ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:	LIVING A PARTICIPATORY LIFE: REFORMATTING RHETORIC FOR DEMANDING, DIGITAL TIMES
	Matthew Paul Salzano, Doctor of Philosophy, 2023
Dissertation directed by:	Associate Professor Damien Smith Pfister, Department of Communication

Living a Participatory Life explores how people navigate demanding, digital times where social movements and digital media meet, in the context of what media scholars refer to as the participatory condition. The participatory condition describes how participation is an inherent, inescapable condition of digitality with its always-on and always-prompting media; it is distinctly different from the participatory cultures theorized of the blogosphere and Web 2.0. In the participatory condition, the digital is demanding, and our demands are digitized. What does it mean to live a participatory life in the participatory condition? How should we practice rhetoric (as a productive and critical art) during demanding, digital times? To aid in answering these questions, this dissertation offers a format theory of participation. I theorize four key concepts— parameters, imperatives, trans-situations, and sensibilities—to define participation as a formatted rhetorical practice that modulates affect and sensibilities within a formatted ecology. In the following three chapters, I locate three participatory sensibilities from advocates for social change across intersectional issues: Disparticipants, offering

participatory dissent at the Women's March; Fictocritics, generating criticism of the YouTube manosphere; and Installectuals, transforming Instagram during the Summer 2020 resurgence of Black Lives Matter activism. Each illustrates the ramifications of the participatory condition and how advocates for social change navigate it. The dissertation concludes with a provocation to learn from these sensibilities and begin reformatting our own participatory lives.

LIVING A PARTICIPATORY LIFE: REFORMATTING RHETORIC FOR
DEMANDING, DIGITAL TIMES

by

Matthew Paul Salzano

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2023

Advisory Committee:
 Associate Professor Damien Smith Pfister, Chair
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Misti Yang: a committed participant, an ingenious rhetorical theorist, and a profoundly missed collaborator and friend.

Acknowledgements

June 7, 2021. It is the first day of the second annual Summer Seminar hosted by Chelốna, UMD's chapter of the Rhetoric Society of America. I had assigned an excerpt from Christopher Kelty's *The Participant* alongside a few Instagram slideshows for the first week. In a lively conversation, Divine Aboagye, Drew Ashby-King, Alex Glass, Erin Green, Taylor Hourigan, Jeannette Iannacone, Brooke Phipps, Carolyn Robbins, Britt Starr, Lexi Walston, Misti Yang, and I detailed some of the central problematics that now frame *Living a Participatory Life.* Two years later, and it is time to acknowledge the many participants who gave life to this project.

Conversations all around the University of Maryland have shaped the pages of this dissertation. Shawn Parry-Giles helped me hone my academic writing skills, made sure I could feed myself, and offered me the chance to teach COMM398T: Digital Culture and Civic Life. Those students deserve a special shout out for my favorite hours in UMD classrooms in lively discussions of many of the theoretical texts featured in this dissertation. Purdom Linblad at the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities has helped me solve many theoretical and technical problems over the years. I cherish my memories as a teaching assistant with Alyson Farzad-Phillips, as we gossiped about the Scooter Boys in the hallway between sections, and with Taylor Hourigan as we Apple Watch walkie-talkied during Zoom lecture. Darrian Carroll, Elizabeth Catchmark, Meg Itoh, Brooke Phipps, Britt Starr, Shelby Sturm, and Kalin Schultz have engaged generously with my musings and/or snark, keeping straight faces mid-seminar despite my best attempts.

I am especially grateful for a group of co-conspirators that made getting through graduate school possible. Victoria Ledford has endured being asked about every single concern, doubt, and curiosity I had over the past five years, and I will never cease to be amazed by the wit, grace,

and speed with which she responds. Jeannette Iannacone and I met during a windy prospective student visit weekend, bonded over watching Pasta Grannies videos in the grad office, and have now traveled the world together. I owe a solid chunk of persevering this Ph.D. to evenings replenished with Italian food and the company of Jeannette, Tom, and Aaron. Drew Ashby-King is always up for a Starbucks run, a long conversation about theory, and for starting a new colla-bro-ation. Aya Farhat gave me many rides home, showed me the ropes of rhetorical criticism, and has always kept me honest like only a fellow fire sign can. Finally, Misti Yang and I developed an entire vocabulary—"technoliberal managerialism," sure, but I always preferred taco pizza and aggressive grief sharing. I miss her dearly, and I'm grateful her profound influence on me will always be reflected in my footnotes.

In Spring 2022, I made an unexpected return to Oxford, England, to be the Site Director for Pacific Lutheran University's International Honors program. In my seminar, "Digital Identities, Digital Politics," 13 PLU students—Koa, Marit, Maddie, Emily, Kaden, Seth, Elijah, Sadie, Madeleine, Valentina, Ellie, Christopher, and Joshua—gifted me with intellectual energy that has sustained dissertation writing. Throughout, Evan Easton-Calabria, and Megan Grover from PLU, and Athena Demetriou and the Bodleian Libraries at the University of Oxford, offered ceaseless support. I am especially grateful for the excuse Oxford provided to be in frequent contact with Arthur Strum and Carmiña Palerm, invaluable mentors and friends who have inspired me since my first-ever class at PLU.

Lifelong friends like Phillip Bax, Genny Boots, Jennifer Haveman, Oliver Johnson, Alex Lund, and Sarah Spech have made sure a wine glass and a good conversation were always close at hand. Pastor Julie Bringman and the congregation of Hope Lutheran Church in College Park meaningfully expanded my definition of kairos. Amy Young and Justin Eckstein have always

graciously offered their mentorship, wine, and whiskey. And my family (newly expanded!) has been a source of delight and encouragement throughout this process, especially Heather, Linda, Peter, and Henry.

The primary audience for these pages are the 5 VIPs (very important participants) of my dissertation committee. Kristy Maddux, Catherine Knight Steele, Carly Woods, and Jason Farman helped make every committee meeting and email chain a generative place. They also wrote countless letters of recommendation, offered feedback on all sorts of writing and other creations, and treated me to many good arguments. My adviser, Damien Pfister, was a supportive and convivial mentor from our first phone call—as he walked the dogs in Maryland while I nervously paced in Washington—through eras of laggy zoom calls, and finishing the nonstop-communication of the dissertation-and-job-market era. I count myself lucky that this document marks the beginning of a career in conversation with you all.

Thank you: I believe everyone listed deserves not just a participation ribbon—they each deserve a trophy. But only one participant can be named MVP (most valuable participant). My husband, Aaron, whose presence—despite pandemic seminars, at-home comprehensive exams, trans-Atlantic surprise moves, and the slog of dissertation writing—made my Ph.D. years my favorite years. He was an excellent cook for long nights of writing and a patient comforter through insecurity, rejection, and revision. More importantly, he is a brilliant communicator whose influence on the dissertation is felt on every page. Aaron, I am so glad to be spending my (participatory) life with you.

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Introduction: Life in the Participatory Condition

"Could I interest you in everything all of the time? / A little bit of everything all of the time / Apathy's a tragedy, and boredom is a crime / anything and everything all of the time."
—Bo Burnham, "Welcome to the Internet," from *Inside*

"The world is changing / the planet's heating up / What the fuck is going on? / Rearranging / It's like everything happened all at once / Um, what the fuck is going on? / The people rising in the streets / the war, the drought / The more I look, the more I see nothing to joke about."
—Bo Burnham, "Comedy," from *Inside*[1]

What is going on?

What is going on? Log on to Twitter or TikTok long enough, and I guarantee you'll eventually ask yourself that exact question. It could be confusion about the story—why is gorilla glue in the zeitgeist today?—or shock with the information presented—what do you mean a Black man is facing 30 more years in prison because he *voted*? Burnham's crooning laments the overwhelming experience of the early COVID-19 months—inescapably anxiety-inducing in its own right–but also intermingled with racial violence, voter suppression, insurrection, climate change, social unrest, and mass unemployment. All this, punctuated with the rhythm of the 21st century digital world: anything and everything, all of the time.

Burnham's—and our—rhetorical environment is vast, spanning a practically-unimaginable number of *topoi*, audiences, exigences; and it is inescapable. I use "our" and "us" throughout the dissertation to describe anyone existing in 21st century media ecologies. As Casey Boyle, James J. Brown, Jr., and Steph Ceraso point out, the digital is an ambient condition—few, if any, are spared from the effects digital media has wrought on our (rhetorical)

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[1] *Inside* (Netflix, 2021). Thanks to Carly Woods for recommending I take the time to watch *Inside* during comps season.

cultures. Even if one is not on social media like Facebook or Twitter, their ubiquity is reflected in communication infrastructures beyond their platforms.[2] In a time of social distancing because of a global pandemic, Burnham showed how many got ever more intimate with the social. But that intimacy, while abundant, was not necessarily pleasant—like being driven mad by the inability to sort out what to do when your lover is inconsolable. Except our intimacy is much more promiscuous, billions of feet tangled in infinite bedsheets of crises. Again, anything and everything. All of the time.

Burnham's portrayals are indicative of what Eric Jenkins calls the big tension. Why does everything feel so demanding? As he explains it, "[s]ome people answer it has to be social media. Others say it is because of the massive extent of our problems, issues like corporate oligarchy, a disrupted climate, and the depth of racism and sexism still plaguing the world. The big tension contends that the answer is both—the staggering scope of our problems confronts us in a rapid, cursory, ever-shifting way that makes truly understanding and addressing the problems increasingly difficult."[3] This dissertation's subtitle mentions "demanding, digital times" to draw out how one relies on the other in this big tension. The digital is demanding, and our demands are digitized. Instagram sends frequent push notifications to subtly demand your attention; you log on, and the posts demand you care about the latest climate disaster, anti-racist workplaces, transphobic discourse, and more. Burnham senses this big tension: recognizing both

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[2]Casey Boyle, James J. Brown, and Steph Ceraso, "The Digital: Rhetoric Behind and Beyond the Screen," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (2018): 251–59, https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2018.1454187.

[3] Eric S. Jenkins, *Surfing the Anthropocene: The Big Tension and Digital Affect* (New York: Peter Lang, 2020), 273.

all the pressing problems of the world in "Comedy," and the intensity at which they're

encountered in "Welcome to the Internet."

In response, *Inside* wonders not just "What is going on?" but "What should one do?" At

the end of Burnham's *Inside,* we find the comedian in utter breakdown. His senses are

overwhelmed by his year-plus-long experience of being isolated with anything and everything all

of the time. As he explains, his normal release valve—comedy—seems an inappropriate form of

participation ("*Should I be joking at a time like this?*"). On one hand, Burnham's social anxiety

and depression contributes to this breakdown. But one could also read Burnham as one of many

experiencing a sort of white-guy-participation, marked by hopelessness and jokes, unsure what to

do when confronted with the need for sincerity and the stories of those living lives without his

immense privilege.

In contrast to Burnham's overwhelmed questioning about his own participatory

sensibilities stands Michaela Coel's widely-circulated 2021 Emmy Award acceptance speech.

Coel was being awarded for writing *I May Destroy You,* an original limited series about a

woman—Arabella, played by Coel—who was drugged and sexually assaulted. In the show,

Arabella is dragged into the social media spotlight via a viral #MeToo video. Her fame leads her

to being completely overwhelmed by rage at the patriarchy, and, after the show depicts her

having a psychotic break from the experience, she ends up deleting her account. In contrast to

Burnham's sensibility, Coel advocates for stepping back, rather than allowing the participatory

condition to break you down and quell potential insight.

> In a world that entices us to browse the lives of others to help us better determine how we
> feel about ourselves, and to, in turn, feel the need to be constantly visible—for visibility,

these days, seems to somehow equate to success—do not be afraid to disappear. From it, from us, for a while. And see what comes to you in the silence.[4]

Coel offered a different participatory sensibility from Burnham: "do not be afraid to disappear." Log off. Coel's speech begins by noting that she is addressing fellow writers, emboldening them to embrace distance rather than succumb to the pressure of constant visibility. As *NME* commentator Rhian Daly writes, "Coel implores us to reject society's always on, always connected digital reliance and social media oversharing… Her words are an impactful reminder that the best creativity – in writing or otherwise – doesn't come from a place of safety, and nor does it necessarily make us feel safe."[5] Where Burnham tries to sort it out, Coel makes the radical suggestion that her audience check out, and "see what comes to you in the silence." As the contrasting examples in this introduction reveal, we are currently seeking frameworks for dealing with demanding times as scholars, activists, creatives—as participants of many kinds.

Living a Participatory Life explores how people navigate these demanding, digital times where social movements and digital media meet, in the context of what media scholars refer to as the participatory condition. In the 2000s, scholars celebrated the possibilities of participatory cultures as "Web 2.0" created space for even novice users of computers to participate in writing blogs, creating videos, posting on forums, and playing games with strangers.[6] Now, 20 years

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[4] *Writing for a Limited or Anthology Series or Movie: 73rd Emmys*, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FI6kwRFRtU.

[5] Rhian Daly, "Michaela Coel's Emmys Speech Proves She's One of the Best in the Biz," *NME* (blog), September 20, 2021, https://www.nme.com/blogs/tv-blogs/michaela-coels-emmys-2021-acceptance-speech-shows-why-shes-one-of-the-best-writers-in-modern-tv-3049613.

[6] Henry Jenkins, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009). Jenkin's 2009 report for the McArthur Foundation synthesizes about a decade of media studies, education, and literacy research to prompt educational responses to young people's participation online.

later, participation is not just a culture, but an intensified, inherent condition of our digital media-saturated lives. Journalists are expected to interact with the public on platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Celebrities go live on Instagram from their homes to interact with chatting fans. Even established institutions like "government agencies, corporations, philanthropic organizations, and especially scientific infrastructures" rely on increasing participation through public involvement to legitimize themselves.[7] In *The Participatory Condition in the Digital Age*, editors Darin Barney, Gabriella Coleman, Christine Ross, Jonathan Sterne, and Tamar Tembeck argue that "participation has become a measure of the quality of our social situations and interactions, and has come to stand in for virtues that, under other conditions, might have names like equality, justice, fairness, community, or freedom."[8] One must participate, one must care, one must be engaged—that is the participatory condition.

The participatory condition renders legible Burnham's catchy lyric, "Apathy's a tragedy, and boredom is a crime," Coel's comment that we are enticed "to browse the lives of others… [and] feel the need to be constantly visible," and the "big tension" that Eric Jenkins identified. In the context of digitality, political culture is digital culture, and it is marked by an imperative to participate. What is the rhetorical significance of this imperative to participate in demanding times? And how can one participate in "anything and everything, all of the time?" *Living a Participatory Life* attempts to answer: how should we participate in demanding, digital times?

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[7]Christopher Kelty et al., "Seven Dimensions of Contemporary Participation Disentangled," *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 66, no. 3 (2015): 475, https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.23202.

[8]Darin Barney et al., eds., *The Participatory Condition in the Digital Age* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), ix.

At its most fundamental, this dissertation asks: What does it mean to live a participatory life? Put differently: how should we practice rhetoric (as a productive and critical art) during demanding, digital times? I attempt to explain the trans-situational rhetorical condition in which we find ourselves. I pursue three key research questions:

RQ1: What are the rhetorical consequences of the participatory condition?

RQ2: How do people navigate the participatory condition in order to participate in collective efforts for social change?

RQ3: What participatory sensibilities are (re)formatted in these efforts, and what models do they offer for living participatory lives?

Ultimately, my argument in this dissertation is two-fold. First, we are living in a participatory condition with unique qualities due to digitality. Second, we must reformat rhetorical practice accordingly. To introduce *Living a Participatory Life,* this chapter shows how this dissertation shifts existing scholarly conversations about participation, foreshadows its major concepts, and previews its chapters and case studies.

Modalities of participation

Living a Participatory Life offers a theory of how digital media formats participation and how rhetors work to reformat that participation. This dissertation will be of interest to readers in rhetoric, communication, and digital studies interested in citizenship and civic engagement, publics theory and social movements, and new materialist and affect theories. Certainly, participation is not a completely new study in these fields. But studying histories of participation *as participation* has not generated much scholarly attention. Anthropologist Christopher Kelty

notes that "participation is both absent from scholarly literature and at the same time surprisingly abundant."[9] Instead of discussing participation, scholarly study instead prioritizes discussions of "democracy, representation, the general will, and liberty."[10] In this section, I want to briefly describe what may be of interest to readers as I attempt to articulate the titular mission in *Living a Participatory Life*.

Participating in (and beyond) citizenship

Political theorist Danielle Allen conceptualizes rhetoric as that instructive, engaged art of citizens that creates the conditions for and cultivates the skills of deliberation. In *Talking to Strangers*, she writes that "rhetoric, understood as the art of talking to strangers as equals and of proving that one has also their good at heart, inspires the trust that provides a consent-based regime with the flexibility needed to garner, from citizens of diverse backgrounds, consent to decisions made in uncertainty."[11] Rhetoric, as outlined by Allen, is the practice of citizen deliberation that can build trust despite generations of distrust built from injustice in the United States. Allen's argument emphasizes the pragmatic reason for practicing rhetoric: using and listening to rhetoric is what makes living in a diverse citizenry possible. It is a necessary modality for members of a community to build trust and collectively make decisions with legitimacy.

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[9]Christopher M. Kelty, "Too Much Democracy in All the Wrong Places: Toward a Grammar of Participation," *Current Anthropology* 58, no. S15 (2017): S78, https://doi.org/10.1086/688705.

[10]Kelty, S79.

[11]Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education*, Paperback ed (Chicago, Ill.: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004), 156.

