to say, ethnographic study gives attention to the human. Given the limitations of time and resources for a semester-length project, students will need to keep the size of their ethnographic study manageable, making use of small data, so that analyses can be performed with field notes that involve human coding of data like language, rituals, and/or discursive sentiment with potentially no algorithmic assistance outside an excel sheet—a practice that Latzko-Toth, Bonneau, and Millette refer to as "data thickening" where researchers reduce the breadth and enhance the depth of data analysis. Other than time constraints, small data methodologies have other productive advantages. For instance, Zeynep Tufekci, has argued that social media researchers tend to lean into a bias for mechanical big data methodologies that elide context and fail to adequately study networked human activity. Tufekci argues that big data from Twitter can't really provide the kind of rich and meaningful analysis that small data allows. For instance, sub-tweeting and screencapping require close analysis to adequately understand, analyze, and interpret. This might especially be a problem when "retweets or mentions are used as proxies for influence or agreement" when retweets can obviously serve as tools for *dis*agreement on Twitter (Tufekci 510). In this way, small data projects enable researchers to better study "digital trace data" (the digital, recorded evidence of human activity) and can engender new realizations about *how* and *why* people do what they do online (Latzko-Toth, Bonneau, and Millette).

Online, data-mining practices pose a number of ethical questions for student researchers. As McKee and Porter point out, to ask if an object of study is a text or a

person "doesn't actually make much sense in our field" because we don't draw a hard line between a text and a person, whether it's "her thoughts, feelings, ideas, words, and even body" ("Ethics of Archival Research" 78). Navigating this ethically fraught space is to re-center context: the context of the writer's life, community, and culture. Following Laurie Gries's recommendations of iconographic tracking, researchers should begin such projects by collecting as much publicly available data as available, and then sorting through how useful that data is and how the data can be used ethically as possible. These data-gathering methodologies involve using common research tools, such as Google's text or image search functions; collecting webpage snapshots with software like Zotero (Gries); following a particular hashtag across platforms or tracking other available metadata; or coding community participation with sentiment analyses—all depending on the project's research questions.

After collecting data, Gries recommends researchers investigate seven material processes, a few of which I think can be helpful for a critical digital ethnography. What she applies to images, I apply to surveillance-mediated online discourse. Here, I briefly review four processes relevant for my discussion that students would need to consider. First, *sites of production* help researchers "discover what materials, activities, people, technologies institutional infrastructures, and bureaucratic forces are intra-acting" in order to actualize digital compositions (Gries 116). Multiple, overlapping sites of rhetorical production complicate notions of online life and offline life. Next, *processes of transformation* give attention to how surveillance has transformed discourse (embodied, textual, or both) and the subjectivities involved. Transformation considers how something changes from context to context in terms of "design, form, medium, materiality, genre,

and function" (Gries 117). Since remix is a foundational vehicle for online communication (Gries; Lessig), transformation might consider how a surveillance-mediated discourse might leap genre or how genre expectations (re)build value systems within discourse communities. Transformation could even study how moderation systems change the trajectory of a discourse over time.

Lastly, studying the two final processes of *circulation* and *consequentiality* attune researchers toward what happens to discourse as it passes through technologies and platforms that enable those discourses. As Gries points out, the computer is not a passive machine that transmits communications. It "participates in and contaminates the process" (120). On social networks, the product of discourse doesn't matter so much as the process discourse undergoes as it travels. In fact, for social media, the process—or the mechanisms that both co-construct and give velocity to rhetorical bodies—*is the product* (Castells). In a digital ethnography, I would like to push students toward considering the "thing-power" (Bennett) of surveillance technologies and the consequences of that thing-power. As we already discussed in Chapter 3, somnambulant bodies affectively (re)produce discourse through cultural contagion—or "a complex process of desire, imitation, and invention" (Gries 125). A consideration of affectivity as a consequence of surveillance involves thinking about the ways in which contagion shapes discourse and shapes bodies (human or otherwise). This work asks: why are we paying attention to it? What makes a rhetorical thing, as Sara Ahmed puts it, "stick"? The concept of "stickiness" for Ahmed investigates what gives value to things amid an affective economy. How, for instance, do processes of surveillance (of collective watching), like "censorship policies, trending algorithms, material infrastructures, or even celebrity

endorsements" (Edwards and Lang 131) impact the circulation of a given online discourse?

