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Rejecting the Digital Utopia: An Analysis of How Technological Structures Allow Racial Harms to Persist Online

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Rejecting the Digital Utopia: An Analysis of How Technological Structures Allow Racial Harms to Persist Online

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Introduction

In his 1995 book titled *The Road Ahead*, Bill Gates claims that "one of the wonderful things about the information highway is that virtual equity is far easier to achieve than real-world equity."[1] Typical critique of this kind of idealism tends to address the material limitations that prevent people from getting online like a "high-end workstation, big bandwidth net connection, unlimited network time, and sophisticated software resources"[2] thus endangering any conception of an online utopia. However, I am more concerned with what would happen if we *were* able to get everyone online. Presuming that material wrongs and discriminatory behavior are easily solvable online allows for such harms to persist in both arenas. Further, Gates builds upon his previous point, insisting that since "we are all created equal in the virtual world, we can use this equality to help address some of the sociological problems that society has yet to solve in the physical world."[3] However, equity and equality are different concepts and require different remedial frameworks, poking holes in Gates' ideal.

Wendy Chun, Professor of Communication and Director of the SFU Digital Democracies Institute, casts Gates as an "unapologetic capitalist" who aimed to cash in on "mainstream desires for a quick and painless fix to the color line."[4] This is illustrated by the erasure of socioeconomic differences that would have had to be addressed before any conception of "virtual equity" was possible. While Gates was prophesizing a "racial utopia", the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) published a 1998 report on the material digital divide. Reportedly, 95.9% of white households had phones while only 86% of Black households had them. This division was more prevalent in

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[1] Bill Gates, Nathan Myhrvold, and Peter Rinearson, *The Road Ahead* (New York, New York: Viking Press, 1995), 258.
[2] Chris Toulouse and Timothy W. Luke, *The Politics of Cyberspace: A New Political Science Reader* (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 1998), 134.
[3] Gates, *The Road Ahead,* 258.
[4] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "Scenes of Empowerment," in *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (Cambridge , MA: MIT Press, 2008), 129.

low-income households (those bringing in less than $15,000) with 76.3% of Black households having phones compared to 90.3% of white ones. In reporting on personal computer (PC) ownership in 1994, white households were more than twice as likely to have PCs at 40.8% reporting ownership while 19.3% of Black households reported ownership.[5] Despite the prevalence of the digital divide, Gates was not the only one to profit on idealistic behavior as several telecommunications corporations propagandized the concept of an online "racial utopia" in their turn-of-the-century marketing strategies. One of which being telecom company MCI—which was acquired by Verizon in 2006. In 1997, MCI Communications released their "Anthem" commercial in which "variously 'raced' humans" were put on display to extol "the virtues of global communications networks."[6] Chun explains that corporations and their executive pundits used the digital divide to their advantage as they capitalized on "the disparity between potential and actual [technological] empowerment to insinuate themselves as 'the solution'."[7]

The extended version of MCI's "Anthem" advertisement is a minute long and is scripted as follows:

> People here communicate mind-to-mind.
> Not black to white.
> There are no genders.
> Not man to woman.
> There is no age.
> Not young to old
> There are no infirmities.
> Not short to tall.
> Or handsome to homely.
> Just thought to thought.
> Idea to idea.
> Uninfluenced by the rest of it.

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[5] James W. McConnaughey and Wendy Lader, "Falling Through the Net II: New Data on the Digital Divide," National Telecommunications and Information Administration (United States Department of Commerce, July 28, 1998), https://www.ntia.doc.gov/report/1998/falling-through-net-ii-new-data-digital-divide.
[6] Chun, *Control and Freedom,* 129.
[7] Chun, *Control and Freedom,* 147.

There are only minds.
What is this place?
Utopia?
No.
The Internet.
Where minds, doors, and lives open up.
It's a nice place, this place called the Internet.
Is this a great time or what?[8]

The post-racial rhetoric in the script is used to push MCI's narrative and position the company as a bridge to a utopian future. Further, the script is delivered by variously "marked" and/or "raced" people—an old man, a Black man, a mother, an Asian woman, a child in a wheelchair, a deaf child, etc.—in a thinly veiled effort to present MCI as a safe space for these people and people who look like them. In this paper, I challenge the idea of an online racial utopia. For Black people in particular, as the digital divide shrinks,[9] exploitation, commodification, and spectacularization will persist online as long as Blackness is seen as something to be consumed. As the Internet was put forth to be profitable, the evolution of the attention economy and online monetization encourages the appropriation of Black ideas, people, and culture. Thus, the Internet may not be a place for leisure or creation but instead, a contemporary manifestation and extension of the burdens Black people face offline.

The crux of this problem has its foundation in the United States' capitalist structure and approach to innovation. Before I begin to outline the harms caused by the Internet, I present a comparative analysis of France's Minitel and the US' invention of the Internet to help set the foundation for how capitalism, race, and technology are connected. From there, I will present a contemporary example of racial capitalism by analyzing how the popular search engine, Google, contributes to racial stereotyping.

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[8] *MCI's Anthem - Freedom from the Marked Body* (University of Southern California, 1997), https://scalar.usc.edu/works/restricted-access/mcis-anthem-1997---freedom-from-the-marked-body.
[9] Andrew Perrin, "Mobile Technology and Home Broadband 2021," Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech (Pew Research Center, June 3, 2021), https://www.pewresearch.org/Internet/2021/06/03/mobile-technology-and-home-broadband-2021/?utm_source=morning_brew.

The United States' innovative values are often connected to the overarching system of capitalism that rules our economic system. That is, competition within the market encourages companies to innovate new products and services to prevent being pushed out of the market. Thus, the innovation economy is puppeteered by profit incentives which impact how and why products are introduced to the public. Meanwhile, French innovation was less impacted by economic competition. Rather, France aimed to maintain cultural norms in their technologies. Heather Moulaison, professor at the University of Missouri Columbia, writes of France's Minitel, the "world's first popular online system."[10] This device was popular before the Internet was widely available and commercialized in the US. Prior to the Minitel rollout, France relied on a system of pneumatic tubes that "used bursts of air" to propel letters underground in order to meet information transfer demand.[11] Moulaison cites an unnamed French Professor's tendency to favor "promising penmanship" in choosing candidates for university programs to highlight the French value of "personal aspects of communication."[12] While this Professor taught during the 1960s and 70s, it points to the cultural differences between the US and France, as American Internet enthusiasts of the 1990s pushed narratives of racelessness, equality, and individual erasure. Further, in professional settings, "several French people admitted to not having confidence in information obtained by telephone because they had learned from experience that 'a response over the phone commits no one.'"[13] Meanwhile, in the US, conducting business online or via phone was preferred as it was considered "frictionless".[14]

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[10] H.L Moulaison, "The Minitel and France's Legacy of Democratic Information Access," *Government Information Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2004): pp. 99-107, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2003.11.003, 99.
[11] Ibid., 99.
[12] Ibid., 100.
[13] Ibid., 100.
[14] Erik Brynjolfsson and Michael D. Smith. "Frictionless Commerce? A Comparison of Internet and Conventional Retailers." *Management Science* 46, no. 4 (2000): 563–85. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2661602.

In 1983, the Minitel was introduced to the French market as a "as a small, rectangular box with a screen on the end that served as a miniature text-interface monitor."[15] Users were able to make online purchases via a small keyboard under the screen, use online services, and Minitel maintained the air of individuality that the French valued in communication. Notably, the French government had monopoly ownership over the phone utility company, French Telecom, which was the "sole distributor of both telephone and Minitel services."[16] Across the Atlantic, the Internet was entering its commercialization stage. In explaining why France was not quick to embrace the Internet, Moulaison says:

> The French are, after all, a people who tend to embrace new technologies. These new technologies, however, must provide a worthwhile service and be culturally compatible to be readily accepted. The communication advantages that were present with the pneumatic tubes and with the Minitel were lacking with the Internet. The structure and the history of the two online systems along with considerations based on the community that they were developed to serve has an important impact on the way each is perceived. The Internet sprang forth from American roots, and the entire system of communications grew out of an economic climate unique to America.[17]

Like France, early versions of the Internet were funded by the US government. Specifically, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), which is situated within the executive branch with the self-proclaimed mission of making "pivotal investments in breakthrough technologies for national security" funded initial projects.[18] Unlike the Minitel, the early Internet embodied a key technical idea: open architecture networking.[19] This approach meant that "the choice of any individual network technology was not dictated by a

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[15] Moulaison, *The Minitel,* 101.
[16] Ibid., 101.
[17] Ibid., 102.
[18] "About DARPA," Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, n.d., https://www.darpa.mil/about-us/about-darpa.
[19] Barry Leiner, Vinton Gerf, and David Clark, "Brief History of the Internet," Internet Society, 1997, https://www.internetsociety.org/internet/history-internet/brief-history-internet/.

particular network architecture but rather could be selected freely by a provider and made to interwork with the other networks through a meta-level 'Internetworking Architecture'."[20] Simply put, the technological infrastructure was made to be public rather than privately owned. Mintel, however, was a closed platform that only offered Mintel services. Further, "to set up a service on Minitel, you had to ask permission from France Telecom."[21] Critics of Minitel attributed this closed network to its demise as the owners of France Telecom were "old guys...who knew absolutely nothing about innovation."[22] Conversely, in the 1970s, DARPA issued contracts to Stanford, research and development company Bolt Beranek and Newman Inc. (BBN), and University College London (UCL) to innovate upon the early Internet technologies it had developed internally. In 1995, the Federal Networking Council (FNC) officially defined the term "Internet" to mark its evolution from the work of a "small band of dedicated researchers, to a commercial success with billions of dollars of annual investment."[23] By 1997, Minitel was retrospectively halfway through its lifecycle and was officially discontinued on June 30th, 2012.[24]

Since its inception, infrastructure provided by the Internet has led to creation of hallmark platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok. While varied commercial successes were born out of America's "unique" economic climate, our "unique" racial climate is equally catalytic. Our history of slavery and Jim Crow coupled with a refusal to confront this history appropriately has led to innumerable instances of structural racism. Contrary to what Bill Gates and MCI Communications would like us to believe, the Internet is not absolved from similar manifestations of racism.

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[20] Ibid.
[21] Hugh Schofield, "Minitel: The Rise and Fall of the France-Wide Web," BBC News (BBC, June 27, 2012), https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-18610692.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Leiner, *Brief History of the Internet.*
[24] Schofield, Minitel: The Rise and Fall.

Parent company of YouTube, Google, has been criticized for the way it straddles the intersection between race and profit. This intersection, racial capitalism, is the brainchild of University of California, Santa Barbara Black Studies and Political Science professor Cedric Robinson. It's defined as the "process of deriving social or economic value from the racial identity of another person."[25] In her book, *Algorithms of Oppression*, UCLA professor Safiya Umoja Noble narrates how an unsuspecting Google search for "black girls" returned a results page full of pornography.[26] Beyond the moral implications of pushing negative and harmful stereotypes about marginalized groups, Noble argues that some social media companies purposefully allow bigoted content in order to retain users and push advertisements to meet profit goals.[27] In the attention economy, "egregious and racist content, [which is] highly profitable, proliferates because many tech platforms are interested in attracting the interests and attention of the majority in the United States, not of racialized minorities,"[28] thus supporting the theory behind racial capitalism.

In addition to influencing profit motives, racial capitalism online affects how truths are formed. In justifying her critique of Google, Noble highlights how technological artifacts that exist in highly commercialized environments can lead us to accept the results as trustworthy and factual.[29] This may result from the seemingly depoliticized nature of the Internet where users implicitly expect to engage with trustworthy and/or factual information. Roland Barthes suggests that depoliticization involves depicting a conflict—or in this case an online search—as apolitical, neutral, "given", or natural.[30] Since Internet users expect search results to be neutral when searching something like "black girls", that presumption of neutrality translates to factuality in absence of a critical analysis of racial capitalism. Contra

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[25] Nancy Leong, "Racial Capitalism," *Harvard Law Review*, June 2013, pp. 2151-2226, 2153.
[26] Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2018), 17.
[27] Ibid., 57.
[28] Ibid., 58.
[29] Ibid., 24-25.
[30] Roland Barthes and Annette Lavers, *Mythologies* (London: Penguin, 2000), 142.

this "neutral" view of the Internet, Alex Halavis says such "assumptions are dangerously flawed; . . . unpacking the black box of the search engine is something of interest not only to technologists and marketers, but to anyone who wants to understand how we make sense of a newly networked world."[31] To illustrate the politicized nature of the Internet and to begin unpacking our "newly networked world", consider that a search for "black girls" that returns pornographic results, reflects a society in which black girls are unfairly hypersexualized.[32] Thus, the Internet reflects and reproduces the very type of racism that Gates and MCI claim is meant to be eliminated. In pursuit of understanding our new online world, it is crucial to adopt a critical framework and to reject idealist claims about digital spaces.

Personifying the Internet as something that can absolve us of racial and social inequalities unduly frees us from personal accountability and allows for the perpetuation of "offline" harms. This personification is what Marx calls Fetishism of the commodity. When this occurs, "the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race."[33] Thus, human production (the Internet) becomes detached from human biases. Although Marx used Fetishization to illustrate how capitalism obfuscates labor exploitation, this concept is also applicable to the way people and companies assign "mystical" attributes to the Internet. The Internet and its many platforms are built by humans for the use of humans—it is irrational to think human faults would not follow us online. Virginia Tech Sociology Professor Trevor Jamerson would agree, writing "digital technologies play a key role in the proliferation of a globalized economy where racially marginalized groups are clearly and systematically disadvantaged."[34]

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[31] Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression,* 25.
[32] Briana Toole, "Demarginalizing Standpoint Epistemology," *Episteme*, February 2020, pp. 1-19, https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2020.8.
[33] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, ed. Friedrich Engels (United Kingdom: Appleton & Company, 1889), 72.
[34] Guillaume Johnson et al., "Race, Markets, and Digital Technologies: Historical & Conceptual Frameworks," in *Race in the Marketplace: Crossing Critical Boundaries* (Springer, 2019), 40.