Studies of citizenship celebrate participation in public life through rhetorical activities as the glue that holds democracies together. Similar to Dewey's call to a "democratic personal way of life," a vision of discursive citizenship has been championed in rhetorical scholarship, and there is much to be recovered from this tightly knit relationship of citizenship and rhetoric.[12] Building from Dewey, Rob Asen's discourse theory of citizenship "recognizes the fluid, multimodal, and quotidian enactments of citizenship in a multiple public sphere."[13] Asen envisions citizenship as a practice that can be recognized in everyday acts, writing "This makes democracy realizable as something other than a grandiose dream of sudden revolutionary social change or a waiting until one's allies are 'in power' to enact democracy. Realization of democracy through human interaction highlights the role of communication in this process."[14] Asen's examples include someone purchasing at a local coffee shop instead of Starbucks because they wanted to support fair trade practices; today, an example might be someone choosing to use Mastodon instead of Twitter because of Elon Musk's labor practices. This quotidian theorization of citizenship is an antecedent to what I'll call the participatory imperative—if you can enact the care at the heart of citizenship literally any time, then you should feel obligated to do it as frequently as possible. Shawn J. Parry-Giles and J. Michael Hogan say that rhetoric is about

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[12] John Dewey, "Creative Democracy – The Task Before Us," 1939.

[13] Robert Asen, "A Discourse Theory of Citizenship," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90, no. 2 (2004): 191, https://doi.org/10.1080/0033563042000227436; cf. Christian Kock and Lisa S Villadsen, "Introduction: Citizenship as a Rhetorical Practice," in *Rhetorical Citizenship and Public Deliberation* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012); Christian Kock and Lisa S. Villadsen, "Rhetorical Citizenship: Studying the Discursive Crafting and Enactment of Citizenship," *Citizenship Studies* 21, no. 5 (2017): 570–86, https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2017.1316360.

[14] Asen, "A Discourse Theory of Citizenship," 197.

cultivating these "habits and skills of engaged citizenship."[15] These authors offer examples of how rhetorical studies imagines itself as more than just an academic discipline in a neoliberal university committed to professionalization of its students and the productivity of its faculty. It opens up the possibility of thinking of rhetorical studies as something that can contribute to civic life rather than just study it, a theme that I'll return to throughout *Living a Participatory Life*.

The frame of the citizen can be clarifying when trying to understand participation that involves appeals to, from, and/or within the nation-state. For example, Kristy Maddux's *Practicing Citizenship* shows how women excluded from suffrage found other methods for advocacy to affect civic life.[16] In another example, Ashley Hinck notes how online citizens may not belong to traditional civic bodies (like political parties) but are guided by new groups (like Harry Potter fan clubs) toward civic action like "voting, petitioning, and so on."[17] Naming their advocacy as practices of citizenship is an important move: for Maddux, to recover how women before and besides suffragists were engaged in U.S. political life in the 19th century; for Hinck, to validate fan networks as facilitating legitimate civic engagement in the 21st century.

However, relying on the concept of citizenship to enframe participation limits rhetorical studies in three ways. First, the citizen allows questions about participation to go ignored, replaced by unspecific assumptions about the disengaged citizen. Rufo and Atchison's review of

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[15]Parry-Giles and Hogan would probably take a narrower view than Asen on what counts as a practice of citizenship; nonetheless, both see the connection of rhetorical practice(s) and citizenship. Shawn J Parry-Giles and J Michael Hogan, *The Handbook of Rhetoric and Public Address* (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 2.

[16] Kristy Maddux, *Practicing Citizenship: Women's Rhetoric at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019).

[17]Ashley Hinck, "Ethical Frameworks and Ethical Modalities: Theorizing Communication and Citizenship in a Fluid World," *Communication Theory* 26, no. 1 (2016): 3, https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12062.

more than 500 articles and books presents compelling evidence of how the field relies on a loose

concept of citizen to avoid "debate… regarding the real value of participation within politics."[18]

As they claim, rhetorical studies of citizenship center the citizen as "always already both a

member of the body politic and its inadequate and life-threatening missing piece."[19] In the

citizenship frame, some suggest that the right formatting would coalesce if only we could

educate and activate enough people properly. Taking a participatory approach offers the chance

to dive into the ecological conditions that sustain this feeling of participatory lack, revealing

what may be needed for improving participation instead of hoping the citizen education model

finally clicks.

Second, the citizenship frame holds up normative standards of whiteness and delimits

rhetorical practices otherwise worthy of recognition. Karma Chávez amplifies the critique of

rhetoric's dominant narrative of citizenship by arguing that rhetorical studies will remain a

discipline studying (usually white) men speaking well if it does not think "Beyond Inclusion" in

that narrative. Breaking from the citizenship narrative, Chávez argues, would allow rhetoric to

become a "discipline constituted through non-normative, non-citizen, non-Western perspectives

and ways of knowing and being."[20] That change would recognize rhetoric's ontology exceeds

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[18]Kenneth Rufo and R. Jarrod Atchison, "From Circus to Fasces: The Disciplinary Politics of Citizen and Citizenship," *Review of Communication* 11, no. 3 (2011): 202, https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2011.578255.

[19]Rufo and Atchison, 203.

[20]Karma R. Chávez, "Beyond Inclusion: Rethinking Rhetoric's Historical Narrative," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 101, no. 1 (2015): 163, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2015.994908. Amy L. Brandzel, *Against Citizenship: The Violence of the Normative* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), makes a similar argument in the context of queer studies.

that of symbolicity directed toward the state, and that reckoning with race means studying more than just speeches from Black people.[21]

Finally, citizenship's directedness toward the nation-state does not reflect the reality of rhetoric or power in digital media ecologies, which makes theorizing about contemporary rhetoric challenging from within that conceptual frame. In the participatory condition, technoliberal corporations like Facebook, Google, and Microsoft are at least as powerful—if not more powerful—than the nation-state.[22] Mark Zuckerberg has even famously said "in a lot of ways Facebook is more like a government than a traditional company."[23] That said, users are not "citizens" of just one corporation or platform. They bounce around a medley of platforms used to participate in public and private life. The local newspaper, representative of a media ecology that ensured a tighter linkage between participation and geographically-bound citizenship, often

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[21] As Wanzer-Serrano details: "Such backgrounding of the theoretical perspectives that undergird critical praxis means that, with few exceptions that perhaps only prove the rule, we [rhetoricians] still don't deal particularly well (in any kind of explicit and theoretically nuanced way) with race or racism." Darrel Wanzer-Serrano, "Rhetoric's Rac(e/Ist) Problems," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 105, no. 4 (2019): 470, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2019.1669068.

[22] Pason et al. write that communication is "the general operating principle in a new phase of Empire with power centers no longer defined by the state but more as a confluence of corporations, governments, and media." Amy Pason, Christina R Foust, and Kate Zittlow Rogness, "Introduction: Rhetoric and The Study of Social Change," in *What Democracy Looks like: The Rhetoric of Social Movements and Counterpublics*, ed. Christina R Foust, Amy Pason, and Kate Zittlow Rogness (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2017), 5.

[23] Henry Farrell, Margaret Levi, and Tim O'Reilly, "Mark Zuckerberg Runs a Nation-State, and He's the King," *Vox*, April 9, 2018, https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2018/4/9/17214752/zuckerberg-facebook-power-regulation-data-privacy-control-political-theory-data-breach-king.

involved appeals to the local government or fellow citizens.[24] But digital rhetors are not primarily invoking nationalities: they are just engaging, just participating.[25]

If rhetorical studies wishes to update its understanding of our media environment, and undo its commitments to racism and nationalism, we need to use language that shifts our frames. While shifting to "participation" cannot solve all ills, *Living a Participatory Life* attempts an important update by shedding the citizenship frame and focusing on participation in order to ask the important questions of rhetoric that Danielle Allen highlights: How do we make participation count? How do we create better possibilities of engagement and disagreement? How do we build a world of diverse people that can live together well?

Making movements move

The rhetorical treatment of publics and social movements has attempted to probe dimensions of how people gather for deliberation and disagreement. Rhetoricians in the 1950s and '60s had their staid methodologies shocked by social unrest. Civil Rights, Vietnam, Women's Liberation, Environmentalism—movements and protests, seemingly teeming with rhetorical energy, prompted a shift from thinking biographically and instrumentally about single rhetors. Leland Griffin offered the first approach in 1952, suggesting "widening the scope of the rhetorical critic from the individual performance to the sweep of a persuasive campaign," as

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[24] Roderick Hart's collection of letters to the editor evidences this nicely. Roderick P. Hart, *Civic Hope: How Ordinary Americans Keep Democracy Alive* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[25] Ethan Zuckerman, "New Media, New Civics?," *Policy & Internet* 6, no. 2 (2014): 151–68, https://doi.org/10.1002/1944-2866.POI360.

Edwin Black summarized.[26] Over the next 25 years, discussions of how these movements should

affect the study of rhetoric continued. Franklyn Haiman believed that movements pointed out the

need to reduce inequality so people could be invited to "traditional standards of public

discussion."[27] Differently reductive, Gregg argued that protestors appeal to themselves, and not a

broader audience, because of a need for "psychological refurbishing and affirmation."[28] These

initial studies gave way to a lively reckoning with movements in the 1980s that informs

rhetorical study of various movements today.[29] The methodologically-disparate but topically-

similar study of publics asked more specifically about what forms participation could take. In the

introduction to their edited collection bringing these concepts together, Amy Pason, Christina R.

Foust, and Kate Zillow Rogness note that scholars turned to publics theory because of the

"rigidity of sociological movement theory" that assumes "social movements as grand agents

oriented toward policy change." In contrast, "Counterpublic scholarship emphasizes how texts,

styles of speaking, and aesthetic choices can mark one's participation in a counterpublic or/and

exclude one from wider publics and circulation channels."[30] The study of publics has attuned

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[26]Edwin Black, *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* (Madison: University of Wisconsin
Press, 1978), 20; Leland M. Griffin, "The Rhetoric of Historical Movements," *Quarterly Journal
of Speech* 38, no. 2 (1952): 184–88, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335635209381762.

[27]Franklyn S. Haiman, "The Rhetoric of the Streets: Some Legal and Ethical Considerations,"
Quarterly Journal of Speech 53, no. 2 (1967): 99–114,
https://doi.org/10.1080/00335636709382822.

[28]Richard B. Gregg, "The Ego-Function of the Rhetoric of Protest," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 4,
no. 2 (1971): 71–91.

[29] Recent edited volumes in rhetorical studies serve as evidence: Christina R Foust, Amy Pason,
and Kate Zittlow Rogness, *What Democracy Looks like: The Rhetoric of Social Movements and
Counterpublics* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2017); Nathan Crick, ed., *The
Rhetoric of Social Movements: Networks, Power, and New Media* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

[30]Pason, Foust, and Rogness, "Introduction: Rhetoric and The Study of Social Change," 4.

scholars to the forms of communal participation, what that participation develops, and where that participation goes.[31] Studies of publics and movements have helpfully attended to circulation and engagement.

Both the study of movement and publics are marked by a distinct situational approach featuring rational human agents oriented toward engagement. Jürgen Habermas's celebration of "people's public use of their reason" as a "political confrontation. . . without historical precedent" is the exemplar.[32] While the field has moved past Haiman's claim that protestors could not access rationality, studies still seek out and celebrate the exchange of arguments, the articulation of identities, and the facilitation of agency in situations.[33] Casey Boyle refers to this

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[31] For example, Asen has explored how neoliberalism obfuscates the search for the public good, and he finds potential for resistance in local publics; Steele, drawing on Squires, has shown how Black Feminist bloggers create enclave and counterpublics for advancing Digital Black Feminist politics; and Alt and Eberly have theorized how the classroom can work to develop public spheres on campuses, building on Eberly's earlier work. Robert Asen, "Neoliberalism, the Public Sphere, and a Public Good," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 103, no. 4 (2017): 329–49, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2017.1360507; Catherine Knight Steele, *Digital Black Feminism* (New York: NYU Press, 2021); Catherine R. Squires, "Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres," *Communication Theory* 12, no. 4 (2002): 446–68, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2002.tb00278.x; Rebecca A. Alt and Rosa A. Eberly, "Between Campus and Planet: Toward a Posthumanist *Paideia*," *Review of Communication* 19, no. 2 (2019): 94–110, https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2019.1595108; Rosa A. Eberly, "From Writers, Audiences, and Communities to Publics: Writing Classrooms as Protopublic Spaces," *Rhetoric Review* 18, no. 1 (1999): 165–78.

[32] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1962), 27.

[33] This criticism implicates even those who critique rationality. For example, agency-increasing is shown in feminist criticisms of deliberation despite their incisive critique of the patriarchal expectations of rationality. Highlighting the opposition of reason and passion—and the gendered assumptions attached to this opposition—feminist philosophers have reflected on deliberative practice and offered ways to do rational, human-to-human deliberation more inclusively. These feminist suggestions are helpful in identifying the limits of patriarchal expectations of rationality,

disposition as current-critical rhetoric (CCR). CCR, Boyle argues, is predicated on a view of

rhetoric that is bound to specific situations and rational decision-making—of "reflective practice

as a means to identify and negotiate social and cultural relations, primarily as a way of increasing

one's agency to negotiate human subjectivity and power."[34] Even as rhetoricians reclaim field

methods that complicate agency and center affect, our methodological orientation is still toward

critical reflection on situations that present knowledge—for being better critics or improving

rhetorical practice.[35]

      But in the participatory condition, this rational-situational sense of agency is fleeting.

Let's say your protest tweet might get tens of thousands of likes—you feel like you have had an

impact. But you notice that, as its ideas are re-circulated among many others, its particular

author, exigence, and audience is lost. It falls into oblivion quicker than it rose to fame. That

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but still find their solutions in either discrete, individual deliberators making conscious rhetorical changes or in deliberative infrastructures including more content for rational discussion but not shifting the telos of deliberation. Cheryl Hall, "Recognizing the Passion in Deliberation: Toward a More Democratic Theory of Deliberative Democracy," *Hypatia* 22, no. 4 (2007): 81–95, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2007.tb01321.x; Judith Squires, "Deliberation, Domination and Decision-Making," *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, no. 117 (2008): 104–33.

[34]Casey Andrew Boyle, *Rhetoric as a Posthuman Practice* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2018), 39. Boyle's naming and critique of CCR comes from his experience with rhetoric and writing studies, but dovetails with rhetoric and communication scholarship, as further evidenced by Rufo and Atchinson. While Rufo and Atchinson point out the reliance on the narrative and propose another one, Boyle challenges the knower-known relationship altogether and instead advocates for practices of embeddedness that do not rely on consciousness—detailed in the next section.

[35]Michael K. Middleton, Samantha Senda-Cook, and Danielle Endres, "Articulating Rhetorical Field Methods: Challenges and Tensions," *Western Journal of Communication* 75, no. 4 (2011): 386–406, https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2011.586969; Sara L. McKinnon et al., *Text + Field: Innovations in Rhetorical Method* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016).

said, it still contributes to the broader weave of culture, potentially shaping and transforming those who encounter it. This influence is probably not obvious or even remotely noticeable to you but nonetheless, your contribution becomes part of the fabric of a rhetorical ecology. *Living a Participatory Life* recognizes that the textual, rational outcomes of a movement or public (what policy is changed, what arguments are forwarded, what texts circulated) cannot account for the affective residue of participation, as Jenny Rice points out.[36] Conceiving of participation this way requires an update to CCR, an update that still emphasizes critical practice, but with vocabulary to appreciate the unique rhetorical qualities of the participatory condition. Let us turn now to such an update.

Practicing a Critical Axiological Turn

Rhetorical theory is undergoing an axiological turn. Guided by thinkers in new materialism and affect studies, the axiological turn suggests it is not enough to think about rhetoric as knowledge producing (epistemological turn) or rhetoric as force having (ontological turn). Laurie Gries explains this orientation as entailing "a suspicion that language and intentionality have been granted too much power in rhetorical matters… an attunement to the distributed enactment of agency and the emergent, contingent eventfulness of rhetoric; a recognition that all kinds of entities are vulnerable and responsive to one another; an appreciation of doing and being, of things and assemblages, of networks and materialities."[37] These

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[36]Jenny Edbauer Rice, "The New 'New': Making a Case for Critical Affect Studies," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94, no. 2 (2008): 211, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630801975434.

[37]Gries in Lynda Walsh et al., "Forum: Bruno Latour on Rhetoric," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 47, no. 5 (2017): 438, https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2017.1369822. On a similar point, Ingraham's review of rhetorical approaches to "energy" also summarizes the theoretical route of

theoretical innovations put a different slant on the centuries-long practice of rhetoric as "offering reasons under conditions of uncertainty, of making the best guess with limited evidence, of attempting to reach the most pragmatic, contingent decision, for the particular time and place."[38] The axiological turn prioritizes *rhetoric as an ethical practice.*

I see the axiological reformatting of rhetoric as a welcome turn toward inventive practice and theorizing that prioritizes collective life, and I consider *Living a Participatory Life* a contribution to the conversation on rhetoric's axiology. I want to suggest that those of us interested in taking the axiological turn, in studying and offering micropolitical practices, ought to examine and offer discrete *critical* practices for participatory life. In my view, one of the primary contributions of *Living a Participatory Life* is developing a theoretical vocabulary and offering critical examples of what rhetorical theory, criticism, and practice in the axiological turn could look like.

Thus far, the axiological turn has focused on micropolitical rhetorical practices in hopes of reformatting broad rhetorical cultures. As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari conceive of it, micropolitics are affective and perceptual and macropolitics are symbolic and systemic.[39] Studies of citizenship, publics, and social movements mostly attended to the macropolitical: to symbolic

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the axiological turn. Chris Ingraham, "Energy: Rhetoric's Vitality," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (2018): 260–68, https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2018.1454188.