The shape these critical ethnographic projects could take on are many. For one, students could track the circulation of an emerging meme, analyzing how discourses around that meme are shaped and how the meme shapes discourse. Also, students could conduct a sentiment analysis of a reddit board featuring a video or image (ideally one in the "strangershot" genre), much like the study I conducted in Chapter 4. This kind of sentiment analysis affords students the ability to observe, firsthand, how algorithmic systems shape discourse through collective affirmation and shape identity through algorithmic and pictorial surveillances. These kinds of critical ethnographies could also track a particular thread of a political movement, studying the images, videos, and/or text about, following their associated hashtags and other trackable metadata. Students could also conduct a discourse analysis of Snapchat's Snap Map during a protest or significant political or special event and observe the ways in which surveilled bodies break and travel through contexts. The moderation practices of a community on livestreaming gaming platforms, like Twitch, has recently shown promise as a site for study (see London et al. for a useful example). In all of these kinds of studies, students would apply mixed qualitative and quantitative methods and thicken the "small data" gathered from online discourse communities to analyze how surveillance technologies have mediated those online activities.

What students will inevitably find is that mapping the traces of digital activity in online discourses makes for a highly complex project. Due to the labor-intensive nature of such a project, it may be necessary to design it as a group project. In developing a

critical ethnography, I don't feel the need to be overly prescriptive about the sites

students choose to study, so long as they are mapping the material circumstances of

digital surveillances and explaining what these traces mean for a given discourse. This

could include analyzing the site of production (perhaps where images were taken or what

the social context a discourse is operating in), the technologies that mediate a discourse,

and the sites where audiences see or interact with the discourse. As such, this orientation

aligns with feminist and queer epistemologies, which disrupt dualisms; it challenges the

binary distinction between "offline" and "online," it illuminates the rhetorical force of

publicity, and attends to the ways that technologies and bodies are intertwined (A. Haas).

In other words, ethnographic, queer epistemologies center the human in a frequently

dehumanized space and lay the groundwork for productive institutional critique.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued for centering empathy as a key learning objective

and as a critical lens through which to analyze and critique everyday surveillances for an

upper-division (or even lower-division!) digital writing class. Many scholars of late have

focused a good on digital activism in digital composition scholarship, but few (if any)

have considered the empathetic dispositions digital writers bring (or don't bring) to

everyday composing spaces. In 2016, Estee Beck wrote, in *Kairos*, about teacher

responsibility for covering the history of surveillance and privacy in writing classrooms.

When studying digital surveillance and privacy, as Beck points out, we simultaneously

risk violating the privacy of others online, being culpable in the very thing we are trying

to mitigate. Viscerally confronting this risk seems essential for cultivating empathetic

dispositions for digital writers. So, the objectives for, say, a digital ethnography should

aim to teach students to analyze and critique the systems that mediate online discourse and the surveillances that rhetorically deliver digital content.

Of course, as Eric Leake writes, "Empathy should be recognized as both worthwhile and always incomplete" endeavor we are never getting quite right. African Diaspora scholar, Carolyn Calloway-Thomas's research works toward creating a global empathetic agenda, which defines a pedagogy of empathy as "knowledge and information-based skills that help global citizens respond to and manage intercultural encounters caringly and competently" (214). I think we could easily find other contexts in which to advance these aims outside "intercultural encounters." As of this writing, the Johnny Depp-Amber Heard trail recently concluded and is still very much present in the mainstream media, producing a fecundity of memes across social media and seems to have unified the majority of the internet around one key narrative: Amber Heard is a crazy person. While I'm uninterested in litigating that obviously complex case here, what is of interest to me is a surprising lack of empathy. The video-recorded court hearings (close analyses of faces and body language), the publicized text messages, the voice-recorded evidence, hashtags, all seem to be insisting that Heard is a terrible person, not deserving of understanding or empathy. For instance, let's say we were to buy into this narrative, if we really believed that Heard is having a mental health crisis, there is surprisingly little mainstream discussion about the relationship between intimate partner violence and the need for stronger mental health support. Instead, the internet has gleefully aimed the full force of its ire directly at her, with little to no interest in empathizing, on some level, with her.