Jamerson offers helpful insight into the impact of racial capitalism, noting that from a capitalistic standpoint, race can be viewed from two perspectives: "The first is that racial difference, and the conflict resulting from it, is a threat to an efficient and smooth market system."[35] An example of this perspective is seen in economist Milton Friedman's book *Capitalism and Freedom*. In discussing fair employment practices in legislation, he says anti-discriminatory legislation and state interference disrupt the "the freedom of individuals to enter into voluntary contracts with one another."[36] That is, if a white employee does not want to work with a Black employee, the state should not be allowed to force a co-worker relationship between the two. Furthermore, Friedman says fair employment legislation does not affect the discriminatory behaviors it was aiming to control. To defend his stance, he poses the case of a grocery store in a racist white neighborhood. In this hypothetical, fair employment legislation requires the store to hire a Black clerk. The result, he explains, will be "to reduce the business done by this store and to impose losses on the owner. If the preference [of this community] is strong enough, it may even cause the store to close."[37] Connecting back to Jamerson's perspectival analysis, Friedman essentially argues that opposing racist attitudes (socially or legally) can affect a business' ability to participate efficiently in the market system. Thus, they have to cater to the "preferences" of their customer base to maintain profitability.

The second perspective that Jamerson introduces is that "racial difference is itself a space for capitalist expansion, especially in an era when information is a valuable commodity. Digital technologies participate in the market-driven regulation of racial difference because of their ability to convert experience into information."[38] Recall MCI's commercial from earlier. Considering the framework I laid out, MCI's campaign marks a

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[35] Ibid., 49.
[36] Robert Calvert, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 111.
[37] Ibid., 111.
[38] Johnson et al., "Race, Markets, and Digital Technologies". 49.

significant shift in the American approach to racism and racial capitalism. Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom* was published in 1962—two years before the Civil Rights Act of 1964—while MCI's commercial launched in 1997. This is not to say racism disappeared during the Civil Rights Era, but instead that its expression is changing. MCI's blatant placement of "marked" individuals in the aforementioned advertisement is off-putting as it is reminiscent of painfully obvious product placement one would see in a tv show, music video, or movie. Despite the goal of the company, Chun explains that the unease felt by the viewer may stem from knowing that the:

> Televisual representation of these raced others reduces these actors to mere markers of difference and displays them for 'our' benefit. The power behind 'no race, no genders, no age, no infirmities' stems from these raced, gendered, aged, and infirm persons.[39]

The understanding of racial capitalism offered by Jamerson's analysis suggests, wrongly I think, that these two perspectives exist simultaneously. However, I submit that the two have a linear relationship. That is, the first perspective is relative to a time in America where explicit racism was normalized and even encouraged. Nowadays, explicit racist ideas and behaviors result in public shaming and/or legal action, thus limiting the ways racist actors can express racism in the market. Therefore, being in the digital age, shifts in public opinion, and the internalization of racist attitudes require large corporations to position themselves within the second perspective to make money. One way this is achieved is through the perpetuation of colorblindness. Although analyzed in a socio-political context, Michelle Alexander develops this concept in *The New Jim Crow,* explaining:

> What has changed since the collapse of Jim Crow has less to do with the basic structure of our society than with the language we use to justify it. In the era of

[39] Chun, *Control and Freedom,* 134.

> colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. So we don't.[40]

Thus, the outcomes of racial discrimination do not change, instead, the causes are sugar-coated to disillusion the public.

Racial differences are weaponized by tech companies for capitalist accumulation while naturalizing a new kind of racism. Unlike the offline world, the language used to perpetuate racism in the online world is not limited to literal words or actions. Social media and other Internet platforms run on content creation and consumption, so any analysis of online racism requires a critical look at how social media algorithms prioritize or deprioritize content, how companies use the Internet to make money, and how we interact with content. These pillars can help us understand how the Internet corroborates existing biases to perpetuate online racism and anti-Blackness.

The goal of this paper is to highlight how the Internet perpetuates offline harms experienced by Black people. It is important to realize that racism is not and should not be limited to explicit and dyadic interactions. While explicit interactions are included under the umbrella of "racism", systemic racism and implicit bias are equally important and will be discussed at length. Moving forward, I employ a three-part approach to situate social media as a tool for racist outcomes. Chapter one is an analysis of how social media algorithms suppress POC-aligned content to maintain white fragility. Chapter two is a look into how companies and individuals commodify and exploit blackness to signal anti-racism on their social media platforms. Chapter three examines several cases of "memeification" to highlight how dehumanizing interactions with Black content lead to testimonial injustice and spectacularization.

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[40] "Excerpt from the Introduction," The New Jim Crow, n.d., https://newjimcrow.com/about/excerpt-from-the-introduction.

Chapter 1: Algorithms and Prioritization

Developing a critical analysis of racial capitalism requires understanding how and why profit-based incentives and commercial interests embedded within social media algorithms limit the ways Black people can upload on these platforms. In this chapter, I present a summary of a documentary to contextualize how popular social media platforms make money and how the attention economy came to be. From there, I analyze how big tech's use of algorithmic and third-party content moderation services contribute to the unfair policing of content uploaded by people of color. Further, I analyze several cases of targeted content moderation to illustrate how race-based or race-aligned content is used to maintain white fragility online.

In popular tech documentary *The Social Dilemma* (2020), multitudes of ex-big tech employees divulge the ways these companies make money. Of those interviewed, Tim Kendall, who was the Director of Monetization at Facebook for five years says his work led to Facebook adopting an advertising model to become profitable.[41] Tristan Harris, former Google design ethicist, is introduced in the documentary as the "closest thing Silicon Valley has to a conscience."[42] After leaving Google, he co-founded the Center for Humane Technology which has the mission of "reframe[ing] the insidious effects of persuasive technology, expos[ing] the runaway systems beneath, and deepen[ing] the capacity of global decision-makers and everyday leaders to take wise action."[43] Returning to the idea of monetization, Harris points out that platforms like Facebook, Google, and Twitter are free for users. Thus, "if you're not paying for the product, then you are the product."[44] Further, Harris says that tech companies generally have three main goals: to drive up your social media

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[41] *The Social Dilemma*, *Netflix*, 2020.
[42] Ibid.
[43] "About Us," Center for Humane Technology, accessed December 5, 2021, https://www.humanetech.com/.
[44] *The Social Dilemma.*

usage, to retain users and gain new ones, and to simultaneously make as much money as possible from advertising.[45] These are the pillars of an attention economy. Justin Rosentein, founder of software company Asana, echoes Harris saying "we're the product. Our attention is the product being sold to advertisers."[46] Jaron Lanier, author of *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Right Now,* pushes back against this notion claiming that it is too simplistic. Rather, the product is the "gradual, slight, imperceptible, change in your own behavior and perception… [resulting in changing] what you do, how you think, who you are."[47] Thus, to an advertiser, the difference between the perspectives put forth by Harris and Lanier is that the former merely means you *see* an ad and the latter means you *buy* from that ad. Coupling an attention economy with surveillance capitalism results in "the infinite tracking of everywhere everyone goes by large technology companies whose business model is to make sure that advertisers are as *successful as possible*."[48]

Mass data collection and predictive technology, or algorithms, are required for surveillance capitalism to be of benefit to advertisers. Rosenstein describes "massive" rooms at Google populated with "tons of computers… running extremely complicated programs, sending information back and forth between each other all the time."[49] He says some of this information can be considered algorithmic and some of it is so complicated that it could be considered artificial intelligence. Data scientist Cathy O'Neil tells the producers that:

> Algorithms are opinions embedded in code… and that algorithms are not objective. Algorithms are optimized to some definition of success. So, if you can imagine a commercial enterprise builds an algorithm to their definition of success, it's a commercial interest. It's usually profit.[50]

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[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.

Thus, the functionalities of platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok are rooted in and limited by how profitable they can be. Recall the three tech company goals Harris laid out: engagement, growth, and profit. Profit is dependent on being able to capture users and keep them online, therefore, requiring a near-constant stream of content to be uploaded. Video sharing site, YouTube, once bore the motto "Broadcast Yourself" to encourage use cases like:

> Unknown performers, filmmakers, and artists promot[ing] their work to a global audience and [rising] to worldwide fame; political candidates and elected officials interact[ing] with the public in new ways; first-hand reporting from war zones and from inside repressive regimes; and students of all ages and backgrounds audit[ing] classes at leading universities.[51]

However, encouraging content creation also requires content moderation or the practice of keeping dangerous and offensive content off of the platforms. In a review of Sarah Roberts' study on the content moderation industry, *The Guardian* journalist John Naughton predicts that Google and Facebook may be heading for "existential crisis."[52] As their business model depends on surveillance capitalism, they walk a fine line between maintaining a steady supply of uploaded content and managing content moderation. If the balance is not kept their brands risk becoming "polluted" causing users and advertisers to "desert their platforms."[53]

In her book, *Behind the Screen: Content Moderation in the Shadows of Social Media,* Sarah Roberts explores the lives and experiences of those employed in "commercial content moderation" (CCM) through compiling one-on-one interviews of CCM workers across the globe. Companies like Facebook and YouTube often hire third party content moderation

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[51] Zahavah Levine, "Broadcast Yourself," YouTube Blog (YouTube Official Blog, March 18, 2010), https://blog.youtube/news-and-events/broadcast-yourself/.
[52] John Naughton, "Behind the Screen Review – Inside the Social Media Sweatshops," The Guardian (The Guardian, August 18, 2019), https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/18/behind-the-screen-sarah-t-roberts-review.
[53] Ibid.

companies, like MegaTech (pseudonym for a multinational company), who then hire contractors to do the actual moderation. In a section of the book concerned with internal policy development, Roberts uses interviews from two CCMs at MegaTech to discern how content moderation biases manifest on the social media platforms. A subset of MegaTech's full-time employees, the Security and Policy (SecPol) group, are the ones creating policies about what kind of content is and is not allowed on their clients' platforms. Roberts explains that these policies are rarely available to the public to prevent creators from discovering loopholes. She also suggests that publishing these policies may bring light to the questionable values undergirding them. In an interview with Roberts, an employee named Josh explains that MegaTech CCMs are to "keep a global viewpoint when applying [the] policies. At least that's what they say. I feel like they are really grounded in American values…."[54] Roberts explains that since MegaTech is situated within the "specific and rarefied sociocultural context of educated, economically elite, politically libertarian, and racially monochromatic Silicon Valley… the firm's internal policies...tend to favor the perceived sensibilities of white people."[55] This illustrates how material conditions and human biases infect social media platforms and taint any possibility for an online world free from the same issues. Further these policies were prone to clash with the values of CCMs. An employee named Max explains:

> We had very specific internal policies that we would meet once a week with SecPol to discuss, there was one: blackface is not technically considered hate speech by default. Which always rubbed me the wrong way, so I had probably ten meltdowns about that.[56]

[54] Sarah T. Roberts, *Behind the Screen: Content Moderation in the Shadows of Social Media* (Yale University Press, 2019), 93.
[55] Roberts, *Behind the Screens*, 94.
[56] Roberts, *Behind the Screens,* 95.

Safiya Noble, for one, takes this as proof that not only are companies making active decisions about what kind of bigoted content they will allow, but also that any outward claims of protecting free speech or free expression are counterbalanced by profit motives.[57] Her claim that tech platforms are mostly interested in attracting "the interests and attention of the majority in the United States"[58] rather than racial minorities highlights one aspect of a troubling paradox.

If Noble is right about tech platforms' desire to cater to white Americans, there must be equal effort to keep them online *and* to prevent them from leaving the platform. Thus, if attracting and maintaining a white audience means moderation companies may overlook blackface content, it may also mean that content from non-white creators are policed as to not challenge whiteness or trigger white fragility. White fragility was coined by Robin DiAngelo in 2011 to describe the "disbelieving defensiveness that white people exhibit when their ideas about race and racism are challenged—and particularly when they feel implicated in white supremacy."[59] An example of this is when a white person claims they "don't see color" when confronted with issues of race. Online, this disbelief and/or defensiveness can take multiple forms as white people navigate the mechanisms provided by a social media platform. When it comes to content moderation, most platforms have external flagging systems (user-reporting) and internal or automated flagging systems (algorithms). On YouTube and Twitter, which primarily depend on Community Flagging,[60] non-white creators can be subjected to targeted harassment or mass reporting even if their content is not harmful. For instance, TikTok prohibits hate speech:

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[57] Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression,* 57.
[58] Ibid., 58.
[59] Katy Waldman, "A Sociologist Examines the 'White Fragility' That Prevents White Americans from Confronting Racism," The New Yorker, July 23, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/a-sociologist-examines-the-white-fragility-that-prevents-white-americans-from-confronting-racism.
[60] Sarah Whitcomb Laiola, "Book Review: Custodians of the Internet," *Media Industries*, no. 6.2 (2019): pp. 155-159, 157.