[38] Jenkins, *Surfing the Anthropocene*, 115.

[39] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1987); Ryan M. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, The Information Society Series (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016); Jennifer Nish, *Activist Literacies: Transnational Feminisms and Social Media Rhetorics* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2022). Milner and Nish both use micro, meso, and macro to refer to individual, group, and cultural discourses online; I employ a different theoretical use of the terms.

exchange about systems, language, representations, and politics, and human agency in responding and acting. In response to the criticism of the CCR model that undergirds this focus, the axiological turn has focused on micropolitical practices that aim to shift habits, affects, and perceptions. Chris Ingraham and Casey Boyle offer two clear examples of this micropolitical focus.

Ingraham's *Gestures of Concern* forwards the concept of an affective commonwealth built through micropolitical gestures. Ingraham focuses on the banal and the small: gestures of concern are the "efforts people make to join in public affairs in ways that feel participatory and beneficial, though their measurable impact remains imperceptible."[40] In pre-digital times, this might be a Get Well card. The card does not *really* contribute to the health of the recipient, but it serves important relational purposes. In our digital time, this might be likes, retweets, follows, posts, or pins. Ingraham explains that participatory media and the "bewilderment of today's globally corporatized, information saturated age" explains the prevalence of these gestures—"an impalpable sense of civic involvement is often more compelling than being involved through a more substantive investment."[41] Recognizing the interplay of affective and symbolic orders, Ingraham focuses on theorizing the affective dimension of contemporary, information-saturated digital culture. Specifically, he conceptualizes the affective commonwealth, "a shared sense of what it feels like to be alive at the present time, but as if that feeling were a resource anyone could draw on to make sense of their worlds and to affirm more sustainable ways of being interconnected within them."[42] Gestures of concern help build and connect gesturers to this

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[40]Christopher Ingraham, *Gestures of Concern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 1.

[41]Ingraham, 26.

[42]Ingraham, 5.

commonwealth, and Ingraham argues that these gestures operate "in a dispositional, orienting mode" that make possible the work of "political emancipation."[43] Ingraham's affective commonwealth and gestures of concern offer a micropolitical mode of participation in hopes of creating environments where macropolitical change ("political emancipation") is possible.

Similarly, Boyle's new materialist approach advocates for participation that works to micropolitically re-iterate infrastructure into more productive macropolitical formations. In *Rhetoric as a Posthuman Practice,* he argues that the posthuman perspective to rhetoric should imagine rhetoric as a "tuning exercise" that helps "amplify and/or attenuate prior relationships toward more productive incorporations."[44] In this view, the networks and infrastructure—the formats—that are produced by rhetorical activity are of primary interest because they co-constitute the affective environment with human actors that subsequently shapes the potential for future action. In this way, Boyle conceptualizes rhetoric as a posthuman practice, "a practice that exercises serial encounters within ecologies to inform bodies."[45] Key to his understanding is supplanting argumentation as the master metaphor for rhetoric with information. Perhaps a hyphen will clarify: in-formation, *v.*, persuasion is the process of "amplifying and attenuating affective forces in an ongoing attempt to individuate bodies."[46] In this view, the goal of rhetorical practice is to "exercise our tendencies—our relations and affinities—to generate greater capacities to affect and be affected."[47] Boyle offers examples like creating glitch art, where digital artists edit the code of an image file to produce unexpected aberrations in the

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[43]Ingraham, 74, 21.

[44]Boyle, *Rhetoric as a Posthuman Practice*, 71.

[45]Boyle, 27.

[46]Boyle, 88.

[47]Boyle, 42.

image. Glitch art creation shows how experimenting with technology can shift common expectations of media, and works toward a sensibility that encourages re-iterative experimentation. Boyle says that posthuman practice asks "Which one?" in contrast to humanist "What is?"—constantly experimenting with new formats and formations instead of focusing on stable explanation.[48] Boyle's practice is not oriented solely toward macropolitical criticism and judgment, because it realizes these are just one result of getting in-formed, and new forms should be consistently, micropolitically practiced to resist a standardization that is necessarily exclusionary.

The axiological turn of rhetoric is returning to and recontextualizing a familiar idea: that everything is political. The feminist mantra "the personal is political" is the go-to example, a sloganization of a key realization second-wave feminists encouraged: that the domestic lives of women were not separate from political concerns about misogyny. As I mentioned earlier, Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* express it in terms of macro- and micro-politics.

> In short, everything is political, but every politics is simultaneously a macropolitics and a micropolitics. Take aggregates of the perception or feeling type: their molar organization, their rigid segmentarity, does not preclude the existence of an entire world of unconscious micropercepts, unconscious affects, fine segmentations that grasp or experience different things, are distributed and operate differently. There is a micropolitics of perception, affection, conversation, and so forth.[49]

Deleuze and Guattari insist on the importance of this micropolitical level because of their interest in fascism. They write that "It's too easy to be antifascist on the molar level, and not even see the fascist inside you, the fascist you yourself sustain and nourish and cherish with molecules both

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[48]Boyle, 191.

[49] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 213.

personal and collective."[50] So attending to the micropolitical is key for resisting macro-movements like fascism because fascism requires mass participation at the micro level of "perception, affection, conversation." Gestures of concern and posthuman practices of in-formation attempt to shift things at that micro level. In a similar way, second wave feminists encouraged seeing the home and (lack of) resistance within it as a political project, one that could sustain or help disrupt the patriarchy.

However, we must heed the concerns of critical scholars of race, who have rightly pointed out the micropolitical turn can result in Eurocentricity and depoliticization. The preference for the micro over the macro can look like ignoring histories and systems of oppression and conflating those perspectives with so-called identity politics.[51] Diana Leong specifically implicates this concern, about the micropolitical ethics of practice, in her critique of new materialism: "Interpreting and describing our entanglements with non-human, materialist forces are not enough to account for, much less dislodge attachments to, social categories and representational arrangements. By this I mean that becoming more aware of material forces will not inevitably reduce the weight of discursive or psychic formations."[52] Leong provides examples of prominent new materialists and posthumanists who disregard the insights of poststructuralist scholarship about race, gender, sexuality, etc., as uncomplex identity politics.

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[50] Deleuze and Guattari, 215.

[51] Black feminist new materialists have shown that this need not be the case. Alexander G Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human.* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*, Sexual Cultures (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

[52] Diana Leong, "The Mattering of Black Lives: Octavia Butler's Hyperempathy and the Promise of the New Materialisms," *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 2, no. 2 (2016): 11, https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v2i2.28799.

The ethics of participation offered by axiology inquiry must be informed by critical insights about the many exigent situations we face in these demanding times. Armond Towns emphasizes this point, too, when he writes that "If my capacity to communicate is not a relation of self-determination and/or choice . . . but instead the product of gratuitous violence, do the communicative methods and theories of the colonizer (or that which first classified me as "Black" and "male") provide an escape from racial violence?"[53] Towns points to how offering posthuman practice as if it transcends identity politics is theoretically unsound when someone other than a white masculine rhetor is the subject of theorizing. While it is attractive to turn to a micropolitical, trans-situated practice of "which one," one needs to start with some macropolitical and perhaps even old-fashioned humanist insights into "which one's *not*"—i.e., which micropolitical practices must we reject because of histories and cultures of prejudice and fascism?[54] New materialism has much to offer for the axiological turn, but much like scholars can slip into an unnamed white feminism, new materialists must ensure they are not doing white new materialism.

Black feminism, and especially Black feminist new materialism, offers an alternative approach that forthrightly puts axes of power and identity into axiological reformatting. Black

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[53]Armond R. Towns, "Black 'Matter' Lives," *Women's Studies in Communication* 41, no. 4 (2018): 356, https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2018.1551985.

[54] "Tactics and techniques alone are insufficient for reinvigorating democracy in our late-modern world. Cooperation, deliberation, and collective action are needed first and foremost." See Alexander Livingston, "Avoiding Deliberative Democracy? Micropolitics, Manipulation, and the Public Sphere," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 45, no. 3 (2012): 288. Livingston argues that an updated critical theory of the public sphere can solve some of the problems with critiques of deliberative democracy as "intellectualist" (and what I refer to here as macropolitical and humanist) from those who support a visceral (affective) micropolitical strategy. Livingston's defense of the public sphere suggests it is a rhizomatic space where the visceral, dialogic, and discursive can function together for deliberative democracy.

feminists have worked to understand the many axes on which the political operates, exemplified

in Kimberle Crenshaw's critique of a single-axis framework in her conceptualization of

intersectionality.[55] In *Black Feminist Thought,* Patricia Hill Collins's matrix of domination gives

a conceptual tool for understanding complex political relations across micro-macro, analyzing

multiple axes of oppression (racism, sexism, colonialism, homophobia, etc) across

"interconnected domains of power—structural, interpersonal, disciplinary, and hegemonic."[56]

Attending to the matrix of domination forces thinking through how micropolitical actions

resonate (or don't, or can't) across various domains, highlighting a fundamental compatibility

between the theories of Deleuze and Guattari and Black feminist insights. There are ample

examples of Black feminist (and Black studies) scholars doing axiological, new materialist work

that imagines beyond liberal humanism because it recognizes how that project is a violent,

colonial one.[57] For example, in *Becoming Human,* Zakiyyah Jackson shows how artists in the

African diaspora have eschewed the human/matter distinctions, appealing to ending anti-Black

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[55] Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139–67; Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99, https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039.

[56] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed., Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 1999), 288.

[57] Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337, https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015; Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, "'Theorizing in a Void': Sublimity, Matter, and Physics in Black Feminist Poetics," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (2018): 617–48, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-6942195. Almost all of these return in some way to Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, New ed, Get Political (London: Pluto-Press, 1952).

violence without appealing to the problematic category of the human.[58] It is not just *possible* to attend to issues of affect, of rhetorical entanglements and environments, and attend to intersectional oppression—it is *vital* to understanding how power works today and how movements for social change might respond.

Putting axes into the axiological turn also emphasizes the power of digital infrastructure in the matrix of domination. Catherine Knight Steele shows how the matrix of domination is conceptually valuable for understanding digital environments. Steele's *Digital Black Feminism* shows how the "matrix of domination explains how interlocking systems of oppression spur Black women's ingenuity and allow us to chart the technological and rhetorical products produced by Black women in addition to the mechanisms used to sustain systems of oppression."[59] This perspective is further enriched by Ruha Benjamin, who relies on the concept of the matrix of domination to show "how race 'gets inside' technology… to look again at the way our sociotechnical systems are constructed – by whom and to what ends."[60] Specifically, Benjamin forwards the idea of the New Jim Code, "the employment of new technologies that reflect and reproduce existing inequities but that are promoted and perceived as more objective or progressive than the discriminatory systems of a previous era."[61] The Matrix of domination is a method to reveal how axes of oppression are built into our daily political lives—now in digital infrastructure—and the practices of resistance being developed to resist them.

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[58] Jackson, *Becoming Human*.

[59] Steele, *Digital Black Feminism*, 56.

[60] Ruha Benjamin, *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Medford, MA: Polity, 2019), 86.

[61] Benjamin, 18.

By considering iterative practices that build infrastructures and small gestures leading to commonwealths, scholars in the axiological turn have begun to articulate the relationship of rhetoric and the micro- and macro-political. *Living a Participatory Life* starts with the relationships they've theorized, but focuses on how to put axes of oppression—and resistance to them—at the center of the axiological turn. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that "molecular escapes and movements would be nothing if they did not return to the molar organizations to reshuffle their segments, their binary distributions of sexes, classes, and parties."[62] Our micropolitical practices and examples take the participatory condition seriously (Ingraham) and can be used inventively to offer explanations of how rhetoric works (Boyle). Now, we ask: how do we take these micropolitical practices back to—and generate them from—the macropolitical? What should we do about intersectional systems of oppression like the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy? What about rising fascism? Can rhetoric still build trust in diverse societies, and equip those advocating for justice? *Living a Participatory Life* approaches these questions of demanding, digital times through a format theory of participation.

Participation, demanding and digital

Living a Participatory Life defines participation as a formatted rhetorical practice that modulates affect and sensibilities within a formatted ecology. In the following chapters, I stage an intervention between format theory and rhetorical theory. In the first chapter, I theorize four concepts at length to develop a formatted theory of participation to help understand rhetoric as an ethical practice in demanding, digital times. For now, I want to offer a short preview of each concept.

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[62] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 216.

First, I explain that participation is always formatted in basic **participatory parameters**. Participation describes practices that relate individuals to collectives. Formats begin with basic parameters, like protocols, interfaces, and infrastructures. Participation has literal parameters, like absentee ballots and character limits, that set up modes of relation. Parameters also include cultural ideas about participation, like the concept of citizenship, that help create a sense of what "individual" (e.g., a citizen) is relating to what "collective" (e.g., the nation).

Second, I explain how digital technology and technoliberal capitalism formats that participation in a **participatory imperative**. In the participatory condition, participation is not encouraged in cultures but instead acts as an imperative. I forward a concept of the participatory imperative to help name the rhetorical structures that compel participation. Naming a "participatory imperative" brings scholars across various fields together in conversation about how digital media compels engagement. In rhetorical studies, Johanna Hartelius writes, "'Anytime! Anywhere!' are the sentencing guidelines for a society in which we are always at the network's disposal. The spatial and temporal unboundedness of economic and social labor compel us toward constant production."[63] In surveillance studies, Julie E. Cohen explains how platforms like Foursquare used gamification to enhance surveillance, writing that it "invests surveillance with a participation imperative directed toward production: a virtuous cycle in which more is always more."[64] And in anthropology and internet studies, Kelty explains how "the experience of participating in social media and other participatory platforms is often felt as a

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[63]E. Johanna Hartelius, "The Anxious Flâneur: Digital Archiving and the Wayback Machine," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 106, no. 4 (2020): 390, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2020.1828604.

[64] Julie E. Cohen, "The Surveillance–Innovation Complex: The Irony of the Participatory Turn," in *The Participatory Condition in the Digital Age*, ed. Darin Barney et al., Electronic Mediations 51 (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2016), 213.

responsibility, even a civic duty (one must connect with people, one must express opinions, one must argue, one must contribute to science, one must know one's genome)."[65] Across these scholars and fields, we see how a condition is explained and sustained by an imperative: you must be online, you must participate.

Third, I suggest a persuasive model of **trans-situational participation.** While participation and rhetorical practice have traditionally been thought of as acts done in a particular setting (i.e., a particular time and place), the participatory condition troubles that stability. The participatory imperative constantly produces the sensation of *kairos* from both technologies and a sense of global sociopolitical crisis. But participating in every potential situation—in anything and everything all of the time—is neither possible nor desirable. Trans-situational participation suggests that participatory affects ecologically and ambiently spread across time and space.

Finally, participation's formatting can be reformatted through **participatory sensibilities.** Sensibilities are culturally encoded (by circulating discourse and by the technological code that circulates it) but are also responsive to particular situations from unique habituations and educable through repeated practice. Participatory sensibilities name how participants interact with trans-situations in ways that are partially determined by digital formats and partially reflective of individual creativity and agency in "tentative explorations of the outer edges" of these formats.[66] Jane Bennett, defending the study of sensibilities in the fields of political theory and ethics, writes: "Why would someone choose to focus on the micromaterialism of sensibility? Perhaps because she judged that the obstacles to social justice included not only a lack of

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[65] Christopher M. Kelty, *The Participant: A Century of Participation in Four Stories* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 256.

[66] Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 146.

knowledge about economic oppression or a lack of the means to mitigate them, but also a lack of willingness to employ the knowledge and means available."[67] In the CCR model, rhetorical practice is an agentic exercise of human reflection and action. In some trans-situational models, humans have little to no agency in discrete rhetorical practice and can only hope their serial practice informs infrastructures. Participatory sensibilities exist in the middle, seeing how micro-inventions may lead to macro-interventions. The problems of the participatory condition are not simply pressing theoretical dilemmas, but key to building collective political life.

Living a Participatory Life suggests that rhetoric is a lifelong commitment one makes to participation, and it theorizes how one might go about developing sensibilities for living a participatory life. Since antiquity, rhetoric has been about preparing participants for participation. Rhetorical training and practice stands out from coercive modes because it places us in a responsible (and response-able) relation to others, as a participant. Rhetoric has a responsibility to collective life. Put differently, rhetoric's fundamental ethic is participatory. Reckoning with rhetoric's intrinsic axiology leads the dissertation to its title, inspired by Ahmed's work *Living a Feminist Life.* In that book, Ahmed reclaims living a feminist life as a valid work of feminist theory.

> Living a feminist life does not mean adopting a set of ideals or norms of conduct, although it might mean asking ethical questions about how to live better in an unjust and unequal world (in a not-feminist and antifeminist world); how to create relationships with others that are more equal; how to find ways to support those who are not supported or are less supported by social systems; how to keep coming up against histories that have become concrete, histories that have become as solid as walls. . . . In this book I refuse to relegate the question of how to live a feminist life to history. To live a feminist life is to make everything into something that is questionable. The question of how to live a feminist life is alive as a question as well as being a life question.[68]

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[67] Bennett, 151.

[68] Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 1–2.

In this dissertation, I want to make the analogous move in rhetorical studies. May we be so lucky

that being a rhetorician becomes just as controversial a political statement as being a feminist!

Living a participatory life should be the ethical work of rhetorical theory. We must refuse to

relegate the question of how to live a participatory life to history, to some unknown 'participant'

or 'rhetor' outside of *us*. Let us embrace making participation alive as a question—a *life*

question.