This kind of *schadenfreude* is not unlike guffawing at tragedy, like rubbernecking at a traffic accident or watching hours of videos from *Fail Army*. Famously, in 2015, a team of psychologists studied 32 football fans with electromyography pads attached to their faces, which measured smiles and frowns while watching a German team play against an archrival Dutch team. The study suggested that the participants smiled *more* at the failures of rivals than at their own successes (Smith). The Heard-Depp case might serve as a useful site to analyze how technologies of watching (cameras, text, social media, algorithmic mediations) have co-constructed a decidedly unempathetic orientation toward this particular case and how we might use empathy as a critical lens through which to criticize all of these surveillance-mediated discourses.

According to Todd DeStigter, "critical empathy relies on a conception of the self as characterized by multiple, shifting, and highly contextualized identities. For my part, this view has helped me see that while I will never completely understand what it is like to be a Mexican American teenaged mother or what it is like to run with the Latin Kings, I can, nonetheless, connect with these students in partial and mutable ways" (242). While he focuses his discussion on working with underserved students, for me, DeStigter's critical empathy could be extended to digital humans we encounter online. What I hope most for our students in any digital writing classroom is for them to study and more carefully develop a richer understanding and reflection of the ways that we watch and relate to each other and for them to challenge their role and their own complicity within these systems of power.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: VENTURING OUT

Humans in Networks

The exigence for this dissertation began with my interests in humans and their

relationship to the camera, the quintessential mode of surveillance. The camera has, for

me anyway, given renewed consideration for a Platonic ontology in the sense that we are

saturated in a world of resemblances. That is, in staring at the images on our screens, we

seem to be regularly one level removed from the human, staring at representations of

humans instead of actual humans. Recent scholarship in composition and rhetoric have

advanced new materialist approaches for studying images online that acknowledges the

agency in non-human actors. Engaging Latour and Baudrillard's treatment of the

subject/object duality, new materialist scholars are invested in, without denying human

and nonhuman distinctions, decentering humans in research and writing. That is, as

Laurie Gries writes, material things (like images) have "distributed agency and [engage

in] mutual transformation" of networked actants (75). While a decentering of the human

is clearly not a centering of the material, it does seem that the human has perhaps taken

more of a backseat in the scholarship. So, while I'm not necessarily recentering the

human, I am interested in what is happening to humans, how networked actors have

dehumanized the human or transformed the subject into object (i.e., reducing humans to

mere images or that of mere data). In a similar line of thinking, in her study of the

#womenswave hashtag, Corinne Jones takes "a technofeminist stance and tr[ies] to carry

feminism's focus on humans[, which is] concerned with the effects on everyday people, many of whom may be overlooked in new materialist scholarship" (Jones). The objective for my project and projects like it is not to elide the material but rather to examine the ways that surveillance organizes us, the humans. Paraphrasing Caroline Dadas, a non-normative, queer approach to digital research seeks to highlight how we are writing the internet and *how we are being written by the internet*.