> We define hate speech or behavior as content that attacks, threatens, incites violence against, or otherwise dehumanizes an individual or a group on the basis of the following protected attributes:
>
> - Race
> - Ethnicity
> - National origin
> - Religion
> - Caste
> - Sexual orientation
> - Sex
> - Gender
> - Gender identity
> - Serious disease
> - Disability
> - Immigration status[61]

However, there are several published instances in which this prohibition is applied unequally. In August 2019, University of Oklahoma Professor and TikTok creator George Lee (@theconsciouslee) began sharing content with his 1.4 million followers about white supremacy and systemic racism. Eventually, his popular videos were mass reported, flagged, and taken down for "harassment and hate speech" while anti-Black "antagonists" left racist remarks in the comment sections of his other videos.[62] Here, one can presume that disapproving users and/or those exhibiting white fragility found Lee's content offensive and flagged it. While it is unclear whether videos are taken down by TikTok's algorithm or by a human moderator, empirical evidence can help provide an answer. When you report a video on TikTok, you get a notification saying "Thank you for helping us keep TikTok safe. You'll get a notification once we review your report." Obviously, the influx of reporting on Lee's

[61] "Community Guidelines: Hateful Behavior," TikTok, accessed 2021, https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines?lang=en#38.
[62] Ashlee Marie Preston, "Taking on Tech: Social Media's Anti-Blackness and Algorithmic Aggression in the Absence of Accountability," Forbes (Forbes Magazine, August 9, 2021), https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestheculture/2021/08/09/taking-on-tech-social-medias-anti-blackness-and-algorithmic-aggression-in-the-absence-of-accountability/?sh=35e56383c79c.

content put him on the moderation radar. If his video was taken down by an algorithmic review, the inclusion of easily identifiable raced words like “black” and “white” are likely what caused the removal. Suspecting this, Lee re-uploaded a video without mentioning “white supremacy” the caption but it was removed again for violating community guidelines, suggesting that a human moderator removed it for being unsavory rather than containing hate speech.

Lee’s content is popular—which is reflected by his large following. However, his content forces users of all races to confront how they contribute to systemic racism and/or white supremacy. DiAngelo’s definition of white fragility is meant to ethogram how white people respond when confronted with conflicting racial viewpoints. Instead of ignoring Lee’s content, muting him, or blocking him, disapproving users reported his videos as they felt personally attacked. The suppression of educational and testimonial videos regarding white supremacy and systemic racism delegitimizes TikTok as a free platform and positions it as one oriented for the white experience. Lee claims that ever since his content was initially mass-flagged, any mention of white supremacy results in his content being suppressed.[63] This method of suppression is called shadowbanning: an algorithmic practice that blocks or hides a user’s content without them being informed by the platform. Shadowbanning relies on artificial intelligence (AI) to identify, remove, and/or suppress prohibited content.[64]

Building upon the idea of shadowbanning, social media platforms have variations of internal flagging mechanisms that clearly illustrate the double standard of what is and what is not allowed online. For example, TikTok has internally run platforms to help their creators monetize their content. One is the Creator Marketplace, which aims to connect brands with

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[63] Ibid.
[64] Merlyna Lim and Ghadah Alrasheed, “Beyond a Technical Bug: Biased Algorithms and Moderation Are Censoring Activists on Social Media,” The Conversation, September 18, 2021, https://theconversation.com/beyond-a-technical-bug-biased-algorithms-and-moderation-are-censoring-activists-on-social-media-160669.

creators for paid campaigns. In a video posted on July 5, 2021, Black creator Ziggi Tyler demonstrates how the Marketplace algorithm allows the word “white” but not “black” when creators are applying for campaigns.[65] The interface of the Marketplace requires creators to type a bio before they can set an asking rate for whatever campaign they are applying for. This bio is algorithmically screened and if any unsavory language is detected, the creator cannot move forward in the campaign process. Tyler’s video begins with a screen recording of a short bio that he had written. He then adds “Supporting white supremacy” at the end. He is able to move forward to the asking rate screen without issue. Then, he changes the last sentence to “Supporting black lives matter” which prompts a pop-up from TikTok that says “To continue, remove any inappropriate content.” Tyler cycles through various phrases that include black: black people, black voices, black success, pro-black—which all prompt the inappropriate content warning. To exaggerate the disparity, he reverts to entering white phrases: white success, white voices, pro-white—which do not prompt a pop-up and allow him to continue to the next page. TikTok responded saying their algorithm is drawn to certain word pairings that might be harmful. Since Tyler's bio included the word “audience”, which contains the word “die”, the algorithm thought that “die” paired with phrases containing “black” may have been hate speech.[66] However, the white phrases could have constituted the same phrasing. This suggests that TikTok may prioritize protections against anti-Black hate speech rather than anti-white hate speech. However it resulted in the suppression of expression of a Black creator, illustrating how algorithms and social media platforms can harm the very people they aim to protect. While pro-Black content is policed, erroneously or

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[65] Tyler, Ziggi (@ziggityler). 2021."I’m going live in 30 minutes to answer questions. Y’all need to get this message out. Please." TikTok, July 5, 2021. https://www.tiktok.com/@ziggityler/video/6981541106118872325?lang=en&is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1.

[66] Abram Brown,“TikTok Influencer of Color Faced `Frustrating' Obstacle Trying to Add the Word 'Black' to His Creator Marketplace Bio,” Forbes (Forbes Magazine, July 9, 2021), https://www.forbes.com/sites/abrambrown/2021/07/07/tiktok-black-creators-creator-marketplace-black-lives-matter/?sh=24436d336d24.

not, bigoted and pro-white supremacist content manages to "slip through the cracks" of TikTok's community guidelines.[67]

TikTok is not alone in algorithmically targeting POC-aligned content. On May 5, 2021 activists supporting an awareness campaign for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) reported that their Instagram stories and highlights had disappeared from their accounts.[68] Although Instagram stories are meant to disappear in 24 hours, "highlighting" a story means the content should remain on the user's profile forever. Instagram issued a statement saying the removals were a "technical bug" but creators maintain that not all stories were affected,[69] only the MMIWG posts, suggesting algorithmic targeting. Similarly, Black Lives Matter activists accused Facebook of unfairly censoring their content for "violating community standards."[70] Facebook issued a statement calling this content removal an "enforcement mistake".[71]

While the aforementioned examples contain arguably political content, even non-political POC-aligned content is negatively affected by algorithmic bias. A study conducted by Cornell University and Qatar Computer Research Institute found that tweets written in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) are two times more likely to be flagged as offensive.[72] Depending on personal view, AAVE can be considered its own language or an English dialect.[73] Regardless, it was spoken amongst slaves and is commonly

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[67] Ciaran O'Connor, "Hatescape: An in-Depth Analysis of Extremism and Hate Speech on TikTok," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, August 24, 2021, https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/hatescape-an-in-depth-analysis-of-extremism-and-hate-speech-on-tiktok/.
[68] Merlyna and Alrasheed, "Beyond a Technical Bug".
[69] Ibid.
[70] Craig Silverman, "Black Lives Matter Activists Say They're Being Silenced by Facebook," BuzzFeed News (BuzzFeed News, June 22, 2020), https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/facebook-silencing-black-lives-matter-activists.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Thomas Davidson, Debasmita Bhattacharya, and Ingmar Weber, "Racial Bias in Hate Speech and Abusive Language Detection Datasets," arXiv (Cornell University, May 29, 2019), https://arxiv.org/abs/1905.12516.
[73] Taneesh Khera, "What Makes African American Vernacular English Distinct and Complex," Dictionary.com (Dictionary.com, February 21, 2021), https://www.dictionary.com/e/united-states-diversity-african-american-vernacular-english-aave/.

used by Black people today to express a range of emotions—not just anger. A separate study found that tweets containing AAVE are assigned higher "toxicity" scores (likely to be considered hate speech, abusive speech, or other offensive speech) than standard American English (SAE) and thus more likely to be automatically removed by Twitter.[74] Their methodology involved running a compilation of tweets, some containing AAVE and some containing SAE, through a publicly available toxicity detection tool called perspectiveAPI. Figure 1[75] illustrates how tweets with AAVE received higher toxicity scores from

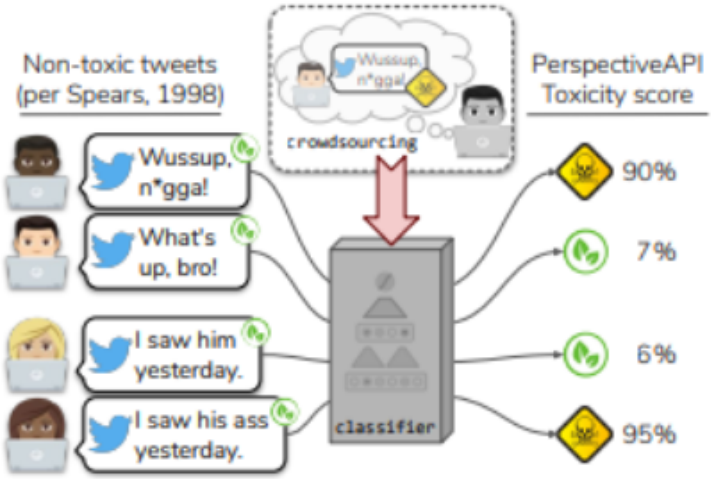

Figure 1

perspectiveAPI then non-AAVE tweets "despite their being understood as non-toxic by AAVE speakers."[76]

The instances of suppression and shadowingbanning I have outlined exemplify how the algorithmic protection of whiteness *and* Blackness result in limitation on what Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) can post online. For instance, anti-racism activist Louiza Douran calls the censorship of her BLM content a "heartbreaking catch-22" because despite the policing, she feels she has no choice but to continue using the platform.[77] Her

[74] Maarten Sap et al., "The Risk of Racial Bias in Hate Speech Detection" (University of Washington, 2019), https://homes.cs.washington.edu/~msap/pdfs/sap2019risk.pdf.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Craig Silverman, "Black Lives Matter Activists Say They're Being Silenced by Facebook," BuzzFeed News (BuzzFeed News, June 19, 2020), https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/facebook-silencing-black-lives-matter-activists.

experience is so identifiable that creators across platforms resort to creating their own digital slang to refer to racial topics to avoid algorithmic targeting. On Facebook, creators often type "wypipo" instead of "white people" to avoid being flagged.[78] On TikTok, younger creators type "yt" instead of "white" because they sound the same, but "yt" is hard to discern unless you know what to look for. Further, "yt" is considered shorthand for YouTube so it is less likely to be flagged. Popular creator Elisa (@promise_elisa), who is a Black woman, avoids written triggers altogether and resorts to pointing at her palm when speaking about white people. Since her palm is significantly lighter than her skin, her followers can deduce when she is slyly speaking about white people to avoid backlash from white fragilists or algorithmic targeting.

While this "secret language" is mostly used by content creators who understand how white fragility can manifest as suppression or harassment, not everyone is so lucky. A Pew Research Center survey revealed that one in four Black Americans faced online harassment because of their race or ethnicity.[79] One Black respondent recalled how talks of "police killings of unarmed black people turned into a full-on verbal assault with racial slurs being hurled at the people who opposed the police killings."[80] Ironically, when asked what is more important online: being able to speak freely or feeling welcome and safe, 48% of white respondents chose free speech compared to 31% of Black respondents. 68% of Black respondents said feeling safe was important online compared to 51% of white respondents.[81] Not only are Black Internet users more likely than white users to be harassed and/or witness

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[78] Jessica Guynn, "Facebook While Black: Users Call It Getting 'Zucked,' Say Talking about Racism Is Censored as Hate Speech," USA Today (Gannett Satellite Information Network, April 24, 2019), https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2019/04/24/facebook-while-black-zucked-users-say-they-get-blocked-racism-discussion/2859593002/.

[79] Maeve Duggan, "1 In 4 Black Americans Have Faced Online Harassment Because of Their Race, Ethnicity," Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, July 25, 2017), https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/07/25/1-in-4-black-americans-have-faced-online-harassment-because-of-their-race-or-ethnicity/.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid.

someone else being harassed, they are also more likely to become anxious that something similar may happen to them.[82]

Despite poll results that suggest white people favor being able to speak freely online, the harassment of black creators and suppression of race-related content illustrates that this is an exclusionary sentiment. White people who exhibit white fragility favor content that does not challenge their beliefs while rejecting content that implicates them in the systems that oppress people of color. Since social media platforms prioritize profit, their algorithms may prioritize "the interests and attention of the majority in the United States"[83]: non-Hispanic whites.[84] This is not to say all white people exhibit white fragility, but those who do are destructive and efficient. Thus, people of color who speak out against their oppression or about their experiences are villainized and policed by white fragilists and social media algorithms.

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[82] Ibid.
[83] Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression,* 58.
[84] Eric Jensen et al., "The Chance That Two People Chosen at Random Are of Different Race or Ethnicity Groups Has Increased since 2010," Census.gov (U.S. Census Bureau, August 12, 2021), https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/2020-united-states-population-more-racially-ethnically-diverse-than-2010.html.

Chapter 2: "Last Summer" and Risk Management

Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) investing is a facet of risk management meant to boost returns for investors. To determine the social impact of a company, ESG investors look closely at carbon emission rates, human rights and worker conditions, and corporate board diversity.[85] Consumers can also adopt similar approaches if there is enough social momentum (e.g.: boycotting a company while their line workers are on strike). While ESG standards are continuously evolving, board diversity has shot to the forefront of corporate priority in light of the unrest following George Floyd's murder in May of 2020. This approach to "diversity" often manifests as one or two people of marginalized identity in a room full of rich white guys. For instance, Nasdaq, the online global marketplace for buying and trading securities, proposed a rule on December 1, 2020 that, if adopted, would require all of their US listed companies:

> To publicly disclose consistent, transparent diversity statistics regarding their board of directors. Additionally, the rules would require most Nasdaq-listed companies to have, or explain why they do not have, at least two diverse directors, including one who self-identifies as female and one who self-identifies as either an underrepresented minority or LGBTQ+.[86]

Through highlighting the rush to prioritize diversity and anti-racism, I aim to show how performative activism puts Black people in positions to be further commodified in digital spaces. In this chapter I provide a brief summary of the social events that transpired following Floyd's death. I then present a comparative analysis between corporate responses to police

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[85] "Understanding ESG and ESG-Related Risks," Thomson Reuters, June 18, 2021, https://legal.thomsonreuters.com/en/insights/articles/risk-management-of-esg-factors.
[86] "Nasdaq to Advance Diversity through New Proposed Listing Requirements," Nasdaq, December 1, 2020, https://www.nasdaq.com/press-release/nasdaq-to-advance-diversity-through-new-proposed-listing-requirements-2020-12-01.

violence in 2014 versus 2020. From there I argue that social pressure and commercial interests are what inspired corporate activism and not genuine anti-racist principles. Thus, companies that align themselves with anti-racism to make money will never be truly anti-racist because their actions result in the commodification of Blackness. This commodification is seen in performative activist trends like awareness campaigning, financial contribution, and representative diversity. In this chapter, I also outline how the harms that accompany these performative actions manifest online.