Conclusion and chapter preview

"The situation of the world is desperate. There's no rational ground for hope. If you look at
things rationally, if you look at the increasing disparities of wealth and health in the world, if you
look at the spreading environmental destruction, if you look at the looming disasters in the
foundations of the economy, if you look at the energy crisis and the food crises affecting the
globe, and especially if you look at the way they interrelate, if you look at the virulence of
renascent nationalist sentiment and of the culture of war, there is no hope. So the [participatory]
question is how to live more intensely, live more fully, with augmented powers of existence,
within the limits of that desperate situation, while finding ways to continue nevertheless,
chipping away at the macro problems."

—Brian Massumi[69]

"Instead, growing the world we want is like the slow tending of a garden, transforming the plants
by fostering relationships, trust, skills, community accountability, and healing. It requires
cultivating new habits *internally*, seeding restorative ways of being together *interpersonally*,
uprooting practices of inequality *institutionally*, and planting alternative possibilities *structurally*.
If we only concentrate on our internal work while ignoring the fires burning all around us, we'll
eventually be consumed. But if we only concentrate on putting out the blaze, we'll eventually
burn out."

—Ruha Benjamin[70]

In *Living a Participatory Life,* I recognize we are in demanding, digital times. In Chapter

1, (Re)Formatting Participation, I theorize four key concepts for understanding the format

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[69] Brian Massumi and Joel McKim, "Of Microperception and Micropolitics," *Inflexions: A Journal for Research-Creation* 3 (2009): 18.

[70] Ruha Benjamin, *Viral Justice: How We Grow the World We Want* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 54.

of participation in the participatory condition: parameters, imperatives, trans-situations, and sensibilities. I build this theoretical base from foundations in rhetorical studies with research from cultural theory, Black feminist studies, digital studies, and media studies. Specifically, I key into the resonance between the emerging field of format theory and cross-disciplinary conversations about participation. Taking the dissertation's title seriously, I take this vocabulary to cases that highlight how we might live more intensely and fully, how we might cultivate, seed, uproot, and plant. Believing that "social movements bring affective knowledge into politics as they offer a space for experimenting with 'how we might live,'" I detail three sensibilities from advocates for social change across intersectional issues of racism and (cis)sexism.[71]

A brief note on methods: as a theorist and critic, I follow a basic pattern in each chapter. First, I describe the context of the chapter. Drawing on rhetorical, media, and intellectual histories, I detail—to the best of my ability—*what is going on?* in the case study at hand. In particular, I attempt to generate format histories that show how a given sensibility stands out from and draws upon a history of participation in that format (i.e., bodily assembly, criticism, and slideshows). I detail the parameters and imperatives acting on participants and participation in the case. Second, I interpret the act(s) of participation, given the context of the case and theoretical apparatus of the dissertation. I engage in close textual analysis to describe a sensibility, naming a few of its rhetorical conventions as they relate to the trans-situation at hand. As the following paragraphs mention, texts include written material like blogs, op-eds, social media posts, and reporting, as well as photographs and videos. Finally, drawing on Black feminist, intersectional, and rhetorical thought, I evaluate how such a sensibility can guide a

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[71] Azumi Tamura, *Post-Fukushima Activism: Politics and Knowledge in the Age of Precarity*, Routledge Innovations in Political Theory 82 (New York: Routledge, 2018), i.

practice of living a participatory life. Chapter 1 further discusses method, as each concept (parameters, imperatives, trans-situations, and sensibilities) amplifies the specific angle I take in approaching rhetoric in demanding, digital times.

Chapter 2, Disparticipants, concerns participants in the 2017 and 2019 Women's Marches. The Women's March, attempting to format a collective of "women," threatened to paper over intersectional issues. Black feminists pointed out the racism in white feminism; trans feminists, cissexism; and Jewish feminists, anti-semitisim. And yet, the promise that millions would march offered an imperative to gather and offer collective voice. How could one challenge white feminism while still taking advantage of the chance to "deliver a bodily demand for a more livable set of economic, social, and political conditions"?[72] Facing a participatory imperative that places ideological purity and mass popularity in tension, movements that desire to be politically effective and act in the interest of their participants need a sensibility for participatory dissent that leads to reformatting instead of conflict that devolves to dissolution. Using three examples from the 2017 and 2019 Women's Marches, this chapter theorizes a queer participatory sensibility that I call "disparticipation." Building from José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications*, I define disparticipation as the sensibility of someone who takes part in an assembly queerly, taking advantage of the gathering but subverting its reformist politics. While disparticipants may be seen as not participating, or even counter-protesting, I reframe their participation as a "diss" of a protest for a lack of nuanced politics. Each case is built from a combination of digital images, blog posts, and journalistic material. I argue that Women's March disparticipants dissed white feminist racism, cissexism, and anti-Semitism. Disparticipation

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[72] Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 11.

generates discourse that can expand the *topoi* of protest rhetoric by revealing and responding to broader structural injustices.

Chapter 3, Fictocritics, asks the question: What is the role of criticism in the participatory condition? This chapter finds an answer in the fictocritical sensibility of the YouTuber ContraPoints. First, I explain the relationship of digitality, criticism, and affect, knitting together intellectual histories of criticism and post-criticism with theorizations of digitality into a participatory format history of criticism. Specifically, I suggest criticism can regain its steaminess in the participatory condition. Then, I perform a visual close reading of two of ContraPoints's videos to explore her participatory sensibility in the context of YouTube. I suggest that ContraPoints reveals a fictocritical participatory sensibility that helps direct critical steaminess. Fictocriticism grew out of the work of Michael Taussig in anthropology, whose goal was to show a multiplicity of perspectives and possibilities by doing experimental ethnography that blended "fact and fiction, ethnographic observation, archival history, literary theory and memoir."[73] Specifically, I'll detail how ContraPoints's fictocritical participatory sensibility resists fascism by taking advantage of the YouTube algorithm while carefully constructing videos where she balances invention and intervention and exaggerates her critical proximity. Fictocritical participation is uniquely suited to the audiences and dilemmas of the participatory condition.

Chapter 4, Installectuals, addresses the phenomenon of the Instagram activist slideshow. After the murder of George Floyd and a resurgence of Black Lives Matter activism in Summer 2020, creators and activists gave Instagram features like carousels and stories a new political use,

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[73] Emily Eakin, "Anthropology's Alternative Radical," *The New York Times*, April 21, 2001, para. 3, https://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/21/arts/anthropology-s-alternative-radical.html.

by remediating an older medium—the slideshow. Are slideshows on a digital platform a meaningful way to participate in anti-racism? To understand the participatory parameters of the slideshow, I first engage in a format history of slideshows from the 17th century to 2020. Then, I perform a close reading of several slideshows, drawing on an archive of Instagram Activist Slideshows.[74] I conclude that the resulting intellectual sensibility is helpfully attuned to access and information, I will argue it remains tethered to technoliberal modes of judgment. By relying on the ethos of slideshows, the sensibility opened up conversation about participation beyond the tired slacktivism talking points. These openings often relied on the participatory imperative, suggesting that feeds should not "return to normal," demanding it was imperative to participate in (re)posting slideshows. But because of the mediated constraints of Instagram and of the slide, an installectual sensibility is limited by what is rendered legible by the visual and digital. These modes of judgment tie participation in social justice projects to the metrics that benefit digital platforms, metrics that must be questioned in projects seeking intersectional justice. However, I also find opportunity in the slideshow's sensibilities when viewed from a more micropolitical angle: slideshows have created a habit of participation on a platform, redirecting attention toward political discussion of intersectional justice issues on a platform that had attempted to be apolitical.

Finally, *Living a Participatory Life* ends with a conclusion that offers a provocation for living a participatory life. In *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed offers a feminist killjoy toolkit that directs readers on how they might go about living a feminist life. Given the contradictions of these three sensibilities, and the desire to intensify instead of standardize, I hesitate to

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[74] That archive is compiled online at the Instagram Slideshow Archive, a digital humanities project that I manage but is separate from the dissertation. https://instagramslideshows.omeka.net/

recommend a set of practices that may be outdated (or back in vogue) as you read this. Instead, the conclusion offers a suggestive DIY guide to reformatting participation. The conclusion participates in a poetic project of (re)building participatory lives we can live together.

Chapter 1: (Re)Formatting the Participatory Condition

Formats and participation

Participation is a question of formatting. Formatting is a task of many layers. Consider this chapter's formatted journey. First, I have my computer disk *formatted* to prepare it for my operating system. Second, on that system, I make edits to the *formatting* of my document to standardize it for the university (*in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy*, as the format demands I write several times). Third, I refer to the DOCX *format* of the document I download before submitting or circulating it. Finally, when it's time to turn it into a book, I'll *reformat* it to suit changes in my thinking and whatever editorial style is requested by the press. And throughout, I have had to listen to my advisor's evaluation of my document's formatting and reformat accordingly.[1] Participation is similarly formatted, as it is prepared, arranged, distributed, and reformatted.

In the introduction, I explained that we are living *in* participatory life, governed by the participatory condition. In other words: "participation—being involved in doing something and taking part in something with others—has become both environmental (a state of affairs) and normative (a binding principle of right action)."[2] In this chapter, I detail the four major concepts of *Living a Participatory Life* that explain the rhetorical significance of the participatory condition. All intersect with the broader metaphor and theory of formatting. Understanding

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[1] For example, this sentence was written by my advisor and added during a round of reformatting.

[2] Darin Barney et al., eds., *The Participatory Condition in the Digital Age* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), vii.

participation as a format is both definitional and metaphorical. Definitionally, participation is formatted: it requires a sense of how the individual and collective must relate, the citizen and the state; the player and the game. I also understand participation through the metaphor of media formatting, which exposes the various rhetorical dimensions of participation as a format.

To understand, critique, and theorize participation—and find and encourage ethical participatory practice—I reckon with four layers of formats. First, like the disk, I set the basic *parameters* of participation to prepare for the next stages of formatting. Second, like the document layout, I advance an understanding of the contemporary *participatory imperative*, specifically formatted by technological change and rhetorics of (techno)liberalism. Third, like the file format, I suggest that participation happens *trans-situationally* in an affective format. Finally, I argue for an axiological turn in rhetorical studies that offers practices for *reformatting sensibilities*.

I am using the concept of formatting to elucidate the relationship of participation, rhetoric, and digital media. Participation *itself* is an expression of a formatted relation. In his book *The Participant,* Kelty says that participation describes the "longstanding problem of the relation between persons and collectives."[3] Kelty argues that participation has to be formatted to make this relationship functional, and these assemblages of participation have different affordances.[4] This is true of participation at the most basic, benign level—a child's tee ball game might be formatted by formal rules and regulations and technological interventions like the tee

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[3]Christopher M. Kelty, *The Participant: A Century of Participation in Four Stories* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 42.

[4]"Different arrangements of people, procedures, goals, and institutions will produce or transform different collective kinds, and different relations can yield dif-ferent forms of personhood (tending toward alienated individuality, for instance, or identification with a particular collective)." Kelty, 23.

and the lines drawn on a field. But it is also true of participation in our most important political

contexts—like voting, a format with a history that reflects how political culture and formats of

participation influence each other. Indeed, Kelty considers the formatting of participation as a

key to his methodology, noting that "one might observe the transformation—even the end—of

liberal democracy by attending more carefully to the concrete, practical ways in which the

elements of participation are being formatted and reformatted today."[5] Participation is thus an

ethical dilemma expressed in a question of formatting—how should individuals relate to

collectives?[6]

 Taking Kelty's idea of participation as being a question of format allows me to stage an

encounter between rhetorical theory and the emerging subfield of format theory. Both

fields overlap with media studies, exploring and explaining histories of media technologies and

practices. Format theory has crystallized as a subfield of media studies in recent years, perhaps

most clearly starting with Jonathan Sterne's 2012 book *MP3: The Meaning of a Format,* and

more recently in the 2020 edited volume *Format Matters*.[7] Sterne posits that formats are distinct

from media.

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[5] Kelty, 43.

[6] I use ethics to refer to questions about the ability and potential for acting—not questions of
moral codes. "Formats" of participation are thus important ethical infrastructure, as they set up
"modes of recognition and relation." Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "Introduction: Race and/as
Technology; or, How to Do Things to Race," *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media
Studies* 24, no. 1 (2009): 9, https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-2008-013; E. A. Grosz, *The
Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism* (New York: Columbia University
Press, 2017); Casey Andrew Boyle, *Rhetoric as a Posthuman Practice* (Columbus: Ohio State
University Press, 2018).

[7] Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012);
Marek Jancovic, Axel Volmar, and Alexandra Schneider, eds., *Format Matters: Standards,
Practices, and Politics in Media Cultures* (Lüneburg: meson press, 2020).

> Format denotes a whole range of decisions that affect the look, feel, experience, and workings of a medium. It also names a set of rules according to which a technology can operate. … Studying formats highlights smaller registers like software, operating standards, and codes, as well as larger registers like infrastructures, international corporate consortia, and whole technical systems. If there were a single imperative of format theory, it would be to focus on the stuff beneath, beyond, and behind the boxes our media come in, whether we are talking about portable MP3 players, film projectors, television sets, parcels, mobile phones, or computers.[8]

As my opening anecdote about formatting this document illustrates, attending to format means attending to various layers of formatting: from the most fundamental, technical, and preparatory to the most minute—yet influential—details of font and style. Perhaps that seems a bit confusing. Marek Jancovic, Axel Volmar, and Alexandra Schneider, the editors of *Format Matters*, admit that "Discussions of the term "format" are troubled by a semantic indeterminacy."[9] Formatting bears similarity to at least four other keywords in rhetoric, media, and digital studies: genre, interface, protocol, and infrastructure. "It seems that these analytical entities," the editors write, "form a circular field in which concepts can be explained in terms of each other, but nonetheless remain elusive individually… the notion of format possesses a strange definitory pliability, seemingly refusing any conclusive *definiens*."[10] The pliable polysemy of format proffers productive possibilities for this project.

Rather than try to set up fragile definitional walls for "format"—that do more for disciplinary posturing and less for conceptual clarity–I want to address how using format's many overlaps with these concepts can be analytically productive.

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[8] Sterne, *MP3*, 8, 11.

[9] Jancovic, Volmar, and Schneider, *Format Matters*, 8.

[10] Jancovic, Volmar, and Schneider, 8.

- **Infrastructure: Formats are in part set by the existence and constraints of digitality's material infrastructure.** Looking beneath, behind, under, and around digital media and technology to the very base of digitality is "network infrastructures: the servers, wires, undersea cables, microwave towers, satellites, data centers, and water and energy resources that constitute networks, along with the programs and applications by which devices access those networks."[11] Formats begin at the material infrastructure: networks of wires, signals of routers, and so on. This infrastructure is then bought, sold, and owned. Formats are made possible by infrastructural giants like Amazon Web Services, which hosts roughly one third of the internet—9 million websites.[12] A polysemous definition of format appreciates how the ideological implications of infrastructure begin with the material: wires and owners, whether running cloud storage space in digitality or broadcasting television in analog times.

- **Protocol: Formats generated within protocols are basic settings (or parameters) that influence the many other layers of formatting.** Alexander Galloway's *Protocol* brought critical attention to how the basic protocols of the internet functioned within society. "A computer protocol is a set of recommendations and rules that outline specific

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[11] Allison Carruth, "The Digital Cloud and the Micropolitics of Energy," *Public Culture* 26, no. 2 (2014): 342, https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2392093.

[12] "AWS Market Share: Revenue, Growth & Competition (2023)," Kinsta®, accessed January 20, 2023, https://kinsta.com/aws-market-share/; Dan Runkevicius, "How Amazon Quietly Powers The Internet," *Forbes*, September 3, 2020, https://www.forbes.com/sites/danrunkevicius/2020/09/03/how-amazon-quietly-powers-the-internet/.

technical standards," Galloway writes.[13] More recently, critical attention to algorithms have surfaced how problematic said protocols can be. Safiya Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* showed how Google search was rife with racist and misogynistic assumptions.[14] Protocols are what make the material infrastructure work. E.g., accessing www.matthewsalzano.com is not made possible simply from undersea cables but from HTML, TCP/IP, and DNS, all of which are protocols that allow computers and servers to link together to create the internet and world wide web. Or, in an analog example, having a television antenna only works with established electromagnetic frequencies for broadcasting each channel. These protocols both rely on the material infrastructure and on human argument, discussion, presentation, and negotiation to be generated, but once they are "released into the world… [they] become merely logistics" that serve as the basic parameters for use.[15] Thus, formats have protocols that rely on infrastructure.

- **Interface: Interfaces are formatted, and formats are interacted with through interfaces.** Interfaces are "designed not to call attention" to themselves and work to make "the user 'well-disposed, attentive, and receptive' and thereby susceptible to persuasion."[16] As Chase Aunspach has shown of Grindr, formatted interfaces can hide

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[13] Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization*, Leonardo (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 33.

[14] Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

[15] Damien Smith Pfister, "Digitality, Rhetoric, and Protocological Fascism; Or, Fascist Ants & Democratic Cicadas," *Journal for the History of Rhetoric* 23, no. 1 (2020): 12, https://doi.org/10.1080/26878003.2020.1693440.

[16] Michelle Kendrick, "Invisibility, Race, and the Interface," *Rhetoric Review* 24, no. 4 (2005): 397; Teena A. M. Carnegie, "Interface as Exordium: The Rhetoric of Interactivity," *Computers and Composition* 26, no. 3 (2009): 171, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2009.05.005.

more dubious protocols of data extraction.[17] Regarding Facebook, Sano-Franchini

revealed how micro-interactions encouraged in posting and commenting interfaces

encouraged the algorithmic production of outrage.[18] And Misti Yang and I have shown

how chatbots and digital emotion-tracking app interfaces can put robust civic culture

further out of reach.[19] In contrast, interfaces can also be formatted to reduce harm, as

Becca Tarsa and James J. Brown demonstrate in the practice of speculative redesigns.[20]

The infrastructures and protocols of formats are most user-facing in the interface, where

the undersea cables and HTML present the webpage and its interface choices.