So, there is a clear exigence for users to better understand how technology shapes our thinking. In her 1995 book *Writing Technology*, Christina Haas argued for a focus on the materiality of writing, pointing out that "writing is language made material" (3). In her study, she describes the impact on users' cognitive processes as they read and write on computers. Other scholars have also illustrated how software interfaces affect composing practices (Bolter; Condon; LeBlanc; Selfe and Selfe; Holdstein and Selfe). As Walter Ong argued, writing technologies stand to affect the "interior transformations of consciousness" (*Orality and Literacy* 82). Technology and the human have always been tightly intertwined. Even, Quintilian compared the cognitive difference between writing on wax and writing on parchment,

> It is best to write on wax owing to the facility which it offers for
>
> erasure, though weak sight may make it desirable to employ
>
> parchment by preference. The latter, however, although of
>
> assistance to the eye, delays the hand and interrupts the stream of
>
> thought owing to the frequency with which the pen has to be
>
> supplied with ink. (10.3.31)

In other words, writing technologies have historically had a profound impact not only on how we write but *on thinking itself*. However, as Paul LeBlanc has pointed out, there is an ideological and recursive relationship between technology and its users. LeBlanc argues, "We are simultaneously the shapers and the shaped" (2). So, better understanding how precisely these writing technologies are shaping our realities and how we, in turn, continue to shape those technologies has engendered a new exigence for our students to develop a critical digital literacy where they learn to criticize these powerful technologies and *criticize their own participations in these technologies*.

Critical literacy has long been an avenue for identifying the ways in which technologies are shaping humans. For instance, smart phones, tablets, and personal computers are being designed with user interfaces so intuitive that toddlers can use them with little to no instruction. So long as people (especially young people) have physical and economic access to these technologies, they should have little problem using them as designed. In other words, if people are learning digital literacies outside of the classroom on their own, it seems more prudent to ask: what *kinds* of literacies are people developing on their own (or with the iPad as their teacher)? Famously, Apple's "It just works" campaign sought to create user interfaces so simple that it required little to no set up or configuration and required little effort on the part of the user. Apple would make all the configuration decisions for you. In short, Apple wanted to make products that didn't require its users to have a particularly sophisticated technological literacy. They would do the thinking for you.

Of course, technology should get easier and easier to use. However, the more immersed we are in a network of practices, we stand to become less critical and more docile. As Latour has argued, technology is not merely a mediating force, it creates new assemblages, it mutually transforms the human into a fundamentally different agent. That is to say, in coordination with these readily accessible tools of watching, we've developed a culture of surveillance, and scholars and students studying digital rhetoric should ask critical questions about what precisely these practices mean for us. This includes how we provide personal data to tech companies, how we provide content (often in the form of picture-taking of others), and how we engage with the content of others. This is, of course, a tall order. As we have seen throughout this dissertation surveillance often occurs in visible and invisible ways. Visible in that we can clearly tell when someone is taking our picture; *in*visible in that there are too many cameras to notice them all. Visible in that we consciously build a public identity with social media profiles; *in*visible in that our data generated from online activity is collected and sold to companies we've never heard of. In an interview with Estee Beck, Cynthia Selfe comments on this growing phenomenon. She argues, "technology is disappearing in terms of being naturalized. In a sense, technology disappears into the background. When the technology disappears, ideologies are working the most strongly" ("Reflecting upon the Past" 353). That is to say, we are so immersed in, accepting of, and enculturated to digital surveillance that we often overlook its impact on subjectivity or that surveillance is even occurring. In their study of the "infrastructure" of digital writing, DeVoss, Cushman, and Grabill make visible the often invisible standards, practices, and the materiality of composing new media that are "deeply embedded in the decision-making processes of

writing" (16). DeVoss et al. outline more institutional modes of surveillance. In our current digital moment, however, institutions are surveilling us, but we are also surveilling each other and ourselves, which makes these mediating forces quite ambient, invisible, and ever-present.

Indeed, these forces that shape writing practices and even day-to-day living are often imperceptible or at least require a good deal of squinting to notice them. As thinkers like Foucault and Freire have long pointed out, subjects are immersed in a culture of practices (for Foucault it's hegemonic discourse; for Freire, it's colonialist pedagogies). According to Freire and Macedo, we should judge a literacy according to "whether it serves to reproduce existing social formations or serves as a set of cultural practices that promotes democratic and emancipatory change" (141). That is to say, a mechanical or functional literacy only serves to reproduce existing power structures without challenging them. Within composition and rhetoric and technical communication, scholars have urged teacher-scholars to cultivate critical digital literacies to encourage students to ask critical questions about the power structures that mediate rhetorical activity. For instance, James Porter critiques how the politics of liberal individualism are discreetly embedded within internet policy. In his work, Stuart Selber seeks "to help teachers of writing and communication develop full-scale computer literacy programs that are both effective and professionally responsible" (xi). In developing a critical literacy, Selber urges us to ask ourselves, "what political and cultural values and assumptions are embedded in hardware and software?" In developing this kind of critical literacy, students should take on the role of questioners of technology in order to develop an informed critique of the technologies in which we are enmeshed and enculturated.