In the months following Floyd's death, this panic to appear "diverse" was exhibited by individuals, small businesses, Wall Street firms, and tech conglomerates alike. Since social media provides a lot of reach, companies used their online platforms to release anti-racist statements, donate to racial justice organizations, launch pro-Black partnerships, and announce grants for POC-owned businesses. Considering the frequency of high profile policing killings, why was Floyd's death the one to cause companies to suddenly embrace anti-racism?

For one, Floyd's arrest was recorded by a bystander and went viral on Facebook. The teen who filmed the arrest, Darnella Frasier, was awarded a journalism Pulitzer Prize as the "video spurred protests against police brutality around the world, highlighting the crucial role of citizens in journalists' quest for truth and justice."[87] Second, Floyd's death and the accessibility of Frasier's video sparked a level of protesting in the US not seen since the Civil Rights Era. Between May 26 (one day after Floyd's death) and August 22 there were 7,750 demonstrations linked to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement across more than 2,440 locations in all 50 states and Washington, DC.[88] There was also international support with

[87] "Teen Who Filmed George Floyd's Murder given Journalism Award," BBC News (BBC, June 11, 2020), https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57449229.
[88] Roudabeh Kishi and Sam Jones, "Demonstrations & Political Violence in America: New Data for Summer 2020," ACLED Bringing Clarity to Crisis, September 2020, https://acleddata.com/2020/09/03/demonstrations-political-violence-in-america-new-data-for-summer-2020/.

protests erupting in England, Switzerland, Brazil, Italy, Spain, Scotland, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal, Australia, France, Wales, Germany, South Africa, South Korea, Kosovo, Tunisia, Japan, Bulgaria, and Ireland.[89] While other high profile killings that occurred earlier in the year (Sean Reed, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery) added fuel to the protesting, none elicited the response seen following Floyd's murder.

In addition to protesting there was a call for corporate accountability among consumers. During this time, polling revealed that 60% of Americans said that they would buy or boycott a brand based on how it responded to the protesting.[90] Companies who were exposed for having racist workplaces or not supporting Black Lives Matter were boycotted or lambasted online. The message to companies was "if you want to profit from Black dollars you need to support Black lives". Championing this message, groups Boycott for Black Lives and Boycott the Silent Ones used their social media platforms to circulate lists of companies for people to hold accountable or boycott altogether.[91] This resulted in a flurry of online posts, statements, and other performative trends as corporations fought to one-up each other and protect their reputations. Performative activism or "slacktivism" is characterized by a desire to increase social capital rather than being devoted to a cause. Performative activism is fairly transparent since most Americans who witnessed the shift in corporate response felt that the statements came from feelings of social pressure rather than from a genuine concern

[89] "Protests across the Globe after George Floyd's Death," CNN (Cable News Network, June 13, 2020), https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/06/world/gallery/intl-george-floyd-protests/index.html.
[90] Consulting.us, "Most Americans Expect Brands to Take Stand on Racism," Consulting.us (Consulting.us, June 11, 2020), https://www.consulting.us/news/4350/most-americans-expect-brands-to-take-stand-on-racism.
[91] Coral Murphy Marcos, "'Boycott for Black Lives': People Plan to Stop Spending in Companies That Don't Support BLM," USA Today (Gannett Satellite Information Network, June 18, 2020), https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2020/06/18/boycotts-people-plan-stop-spending-stores-dont-support-blm/3208170001/.

about Black people.[92] However, considering the sheer volume of protesting and calls for accountability, it makes sense that corporations may have felt pressure to appear anti-racist.

Comparing 2014 responses to police misconduct and 2020 responses from Facebook, Google, and Twitter illustrates how the social conditions created following Floyd's death led them to adopt anti-racism as a measure of risk management. For context, protesting in Ferguson began following the acquittal of the officer who shot unarmed Michael Brown[93] and the release of a federal report that found widespread racial bias within the Ferguson police department.[94] In 2014, Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg was asked about "social media's role in helping strengthen communities in the wake of Ferguson and other protests against the use of excessive police force" during a town hall.[95] Zuckerberg replied saying Facebook, which also owns Instagram, does two things: gives everyone a voice and provides greater diversity of perspectives.[96] Aside from a 2-minute video of him answering this question and the 172-word accompanying caption, there are no other public statements or press releases from Facebook regarding anti-racism or racial justice following the death of Michael Brown and the resulting protests. In contrast, seven days after Floyd's death, Zuckerberg committed Facebook to giving an "additional $10 million to groups working on racial justice."[97] He also

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[92] Monica Anderson and Colleen McClain, "Americans See Pressure, Rather than Genuine Concern, as Big Factor in Company Statements about Racism," Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, August 12, 2020), https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/12/americans-see-pressure-rather-than-genuine-concern-as-big-factor-in-company-statements-about-racism/.

[93] "Ferguson Unrest: From Shooting to Nationwide Protests," BBC News (BBC, August 10, 2015), https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-30193354.

[94] "Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department - Justice.gov," Justice (United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, March 4, 2015), https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/ferguson_police_department_report.pdf?te=1&nl=jamelle-bouie&emc=edit_jbo_20200529.

[95] Jay Peters, "Big Tech Companies Are Responding to George Floyd in a Way They Never Did for Michael Brown," The Verge (The Verge, June 12, 2020), https://www.theverge.com/2020/6/5/21281017/amazon-apple-facebook-response-george-floyd-michael-brown-tech-companies-google.

[96] Mark Zuckerberg. 2014. "As the debate continues about Ferguson and the tragic death of Eric Garner, I'm often asked what role social media plays in strengthening communities." Facebook, December 17, 2014. https://www.facebook.com/zuck/videos/10101795326967161.

[97] Mark Zuckerberg. 2020. "The pain of the last week reminds us of how far our country has to go to give every person the freedom to live with dignity and peace." Facebook, May 31, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/10111969612272851.

shared that he and his wife's philanthropic organization, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, invests around $40 million annually in racial justice organizations.[98] Google made similar commitments, donating $12 million to "organizations working to address racial inequities."[99] YouTube, which is owned by Google, announced a $100 million fund "dedicated to amplifying and developing the voices of Black creators and artists and their stories."[100] Google CEO, Sundar Pichai emphasized that this latest round of donations built upon the $32 million Google has donated to "racial justice" since 2015. Based on this, Google donated almost double during 2020 than they had, on average, in the past 5 years. Google did not make any public statements or donations in response to the Ferguson protests in 2014.[101] Ex-Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey (who was executive chairman at the time) participated in the Ferguson protests in addition to using his personal Twitter account (@jack) to tweet with the hashtag #HandsUpDontShoot.[102] Following Floyd's death, Dorsey continued to use his personal Twitter account to call for "police policy reform now."[103] In addition to encouraging allyship, Twitter donated $250,000 to the Equal Justice Initiative and the National Association of Black Journalists and matched employee donations up to $1 million.[104]

While 2020 corporate responses were characterized by large financial contributions, alignment with the Black Lives Matter movement, and alleged dedications to the betterment of people of color, corporate "activism" will always be performative as a company's main

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[98] Ibid.
[99] Sundar Pichai, "Standing with the Black Community," Google (Google, June 3, 2020), https://www.blog.google/inside-google/company-announcements/standing-with-black-community/.
[100] Susan Wojcicki, "Susan Wojcicki: My Mid-Year Update to the YouTube Community," YouTube Blog (YouTube Official Blog, June 11, 2020), https://blog.youtube/inside-youtube/susan-wojcicki-my-mid-year-update-youtube-community/.
[101] Peters, "Big Tech Companies are Responding".
[102] Jack Dorsey (@jack). 2014. "Feels good to be home. I'll be standing with everyone in Ferguson all weekend #HandsUpDontShoot". Twitter, August 15 2014, 7:37 p.m., https://twitter.com/jack/status/500471497539190784.
[103] Jack Dorsey (@jack). 2020. "Police policy reform now." Twitter, June 1, 2020, 6:00 p.m. https://twitter.com/jack/status/1267621973300875265.
[104] Twitter For Good (@TwitterForGood). 2020. "We're committed to continuing our support for #BlackLivesMatter and organizations fighting for racial equality and justice." Twitter, June 12, 2020, 4:21 p.m. https://twitter.com/TwitterForGood/status/1271583326139277313.

concern is profit. Since alignment with anti-racist organizations and/or Black Lives Matter was almost necessary to avoid the wrath of a newly "anti-racist" customer base, most company activism was a part of social exchange and thus performative. Google search trends from the summer of 2020 indicate a collective shift within the general populace with regard to racial justice. For instance, Figure 2 shows that since the beginning of 2014, the term "anti-racist" was searched more times during June of 2020 than at any other time in the US.[105] Anti-racism is a political philosophy that adopts a range of ideas with the aim of opposing racial injustice and promoting racial tolerance. People searching for "anti-racist" also searched for *This Book Is Anti-Racist: 20 Lessons on how to Wake Up, Take Action, and Do the Work* by Tiffany Jewell and *So You Want to Talk About Race* by Ijeoma Oluo among other

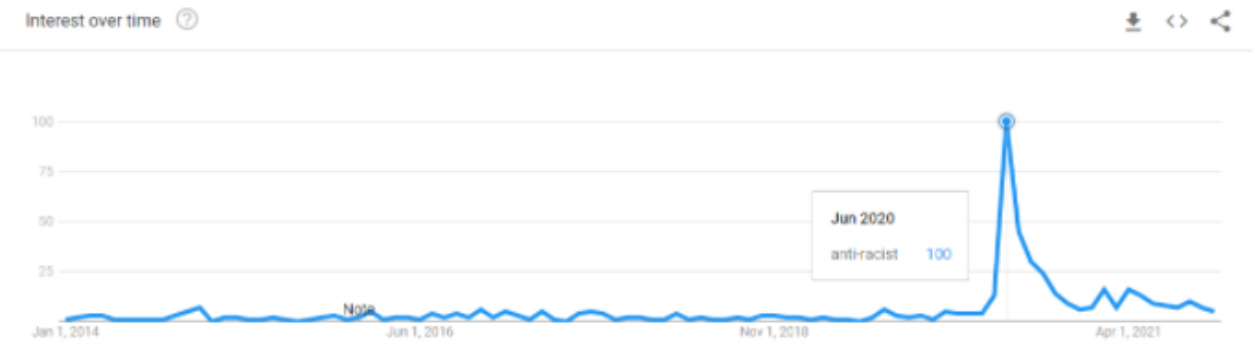

Figure 2

topics.[106]

Given that calls for corporate accountability and threat to profitability are likely what influenced these actions, Law Professor Nancy Leong Leong's proxy framework helps to illustrate how the exchange between various companies and the public contributed to the commodification of Blackness. In this exchange, companies positioned themselves as anti-racist to give consumers peace of mind and relieve them of the guilt associated with supporting a racist company. In return, consumers gave companies money and/or positive

[105] "Searches for 'Anti-Racist,'" Google trends (Google), accessed November 2021, https://trends.google.com/trends/?geo=US.
[106] Ibid.

reinforcement through the purchase of goods and services and online engagement. Thus, at the crux of this exchange is the commodification of Blackness and the BLM movement.

Despite one's individual commitment to anti-racism, pressuring companies to do the same will have warped outcomes due to their commercial interests. As soon as boycotting in support of Black Lives Matter became a legitimate threat to corporations' bottom lines, the authenticity and genuineness of their "statements" were lost. Leong suggests that the shift in corporate response that I outlined prior is a type of virtue signaling. She says that "acquiring certain affiliations [can] become a way of signaling status to those with whom one wishes to engage in some way."[107] She then gives the example of white person who engages in an exchange with a non-white person to gain a "status of nonracist...by signaling those attributes through affiliation."[108] Consider a white person accused of being racist who defends their character by claiming "they have Black friends". The logic of this defense is that a Black person would not be friends with a racist person. Thus, this affiliation signals the "anti-racist" intentions of said white person without requiring an in-depth investigation of their innermost thoughts and beliefs. However, just as a misogynist can enter a relationship with a woman and a slave master can "be nice" to his slave, having Black friends does not automatically make someone anti-racist. Instead, referencing a surface level relationship serves as a "proxy for making independent judgements" and reduces the need for others to take a critical look at the relationship.[109] And this is exactly what performative activism does. A company that uploads an anti-racist post or issues an empty statement, enables other performative activists and/or consumers to add that company to their "is anti-racist" list without much of a second thought. More importantly, this oversight does not result in true accountability for the racist

[107] Leong, *Racial Capitalism,* 2179.
[108] Ibid., 2179.
[109] Ibid., 2179.

person, or in this case the corporation, and allows harms to persist within the limits of their "anti-racist" facade.

During the summer of 2020, companies positioned themselves as anti-racist in three ways: awareness campaigning, financial contributions, and/or representative diversification. Of the three, a financial contribution is the least harmful because the exchange has three actors rather than two. For example, when Facebook donated $10 million to racial justice organizations in 2020 and then posted about it,[110] organizations dedicated to legitimate activism and communities in need got support, Facebook got to position itself as anti-racist corporation, and the public got to perceive the company as anti-racist. Although not the only organization to receive donations, NAACP's Legal Defense and Educational Fund President Sherrilyn Ifill shared that "the most valuable gift over the past year has been the increase in pro bono support" which enabled the NAACP to "litigate and advocate with greater intensity, and to increase the pace of [their] work."[111] Thus, financial contributions allow for the least harm within performative activism because it is offset by funding legitimate activism. For this reason, I will focus on the other two exhibited anti-racist proxies, awareness campaigns and representative diversification, for the rest of this chapter. Awareness campaigning and representative diversification are significantly more harmful because they commodify Blackness and do not support legitimate activism.