- **Genre: Format indexes how recurrent social action (genre) and protocols,
  infrastructures, and interfaces influence one another.** Carolyn Miller famously
  defined genre as "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations," and called it
  "an important mid-level concept, a mid-level ordering of social life and interaction."[21] In

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[17] Chase Aunspach, "Discrete and Looking (to Profit): Homoconnectivity on Grindr," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 37, no. 1 (2019): 43–57, https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2019.1690157.

[18] Jennifer Sano-Franchini, "Designing Outrage, Programming Discord: A Critical Interface Analysis of Facebook as a Campaign Technology," *Technical Communication* 65, no. 4 (2018): 387–410.

[19] Misti Yang, "Painful Conversations: Therapeutic Chatbots and Public Capacities," *Communication and the Public* 5, no. 1–2 (2020): 35–44, https://doi.org/10.1177/2057047320950636; Matthew Salzano and Misti Yang, "Going off Scripts: Emotional Labor and Technoliberal Managerialism," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 39, no. 2 (2022): 78–91, https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2021.2011349.

[20] Becca Tarsa and James J. Brown, Jr., "Complicit Interfaces," in *Precarious Rhetorics*, ed. Wendy S Hesford, Adela C Licona, and Christa Teston (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2018), 255–75.

[21] Carolyn R. Miller, "Genre as Social Action," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70, no. 2 (1984): 159, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638409383686; Carolyn R. Miller, "Genre as Social Action

the most recent update, Miller et al. recognize that genre must be updated given digitality's materiality and multimodality.[22] Format is one way to do that, recognizing how genres are changed by multimodality (symbols used in different interfaces) and materiality (the affects of genre are generated and distributed differently depending on infrastructures, interfaces, and protocols). For example, Susan Zaeske describes how women advocating for anti-slavery in the 1830s and 40s used the genre of the petition (an interface with social action) to shift dominant protocols (cultural norms and legal codes) that suggested women were unfit for political participation.[23] In the format of the participatory condition, digital infrastructures, protocols, and interfaces enable and constrain genres *and* genres influence interfaces, protocols, and infrastructures.

Living a Participatory Life addresses "formats precisely at the points where the many dissonant and incommensurable meanings we attach to this term become apparent and thus where… formats become analytically productive."[24] The following ideas in this chapter, and the case studies following it, use format to address how these four related concepts interact in our digital,

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(1984), Revisited 30 Years Later (2014)," *Letras & Letras* 31, no. 3 (2015): 58, https://doi.org/10.14393/LL63-v31n3a2015-5.

[22] Carolyn R. Miller, Amy J. Devitt, and Victoria J. Gallagher, "Genre: Permanence and Change," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (2018): 269–77, https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2018.1454194.

[23] "As a genre of political communication, then, the petition held out radical possibilities for women to insinuate themselves into public discussion despite widespread beliefs that they were unsuited to participation in the republican political sphere. By casting petitioning as a form of prayer and by inserting themselves into familiar political narratives, female antislavery petitioners gained entry to political space." Susan Zaeske, "Signatures of Citizenship: The Rhetoric of Women's Antislavery Petitions," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88, no. 2 (2002): 156, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630209384368.

[24] Jancovic, Volmar, and Schneider, *Format Matters*, 10.

participatory lives. Using the language of format reveals how, in the participatory condition, infrastructures, protocols, interfaces, and genres can be hard to distinguish.

I propose **defining participation as a formatted rhetorical practice that modulates affect and sensibilities within a formatted ecology**. This chapter will unpack each dimension of this definition: the first section, parameters of participation, explains how the rhetorical practice of participation is formatted by the basic historical and material parameters set up between participants and collectives. The second section, arranging the participatory imperative, explains how ecologies are formatted by economic and social forces. The third section, distributing affect in the trans-situation, addresses how participation modulates (intensifies, de-intensifies, and circulates) affects in formatted ecologies. Finally, the fourth section, reformatting sensibilities, addresses how participants can reformat sensibilities and hope to generate social action.

Parameters of participation

Understanding participation requires formatting-as-preparation: setting the conceptual parameters of participation. Kelty compares participation to a computer disk: it requires formatting "to prepare for further changes, and to allow one to get on with things without having to worry about what lies behind or below… 'unformatted' objects are unusable."[25] Kelty argues that participation is the same. "Participation most often takes the form of a practical procedure, arranged in concrete places, with specific rules and scripts, and it asks people to act and think in particular ways in the service of various goals or projects related especially to political and

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[25] Kelty, *The Participant*, 15.

ethical issues of living with others. Participation must be formatted."[26] Participation's parameters are set in two ways: first, in literal parameters—rules, scripts, places, procedures—set up for participation. Second, discursive parameters set in model formats, constituted and changed by rhetorical processes. These two features intermingle, as processes of participation shape and are shaped by model formats.

Voting is a basic example of how participation is formatted in specific protocols—instructions, ballots, voting locations—and I'll return to it as an example throughout this chapter to clarify these concepts. Carolyn Marvin and Peter Simonson explain the rhetorical history of the change in voting parameters by the introduction of the secret, uniformly-formatted ballot in U.S. presidential elections. They show how this seemingly innocuous reformatting transformed voting from a ritual public spectacle that "created a res publica of mutual solidarity" into an "eviscerated and textualized… abstracted and imagined political entity."[27] The format of the public vote, with its recognizable party ballots and the mass gatherings, encouraged the feeling of participation in and responsibility toward the complexly-layered ecologies of one's community, nation, and civic life. The secret ballot, on the other hand, reformatted that participation by textualizing a rich community practice, producing fewer opportunities to develop affective ties to broader rhetorical ecologies. Formats implicate concrete structures (like the polling location, the voting booth, the ballot, the envelope), social norms (like displaying your ballot, sharing who you voted for, how long you wear your I voted! sticker), and cultural

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[26]Kelty, 15.

[27] Carolyn Marvin and Peter Simonson, "Voting Alone: The Decline of Bodily Mass Communication and Public Sensationalism in Presidential Elections," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 1, no. 2 (2004): 138, 139, https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420410001685359.

commonplaces (like concepts of community or nation). These all work to help format individuals and ecologies and make participation sensible.

Treated as a history of a format, the parameters of contemporary participation emerge from a capitalist history—participation did briefly occupy mainstream academic and civic attention, though it may have been stunted by the rise of neoliberalism. In 1962, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) released the Port Huron Statement. In it, the students proposed "participatory democracy," one where power "rooted in possession, privilege, or circumstance" was replaced by "power and uniqueness rooted in love, reflectiveness, reason, and creativity."[28] For SDS, participation was explicitly equivalent to decision-making.[29] This concept of participatory democracy animated conversations (and conflict) within SDS. The subsequent conversation after the Port Huron statement showed that the concept of participatory democracy exposed important rifts and enlivened conversations among SDS members.[30] Participatory energy spilled over into conversations in democratic theory.[31] Participatory programs began in

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[28]Students for a Democratic Society, "Port Huron Statement," June 15, 1962, para. 18, https://history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/111huron.html.

[29]Students for a Democratic Society, para. 19.

[30] *Democracy in the Streets* includes a chapter of individual narrative accounts of what "participatory democracy" meant. It captures how the concept was both energizing the group and how there was little conceptual consensus about it. James Miller, *Democracy Is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago, With a New Preface by the Author* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

[31]Most notably, Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, Reprinted (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000). Pateman answers two critiques in democratic theory. First, she critiques a strawperson argument popular among her contemporaries that participation was disavowed by "classical democratic theorists," showing that theorists like Rousseau and J.S. Mill *centered* participation. What Pateman makes clear is that, while participation's intellectual history by that name arguably starts with SDS's catchy use of "participatory," concepts like the social contract and direct democracy were also really about participation. Second, she argues that empirical evidence supports a "viable theory of democracy which retains the notion of

housing, welfare, and suffrage. But this groundswell of participatory energy had the ground cut

under its feet by neoliberal governance. When Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher took over

in the '80s, their austerity measures cut funding for participatory programs.[32] Disappointed with

the forced failure of participation in civic life, participatory energy in scholarly, activist, and

policy circles was driven to "more assertively discursive" theories related to deliberative

democracy, publics theory, and rational-critical discourse.[33] In the next section, I'll discuss

further how neoliberalism interferes with the project of formatting participation. For now, it

suffices to say that neoliberalism has redirected conversation away from seemingly-unthinkable

questions of participation.

    What this participatory history also exposes is that our language about participation also

serves to script participation. For example, in rhetorical studies, terms like citizenship have been

favored over participation.[34] Certainly part of this owes to the discipline's attempts to link itself

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participation at its heart." Specifically, she shows that participation begets participation, and
people learn about participating from participation. Thus, Pateman advocates for employers and
government entities to build participatory infrastructure that would encourage this democracy—
dovetailing nicely with SDS's vision in the Port Huron Statement.

[32] Robert Asen's work on public school boards and deliberation elucidates this connection
between neoliberalism and participation. Robert Asen, *Democracy, Deliberation, and Education*
(University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015); Robert Asen, "Neoliberalism,
the Public Sphere, and a Public Good," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 103, no. 4 (2017): 329–49,
https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2017.1360507.

[33] Christopher M. Kelty, "Too Much Democracy in All the Wrong Places: Toward a Grammar of
Participation," *Current Anthropology* 58, no. S15 (2017): S78, https://doi.org/10.1086/688705;
James Bohman, *Public Deliberation: Pluralism, Complexity, and Democracy* (Cambridge: MIT
Press, 1996); James Bohman and William Rehg, eds., *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on
Reason and Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997); Arthur Strum, "A Bibliography of the
Concept Offentlichkeit," *New German Critique*, no. 61 (1994): 161,
https://doi.org/10.2307/488626.

[34] Vernacular rhetoric has focused on studying everyday participation, but almost always with
the frame of "citizen participation." Michael Lechuga, in a recent forum piece with John

back to the beginnings of democracy—in Athens—and other moments of specifically-democratic resistance, like the lyceum. Writing about Athenian political culture, Josiah Ober says, "there was a commitment to the idea that it is nothing other than participation by the citizens in the day-to-day practice of self-governance that makes the core values real (that is, renders people free, equal, and secure in fact). It is participation in democratic practices that teaches people to 'become what they are'—that is, citizens of a democratic polity."[35] This participation-as-education ideal has been replicated throughout the history of rhetoric.[36] For example, in the 19th century lyceum: in these national lecture circuits, speakers known for their writings developed "major [U.S.] American ideas" in a process of audience-speaker interaction.[37] The agora and the

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Murphy, defends vernacular as a way to move toward decolonial rhetorical study. John M. Murphy and Michael Lechuga, "The Role of the Critic," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 24, no. 1/2 (2021): 51–67; see also Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, "The Critique of Vernacular Discourse," *Communication Monographs* 62, no. 1 (1995): 19–46, https://doi.org/10.1080/03637759509376346; Gerard A. Hauser, "Vernacular Discourse and the Epistemic Dimension of Public Opinion," *Communication Theory* 17, no. 4 (2007): 333–39, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2007.00299.x; Gerard A. Hauser, *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2008); Jeffrey Bennett, "'Born This Way': Queer Vernacular and the Politics of Origins," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 11, no. 3 (2014): 211–30, https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2014.924153; Robert Glenn Howard, "Manufacturing Populism: Digitally Amplified Vernacular Authority," *Media and Communication* 10, no. 4 (2022): 236–47, https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i4.5857.

[35] Josiah Ober, *Athenian Legacies: Essays on the Politics of Going on Together* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 33.

[36] It was especially resurgent during the American Forum Movement and the emergence of speech communication as a U.S. academic discipline, as Bill Keith has detailed. The movement attempted to (re)format democracy as discussion, with a model of a public forum at the center. William M. Keith, *Democracy as Discussion: Civic Education and the American Forum Movement* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007).

[37] Carolyn Eastman, "Conclusion: Placing Platform Culture in Nineteenth Century American Life," in *Thinking Together: Lecturing, Learning, and Difference in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Angela G. Ray and Paul Stob (University Park: Pennsylvania State University

lyceum both act as model formats of citizenship that rhetorical historians use to explore questions about formats of participation. These models format our very parameters of participation around a specific ideal of "citizenship," a concept with specific problems I detailed in the introduction. But the point here is less to critique citizenship, and more to point out that when conversations about participation are conveyed in other terms, it limits the horizons of possibility for participation by constraining what is thinkable to what suits the model format.

Relying on the formatting of "citizen" forecloses opportunities to respond to the ethical questions raised by participation. Without tools for assessing and understanding participation beyond the vaguest of critiques, rhetorics of participation swing between "normative enthusiasm" and "critiques of co-optation."[38] This can lead to "Too Much Democracy in the Wrong Places," as Kelty cutely states: desire for participation rises, and then it is co-opted. For example, Uber is participatory (you are your own boss! You're in control!) but that is not ultimately good for the participant—it comes with all the costs of the gig economy's carelessness for the participant-worker. Without theoretical resources to reckon with rhetorics of participation, conversations about participation tend to falsely presuppose a shared sense of participation or prioritize something abstract. That presupposition makes the rhetorical project of formatting participation more difficult—discouraging the development of engaged publics who can assess and re-negotiate the parameters of participation. Recognizing that participation has

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Press, 2018), 193. See also Angela G. Ray, *The Lyceum and Public Culture in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2005); Tom F. Wright, *The Cosmopolitan Lyceum: Lecture Culture and the Globe in Nineteenth-Century America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013).

[38]Kelty, "Too Much Democracy in All the Wrong Places," S88.

parameters is a step toward richer theoretical and public discourse about living a participatory life.

In sum, participation's basic parameters are twofold. First, participation is, by definition, formatted. Participation formats the relation of individual and collective in specific procedures, rules, scripts, etc. Second, concepts like the citizen are euphemisms for formats of participation, artifacts of a history of a format. When not appreciated as a format, abstractions about a second layer of formatting (the citizen) often obscure conversations about the first layer of formatting (the parameters of participation). In the next section, I explore the second layer of the contemporary formatting of participation; namely, how the 'participant' has been appropriated by technoliberal capitalism, presenting both an opportunity for and a serious challenge to (re)formatting participation.

Arranging the participatory imperative

Understanding the specifics of the participatory condition requires understanding a second layer of formatting. Once the broad parameters are laid out, as when a computer is formatted to run Microsoft Word, then a number of more fine-grained decisions about formatting our document remain–columns, fonts, margins. As format theory teaches us, these features expose important political interests, because "formats are oftentimes developed tactically and serve to lock users into particular hardware or software environments, or utilized to reinforce geopolitical borders and interests. As such, they demand a critical questioning of the political processes of legitimation that the standardization of a particular format represents."[39] In the case of participation, we open a palimpsestic document that has already been continuously re-

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[39] Jancovic, Volmar, and Schneider, *Format Matters*, 16.

formatted by various forces throughout history. If the basic parameters of participation are

formatted such that it expresses the relationship of individual and collective, then we must ask:

what constraints have been placed on those positions because of contingent, historical forces?

Participation has often been formatted as an obligatory relationship—something the

individual must do to serve the collective. When white women were enfranchised in the U.S. in

1920, signs like "Women! Use Your vote!" prompted individual women to practice civic

participation with their vote.[40] After the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, "Vote Baby

Vote!" became a common refrain on posters and pins to prompt exercising one's newly-won

rights.[41] 1960s protest posters from UC Berkeley, inspired by those in Paris, feature "the

obligation of citizen participation, protest, and speech."[42] Thomas Benson suggests that "many of

the Berkeley posters invoke a reflexivity about their own persuasion and call for discussion

beyond the poster—asking not merely for belief or action, but for speech, participation,

deliberation."[43] Social science research also confirms what history has intimated. Mid-century

political culture researchers studied civic obligation and found that half of U.S. Americans

interviewed believed "that the individual should be an active participant in the affairs of his [*sic*]

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[40] As pictured in Anna Harvey, "What Happened to the Suffrage Movement after Suffrage?," *Vox*, April 13, 2017, https://www.vox.com/mischiefs-of-faction/2017/4/13/15278116/suffrage-movement-voter-mobilization.

[41] "Two Smiling Women Stand Outdoors and Hold Signs Reading "Vote Baby... News Photo - Getty Images," 1970, https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/two-smiling-women-stand-outdoors-and-hold-signs-reading-news-photo/1862137.

[42] Thomas W. Benson, *Posters for Peace: Visual Rhetoric & Civic Action* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 60.

[43] Benson, 48.

com-munity."[44] In addition, contemporary psychological research shows that moral obligation is

"associated with a greater willingness to participate in collective action."[45] Participation's

relationship with obligation is not limited to explicitly civic activities like voting and protest—

the phenomenon of appointment television and the decades-long debates about cultural literacy

are both evidence of obligatory formatting.[46]

Participation is often formatted such that we each feel like we *must* participate in civic

and popular culture. While participation has traditionally been seen as an obligation one has to

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[44] Gabriel Abraham Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture : Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 170.