The good news is that there is growing, though nascent, literature in critical

digital studies that attends specifically to developing a critical pedagogy about these

invisible kinds of digital surveillances that tend to dehumanize us, reduce the human to

capital (Reilly; Vie; Hutchinson and Novotny). For instance, there is a good deal of

research on plagiarism detection software as it pertains to pedagogy (Marsh; Purdy;

Zwagerman). Colleen Reilly argues that teachers in composition and particularly those in

digital studies or technical writing should prepare students to develop a critical literacy in

order to assess the risks to their privacy and to encourage them to advocate for privacy

rights in digital spaces. Hutchinson and Novotny have applied feminist theory to a critical

digital literacy of wearable technology. They argue that since many of our students may

become future developers of these kinds of technologies, it has become imperative for

them to reflect on the ethics of reading and writing in digital ecologies and learn to

critique the values embedded within those systems. So, there is an obvious ethical

imperative to teach a critical literacy that attends to the surveillance culture students

(future developers or not) are already immersed in—a literacy that helps them to critique

systems of surveillance and properly assess the kinds of risks they are regularly exposed

to in a surveillance economy.

Gossip, Cancel Culture, and Future Risks

Throughout this dissertation, I have used a new materialist lens to examine what

is most at risk for humans, which seems to be their reputation. However, when new or

emerging technologies or cultural practices are critiqued, a common counterargument

comes usually in the form of, "Things have always been this way in one form or another.

So, there's nothing to really worry about." In some ways, this argument isn't wrong.

Information about reputation has always traveled and circulated through complex networks. We have, for instance, always had gossip. In her study of gossip in ancient Athens, Virginia Hunter points out that gossip has always "function[ed] as a means of social control, attempting, through its sanctions, to ensure conformity with those rules" (Hunter 96). People gossiped in public squares or the agora. In these settings Athenians chatted through a network of information that spread throughout the *polis* (98). The Attic lawsuits, according to Hunter, were riddled with scandal and name-calling intended to publicly destroy reputations: private matters aired out in public spaces. Living in small numbers, in concentrated out-of-doors life, "ancient Athens," Hunter writes, "was the model of a face-to-face society" (97). That is to say, gossip functioned within tight communities or the *deme*. Slaves were also known to maintain networks of gossip among each other. Aristophanes's the *Frogs*, for instance, features a slave who listens in on his master's conversations and spreads them outside the household, to humous effect. A phenomenon so prevalent, Hunter asks if privacy was even possible if slaves were in the household. In other words, talking about and reporting on each other's lives is nothing new.

Perhaps the most obvious analog to contemporary gossip networks might be the oft reported "cancel culture," a culture that many argue doesn't have a clear definition or that it doesn't even exist. That is, "canceling" isn't any different from the gossip networks in ancient Athens. Some gossip is true. Some of it is untrue. In either case, people suffer the consequences, rightly or wrongly, as people talk about and spread information about other people. In either case, most people who are "canceled" these days don't seem to stay that way for long. (It's worth pointing out that Socrates was, of