Commodification is the act of taking something's original form and transforming it into an object of trade and capital.[112] In developing this concept of commodification, I borrow several definitions and applications from Ross Haenfler's *Subcultures: The Basics*. Positioning the Black Lives Matter movement and anti-racism as subcultures can help us

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[110] "The pain of the last week.", Facebook, May 31, 2020.
[111] Yume Murphy, "One Year after #BlackoutTuesday, What Have Companies Really Done for Racial Justice?," Vox (Vox, June 2, 2021), https://www.vox.com/the-goods/22463723/blackout-tuesday-blm-sephora-starbucks-nike-glossier.
[112] Ross Haenfler, "Subcultures and Sociology," Commodification (Grinnell College), accessed November 2021, https://haenfler.sites.grinnell.edu/subcultural-theory-and-theorists/commodification/.

understand how Blackness becomes commodified. A subculture is a cultural group within a larger one that often has differing beliefs or interests. Unlike material commodities like phones or clothing, analyzing the commodification of identity requires considering a multitude of expressions and attitudes that contribute to the subculture. This is not to say that all Black people support BLM or consider themselves anti-racist, instead, the dominant group (non-Blacks) conflate Blackness with BLM and anti-racism. Within subcultural theory, commodification occurs most often in regard to "things that identify a subculture visually, such as clothing and symbols, but also takes advantage of the [related] ideologies."[113] Further, there are two types of commodification: diffusion and defusion. Diffusive commodification is the process "of spreading styles, ideas, values, and norms into a wider society" while defusive commodification is the process of "depoliticizing or 'watering down' the values, meanings, ideals, and subversive potential of a group."[114] Keep in mind that companies that participate in these types of commodification aim to take aspects of a subculture, market them, and then profit. In this case, think of "profiting" as a two step process. Instead of selling a product, companies engaging in performative activism sell an image of themselves that allows them to profit from a shifting consumer base.

Awareness campaigning—the act of raising awareness for a specific topic, group, or event—contains aspects of both diffusive and defusive commodification. Posting online or resharing someone else's work may reach "wider society", thus raising awareness, but the act is often shallow and meaningless when compared to the greater movement or alternative methods of activism. Thus, watering down the work of activists and confining the movement to a pixelated cage. Since awareness campaigning is as easy as clicking "reshare", droves of performative activists looking for a simple anti-racist proxy can drown out the voices of legitimate activists through their actions. One of the most undeniable instances of

[113] Ibid.
[114] Ibid.

performative awareness campaigning occurred on June 2, 2020 as "Blackout Tuesday". It was originally named the #TheShowMustBePaused initiative and was created by two Black female music executives with the goal of disrupting "the long-standing racism and inequality" in the music industry. What started as a clever and industry-specific call for "honest, reflective, and productive conversations" while refraining from posting online,[115] was quickly co-opted by individuals and corporations searching for an easy way to signal their "anti-racism". More than 950 brands worldwide participated in Blackout Tuesday and 188,000 unique Instagram accounts referenced the hashtag on June 2, 2020. Participation entailed posting a black square (and nothing else) for that day with whatever caption the user chose. Regardless of the caption, most users included #blm and #blacklivesmatter, flooding each hashtag page with black squares. By the end of the day, activists noticed that the Blackout day posts were pushing actual and helpful content to the bottom of the search results. Hashtags compile posts from millions of users into one location for easy access. This trend made valuable resources and contributions to the Black Lives Matter movement like "where to protest and donate, as well as video evidence of police brutality" generally inaccessible.[116] Organizer Feminsta Jones recounted that "it took [#blacklivesmatter] seven years to get 11.9 million posts, and within seven hours, there were already a million more of them, mostly black boxes."[117] Posting a black square online was a disgustingly simple way to signal anti-racism at a time when most people and companies wanted to be an "ally".

While taking part in the Blackout Tuesday trend was questionable, Grinnell University Professor Ross Haenfler clarifies that the commodification does not take place in a

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[115] Jamila Thomas and Brianna Agyemang, "About #TheshowMustBePaused," #TheShowMustBePaused, accessed November 2021, https://www.theshowmustbepaused.com/about.
[116] Rebecca Jennings, "Who Are the Black Squares and Cutesy Illustrations Really for?," Vox (Vox, June 3, 2020), https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2020/6/3/21279336/blackout-tuesday-black-lives-matter-instagram-performative-allyship.
[117] Ibid.

vacuum. Consumers "have to accept the object or identity [that is being commodified] for the process to be successful."[118] That is, even though companies were heavily involved in commodification via Blackout Tuesday posting, the public implicated themselves in the exchange by validating the posts. There were 11.8 million Instagram engagements (likes, views, comments, shares, follows) for brands who used #blackouttuesday, #blm, and #blacklivesmatter.[119] The consumer and media brands that drew the most engagement/interactions were Complex Magazine (804,000+), Liverpool F.C. (566,000+), E! Entertainment Television (484,000+), FaZe Clan (392,000+) and Ninja (298,000+) as of June 5, 2020;[120] thus, reflecting the success of each company or brand's anti-racist proxy.

Outside of corporate performative activism, the individuals were (and still are) quick to engage with the online work of small activists to oblige their own conceptions of what allyship means. Like the Blackout Tuesday trend, the sheer volume of individualistic and performative behavior results in harms like dehumanization and epistemic exploitation, which will be discussed shortly. However, unlike the exchange between the corporation and individual, the exchange between the educator and the student is much less balanced. The activist who educates their followers about racial injustice through "critical caption essays",[121] or posts primarily for educational purposes, receives little in the short term while the person wishing to learn about allyship and activism gains access to the activist and their work as a resource (often for free). Around the time there were calls for corporate accountability, there were also calls for individuals to "diversify their feeds" in order to better educate themselves. That is, follow less dog accounts and celebrities and follow more activists and non-white creators online.

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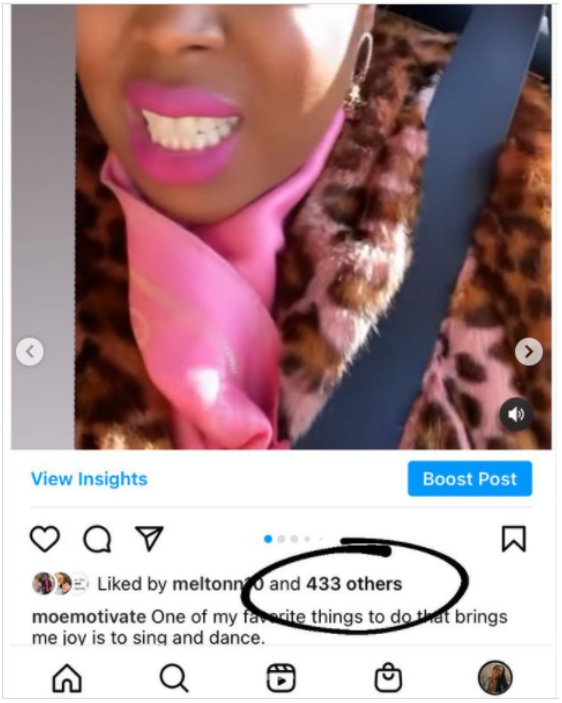
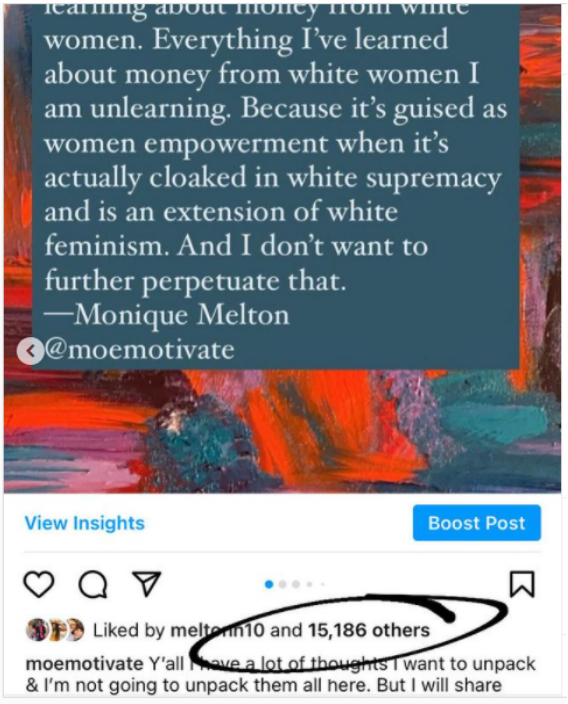
[118] Haenfler, Commodification.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Williams, Amanda (@idealblackfemale). 2021. Instagram account, November 2021. https://www.instagram.com/idealblackfemale/.

But that behavior is what leads to a kind of exploitation that is undertheorized. Consider Black author Monique Melton's recent Instagram post (@moemotivate) criticizing her 293,000 followers about their tendency to use her as an "anti-racism mammy".[122] A mammy is a racist caricature for Black women that nannied during the Jim Crow era and were depicted as "devoted" to the white children they looked after. While this phrasing likely went over the heads of the audience Melton was addressing, she presumably felt she was being epistemically exploited. Epistemic exploitation, coined by Nora Berenstain, is when "privileged persons compel marginalized persons to produce an education or explanation about the nature of the oppression they face."[123] Melton is a Black entrepreneur and activist who's Instagram bio reads "pursuing Black liberation by reclaiming our humanity & living authentically."[124] Many of her educational or anti-racist posts are addressed to white people directly: encouraging them to unlearn racist things from childhood, calling out their "pseudo white awakening" during the summer of 2020, sharing how white supremacy shapes motherhood, etc. As she believes reclaiming her humanity is an aspect of anti-racism and Black liberation, she conducted a small experiment to illustrate that her followers dehumanize her more than anything else. On November 23, 2021, Melton posted an Instagram carousel with a video of her singing in her car as the first slide. The caption read "One of my favorite things to do that brings me joy is to sing and dance."[125] Since Instagram allows for users to post more than one photo at once in a carousel or slideshow, users must swipe to see all of the content. She purposely put non-anti-racist content first and hid anti-racist content on the subsequent slides to see if people would swipe/engage with the content. She then points to the difference in engagement between the singing video and her

[122] Melton, Monique (@moemotivate). 2021. Instagram photo, November 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CWITKy-DC6k/.
[123] Nora Berenstain, "Epistemic Exploitation," *Ergo, an Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 3, no. 22 (2016): pp. 569-590, https://doi.org/10.3998/ergo.12405314.0003.022, 570.
[124] Melton, Monique (@moemotivate). 2021. Instagram bio, November 2021. https://www.instagram.com/moemotivate/.
[125] Melton, Monique. Instagram photo, November 2021.

typical critical caption essay as proof that people would rather use her as a resource for learning about the struggles Black women face than see her as a dynamic human being. As seen in the photos below, the happy car video garnered 434 likes while her most popular critical caption essays typically receive between 15,000 and 25,000 likes.[126] Melton shares





that she went from 17,000 to 225,000 followers in one week during the time when people were "diversifying their feeds". Melton attributes this increase in followers to the drastic difference in engagement that occurs whenever she posts about "Black joy or anything about [her] as a person."[127] Berenstain shares that staple of epistemic exploitation is that:

> It maintains structures of oppression by centering the needs and desires of dominant groups and exploiting the emotional and cognitive labor of members of marginalized groups who are required to do the unpaid and often unacknowledged work of providing information, resources, and evidence of oppression to privileged persons who demand it.[128]

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[126] Ibid.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Berenstain, *Epistemic Exploitation,* 570.

Melton echoes this, sharing that this kind of exploitation happens to many other Black online educators and activists:

> Folks are so committed to commodifying us and seeing us only as a tool that when we aren't teaching or talking about racism then folks see no value in us. White folks are so deeply socialized to engage with Black folks in a relationship of seeing us as being of service to them and seeing us as a resource for their enlightenment, entertainment, and education…Dehumanization is normalized and it's all [they] choose to know.[129]

Recall my assertion that anti-racist proxies do not result in true accountabilty but instead allows for harms to persist within that facade. Melton shared a response from one of her presumably white followers who apologized for "overlooking other parts of what [Melton] shares and only paying attention to the content [she] thought benefitted [her]."[130] The engagement with Melton's anti-racist content may appear to be a genuine dedication to allyship and self-education however there is evidence of exploitation of her labor and the resulting dehumanization. While there are numerous algorithmic factors that can result in low engagement, the engagement differences are consistent. Further, Berenstain's analysis suggests that epistemic exploitation is often considered a necessary and even virtuous form of intellectual engagement.[131] However, the situatedness of Melton as a marginalized knower in comparison to her primarily white audience illustrates the unjust burden for Black people to educate their oppressors.