[45] Mete Sefa Uysal et al., "'To Participate or Not Participate, That's the Question': The Role of Moral Obligation and Different Risk Perceptions on Collective Action," *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 10, no. 2 (2022): 446, https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.7207; Patrizia Milesi and Augusta Isabella Alberici, "Pluralistic Morality and Collective Action: The Role of Moral Foundations," *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 21, no. 2 (2018): 235–56, https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430216675707; José-Manuel Sabucedo et al., "The Importance of Protesters' Morals: Moral Obligation as a Key Variable to Understand Collective Action," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (2018): 418, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00418; Xiana Vilas and José-Manuel Sabucedo, "Moral obligation: A forgotten dimension in the analysis of collective action," *Revista de Psicología Social* 27, no. 3 (2012): 369–75, https://doi.org/10.1174/021347412802845577.

[46] Regarding the cultural literacy debate: E. D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, Updated and Expanded edition (New York: Vintage, 1988) mostly responsible for inaugurating this debate; see also Chris M. Anson, "Book Lists, Cultural Literacy, and the Stagnation of Discourse," *The English Journal* 77, no. 2 (1988): 14, https://doi.org/10.2307/819507; Leila Christenbury, "Cultural Literacy: A Terrible Idea Whose Time Has Come," *The English Journal* 78, no. 1 (1989): 14, https://doi.org/10.2307/817980; Eric Liu, "The 10 Things That Every American Should Know," *The Atlantic*, July 3, 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/what-every-american-should-know/397334/. Regarding appointment television: Iain Grant, Amit Kaminer, and Cynthia Lee, "Paradise Lost: The End of Appointment Television," *Policy Options*, 2009; Matthew Pittman and Alec C. Tefertiller, "With or without You: Connected Viewing and Co-Viewing Twitter Activity for Traditional Appointment and Asynchronous Broadcast Television Models," *First Monday* 20, no. 7 (2015), https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v20i7.5935.

community, nation, morals, or movements, it has become intensified and made virtually inescapable by our contemporary conditions of mediation. The participatory condition is marked by a participatory imperative—where one cannot escape participation. This ratcheting up of obligatory participation into an imperative emerges from the intensification of participatory cultures into a participatory condition, an intensification that becomes clearer with some historical context.

A rhetorical history of participation reveals how tightly knit the concept's recent history is to the emergence of the internet. Participatory talk re-emerged from its 1980s hibernation as the internet entered public life in the late 1990s. Robert Glenn Howard explains how the internet was transformed in 1990 when Hypertext Markup Language (HTML), which allows for the formatting of web content, was created.[47] In 1992, Congress allowed the internet to be used for commercial purposes. Before the rules changed in 1992, there were fewer than 100 websites, and by 1995, there were more than 10,000.[48] As the web expanded, so did "technological utopians," as Sarah Florini notes, who "argued that digital interactions could lead to a new era of increased democracy."[49] Journalists imagined "totally new forms of storytelling [that] involved users as partners in the news-making process."[50] While most scholars now believe these utopians were

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[47]Robert Glenn Howard, "The Vernacular Web of Participatory Media," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no. 5 (2008): 499, https://doi.org/10.1080/15295030802468065.

[48]Howard, 500.

[49]Sarah Florini, *Beyond Hashtags* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 14; Lisa Nakamura, "After/Images of Identity: Gender, Technology, and Identity Politics," in *Reload: Rethinking Women + Cyberculture*, ed. Mary Flanagan and Austin Booth (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

[50]Thorsten Quandt, "Dark Participation," *Media and Communication* 6, no. 4 (2018): 36, https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v6i4.1519.

misguided, their hopes found a fleeting home.[51] Howard recounts that, as an institutional online

presence was built, the network of hobbyists became a vernacular web of links distinct from the

corporations, governments, and universities.[52] This vernacular web of links transformed into the

blogosphere, a network of "posts, hyperlinks, trackbacks, and comments among the multitude of

blogs," in the time between the 1990s until the dominance of Twitter and Facebook in the mid-

2000s.[53]

    The blogosphere's moment marked a high water mark in the development of

"participatory culture." Henry Jenkins is primarily credited with the conceptualization of

participatory culture as an outgrowth of digitality, stating such a culture was "emerging as the

culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible

for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in

powerful new ways."[54] In a similar vein, Damien Pfister's *Networked Media, Networked*

Rhetorics rhetorically situated the blogosphere's democratic functions.[55] But this participatory

culture remained plagued with problems of access and prejudice.[56] As scholars like Lisa

Nakamura have shown, "rhetorics that claim to remedy and erase gender and racial injustices and

imbalances through expensive and difficult-to-learn technologies such as the Internet entirely

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[51]See James W. Carey, "Historical Pragmatism and the Internet," *New Media & Society* 7, no. 4 (2005): 443–55, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444805054107.

[52]Howard, "The Vernacular Web of Participatory Media," 501.

[53]Damien Smith Pfister, *Networked Media, Networked Rhetorics* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 4–5.

[54]Henry Jenkins, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009), 8.

[55]Pfister, *Networked Media, Networked Rhetorics*.

[56]Florini, *Beyond Hashtags*, 14.

gloss over this question of access, which seems to me *the* important question."[57] Kishonna Gray

builds on that claim by showing that even when access *is* afforded, racial markers are still found

online and used for discrimination.[58] The so-called democratizing power of the blogosphere still

promoted the voices of white men and perpetuated the violent exclusions of the status quo. In her

study of Reddit, Adrienne Massanari writes, "If anything, 'participatory culture' has enabled

some of the more disturbing elements of human nature to become more visible and perhaps gain

more traction than they might have otherwise."[59] Replicating the problems of the offline world,

participatory media facilitated by the online world created various participatory cultures—toxic,

democratic, and otherwise.

But contemporary participation is no longer habituated primarily by the technologies of

the blogosphere era alone, where one's individual weblog hyperlinks to a collective blogosphere

via comments and clickbacks. Instead, the web has been colonized by corporate power

represented by platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and so on. Loose

networks of blogs have given way to more-tightly concentrated corporate power in social media

platforms. This has ushered in an age of platform capitalism, where corporations like Google and

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[57]Nakamura, "After/Images of Identity: Gender, Technology, and Identity Politics," 327. Perhaps it gave voices to *different* white men then the news executives of the 1990s, which is notable, but still not *actually* democratizing because the possibility of participation did not extend far beyond the almost-always-already enfranchised.

[58]Kishonna L. Gray, *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020); cf. Alice Crawford, "The Myth of the Unmarked Net Speaker," in *Critical Perspectives on the Internet*, ed. Greg Elmer (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 89–104.

[59]Adrienne Lynne Massanari, *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play: Learning from Reddit* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 167–68.

Facebook control massive amounts of our rhetorical culture.[60] Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias's *The Costs of Connection* and Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* expose how these corporations extract data from their users in everyday life, turning humans into the product whose behaviors can be predicted and controlled for huge profit.[61] Pfister and Yang explain how these behaviors are guided in multiple ways–by nudges embedded in technical systems, like predictive systems that guide decisions about applicants in Human Resources, students in Admissions, and threats at the 911 call center; and by the grammatization of subjects into data (like gender, race, ethnicity, work status, location, interests) that can be used for micro targeted advertisements.[62] Instead of logging on to various platforms where one could choose to participate in participatory (sub)cultures, users' identities and activities are constantly formatted by their participation in everyday digital ecologies.

As the digital has intensified to an inescapable condition, so has participation. What does it mean for the digital or the participatory to be a *condition*? Casey Boyle, Jim Brown, Jr, and Stephanie Ceraso have declared that "the digital is no longer conditional on particular devices but has become a multisensory, embodied condition through which most of our basic processes

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[60]Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2017); Jean-Christophe Plantin et al., "Infrastructure Studies Meet Platform Studies in the Age of Google and Facebook," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 1 (2018): 293–310, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816661553; Jean-Christophe Plantin and Aswin Punathambekar, "Digital Media Infrastructures: Pipes, Platforms, and Politics," *Media, Culture & Society* 41, no. 2 (2019): 163–74, https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443718818376.

[61]Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019); Nick Couldry and Ulises A Mejias, *The Costs of Connection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

[62] Damien Smith Pfister and Misti Yang, "Five Theses on Technoliberalism and the Networked Public Sphere," *Communication and the Public* 3, no. 3 (2018): 254, 258, https://doi.org/10.1177/2057047318794963.

operate."[63] "The digital" has become an ambient condition, like Rickert's conception of ambient

rhetoric—always in relation to and interacting with our world(s).[64] The present participatory

condition has emerged in tandem with this digital condition. While the "promise of participation"

was shaped around modernity and democracy, "today, the popularization of digital media

reactualizes the participatory thrust of modernity across the realms of politics, art, and media, as

well as beyond."[65] Consider the 2014 controversy where Facebook's digital "I Voted!" sticker

was found to be part of a massive, secret experiment on users to see if Facebook makes people

more likely to vote. Facebook leveraged its incredible surveillance capacity, powered in part by

its ambient, always-on digital presence on user devices, paired with rhetorics of political

participation, to increase voter turnout by 340,000 people.[66] Participation, like the digital, is

inescapably ambient, omnipresently available in our formats of daily life.

The participatory imperative shows how participation has been formatted in a

participatory condition, such that it is always-on, always-requested, always-implied. However,

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[63] Casey Boyle, James J. Brown, and Steph Ceraso, "The Digital: Rhetoric Behind and Beyond the Screen," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (2018): 252, https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2018.1454187.

[64] "For an ambient rhetoric, connection is already given as possibility by the world itself, with world being a composite of meaning and matter. The salience of our discursive entreaties is already prepared in advance by the complexity of ambient relation and interaction. Language, person, and environment, then, are perhaps not so much linked, and from such a linkage established as coadaptive, as they are enmeshed and enfolded, making them mutually conditioning entities that have already emerged from a larger, worldly whole." Thomas J. Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), 106.

[65] Barney et al., *The Participatory Condition in the Digital Age*, xxii.

[66] Dara Lind, "Facebook's 'I Voted' Sticker Was a Secret Experiment on Its Users," *Vox*, November 4, 2014, https://www.vox.com/2014/11/4/7154641/midterm-elections-2014-voted-facebook-friends-vote-polls.

the equation is not simply *rhetorics of obligatory participation + more possibilities for participation = participatory imperative*. The participatory imperative names the rhetorical significance of what media studies researchers are calling "digital by default" or even "compulsory digitality." In Aristea Fotopoulou's study of feminist activists, she concludes that

> [T]he notion of 'default' in relation to digital and networked technologies is ideological because it refers not to how feminists *could* be producing an abundance of communicational texts and online content (social online platforms, newsletters or creative code), but that they *ought* to be producing them, or else the world will pass them by. The tension between *ought to* and *could* participate and be empowered can be thought as symptomatic of the promises of "good life" and the "digital way of life"… This promise and social imaginary of networked feminism… is a set of practices and discourses which shape social and cultural expectations about how life with digital media should be: digital media require our participation, our willingness to provide data for advertisers or for our own benefit. Participation and interactivity are becoming standard framings and the production of networked connections is central in the promise of empowerment.[67]

The "ought" here is not an obligation–it is an imperative. While obligations stem from the self ("I feel obligated to donate, protest, vote") imperatives are a threat from outside the self ("you must vote, or you will be fined.") To return to the example of voting: it is the difference between it weighing on your conscience that you didn't vote—as might have happened with the aforementioned newly enfranchised U.S. citizens—versus the practice of compulsory voting, as was done in ancient Athens, where a rope was brought out to literally herd voters toward the assembly, and citizens were fined if it was found the red-stained rope had touched their cloaks.[68] But in the participatory condition, "participatory subjectivity is not constituted through the imposed threat of [disciplinary power] but, rather, by the constant possibility of disappearing and

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[67] Aristea Fotopoulou, "Digital and Networked by Default? Women's Organisations and the Social Imaginary of Networked Feminism," *New Media & Society* 18, no. 6 (2016): 1000, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814552264, emphasis in original.

[68] Anthoula Malkopoulou, *The History of Compulsory Voting in Europe: Democracy's Duty?* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

becoming obsolete."[69] There is no literal red-stained rope, but the imperative is enforced nonetheless. It is enforced in the appearance of platforms like Facebook, as the platform's news feed highlights only the friends who are participating, suggesting "participation is the norm," as Taina Bucher shows.[70] The imperative is also enforced by the use of digital technology—without a legitimate opt-out—in contexts like health, government, and education, as Adi Kuntsman and Esperanza Miyake have found.[71] So, a better representation of the participatory imperative's equation is *rhetorics of obligatory participation + more opportunities for participation + compelled to participate digitally = participatory imperative.*

The elevation of the digital and the participatory to an imperative condition represents an *intensification* of power. Intensification, as Foucauldian Jeffrey Nealon explains, refers "less to a centripetal force acting on an individual body ('intense pain'), and more to name a 'lateral' or 'centrifugal' smearing or saturation of effects over a wide field (intensity as a state that strives to be complete and exhaustive, as seamless as possible—as in intensive care)."[72] The sovereign power of the king, only encountered rarely, was intensified by a disciplinary society, in which power is encountered more fully in everyday life. Intensification does not remove previous

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[69] Taina Bucher, *If...Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 92.

[70] "The news feed algorithm can be said to function as a disciplinary technique, producing a 'desired user' by constructing subjects through sociotechnical arrangements that emphasize and favor participation, sharing, and socialization. Because interaction functions as a measure for interestingness, practices of liking, commenting, and participation become processes through which the subject may approximate this desired normality." Bucher, 89.

[71] Adi Kuntsman and Esperanza Miyake, *Paradoxes of Digital Disengagement* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2022).

[72] Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Foucault beyond Foucault: Power and Its Intensifications since 1984* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 34.

formations of power, but rather makes it more efficient and ever-present. The intensive care unit is an intensification of the emergency room—whereas care in the ER is responsive to an immediate concern, intensive care distributes the care more efficiently—responding with less intensity but more intensively, to more reactions and interactions. Now, disciplinary society has intensified to control society, as Deleuze coined in 1992, predicting a "technological evolution" that would bring about a "mutuation in capitalism."[73] Deleuze's forecasting has essentially come to fruition, exemplified in digital formats. Galloway argues that "Protocol is to control societies as the panopticon is to disciplinary societies."[74] Disciplinary societies operated through the internalized (disciplined) gaze of power (e.g., the state, the church) that Foucault theorized using the image of the panopticon. Power is internalized in control societies, not from the vision of the panoptic but through control of the protocol. As Pfister explains, "If discourse establishes rules, conditions, and habituations in disciplinary societies, then control societies – which are intensifications of disciplinary societies rather than breaks from them – establish rules, conditions and habituations through infrastructural protocols."[75] This protocological control is an intensification because protocols can *actually* continue to watch and guide (control) subjects rather than threaten (disciplinary) watching.

This ability to control through protocols has reverberated profoundly in our governing rationalities. Accompanying the intensification from disciplinary to control societies is an intensification of a governing rationality: from (neo)liberalism to technoliberalism. If neoliberalism is yellow, technoliberalism is electric yellow. As Pfister and Yang explain,

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[73] Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (1992): 6.

[74] Galloway, *Protocol*, 40.

[75] Pfister, "Digitality, Rhetoric, and Protocological Fascism; Or, Fascist Ants & Democratic Cicadas," 6.

technoliberalism is marked by the belief that "digital technology can address liberalism's shortcomings with an attenuated form of togetherness mediated by corporate platforms and focused on individual empowerment through software and hardware upgrades."[76] Specifically, technoliberalism "highlights how digital infrastructures and neoliberal discourses work in tandem to effect communicative practices," by creating and/or using existing digital infrastructures that can quantify, track, and optimize phenomena like human relationships, something that would be less-accessible to corporate, neoliberal co-optation without digital technology.[77] That market is justified (proactively and retrospectively) by technoliberalism because "digital media enable the emergence of control society, a society in which in which people become subject to the control of free-ranging, globalized businesses who track and modulate our activities and desires, directing them into profitable channels which they own," as Eric Jenkins argues.[78] Earlier critiques of neoliberal capitalism and technology, such as Jodi Dean's analysis of communicative capitalism, showed how economic modes of reasoning had capitalized upon constant communication for profit in a disciplinary society.[79] But technoliberalism emphasizes how this phenomenon has been intensified by Silicon Valley inventions that facilitate efficient, ambient extraction from everyday life in a control society.

Participation is key to technoliberalism. If, as Pfister argues, technoliberalism has some key terms like connection, innovation, and precision, then I suggest that participation is the term

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[76] Pfister and Yang, "Five Theses on Technoliberalism and the Networked Public Sphere," 249.

[77] Salzano and Yang, "Going off Scripts," 4.

[78] Eric S. Jenkins, *Surfing the Anthropocene: The Big Tension and Digital Affect* (New York: Peter Lang, 2020), 8.

[79] Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2010), 4.

underwriting all others.[80] Technoliberalism centers participation after its ideological predecessors euphemized it. Modernity's liberal individual who participates in *democracy* becomes neoliberalism's individual who participates in market *capitalism*. Technoliberalism commits to individual, *digitally-mediated* participation in the extractive markets of *surveillance capitalism*. Connection, innovation, and precision are made possible by technology, but that technology requires participants: to generate networks (for connection) and data (for innovation and precision). Modernity referred to the subject as a citizen; neoliberalism, a consumer; and technoliberalism blends these identities into "participant," who must fulfill their social roles by upgrading, connecting, and serving as the raw material for the precise extraction of data.

The technoliberal 'participant' has appeared prominently in the flourishing of social change activism on social media. Much has been written in rhetoric, communication, and media studies that celebrates how participatory media like Tumblr, Twitter, Reddit, Vine, YouTube, and Facebook can serve as sites for activism and deliberation.[81] Indeed, participation on these

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[80]Damien Smith Pfister, "The Terms of Technoliberalism," in *Theorizing Digital Rhetoric*, ed. Aaron Hess and Amber Davisson (New York: Routledge, 2017), 32–42, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315203645-4.