course, canceled badly.) However, I would argue that, whatever we call this phenomenon, the internet has given us not only a tool but a cultural greenlight to destroy or damage the reputations of people, famous or otherwise. Surveillance presents new and unique sets of challenges for people navigating online life because of the persistence of digitized artifacts. The axiom, "Google never forgets," seems apt here. While cancel culture typically seems to refer to famous people, everyday, non-famous people also have confrontations with cancel culture too, especially when their names are forever search-engine indexed to a given story, article, or image. Consider, for instance, 23-year-old medic, Lauren Kwei, who was doxed by the *New York Post* for selling her own nude photos on OnlyFans in order to make ends meet, a public shaming that risked her job (although it doesn't look like she lost it). Or consider Tyler Clementi, a Rutgers University student, who died by suicide after a video—secretly recorded by his roommate—of him having sex with another man was published online. Or Matt Colvin, an Amazon seller, who became famous from a *New York Times* article for inflating the price of hand sanitizer during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Colvin later faced doxing campaigns, harassment, and threats on his life. Subsequently, all the attention made it impossible for Colvin to earn money or acquire employment (Joseph). Many of the case studies covered throughout this dissertation should certainly attest to the power and permanence of online shaming.

Whether or not cancel culture is simply a rebranded old phenomenon, I'm not sure. What seems clear to me is the nature of how reputations and privacy are being rewritten by convergent technologies. More to the point, the internet is a storehouse of collective memory that, rather than atrophying our ability to remember, has made

memory more durable than ever. If we were ever afforded an amount of privacy through collective forgetting, that seems to be compromised. If we were ever afforded privacy through fixed spaces and times, that too seems to have gone by the wayside. In many cases, damages to reputation cannot be ameliorated by simply moving to a new town anymore. My Rate My Professor score is available to everyone, including students or acquaintances who want to see if I'm bad at my job. Clearview AI—a company developing facial recognition software for law enforcement agencies including the FBI and Department of Homeland Security—has received attention for its threat to privacy. According to tech reporter Kashmir Hill, Clearview AI has generated a database of more than three billion images culled (a method referred to as "scraping") from "Facebook, YouTube, Venmo and millions of other websites" (Hill). Essentially, users could take a photo of an individual, upload it onto the app and then the software will conduct an analysis of that face and then populate search results of all publicly available photos of that person along with links to where those photos appeared, decontextualizing and recontextualizing those images. Obscurity, it seems, is difficult to come by these days.

This new technological milieu begs us to ask critical questions about public life. In what way will people be disincentivized to participate in political action? To what degree are individuals *already* disincentivized to participate in the public debate because of the ignominy of dubious or virulent rhetorical velocities? Further, who would run for political office in this ecosystem? Perhaps only the shameless or those immune from public shame? The consequences of Clearview's venture in facial recognition remain, at this point, uncertain in the absence of any clear regulation. However, like a decades-old, digitized polaroid, there will be future technologies of recomposition that we can't

adequately anticipate or strategize for. However, we can reliably assume that, because

our bodies and our data can be and are frequently digitally appropriated, the status of our

bodies or identities as mineable, (re)inscribable texts remains an ever-tenuous one. Some

computer science ethicists, like Jaron Lanier, have suggested a move toward data

ownership, a concepted called *data dignity*, meaning that people should have the moral

right to all of our personal data. Lanier suggest a legally mandated system he calls a

Mediator of Individual Data (MID) that would essentially be an entity responsible for

keeping track of certain kinds of data and keeping track of individual data and what tech

companies owe those individuals for using and profiting from that data. He likens MIDs

to a cross between car insurance, a labor union, and a pension—a royalty might also be

an apt analogy (Lanier).

There will, however, always be risks to going out in public. Risk to reputation.

Risk of miscommunication. Risk of misappropriation. Risk of unknowable rhetorical

velocities. However, to avoid public engagement, too, carries its own risks (after all,

someone has to fight the good fight). Hopefully, this dissertation has offered useful

insight in reframing the risks of public participation and how we should negotiate our

relationship to public bodies and public discourse more generally. Perhaps even the value

of grace for those willing to venture out in public. Indeed, in our current information

ecosystem, our rhetorical velocities continue to be capricious and potentially dangerous.

However, as Derrida writes, perhaps the best we can do for the time being is "[c]alculate

the risks, yes, but [not to] shut the door on what cannot be calculated" (*Paper Machine*

67). Otherwise, we might never leave the house.

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