The third type of anti-racist proxy, representative diversification, is a corporate initiative to diversify the employee base. For instance, Nordstrom released a statement committing to "increasing representation of Black and Latinx populations" in management

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[129] Melton, Monique. Instagram photo, November 2021.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Berenstain, *Epistemic Exploitation,* 570.

roles by 2025.[132] On a similar note, in October 2020 Starbucks outlined a five-year plan to have "people of color represented in at least 30% of roles in corporate operations and 40% of retail and manufacturing roles" and tied the success of these goals to executive pay.[133] Leong says this conception of diversity begins, and often ends, with "increasing the number of nonwhite people within a group or institution."[134] While some may not see issue with this, Leong introduces the concept of thin diversity to explain why solely focusing on numerical diversity can be harmful:

> The first iteration — what I will call the "thin" version of the diversity objective — emphasizes numbers and appearances. That is, it is exclusively concerned with improving the superficial appearance of diversity. The second iteration — what I will call the "thick" version of the diversity objective — is not focused on the appearance of diversity, but rather views diversity as a prerequisite to cross-racial interaction, which fosters inclusivity and improves cross-racial relationships, thereby benefiting institutions and individuals of all races.[135]

In line with the MCI commercial from chapter 1, including people by virtue of them being non-white not only underpins the reality of their discrimination but also reinforces the structures that contribute to their discrimination. Thick diversity is clearly the better choice because there is a dedication to balancing the labor of anti-racism and cross-racial relationship building. On the other hand, thin diversity just *looks* good. A common theme across the different types of performative activism is ease and marketability. As the thin

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[132] Pete Nordstrom and Erik Nordstrom, "Black Lives Matter - What We've Heard & What We're Doing," Nordstrom Now (Nordstrom), accessed November 2021, https://press.nordstrom.com/news-releases/news-release-details/black-lives-matter-what-weve-heard-what-were-doing.
[133] Paul Roberts, "Starbucks Sets Ambitious Goals for Corporate Diversity - and Ties It to Executive Pay," The Seattle Times (The Seattle Times Company, October 14, 2020), https://www.seattletimes.com/business/starbucks/starbucks-sets-ambitious-goals-for-corporate-diversity-and-ties-it-to-executive-pay/.
[134] Leong, *Racial Capitalism,* 2169.
[135] Ibid., 2169.

version of diversity is significantly easier to accomplish and advertise than the thick version, that is what most companies adopt. Even if the senior management or employee base is not statistically diverse, simply including non-white people in marketing materials or in social media posts is a way to signal diversity to the public. Thus, Leong suggests, nonwhiteness acquires "a unique value because, in many contexts, the presence of the prized characteristic of diversity"[136] even if those nonwhite people are suffering.

Unsurprisingly, representative diversity is the manifestation of thin diversity. Further, this causes harm because white people and white institutions are the ones to determine the value of diversity. Thus, POC are subjected to the whims of whatever kind of diversity fits the agenda at the moment. Leong says that because nonwhiteness is "valued in terms of what it adds to white people's experiences or endeavors, white people determine what nonwhiteness is worth."[137] Take for instance a university that employs affirmative action initiatives yet has an overrepresentation of Asians within their student body. Because of this, they choose to reduce admissions for Asians. In the 80s, top schools like Brown University, Harvard, and Berkley admitted to reducing Asian admissions in favor of "underrepresented talents" (Black and brown students).[138] This is not necessarily an argument against affirmative action, but an illustration of how white people and white institution decide when and how to value nonwhiteness. On a similar note, Leong says that "even when white people and predominantly white institutions highly value nonwhiteness, they retain control over the assignment of value and may increase or diminish that value at will."[139] Thus, even though there may be a push to hire and admit Black and brown talent right now, that is likely to

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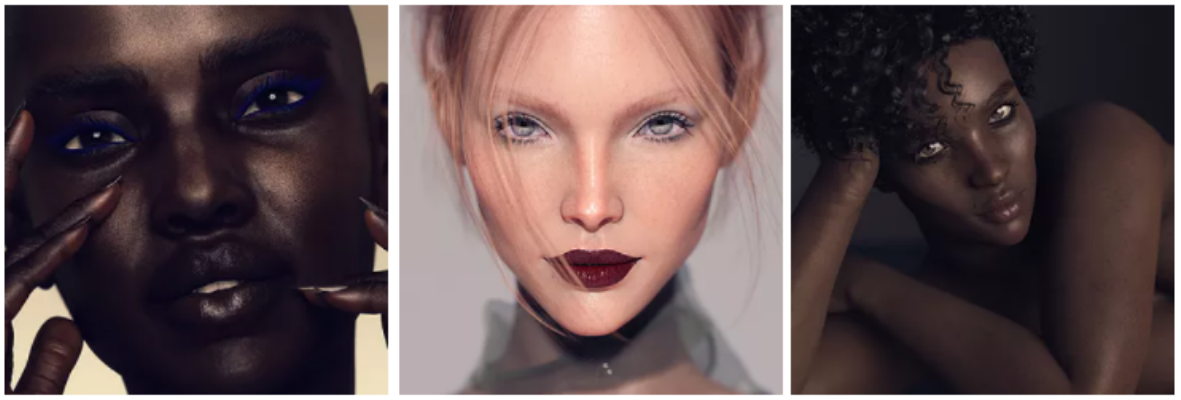
[136] Ibid., 2169.
[137] Ibid., 2171.
[138] Dana Y. Takagi, "From Discrimination to Affirmative Action: Facts in the Asian American Admissions Controversy," *Social Problems* 37, no. 4 (1990): pp. 578-592, https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.1990.37.4.03a00110.
[139] Leong, *Racial Capitalism,* 2172.

diminish depending on the whims of those institutions and individuals. It is worth noting that most diversity hiring occurs for entry-level positions and not in upper-level positions.

Another issue with representative diversity is that it leaves little space for addressing the material issues POC face within white institutions. Additionally, the developments of the technological age combined with the prioritization of thin diversity means companies do not have to hire real Black people to appear progressive. I illustrate this through an examination of "the world's first all digital modeling agency", The Diigitals. Founded by a white man named Cameron-James Wilson, The Diigitals showcases seven CGI models: four are Black, one is white, one is Korean, and one is an alien.[140] The CGI is so advanced, that when the first Black model, Shudu, began posting on Instagram (@shudu.gram) people thought she was a real person. Since 2017, Shudu has accumulated over 200,000 Instagram followers and has digitally collaborated with brands such as Hyundai, Lexus, Michelob Ultra, Ferragamo, Christian Louboutin, Samsung, GQ, and done editorials for numerous magazines. Wilson, who modeled Shudu on a Princess of South Africa Barbie doll, characterizes her as "having a



life of her own" and a champion of "diversity in the fashion world."[141] Considering Leong's presentation of the different types of diversity, there is no doubt that Wilson and his firm profit off the thin conception of diversity. For one, it is problematic that a white man is able

[140] Cameron-James Wilson, "The Diigitals Models," Thediigitals, accessed November 2021, https://www.thediigitals.com/models.
[141] Cameron-James Wilson, "The Diigitals About," Thediigitals, accessed November 2021, https://www.thediigitals.com/about.

to profit on the likeness of a Black woman when there are Black women in the modeling industry that struggle to find consistent work. Further, companies that adopt the thin version of diversity for their representations could easily work with Wilson rather than actual Black models. As thin diversity is mainly concerned with appearances, using CGI to insert Black people into marketing materials or in campaigns is technically okay within that conception of diversity. Cardiff University Professor Francesca Sobande worries that "CGI Black influencers are digital canvases that their creators can project messages about so-called racial diversity on, while platforming their own work and without even having to involve or pay real Black people."[142] Additionally, considering the current focus on representative diversity, working with Wilson's models allows brands to co-opt Blackness and mold it to "fit whatever Instagrammable notion of Black identity and culture [they] are in search of…[without having to] worry about what the [models] might say and do which could bring them into disrepute."[143] Recall that commodification of subcultures often includes the co-opting of visual indicators. I have said previously that most people conflate Blackness with anti-racism. Thus, simply buying a Black face or hiring a CGI model allows a company to position itself as anti-racist without having to deal with an actual Black person.

The thick conception of diversity, in which numerical diversity is the *prerequisite* for cross-racial interaction and betterment, has intrinsic remedial aspects that aim to correct past injustices.[144] Wilson's agency, which capitalizes on the thin conception of diversity, is quite literally incapable of adopting remedial aspects because his models are not real. Thus, there is no one to advocate for the issues actual Black models face nor anyone to fix them for. Meanwhile, *real* Black models are left to advocate for themselves in an industry that caters to

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[142] Francesca Sobande, "Spectacularized and Branded Digital (Re)Presentations of Black People and Blackness," *Television & New Media* 22, no. 2 (2021): pp. 131-146, https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476420983745, 135.
[143] Ibid., 136.
[144] Leong, *Racial Capitalism,* 2170.

lighter skin and straight hair. British model Leomie Anderson, most known for being a Victoria's Secret angel, recently posted a video captioned "Being a black model is doing other people's jobs and not being paid for the extra work looool."[145] In the video, she records herself getting her makeup poorly done by a non-Black makeup artist. Although it was redone by another artist she recounts feeling "ugly AF" and redoing it herself minutes before she was due to walk. She also includes a clip of three people working on her hair at once as if it was an afterthought. At the end of the video she implores the modelling industry to "hire more black hair and makeup artists so we don't have to go through this."[146] CGI agencies like The Diigitals absolve brands from having to deal with the "complexities" of Black models and prolong such issues. Instead, brands can arrange digital shoots and never have to worry about hiring someone who can do Black hair or makeup whilst still profiting on the value that thin diversity provides.

Overall, performative activism is a plague to social justice. When it is combined with the viral mechanisms of social media, those harms become amplified to the detriment of actual activists and victims of racism. The two most harmful types of performative activism, awareness campaigning and representative diversity, both perpetuate harms against Black people and prioritize a white conception of anti-racism. For instance, epistemic exploitation, thin diversity, and Black erasure build upon existing material harms to allow white people to feel better about themselves. While the push for anti-racism during the summer of 2020 had led to significant financial donations to social justice organizations, that is not enough. The long-term effects of corporate and individual performative activism significantly outweigh the donations made.

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[145] Leomie Anderson (@leomie_anderson). 2021 "Being a black model is doing other people's jobs and not being paid for the extra work looool". Twitter, October 24, 2021, 7:48 a.m., https://twitter.com/Leomie_Anderson/status/1452285917172015108?.
[146] Ibid.

Chapter 3: Digital Blackface and Memeification

Derived from the Greek word for "something imitated", memes are the lovechild of Internet remix culture and a near-constant stream of content. An analysis of the secondary memeification of Black people and the prevalence of digital blackface highlights how online interactions result in testimonial injustice and spectacularization.

In this chapter, I use philosopher Miranda Fricker's theory of testimonial injustice to examine three cases of memeification. Fricker describes testimonial injustice as when "prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word."[147] While there are multiple types of prejudice, Fricker highlights identity prejudice as particularly harmful due to its dependence on unreliable stereotyping. Since prejudice is not intrinsically unethical, Fricker clarifies that stereotyping becomes unethical when someone is presented with counter-evidence yet maintains their wrong beliefs.[148] Thus, identity-prejudicial credibility deficit is "the injustice that a speaker suffers in receiving deflated credibility from the hearer owing to identity prejudice on the hearer's part."[149]

Fricker explains that identity prejudice can "distort a hearer's credibility judgement [and thus their] perception of the speaker."[150] While I agree with this narrative, I add that Internet meme culture amplifies this distortion because of its disjointedness. Online, testimonies are shared without an intended target and they exist forever to be consumed by random people. In contrast, face to face testimonial exchanges are contextualized and identifiable—as is the injustice. Further, engagement with testimonial content is not limited to oral or written communication so the injustice can take different forms. Memeification, in

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[147] Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1.
[148] Ibid., 34.
[149] Ibid., 4.
[150] Ibid., 36.

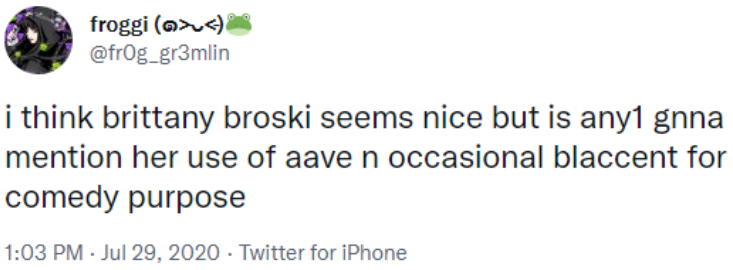
particular, involves taking a certain aspect of a photo or video and remixing it into a more entertaining form—often overshadowing the message within the original testimony.

Memetic engagement with Black testimonial content contributes to testimonial injustice through delegitimization and memeification. Memetic engagement consists of typical engagement with viral or highly popular content: liking, sharing, sending, and/or remixing. While this is not inherently harmful, the consistent memeification of unsuspecting Black people needs to be unpacked. The cases of Black testimonial content I present shortly deal with topics of property damage, chronic illness, poverty, attempted rape, home invasion, and physical injury yet are some of the most viral memes of the decade. Memetic engagement with somber, painful, and generally unfunny content appropriates Black pain for entertainment purposes while undermining that pain.

Unlike other types of somber online content that elicit feelings of empathy, I posit that the use of AAVE makes Black testimony more susceptible to memetic engagement. All three testimonies use AAVE. There are several studies that reveal people who hear AAVE presume the speaker to be less credible, unintelligent, and incompetent[151] which would distort the way a hearer interprets information from a speaker. Ironically, despite this negative association, AAVE is not shunned by non-Black people to the extent one would suspect. Rather, it has been controversially dubbed "Gen Z slang" because of its widespread use by young people online.[152] Although AAVE was created among Black communities experiencing chattel slavery, the people using it the most (or misusing it) tend to be non-Black. Online, non-Black users of AAVE are often accused of appropriating certain phrases and enunciations to seem

[151] Valerie Fridland, "The Sound of Racial Profiling: When Language Leads to Discrimination," NSights (Nevada Today, June 16, 2020), https://www.unr.edu/nevada-today/blogs/2020/the-sound-of-racial-profiling.
[152] Meron Berhe, "AAVE Isn't Gen Z Slang," The Pitch (Walter Johnson High School, January 14, 2021), https://www.wjpitch.com/opinion/2021/01/14/aave-isnt-gen-z-slang/.

cooler, funnier, and overall more engaging—as seen in the tweet below.[153] This tweet references white influencer Brittany Broski (aka Kombucha Girl) who faced backlash when she claimed AAVE was a part of Internet culture.[154] I suspect that the "entertainment factor" assigned to appropriated uses of AAVE has tainted legitimate uses, causing people to conflate AAVE usage with "funny". Thus, the perceived contradiction between unfunny testimonial



content and the way it is delivered with AAVE causes hearers to disregard the reality of the message. Additionally, this perceived contradiction between the message and the delivery in conjunction with general anti-Black prejudices and stereotyping contributes to the memetic engagement.