[81]Jessica H. Lu and Catherine Knight Steele, "'Joy Is Resistance': Cross-Platform Resilience and (Re)Invention of Black Oral Culture Online," *Information, Communication & Society* 22, no. 6 (2019): 823–37, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1575449; Avery Dame, "Making a Name for Yourself: Tagging as Transgender Ontological Practice on Tumblr," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 33, no. 1 (2016): 23–37, https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2015.1130846; Joe Edward Hatfield, "The Queer Kairotic: Digital Transgender Suicide Memories and Ecological Rhetorical Agency," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (2019): 25–48, https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2018.1549334; Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles, *#hashtagactivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2020); Sarah J. Jackson, "(Re)Imagining Intersectional Democracy from Black Feminism to Hashtag Activism," *Women's Studies in Communication* 39, no. 4 (2016): 375–79, https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2016.1226654; Darrian Robert Carroll, "#Palestine2Ferguson a Community Created through Words," *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society* 16, no. 3 (2018): 328–37,

platforms has facilitated organizing efforts like the Women's March and Black Lives Matter, which have given public voice to important issues. Meanwhile, as Noble has importantly shown, the algorithms of these corporations perpetuate racist stereotypes and facilitate white supremacist violence.[82] Technology may be used to empower movements—but regarding it solely in that way is ultimately a rhetoric that serves the platforms, a point I will explore in depth in Chapter 4, on Installectuals. That uncritical optimism reveals the intensification of neoliberalism into technoliberalism insofar as it suggests that digital, corporate platforms can bring us together for a thriving democracy.

The participatory imperative constrains inventive rhetorical practice. Some rhetoric and composition scholars describe pedagogical imperatives as limiting "our range of vision and knowledge production."[83] Sara Ahmed has inspired research explaining how happiness imperatives "stifle the expression of emotional range—and its political potential."[84] In

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https://doi.org/10.1108/JICES-03-2018-0026; Abby M. Dubisar, "Embodying and Disabling Antiwar Activism: Disrupting YouTube's 'Mother's Day for Peace,'" *Rhetoric Review* 34, no. 1 (2015): 56–73, https://doi.org/10.1080/07350198.2015.976305; Noam Gal, Limor Shifman, and Zohar Kampf, "'It Gets Better': Internet Memes and the Construction of Collective Identity," *New Media & Society* 18, no. 8 (2016): 1698–1714, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814568784; Marcin Lewiński and Dima Mohammed, "Deliberate Design or Unintended Consequences: The Argumentative Uses of Facebook During the Arab Spring," *Journal of Public Deliberation*, 2012, 13; Aaron Hess, "Resistance Up in Smoke: Analyzing the Limitations of Deliberation on YouTube," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26, no. 5 (2009): 411–34, https://doi.org/10.1080/15295030903325347.

[82] Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*; Zeynep Tufekci, "YouTube, the Great Radicalizer," *The New York Times*, June 8, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/10/opinion/sunday/youtube-politics-radical.html.

[83] Karen Kopelson, "Sp(l)itting Images; Or, Back to the Future of (Rhetoric and?) Composition," *College Composition and Communication* 59, no. 4 (2008): 758.

[84] Salzano and Yang, "Going off Scripts," 5.

community development, the imperative to use participatory development methods has been critiqued as "the new tyranny," as participation has been flippantly applied and used to justify decidedly inegalitarian development solutions.[85] The participatory condition may further stifle the radical possibilities of participation. Pfister has noted that hyperpublicity, brought about by constant, public, digital participation, could threaten "paramount values of deliberation [like] play, experimentation, spontaneity, and risk taking."[86] When the participatory imperative acts as the criterion for value judgment, then participation = good and no participation = not good. As I'll explore in Chapter 2: Disparticipants and Chapter 4: Installectuals, that prioritizing of participation can miss the reality that sometimes not participating or not participating in the way that is expected—by taking a break, by letting off steam, by using a different medium, by taking a different tone—can actually be key for inventiveness, whether because that invention required some distance for insight or because your spirit is rejuvenated when you choose to participate again. When that conscious act of not participating is discouraged, inventiveness can suffer.

However, the participatory imperative is also generative—it enables practices that subvert and/or take advantage of the imperative. The imperative to participate does, after all, "make participation visible, and therefore render it as something that can be experienced."[87] By

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[85] Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari, eds., *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (London: Zed Books, 2001); Pablo Alejandro Leal, "Participation: The Ascendancy of a Buzzword in the Neo-Liberal Era," *Development in Practice* 17, no. 4–5 (2007): 539–48, https://doi.org/10.1080/09614520701469518; Naomi Joy Godden, "The Participation Imperative in Co-Operative Inquiry: Personal Reflections of an Initiating Researcher," *Systemic Practice and Action Research* 30, no. 1 (2017): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11213-016-9387-2; JC Gaillard, *The Invention of Disaster: Power and Knowledge in Discourses on Hazard and Vulnerability* (London: Routledge, 2021).

[86] Pfister, *Networked Media, Networked Rhetorics*, 183.

[87] Kelty, *The Participant*, 256.

making participation so prominent, so frequently, it can also make participatory environments overwhelming. But Ruha Benjamin suggests this invites us to participate in a "microvision of change," one where "the vastness of the problems we face will be their undoing when we accept that we are patternmakers."[88] *Living a Participatory Life* seeks out patternmakers addressing the vast problems we face. The participatory condition does prompt the possibility of recognizing that one belongs to a collective, and perhaps can make publics and communities out of it. As Dean writes, "Despite the critique of technoculture I've raised… I find the Web a source of democratic potential. That is to say, there we might find some of the material conditions that suggest alternate configurations of democratic politics. After all, it's highly unlikely that the world will become less technological, less mediated."[89] The participatory imperative, despite its issues, creates an environment in which our potential connectedness is formatted front and center. Now we need tools to understand it and respond to it, but this format elides our traditional conceptions of understanding rhetorical interactions. That dimension of formatting—the medium of exchange—is what I will turn to next.

Distributing affect in the rhetorical trans-situation

Digital media formats rhetorical interaction such that it emphasizes the affective, an always-extant dimension of rhetorical exchange. Let's return to our example of voting: *Which candidate would you rather have a beer with?* is a colloquial way of asking: *which candidate are you more open to?* Voting may be conceived as a practice of rational decision-making. But really

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[88] Ruha Benjamin, *Viral Justice: How We Grow the World We Want* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 283.

[89] Jodi Dean, *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 166.

it is often about who is likable, relatable, and/or authentic, who your community supports, who

aligns with your vision of yourself and your identity—it's about choosing who *feels right.*[90]

Someone you'd want to sit and have a beer with. But those feelings of authenticity don't come

simply from well-thought-out character judgment, they come from what might be colloquially

known as "vibes." Those vibes are affective orientations, generated by experiences like sensing

candidates' alignment with our cultural assumptions (e.g. does the candidate match favorable

gender stereotypes?) and by the frequency the candidate has been seen favorably (e.g. in a viral

video on TikTok or Twitter).[91] The question is less: do you agree with this candidate? And more:

do you feel like you've been oriented to this candidate, has your energy been directed to them?

　　As this example reveals, rhetoric has always been affective. Writing about the ancient

rhetorical practice of *stasis*, Calum Matheson says it "cannot be meaningful without… the

affective attachments that bind disparate audiences together and cause some signifiers to shine,

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[90] Erica J. Seifert, *Politics of Authenticity in Presidential Campaigns, 1976 - 2008* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2012); Carter Eskew, "Donald Trump or Ted Cruz: Who Would You Rather Have a Beer With?," *Washington Post*, December 2, 2021, sec. Opinion, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2016/01/27/donald-trump-or-ted-cruz-who-would-you-rather-have-a-beer-with/.

[91] Shawn J. Parry-Giles, *Hillary Clinton in the News: Gender and Authenticity in American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014); Blair Guild, "The 2020 Candidates Are Good at Social Media — until They Make You Cringe," *Washington Post*, November 29, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/11/29/candidates-are-good-social-media-until-they-make-you-cringe/. Also, humorously satirized in Ria Sardana, "Relatable Things We'd Like to See 2020 Presidential Candidates Do on Their Instagram Stories," *The New Yorker*, January 26, 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/humor/daily-shouts/relatable-things-wed-like-to-see-2020-presidential-candidates-do-on-their-instagram-stories.

while others recede into the dark."[92] Rhetoric is a practice of making some things shine—making them feel relatable, making them make sense, making them feel consubstantial. The participatory condition did not make rhetoric affective, but it emphasizes the affective dimension of rhetoric, not as "special-purpose device but [as] a new format on a general-purpose medium."[93] Digital media facilitates the energetic spread of discourse across networks with incredible speed, with little to none of the boundedness presupposed in earlier conceptions of audience or context. It challenges the ability of rhetoric to bind specific audiences together and make specific signifiers shine; as Matheson said, as it makes many signs shine and unexpected audiences bind. The digital's affective emphasis is maybe most obvious in the reactions encouraged by various interfaces—whether Facebook's buttons to like, laugh, rage, etc., at a post, or iMessage's tapback reactions to heart or !! a text. But affect, as I'll explain, does not so much account for the personal reaction to content, but considers the prepersonal capacity for the circulation of energy. To develop rhetorical theory that can reckon with the affective emphasis in the participatory condition, I propose understanding rhetoric *trans-situationally*.

Digital participation is perplexing, and that increase in perplexity is a result of how digitality exposes and circulates complex ecologies of affect. Kelty describes perplexity as a disorienting experience of participation.

> Opposite to the sense of immersion and collective joy—and sometimes by virtue of it—
> the experience of participation can be one of perplexity: the sudden awareness that a
> background or milieu of sense and agreement is not there . . . Or when it becomes clear
> that another collective immersed in its own sense of belonging (white people of privilege,

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[92] Matheson, "Stasis in the Net of Affect," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 52, no. 1 (2019): 72, https://doi.org/10.5325/philrhet.52.1.0071.

[93] Axel Volmar, "Reformatting Media Studies: Toward a Theoretical Framework for Format Studies," in *Format Matters: Standards, Practices, and Politics in Media Cultures*, ed. Marek Jancovic, Axel Volmar, and Alexandra Schneider (Lüneburg: meson press, 2020), 40.

say) cannot experience the world as you do, and cannot even hear your ideas and demands as sensible or achievable, so that your words may literally make no sense. Instead of the immediate affective sense of organic agreement, perplexity signals instead the absence of disagreement.[94]

This sense of perplexity challenges participation because participation, as defined earlier, requires a sense of being a part of the thing you are participating in.[95] The rhetorical situation would historically be the sort of tool that would help identify the specific situation of participation. For Bitzer, the rhetorical situation's constitutive parts are audience, exigence, and constraints.[96] The critic that can detail these parts can better understand a situated act of oratory; the rhetor who understands these parts can be more persuasive in the moment. The situation metaphor helps ground discourse to *find the rhetoric*. Situational analysis helps reveal agreement and disagreement, identify *doxa* and *topoi*, and assess the deliberative needs of public life. Put differently, tools like the rhetorical situation help reduce a sense of perplexity.

Digital circulation spreads perplexity virally, despite these tools. Media studies scholars like Alice Marwick and danah boyd have described how users of digital media face context collapse, wherein the audience of their digital participation is always indeterminable—in contrast to being able to attune one's presentation differently when in a group of colleagues vs. a group of old friends.[97] On Facebook, your college friends, adult colleagues, and extended family may all

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[94]Kelty, *The Participant*, 20.

[95]Kelty writes: "If participation depends on the ability to apprehend and experience participation as seeing oneself participate, or knowing that one's voice has been heard, this implies the capacity to know the contours of these relations and their extent. If that is lacking, the only available experience will be that of perplexity." Kelty, 263.

[96]Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (1968): 6.

[97]Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd, "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience," *New Media & Society* 13, no. 1 (2011): 114–33, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810365313.

meet because of context collapse. Maybe your tweet intended for your 200 followers quickly

reaches hundreds of thousands who each bring their own contexts. Or, perhaps you are

attempting to persuade a group of people to stop spreading anti-vaxx content, but digital content

moderation means you are not even seeing the most extreme content spreading in other

networks.[98] In her book *Activist Literacies,* Jennifer Nish develops practices of digital literacy to

help cope with the reality that "many audiences encounter only part of an activist movement or

campaign. A casual observer may not see how the post in their social media feed is connected to

other texts or activities, or they may not have a useful framework for evaluating these

connections."[99] Jodi Dean considers this as a symptom of a much more daunting social problem,

what she calls the decline of symbolic efficiency. She describes that "the very conditions of

possibility for adequation (for determining the criteria by which to assess whether a decision or

answer is, if not good, then at least adequate) have been foreclosed. It's just your opinion."[100] In

the environment Dean describes, one can only experience perplexity, a feeling that there is no

shared sense of what is happening, that dis/agreement is fundamentally impossible. While their

theorizations vary in fatalism, Dean, Nish, and Marwick & boyd all point to a sense of

contextlessness formatting participation in digital ecologies.

       The conventional frame of the "rhetorical situation" cannot account for digital media

ecologies, where audience, exigence, and constraints are constantly in flux, indeterminable for

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[98]Tarleton Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Sarah T. Roberts, *Behind the Screen: Content Moderation in the Shadows of Social Media* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

[99] Jennifer Nish, *Activist Literacies: Transnational Feminisms and Social Media Rhetorics* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2022), 12.

[100] Dean, *Blog Theory*, 6.

both rhetor and critic. As I've written elsewhere, the "situational approach is still useful to describe incredibly specific episodes, but it cannot build a broad account of what constitutes persuasive discourse."[101] While I was writing about digitality, the critique of the situation remains true about rhetoric, even before digital media ecologies thoroughly suffused everyday life. Rhetoric has never been purely situational, but some cultural moments have made it easier to imagine it as such. Now, the rhetorical situation might not clearly read and display the file, but it can still glitchily open a file that allows us a glimpse at a rhetorical event. If I open a Microsoft Word .doc file on Apple Pages, I will be able to read the document but some of its basic formatting (like the fonts used or margins set up) will be glitchy, rendered differently than it is on Microsoft Word. The participatory condition is like the .doc file, and the rhetorical situation, like Apple Pages. Some of the basics are still legible, but a different theory would present the format more clearly.

Rhetorical scholars have tried to make sense of this un-situational environment by advancing an understanding of rhetoric's format as fundamentally trans-situational. Trans-situational rhetoric can be understood via three key terms: affect, ambience, and ecologies.

First, whereas the rhetorical situation centers a liberal fantasy of unmasking ideology with better discourse, trans-situational rhetoric understands that "the fundamental persuasive unit is affect."[102] To go back to our analogy of the document, our file extension would be .affect— bear with me, this extended analogy will pay off! Affect refers to the felt energy of bodily intensity that directs and orients bodies; affect describes potentiality, opening up and foreclosing

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[101]Matthew Salzano, "Lemons or *Lemonade*? Beyoncé, Killjoy Style, and Neoliberalism," *Women's Studies in Communication* 43, no. 1 (2020): 48, https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2019.1696434.

[102]Salzano, 47.

upon possibilities.[103] Catherine Chaput's idea of rhetorical circulation centers rhetoric's power in

the circulation of affect. Chaput specifically argues that neoliberalism demands a retheorizing of

rhetoric. She turns to two concepts in particular to discuss that retheorizing.

> First of all, [Foucault's] theory of biopolitics requires that we reshape the internal
> dynamics of rhetoric, abandoning the understanding of such dynamics in terms of
> situations—particular moments that demand discursive intervention in order to propel
> change—and instead conceptualizing them in terms of a milieu of dispersed
> transhistorical and trans-situational moments. . . . This means turning away from closed
> situations in which specific problems are deliberated by identifiable subjects who hold
> clear ideologies and turning toward trans-situated circuits that include ordinary spaces
> and subjects who have fluctuating identities.[104]

Chaput centers the trans-situational and the transhistorical in a Rhetorical Circulation Model in

contrast to the closed, bounded sites of a Rhetorical Situation Model. Clarifying, Chaput writes

"rhetoric circulates through our everyday, situated activities and does not exist in any one place:

it is always passing through, but it is never located."[105] A rhetorical circulation model represents

an intensification of the rhetorical situation model. Our digitally mediated and neoliberal

conditions generate encounters with situations at a quicker pace and at a higher frequency, and a

rhetorical circulation model accounts for how that shifts the goals of rhetorical criticism and

practice. Chaput theoretically affirms what Burnham puts more-snappily: (rhetoric) is anything

and everything, all of the time. Always passing through, but never located—the rhetorical

circulation model does not mean rhetoricians and rhetor cannot attend to the situation and

historical context, but rather that that approach cannot fully account for what makes something

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[103]Catherine Chaput, "Rhetorical Circulation in Late Capitalism: Neoliberalism and the
Overdetermination of Affective Energy," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 43, no. 1 (2010): 15,
https://doi.org/10.1353/par.0.0047; Cf. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Second
edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014); Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*
(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

[104]Chaput, "Rhetorical Circulation in Late Capitalism," 5–6.

[105]Chaput, 20.

stick. Situations are places where rhetoric passes through, but the bounds of the situation are always already partial. Affective accretion over time and space accounts for stickiness, not the pure eloquence of a rhetor in a specific time and place.[106]

Rhetoric's affective turn is truly a re-turn to an Aristotelian attentiveness to flows of energy. Aristotle's theory of *pathos* in the *Rhetoric,* now often reduced to just persuasion targeting the emotions, is really a nuanced theory of affect. Literary historian Rüdiger Campe shows how "the description in Aristotle shows affects in a continuous world of action and reaction instead of a world marked by interior mental or psychic experience and exterior forms of expression," the latter model being instigated by Descartes.[107] Rhetorical goals of shifting ideologies and imaginaries should be recast as projects of circulating flows of positive affective energy that "invite human connectivity and constitute knowledge as an ongoing, creative pursuit."[108] Formatting rhetoric as primarily affective and trans-situational means releasing our

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[106] Jenny Edbauer Rice, "The New 'New': Making a Case for Critical Affect Studies," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94, no. 2 (2008): 200–212, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630801975434.