Fricker suggests that anti-Black prejudices are rooted in anti-Black stereotypes: "over-emotionality, illogicality, inferior intelligence, evolutionary inferiority, incontinence," etc.[155] While these stereotypes contribute to many discriminatory structures and experiences, stereotyping in the digital age requires addendum since the Internet has allowed for relatively new structures and platforms. For instance, YouTube was created in 2005, Instagram in 2010, and TikTok in 2016. In discussion of how technology contributes to the proliferation of systemic disadvantage, Trevor Jamerson explains that "racially marginalized groups tend to be stereotyped along a spectrum regarding [technological] access, production, and use."[156]

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[153] (@fr0g_gr3mlin). 2020. "i think brittany broski seems nice but is any1 gnna mention her use of aave n occasional blaccent for comedy purpose". Twitter, July 29, 2020, 1:03 p.m. https://twitter.com/fr0g_gr3mlin/status/1288565772088938496.
[154] Bria Overs, "An Influencer Got Backlash for Claiming Black Slang Terms Belonged to Internet Culture. It Highlights a Common Problem Online.," Insider (Insider, August 8, 2020), https://www.insider.com/brittany-broksi-tiktok-aave-internet-culture-slang-appropriation-chile-2020.
[155] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice,* 32.
[156] Jamerson, "Race, Markets, and Digital Technologies", 41.

The label of "non-technological" is often applied to people of African and Indigenous descent and used to prove their inferiority.[157] Historically, this ideology was used to justify imperialism and slavery. I suspect that this general notion paired with contemporary AAVE use casts Black people as being unintentionally funny because they (i) do not know how the Internet works and (ii) do not understand how their online testimonies will be perceived. The constant memeification of this type of content suggests an "inside joke" among competent Internet users. Further, when the subject of the meme tries to get in on the joke by reclaiming their comedic intentionality, their online persona often loses its memetic appeal—highlighting the notion of "we're laughing at you, not with you". I highlight this in Case 3 where Tessica Brown faces ridicule after trying to capitalize on her own meme.

The two types of memes I examine in this chapter are in musical, catchphrase, and image form. While all of the testimonies began in video form, the appropriated component is often a short phrase that is remixed into a song or referred to orally. Some of these testimonies were also remixed into image and gif form which I will highlight later on. The examination of how testimonial injustice appears within these types of memes is important because memetic engagement appropriates unavoidable facets of human expression: emotion and speech. Thus, the memeification of these facets depends on undermining the personhood of the subject.

Case 1: Antoine Dodson

On July 28, 2010, Antoine Dodson was interviewed by NBC affiliate WAFF-48 News following the attempted rape of his sister in Lincoln Park, Alabama. Antoine's sister, Kelly,

[157] Ibid., 41.

recounts that she was "attacked by some idiot out here in the projects. He tried to rape me. He tried to pull my clothes off."[158] The interview then cuts to Antoine who is clearly upset:

> Well, obviously we have a rapist in Lincoln Park. He's climbing in yo' windows. He's snatching yo' people up—trying to rape 'em. So you need to hide yo' kids, hide yo' wife, and hide y'o husband because they raping everybody out here.
>
> We got your t-shirt. You done left finger prints and all. You are so dumb. You are really dumb. Forreal!
>
> You don't have to come and confess that you did it. We looking for you. We gon' find you. I'm letting you know now. So you can run and tell that. Homeboy![159]

Antoine's interview was very animated and ripe with emotion. The juxtaposition of Antoine's voice with the interviewer's highlights his use of AAVE. Several people who saw the interview online criticized WAFF-48 for allowing an interview to air that negatively "stereotyped the black community."[160] The station replied saying it would have been "far worse" to censor him. They defended their position by saying "Dodson is a victim and, just like any victim, has the right to speak out."[161] Despite the backlash, nothing Antoine did in the interview was inherently negative—he did not swear nor elicit graphic imagery. As I outlined earlier, I suspect the backlash came from negative racial projections about emotive Black people and the use of AAVE.

Regardless, Antoine's interview caught the attention of a New York band called The Gregory Brothers who often autotuned news segments and uploaded them to YouTube. By July 31, 2010, "Bed Intruder Song" was uploaded on their YouTube channel: Songify the

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[158] Crazy Laugh Action. "Antoine Dodson 'Hide Yo Kids, Hide Yo Wife' Interview (Original)." YouTube, April 11, 2012. Video, 2:02. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzNhaLUT520.
[159] Ibid.
[160] Paul Gallagher, "Antoine Dodson: From Local News Item to Internet Sensation," The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, August 14, 2010), https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/aug/15/antoine-dodson-internet-sensation.
[161] Ibid.

News (currently named schmoyoho).[162] It went viral overnight, becoming YouTube's most watched video of the year.[163] It sold over 250,000 copies on iTunes and even reached number 89 on Billboard's Hot 100 list.[164] The video currently has 151 million views.

In an NPR interview, Antoine shared that his sister, Kelly, encouraged him not to feed into the Internet fame because they were trying "to make a fool out of [him]."[165] While he did not say whether he agreed with her or not, Antoine told her not to worry about it because "it could be an opportunity for [their] family to get out of the hood."[166] By that point, Antoine and the Gregory Brothers had decided to split the iTunes profits and Antoine was asking people to donate via PayPal to help his family move out of the projects."[167] By September of 2010, Antoine and his family were able to move to a house in a safer neighborhood.[168] Meanwhile, the Gregory Brothers were securing a pilot with Comedy Central that would give viewers a "behind-the-scenes look at the creation of their YouTube videos."[169] By the end of 2010, Antoine had made several commercial appearances and performed "Bed Intruder Song" at the BET Hip Hop Awards with Michael Gregory of the Gregory Brothers.[170] He told US Weekly that his next goals were to finish his Associate's Degree in business and open a

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[162] schmoyoho. "BED INTRUDER SONG!!!" YouTube, July 31, 2010. Video, 2:07. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMtZfW2z9dw.
[163] Will Wei, "The Top YouTube Videos of 2010," Business Insider (Business Insider, December 13, 2010), https://www.businessinsider.com/most-watched-youtube-videos-2010-2010-12#:~:text=The%20most%20watched%20YouTube%20video,%22%20%E2%80%93%20according%20to%20YouTube%27s%20blog.
[164]Philip Kennicott, "Auto-Tune Turns the Operatic Ideal into a Shoddy Joke," The Washington Post (WP Company, August 29, 2010), https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/27/AR2010082702197.html.
[165] "Antoine Dodson: Riding YouTube out of the 'Hood'," NPR (NPR, August 23, 2010), https://www.npr.org/transcripts/129381037.
[166] Ibid.
[167] Gallagher, "Antoine Dodson: From Local News Item to Internet Sensation".
[168] Us Weekly Staff, "'Bed Intruder' Singer Moves Family into New Home," Us Weekly, September 16, 2010, https://www.usmagazine.com/celebrity-news/news/bed-intruder-singer-moves-family-into-new-home-2010169/.
[169] Gallagher, "Antoine Dodson: From Local News Item to Internet Sensation".
[170] "2010 BET Hip-Hop Awards: The Performances," Z 107.9 (Z 107.9, 2010), https://zhiphopcleveland.com/1714461/2010-bet-hip-hop-awards-the-performances-video/.

salon or hotel.[171] In 2018, Style Mag's *Where Are These Internet Stars Now?* article reported that Antoine was living in Chicago with his wife and kids.[172]

Capitalizing on Internet fame is a common theme across the three cases. Antoine was arguably the most successful at this. Unlike the other two cases, he made profits from the initial remix and fed into the Internet's obsession with him from the start. Some might say he enabled "class tourism" or allowed wealthy white people to see into his life of poverty for their own entertainment. While this may be the case, Antoine's awareness of being a spectacle allowed him to obtain safe housing for his family. I will develop the concept of spectacularization after presenting all the cases.

Case 2: Kimberly "Sweet Brown" Wilkins

On April 8, 2012, Kimberly "Sweet Brown" Wilkins was interviewed by a local news station after she fled her burning apartment building in Oklahoma City. In the interview, Brown remarks on how she came to realize the building was on fire:

> Well, I woke up to get me a cold pop and then I thought somebody was barbecuing. I said, "Oh Lord Jesus, it's a fire." Then I ran out, I didn't grab no shoes or nothing, Jesus. I ran for my life and then the smoke got me, I got bronchitis! Ain't nobody got time for that.[173]

Wilkins' interview is similar to Dodson's in that her delivery is very animated and she uses noticeable AAVE. Phrases like "woke up to get me a cold pop" and "ain't nobody got time for that" are ones that diverge from Standard American English (SAE) the most. As expected,

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[171] Gallagher, "Antoine Dodson: From Local News Item to Internet Sensation".
[172] Tiffany White, "Viral Internet Stars - See Where They Are Now!," Life & Style Mag, February 20, 2018, https://www.lifeandstylemag.com/posts/viral-stars-where-are-they-now-117729/?display=listicle#photo-anchor.
[173] KFOR-TV and K. Querry, "Oklahoma City Apartment Complex Catches Fire, 5 Units Damaged; Sweet Brown Explains," KFOR Oklahoma City (KFOR Oklahoma City, April 9, 2012), https://kfor.com/news/okc-apartment-complex-catches-fire-5-units-damaged/.

most remixes and memeificiations focused on the line "Ain't nobody got time for that" since it is the most "comedic" use of AAVE. The unedited interview quickly went viral, gaining over a million views within 48 hours.[174] While the original interview clip has since been removed from YouTube, its initial popularity caught the attention of a radio program called The Bob Rivers Show. The Bob Rivers Show used phrases from Wilkins' interview like "Ain't nobody got time for that", "Ran for my life", and "Oh, Lord Jesus it's a fire" in a song they named "I Got Bronchitis" and then uploaded to iTunes. Unlike the Gregory Brother's from Dodson's case, the Bob Rivers Show had no intention to split profits with Wilkins. They even falsely advertised that she consented to the use of her soundbites in their remix. In June 2012, Wilkins filed a suit against Apple and The Bob Rivers Show seeking $15 million for music plagiarism sampling, fraud, and negligence.[175] The song has since been removed but the case was dismissed in 2013 due to Wilkins' failure to submit appropriate documentation.[176] As of November 30, 2021, the only streamable rendition of an "Ain't Nobody Got Time For That" remix is under Sweet Brown's artist profile on iHeart Music. Currently, the top three search results for "ain't nobody got time for that" on YouTube are unmonetized videos that have over 100 million views combined.

Since her brief rise to stardom in 2012, Wilkins has attempted to capitalize on her virality through music and commercial appearances. In 2013 she released a song on Spotify called "Cold Poppin" that focuses on her "I woke up to get me a cold pop" line from the interview; it currently has under 20,000 total streams. She was briefly a celebrity

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[174] Megan Rose Dickey, "'Ain't Nobody Got Time for That' Viral-Video Star Does Have Time to Sue Apple," Business Insider (Business Insider, March 12, 2013), https://www.businessinsider.com/sweet-brown-apple-lawsuit-2013-3?IR=T.

[175] "Kimberly 'Sweet Brown' Wilkins v. The Bob Rivers Show," OCIS Case Summary for CJ-2012-3851- Kimberly Sweet Brown Wilkins (Oklahoma County District Courts, June 21, 2012), https://www.oscn.net/applications/oscn/GetCaseInformation.asp?number=CJ-2012-3851&db=Oklahoma&submitted=true.

[176] Ibid.

spokesperson and appeared in Tyler Perry's *A Madea Christmas* (2013).[177] After 2014, her momentum fizzled out as a potential reality show, clothing line, and BBQ sauce brand were promoted on her socials but never took off.[178] By the end of 2014, all of Wilkins' social media activity ceased. The same Life and Style Mag's *Where Are These Internet Stars Now?* article rumors that Wilkins still lives in the same apartment building that made her famous.[179]

While Dodson and Wilkins had near identical rises to fame, Wilkins profited significantly less because she was not compensated by the object of virality: the song remixed by the Bob Rivers Show. While getting the remix taken down prevented the radio show hosts from profiting, the introduction of legalities created friction in the Internet world. For instance, most videos of the original interview and remix are no longer available on monetized sites like YouTube or the articles written about her back in 2012 and 2013. Things move fast on the Internet and interests fade. Building a brick wall around the object of virality likely did not help her stay relevant online. However, I recognize that getting the original remix taken down was the first step necessary for her to profit from her own musical releases.

Case 3: Tessica Brown

On February 3, 2021 Tessica Brown uploaded a video to her TikTok (@im_d_ollady) recounting how she accidentally slicked her hair back with Gorilla Glue spray instead of her regular hairspray. She typically uses Got2B Glued Blasting Freeze Spray which is a high strength but water-soluble hairspray. Gorilla Glue is an industrial strength adhesive that has waterproofing chemicals on its ingredient list. Both come in a brightly colored aerosol can, which likely made her think they can be used the same way. In an interview with Vox she

[177] "Sweet Brown," IMDb (IMDb.com), accessed November 2021, https://www.imdb.com/name/nm5721863/.
[178] Debra Kelly, "Whatever Happened to Sweet Brown?," Nicki Swift (Nicki Swift, April 11, 2017), https://www.nickiswift.com/56529/whatever-happened-sweet-brown/.
[179] White, "Viral Internet Stars".

explains that she spotted the Gorilla Glue when she was in a rush and used it as a "makeshift hairspray" and intended to wash it out when she got home.[180] Unfortunately, it did not work out as planned:

> Hey y'all. For those of y'all that know me know...my hair has been like this for about a month now. It's not by choice… no… it's not by choice. When I do my hair, I like to, you know, finish it off with a little Got2Be Glue spray. You know, just to keep it in place. Well, I didn't have any more Got2Be Glue spray so I used this. [Holds up Gorilla Glue spray adhesive]. Gorilla Glue spray. Bad. Bad. Bad idea. Y'all look. My hair. [Rubs hair vigorously] It don't move. You hear what I'm telling you? It. Don't. Move. I've washed my hair fifteen times. And it don't move. Stiff where? Woo! My hair. So Imma tell you this. If you ever, ever run out of Got2Be Glue Spray don't use ever, ever use this. [Holds up Gorilla Glue spray adhesive] Unless you want your hair to be like that forever.[181]

That video has 50 million views and 8 million likes on TikTok. Between February 3rd and February 7th Brown posted 6 videos documenting her experience on TikTok before encouraging people to go to her YouTube channel, Tessica Brown, for further updates. She reposted the same videos on YouTube which garnered over 4 million views. Subsequent videos on TikTok and YouTube depict her vigorously washing her hair on camera to no avail, visiting the hospital, attempting to remove the adhesive at home, and eventually getting the glue surgically extracted by a surgeon in Beverly Hills, California on February 11th. In her interview with Vox, she says she wishes she had never posted the videos but only "went to social media to try to get help because [she] tried everything."[182] While the first video showed

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[180] Melinda Fakuade, "The 'Gorilla Glue Girl' Never Wanted Her Nickname," Vox (Vox, February 19, 2021), https://www.vox.com/the-goods/22291160/tessica-brown-gorilla-glue-girl-tiktok-viral-surgery-manager.
[181] Tessica Brown (@im_d_ollady) 2021. "Stiff where????? Ma hair 😡😡." TikTok, February 3, 2021. https://www.tiktok.com/@im_d_ollady/video/6925174778387025157.
[182] Fakuade, "The 'Gorilla Glue Girl' Never Wanted Her Nickname".

her in a generally positive disposition, other update videos show her near tears and writhing in pain during attempts to remove the glue at home.

Capitalizing on the popularity of that video, an unidentified person remixed Brown's initial testimony and uploaded it to streaming platforms under the name "Bad Idea (Gorilla Glue Girl Remix)". The line "my hair, it don't move" is the central catchphrase of the remix and is what went viral on TikTok. Unlike other video sharing platforms like YouTube or Vimeo, most TikToks are filmed over an audio track. So, when one person uploads a video with a unique audio, that audio becomes an independent sound bite that can be used by other creators. That is what a user named @queenk_990 did with a 54 second clip from "Bad Idea (Gorilla Glue Girl Remix)". While TikTok does not compile total views for a particular sound, 89,300 unique accounts used that sound bite since it was uploaded on the platform. The most popular videos using that bite have between 1 million and 7 million likes. Celebrities like Cardi B and Tia Mowry are amongst those to lip sync or dance to Brown's sound bite. Nicki Minaj even referenced Brown in a re-released version of her song "Fractions".

While her story was going viral, Brown was also experiencing waves of hate messages because people thought she glued her hair down on purpose. She described the negative messages as "brutal" and shared that her 11-year-old daughter came home crying after being ridiculed for her mother's publicized mistake.[183] Brown pushed back in an interview saying "I don't need all of this, because this was just way, way too much. And truly, who would want to go through the pain that I went through for clout?"[184]

Since then, Brown has tried to capitalize on the Internet fame that she never asked for. In May of 2021, she issued cease and desists to several parties that remixed her original video

[183] Ibid.
[184] Ibid.

claiming she was not making money from the song.[185] On November 19th, Brown released a song called “Ma Hair” on all streaming platforms. On iTunes, it has two stars and four reviews. Three of the reviews only consist of trashcan emojis indicating that the reviewers think the song is “trash”. Under promotional TikToks for the song, some users joke that she should “unrelease” the song while others suggest the song is performing poorly because “she took too long”. In addition to music, Brown sells “Ma Hair” merchandise, hair products, and Cameo services. On December 2, 2021, Brown uploaded another video in which she faces hair troubles. She claims that her hair started falling out after dying it black. While she does include clips of her hair falling out while she combs it, she holds up a clump of clearly fake hair in the beginning of the video for dramatic effect.[186] The comments mostly consist of people accusing her of trying to go viral again to make money. However, the negative attention has resulted in the video performing rather well numerically with 2.5 million views, 327,000+ likes, 23,000+ shares, and 35,000+ comments.

Like Wilkins, I suspect Brown struggled to make money from her initial testimony because she was not paid from streams of the remix. Both women turned to legal action to divert stream sales to themselves but that required de-platforming the viral artifact to make room for themselves. As I outlined previously, social media users do not like when the source of the meme becomes complicit in their memeification. It disrupts the fantasy that the “memed” person is unaware of how the Internet works, thus making the joke less funny. Further, the legal action takes up valuable time in the life cycle of a meme. Most money is made in the beginning of a meme’s life when people who are infatuated with a person or event are rapidly consuming that content to stay “in the know” or get in on the joke. I suspect

[185] James Rettig, “Gorilla Glue Girl Issues Cease and Desist over ‘My Hair, It Don't Move’ Song,” Stereogum (Stereogum, May 30, 2021), https://www.stereogum.com/2149595/my-hair-it-dont-move-song-gorilla-glue-girl-tiktok/news/.
[186] Tessica Brown (@im_d_ollady). 2021 "I thought my hair was strong enough to for chemicals 😭 #tessicabrown #mahair #helpmyhairplease #fyp #imoverit." TikTok, December 2, 2021. https://www.tiktok.com/@im_d_ollady/video/7037160631770025263.

that once a meme is widely known, it is nearing the end of its lifecycle and is less monetizable. Now, I will turn to further analysis of these cases.

Earlier, I mentioned that these testimonies were also memed into "gif" form. A gif is a series of images that load sequentially like a flipbook which results in "animated" images.[187] At its inception, gifs were mostly used in chain emails and on MySpace but now many gifs are searchable in centralized hubs like GIPHY and Tenor. GIPHY is one of the most popular gif hubs in the world, providing 10+ billion pieces of GIPHY content to around 700+ million people a day.[188] GIPHY claims that their collection of gifs helps people express themselves and make their everyday conversations more entertaining.[189] Despite this seemingly harmless technological ideal, feminist writer Lauren Michele Jackson finds issue with the types of images being used for said expression and entertainment. In a Teen Vogue op-ed, Jackson notes that while gifs are "integral to the social experience of the Internet", the recurring use of GIFs featuring Black people has "implications in terms of broader digital blackface."[190] According to Jackson, digital blackface is used to describe "various types of minstrel performance that have become available in cyberspace."[191] Traditional blackface began in the 1830s as a way for poor white people to separate themselves from poor and/or enslaved Black people. The National Museum of African American History and Culture notes that:

> Poor and working-class whites who felt "squeezed politically, economically, and socially from the top, but also from the bottom, invented minstrelsy" as a way of

[187] Andrew Heinzman, "What Is a GIF, and How Do You Use Them?," How to Geek (LifeSavvy Media, September 25, 2019), https://www.howtogeek.com/441185/what-is-a-gif-and-how-do-you-use-them/.
[188] "About: GIPHY: Be Animated," GIPHY (GIPHY), accessed November 2021, https://giphy.com/about.
[189] Ibid.
[190] Lauren Michele Jackson, "We Need to Talk about Digital Blackface in Gifs," Teen Vogue (Condé Nast, August 2, 2017), https://www.teenvogue.com/story/digital-blackface-reaction-gifs.
[191] Ibid.

expressing the oppression that marked being members of the majority, but outside of the white norm.[192]

In exaggerating and distorting Black stereotypes through makeup, animatedness, and costumes, white people who felt outcast because of their economic status were able to "codify whiteness across class and geopolitical lines as its antithesis."[193] Consider the minstrel show poster below.[194] Both images are of the same man. The one on the right is clearly in blackface, differentiated by dark skin, unkempt hair, large overdrawn lips, and wild

eyes. The juxtaposition of both figures makes the visibly white man on the left look cleaner, classier, and generally better. The performances, or minstrel shows, of the 1830s characterized Black people as "lazy, ignorant, superstitious, hypersexual, and prone to thievery and cowardice."[195] By 1845, minstrel shows had grown so popular that it was considered a "sub-industry" complete with mass production of songs, sheet music, makeup, costumes, and pre-set stereotypes. With the introduction of new media and its continued popularity, minstrelsy found its way onto radio, television, theaters, and—as Jackson argues—the Internet.

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[192] "Blackface: The Birth of an American Stereotype," National Museum of African American History and Culture (Smithsonian), accessed November 2021, https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/blackface-birth-american-stereotype.
[193] Ibid.
[194] Ibid.
[195] Ibid.

Returning to the idea of digital blackface, both Dodson[196] and Wilkins[197] can be found on GIPHY with their AAVE catch phrases captioned in bold letters:

Jackson also highlights The Real Housewives of Atlanta, Oprah, Whitney Houston, Mariah Carey, various NBA players, Tiffany Pollard, and Kid Fury as other commonly "gif-ed" Black figures. Certain facial expressions, phrases, and images are cherry picked from Black experiences by non-Black people wanting to "harness and inhabit these images as an extension of themselves."[198] In her video essay "Black Meme" and the accompanying literature, Legacy Russell explores the implications behind the memeification of Black people saying "memes are not neutral. The labor enacted through black meme culture raises questions about subjectivity, personhood, and the ever-complicated fault lines of race, class, and gender performed both on and offline."[199] Despite the motivation difference between the two, digital blackface and traditional blackface are linked by white people performing oversimplified and often incorrect versions of Blackness. Furthermore, both versions of blackface result in othering and the spectacularization of Black people.

Thus far, I have outlined two phases of the Black meme and two accompanying harms. The first phase, memeification, is the transformation of an original piece of media into a meme. Consider Antoine Dodson's case: when The Gregory Brothers remixed his interview into an autotuned song, they were engaging in an act of memeification. In its original

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[196] GIPHY, "Antoine Dodson Hide Yo Kids GIF by Amanda @Arg," GIPHY (GIPHY), accessed November 2021, https://giphy.com/gifs/arg-l2SpQdJ7u7rfgED5e.
[197] GIPHY, "Aint Nobody Got Time for That GIF," GIPHY (GIPHY), accessed November 2021, https://giphy.com/gifs/aint-nobody-got-time-for-that-gif-kjelbEcB3I33a.
[198] Jackson, "We Need to Talk about Digital Blackface in Gifs".
[199] Legacy Russell, "BLACK MEME Opens on External Pages," External Pages, 2020, https://externalpages.org/#legacyrussell.

medium, Dodson's raw emotion, animatedness, and use of AAVE are likely what enticed the Gregory Brothers to memeify him. This resulted in testimonial injustice because rather than sympathizing with his testimony, they saw him as a vehicle for entertainment. This injustice is amplified further through widespread memetic engagement—liking, sharing, retweeting of the remix—because every instance of memetic engagement further divorces Dodson from his original testimony. The second phase is naturally related to memetic engagement: digital blackface. The overuse of Black images, gifs, and catchphrases by non-Black people to better express oneself or to seem cooler online are some of the components of digital blackface. This overuse results in the spectacularization of people like Dodson and other Black memed figures.

In this case, spectacularization is the intentional severance of a Black person's reaction from the context of their provocation for the purpose of engaging an audience. For instance, the spectacularization of Dodson reduced him from a concerned brother reacting to his sister's sexual assault to a funny Internet man yelling "hide yo kids, hide yo wife". Consistently trapping Black people in replayable mediums reinforces the performer/audience dichotomy in which Black people are the spectacle. Technology columnist Monica Torres argues that to be "looped in a gif, to be put on display as 'animated' at the behest of audiences is, to be racialized, othered."[200] Torres builds upon this by citing cultural theorist Sianne Ngai:

> ...a body animated looks utterly unnatural, puppet-like, revealing the desperation and labor underlying the humanizing project as well as turning "the racial body … into comic spectacle."[201]

[200] Monica Torres, "Instant Replay," Real Life Mag (Snap Inc. , November 22, 2016), https://reallifemag.com/instant-replay/.
[201] Ibid.

This concept of the racialized body as a spectacle is also developed by Hortense Spillers in her book *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe.* In her writing, she employs the term *pornotroping* to "describe the rhetorical uses of the captive body... Most simply, pornotroping reduces a person to flesh—to a sensuous thing embodying sheer powerlessness—and then displays this flesh to incorporate the viewing subject/body."[202] Applying this concept to Dodson's memeification illustrates his positioning as a cultural tool. The severance of Dodson from the context of his original testimony allows people to step into his raw emotion and animatedness without having to experience what inspired his reaction (the attempted rape of his sister). Those who use memes of people like Dodson, Wilkins, and Brown essentially use their likeness to "step into character" to amplify their own messages.

[202] Chun, *Control and Freedom,* 135.

Conclusion

The Black online experience is one marked by exploitation, commodification, and spectacularization. Whether posting online or consuming the content of others, the Black experience is never really whole. From algorithmic suppression to memeification, analyzing the ways Black people navigate anti-Blackness on TikTok, YouTube, Twitter, Google, Instagram, and Facebook reveal a narrative that rejects the romanticization of the Internet. Rather, an analysis of the various harms experienced by Black people online shows that the Internet reflects the same racist and discriminatory structures found offline. To assume otherwise is irresponsible. However, we have moved into a colorblind era which may make it difficult to detect some racial harm. Thus, a critical look at how technological mechanisms encourage anti-Black behaviors is required to prevent online harms from persisting. I suspect that an honest look at anti-Blackness online would help us move towards racial justice offline as well.

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