[107] Rüdiger Campe, "Presenting the Affect: The Scene of Pathos in Aristotle's Rhetoric and Its Revision in Descartes's Passions of the Soul," in *Rethinking Emotion: Interiority and Exteriority in Premodern, Modern, and Contemporary Thought*, ed. Rüdiger Campe and Julia Weber (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 39; cf. Daniel M. Gross, *The Secret History of Emotion: From Aristotle's Rhetoric to Modern Brain Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[108] Chaput, "Rhetorical Circulation in Late Capitalism," 22; Brian Massumi and Joel McKim, "Of Microperception and Micropolitics," *Inflexions: A Journal for Research-Creation* 3 (2009): 7, would add: "As Deleuze and Guattari liked to say, there is no ideology and never was. What they mean by that is no situation is ever fully predetermined by ideological structures or codings. Any account paying exclusive attention to that level is fatally incomplete. No situation simply translates ideological inculcations into action. There's always an event, and the event always includes dimensions that aren't completely actualized, so it's always open to a degree, it's always dynamic and in re-formation. To be in effect, ideological predeterminations have to enter the event and take effect. They have to reassert themselves, to make themselves effectively ingredient to the event. Their effectiveness is always an accomplishment, a renewed victory, and what needs to be accomplished can fail."

tight grasp on the imagined or reconstructed situation and instead, working to understand how the circulation of affective energy constitutes subjects and knowledge.

Second, trans-situational rhetoric is generated ambiently. Ambient generation and circulation means that rhetoric's influence is not tied to specifically-motivated symbol exchange. For example: that .affect file from earlier probably lives in a hidden folder that is impossible to edit directly, but is being constantly updated ambiently by your operating system, given temporary information to understand your engagement with the machine. Thomas Rickert's *Ambient Rhetoric* rejects rhetoric "understood as suasion attempted between discrete or among aggregate subjects embedded in a transitive, subject-driven view of rhetorical situations."[109] Rejecting that "tame" sense of the rhetorical situation, Rickert takes a posthuman view that suggests that rhetoric is an "emergent result of environmentally situated and interactive engagements, redolent of a world that affects us, that persuades us prior to symbolicity."[110] For example, Rickert shows how the Microsoft Windows startup sound acts as pre-suasion, i.e., it creates an environment for suasion—affectively marking the surface and boundary of the computer as a space for discourse.[111] Understanding ambient rhetoric helps recognize how digital interfaces can create the possibility for suasive discourse, but can also create the impossibility. Where the Microsoft sounds marks the discrete space for creation on the operating system, the constant push notifications reminding you to log back on to Twitter to see the latest trending topic make everything bleed together. Rickert's concept of ambience attends to trans-situational

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[109]Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, xv.

[110]Rickert, 34.

[111]Rickert, 154.

formatting by showing how infrastructures and interfaces ambiently shape the horizons of our rhetorical environments, actively shaping what participation is possible.

Finally, trans-situational rhetoric can only be understood ecologically. Namely, it emphasizes how texts are given new meaning as they circulate and as one considers the varied agency the text (and its parts) can have. In Jenny Edbuaer Rice's germinal piece, she describes how The rhetorical situation "bleeds into the concatenation of public interaction. Public interactions bleed into wider social processes. The elements of rhetorical situation simply bleed. . . . Rather than primarily speaking of rhetoric through the terministic lens of conglomerated elements, I look towards a framework of affective ecologies that recontextualizes rhetorics in their temporal, historical, and lived fluxes."[112] She uses this model to trace the phrase "Keep Austin Weird" through its varied contexts—not simply tracing its history but tracing how its meaning fundamentally changed as it took on new affective associations in its transit. Building on Rice, Nathan Stormer and Bridie McGreavy suggest that rhetoric is ontologically ecological: i.e., rhetoric "considers *qualities of relations* between entities, not just among humans, that enable different modes of rhetoric to emerge, flourish, and dissipate." Given this acknowledgement, one must recognize that rhetoric is done "in dependence, not between 'independents.'"[113] These conceptual shifts retune rhetorical commitments away from situations ("eruptive moments") and individuals and toward the "studies [of] tangled forces that

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[112]Jenny Edbauer, "Unframing Models of Public Distribution: From Rhetorical Situation to Rhetorical Ecologies," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2005): 9, https://doi.org/10.1080/02773940509391320.

[113]Nathan Stormer and Bridie McGreavy, "Thinking Ecologically About Rhetoric's Ontology: Capacity, Vulnerability, and Resilience," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 50, no. 1 (2017): 3, https://doi.org/10.5325/philrhet.50.1.0001.

conditionally empower addressivity."[114] This perspective foregrounds participation as formatted—it considers participation as inseparable from the lively environments from which it must emerge.[115] Our .affect file's formatting can only be understood by a program that would (1) understand .affect as the mode of distribution (2) represent the various connections that ambiently created a formatted affective state trans-situationally, noting how various situations, interactions, and environments acted upon each other and continue to operate in flux. Ecologies would be the system that understood the distribution of ambient affect.

Specifically, I consider participation in the trans-situation as affectively *formatted,* which marks a departure from the scholarly literature I've reviewed above. Rhetorical scholars tend to opt for descriptions like "style" or "habituation" to describe how affective energy directs rhetors.[116] Take, for example, Chaput's explanation: "[T]he rhetorical situation… works through a fairly rigid grid of determinacy embedded within bounded sites of exchange that cannot account for the beliefs people hold through sensed experiences that do not necessarily align with clear surface logics—beliefs that are affective habituations rather than ideological errors."[117] I agree with Chaput that affective habituations are a better explanation for so-called ideological errors and that a trans-situated model better accounts for how discourse circulates outside of modernist conceptions of situation, audience, exigence, and so on. But I also think that

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[114]Stormer and McGreavy, 11, 15.

[115]Stormer and McGreavy, 9.

[116] Robert Hariman, *Political Style: The Artistry of Power* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995); Bradford Vivian, "Style, Rhetoric, and Postmodern Culture," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 35, no. 3 (2002): 223–43, https://doi.org/10.1353/par.2003.0005; Anna M. Young, *Prophets, Gurus, & Pundits: Rhetorical Styles & Public Engagement* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2014); In this way, the dissertation also marks a change in my own thinking, see Salzano, "Lemons or *Lemonade*?"

[117] Chaput, "Rhetorical Circulation in Late Capitalism," 20.

infrastructure–especially digital infrastructure–plays a key role in sense-making in a way that requires a different theoretical emphasis on affective habituations. For these habituations do not emerge organically from exchange in the world, they are influenced by the goals of global capital, enacted in the daily practices of surveillance capitalism.[118] In "Algorithmic Culture," Ted Striphas argues that, while our cultural habits have always been determined by elitism, they are now completely leaving human control, turned over to "algorithmic data processing, which is increasingly becoming a private, exclusive and indeed profitable affair.… [C]ompanies like Amazon, Google and Facebook are fast becoming, despite their populist rhetoric, the new apostles of culture."[119] Striphas's concern about *apostolic* algorithmic culture is fitting— Foucault often turns to the church of an example of disciplinary culture. What is unique about the algorithmic control society is that its decreed texts will come from neither critics nor popes, but from the algorithmic sorting performed behind a black box in a tech firm. Affective formatting, then, can be seen as an intensification of affective habituation: where disciplinary societies featured a habitus informed and enforced by discourse, a control society features formatted ecologies set in large part by technological and social code.

How do we practice rhetoric differently when we understand rhetoric as trans-situated and rhetors as affectively formatted? Kelty notes that digital participation "occurs in a situation in which all but a few are prevented from reverse-engineering an understanding, and so cannot act or contribute in ways that are creative, critical, or transformative."[120] But perhaps, from an ecological perspective, that does not have to be a bad thing. Affect theorists like Brian Massumi

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[118] See Couldry and Mejias, *The Costs of Connection*, on "data relations."

[119] Ted Striphas, "Algorithmic Culture," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 18, no. 4–5 (2015): 407, https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549415577392.

[120]Kelty, *The Participant*, 264.

are specifically committed to not reducing and standardizing experiences and risk flattening affective flows that could sustain invention. Of affective politics, Massumi advocates for its purpose outside of common language and shared rationality: "Rather than going back to the failed project of finding a common language, purpose, or rationality, it would seem that the complexity of that dissensus should be the starting point for politics. Why accept as the starting point a reduction of difference, a channeling into tired habit? That's to start with defeat. Taking complexity for a starting point, broadly speaking, is what 'ecological' means."[121] Taking complexity for a starting point, how do we modify our practices of participation? And, how do we keep in sight the problem of digital infrastructure—how do we go about (re)formatting when our affective ecologies are partially generated by formats that are often black-boxed, out of collective control? Together, these questions feed into the overarching ethical question: *How should we participate in demanding, digital times?*

Reformatting sensibilities

Earlier, I mentioned protest posters from the early and mid-twentieth century that encouraged newly-enfranchised women and people of color to vote in the United States. In 2020, deciding between Joe Biden and Donald Trump, these images re-emerged. An iconic photograph of a woman holding a "Women, use your vote!" sign was put on a T-Shirt and sold on Redbubble, with added text: "It mattered in 1920 / it matters in 2020."[122] A new illustration of

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[121] Massumi and McKim, "Of Microperception and Micropolitics," 13.

[122] "'Women! Use Your Vote' Photographic Print for Sale by Litlnemo | Redbubble," accessed January 20, 2023, https://www.redbubble.com/i/photographic-print/Women-Use-Your-Vote-by-litlnemo/58260848.6Q0TX.

the Vote Baby Vote! photo was featured in *Southern Cultures*.[123] All this as Democrats and

Republicans alike pushed to get out the vote, resulting in the "highest rate of voter turnout in

more than a century," according to Pew Research.[124]

Amid all this traditional civic participation, there was a push to reformat that

participatory sensibility — one where an individual participated in a collective nation-state

through the ballot — into an even more engaged one:

> Both my daughter and I believe that those who can must vote in this election. But it's
> critical that we realize it will take more than our votes to defend democracy and defeat
> white supremacy.[125]

> But the demonstrations of the summer, the ongoing campaigns for mutual aid, and the
> growing movement against evictions are demonstrable proof that power is not only
> generated in mainstream politics but can be garnered through collective organizing and
> acts of solidarity. They also foretell a future in which the country does not return to a
> long-forgotten normal but is animated by protests, strikes, occupations, and the ongoing
> struggle for food, medicine, care, housing, justice, and democracy.[126]

And, again, around the 2022 midterms, especially in response to the Supreme Court overturning

Roe v. Wade:

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[123] Jennifer Standish et al., "In Place to Make Change: NC2020 and the Commemoration of Women's Suffrage," *Southern Cultures* 26, no. 3 (2020): 156–71, https://doi.org/10.1353/scu.2020.0046.

[124] Reem Nadeem, "Behind Biden's 2020 Victory," *Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy* (blog), June 30, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/06/30/behind-bidens-2020-victory/.

[125] Eveline Shen, "Voting Is Not Enough," *Forward Together* (blog), October 26, 2020, para. 3, https://forwardtogether.org/voting-is-not-enough/.

[126] Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "Voting Trump Out Is Not Enough," *The New Yorker*, November 9, 2020, para. 26, https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/voting-trump-out-is-not-enough.

> Voting is the most basic thing we must do, but it is not the only thing we should do. We have to be out mobilizing, marching in the streets and organizing others in our communities. It is not enough just to elect officials and hope they do the right thing.[127]

> When people continually ask what they can do and the only answer is to vote it literally hides the vast and powerful tradition of organizing coalitions and actual participatory democracy. This isn't a spectator sport, and that that notion continues is damning.[128]

Participation matters. Our digital times are not just demanding because of our media. They are demanding because, if one cares about making the world a better place, there are many overlapping crises demanding our attention and care. Finding ourselves in complicated and urgent entanglements, people are demanding we reformat our participatory sensibilities for our demanding times.

We arrive at an impasse. The participatory condition exposes the affective dimension of rhetoric. Theorizing the affective dimension of rhetoric is key to the axiological turn I described in the introduction, but the micropolitical theories presented in that turn can fail to see axes of oppression as they are embedded in our infrastructures of language and digitality. What participatory practices can we exercise to fulfill RSA's affirmation, in a statement condemning anti-Black violence, of "the capacity of rhetoric to improve our conditions: to expand our abilities to empathize, to mobilize demands for justice, and to disclose more ethical worlds made

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[127] Cristina Tzintzún Ramirez, qtd. in Kevin Robillard, "'Vote For Democrats' Is Not Enough In A Post-Roe America | HuffPost Latest News," *Huffington Post*, June 24, 2022, para. 24, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/vote-for-democrats-is-not-enough_n_62b626c5e4b06594c1e43bab.

[128] Jared Yates Sexton [@JYSexton], "When People Continually Ask What They Can Do and the Only Answer Is to Vote It Literally Hides the Vast and Powerful Tradition of Organizing Coalitions and Actual Participatory Democracy. This Isn't a Spectator Sport, and That That Notion Continues Is Damning.," Tweet, *Twitter*, July 19, 2022, https://twitter.com/JYSexton/status/1549430315835334656.

by words"?[129] How do we find the "capacity to act, that is, to have the competence to speak or write in a way that will be recognized or heeded by others in one's community," the rhetorical agency that Karlyn Kohrs Campbell calls the "*sine qua non* of public participation"?[130] We find ourselves at a perplexing moment where we *need* to participate but we are not sure what we should participate in, how we should participate, what it should feel like, what it should look like. How do we go about reformatting our participation?

I propose *participatory sensibilities* as a concept for use in reckoning with how rhetorical culture is (re)formatted. Jane Bennett defines sensibilities as "residing between a striking reality and a stricken body… culturally encoded and temperamentally delimited, but… still educable to some uncertain degree."[131] While styles have been theorized sensorily—gesturing toward particular affective orientations and rhetorical habits—style carries the baggage of its colloquial usage as adornment.[132] In contrast to style, the language of sensibilities emphasizes how circulation relates to *sensations,* sometimes brought on by striking realities, sometimes by the stricken body, usually somewhere in-between. Bennett offers sensibilities as one-half of a model of ethics, the other half being a *code*. By recognizing specifically that sensibilities are culturally encoded, not just consciously selected but received from culture, Bennett's definition of sensibility leaves a key role for technology, understood rhetorically as both encoded and encoding. As Pfister has argued, "the task for critics interested in bending new technologies to

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[129]RSA Board of Directors, "Statement Condemning Anti-Black Violence," June 2, 2020, para. 4, https://associationdatabase.com/aws/RSA/ebulletin/view_mail/164600/205225.

[130] Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "Agency: Promiscuous and Protean," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (2005): 3, https://doi.org/10.1080/1479142042000332134.

[131] Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 150.

[132]Salzano, "Lemons or *Lemonade*?," 50.

democratic ends is to identify how technologies constrain and enhance the possibilities of

common sensation, mutual interdependence, shared risk, and conjoint action in complex

rhetorical ecologies where collective action is difficult but possible."[133] Pfister's list suggests

something precisely relevant to this study: that technologies help format the parameters of

participation, and that those parameters format different sensibilities.

Attending to participatory sensibilities attends to the relationship between affective and

symbolic, collective and individual. Sensibilities, on one hand, are formed by individuals'

symbolic diets, i.e., their unique habitus of rhetorical content.[134] So influencing one person's

sensibilities is not impossible via direct debate and argumentation about macropolitical issues.

But Deleuze and Guattari emphasize how a sensibility mostly operates in the "molecular realm

of beliefs and desires in which the distinction between the social and the individual loses all

meaning since flows are neither attributable to individuals nor overcodable by collective

signifiers."[135] We should place our commitment, our energy in the nonsymbolic and trans-

situational. Recognizing that rhetoric works ambiently, infrastructurally, affectively, and

transsituationally, we should not place our hope in persuading or blaming individuals in bounded

situations. We have to recognize with Jenkins that, "All the lectures in the world cannot get rid

of trolls when the virtual environment makes their generation likely."[136] Instead of focusing on

the racist trolls, we need to attend to the formats that keep creating racist trolls—i.e., focus on

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[133]Damien Smith Pfister, "Technoliberal Rhetoric, Civic Attention, and Common Sensation in Sergey Brin's 'Why Google Glass?,'" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 105, no. 2 (2019): 196, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2019.1595103.

[134] See Amy Young's discussion of habitus. Young, *Prophets, Gurus, & Pundits*.

[135] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1987), 219.

[136] Jenkins, *Surfing the Anthropocene*, 23.

racism over the racists, platforms over the posts. We should think about what has become sensible, and what formats that sensibility, and not just the results of said sensibilities.

Sensibilities provide a middle ground between complete technological determinism and continued fantasies of rhetorical agency. It is true that "algorithms have productive capacities not merely by mediating the world but through their delegated capacities to do work in the world and by making a difference in how social formations and relations are formed and informed."[137] Denying the deterministic and agentic properties of algorithmic platforms only serves technoliberal rhetoric that platforms are neutral and human agency (expressed on those platforms) is entirely to praise and blame. Here, there is resonance between Black Feminists like Brittney Cooper, who show why intersectionality should be about structures, not identity; and materialist critics like Grossberg, who emphasize "people make history but… they do it in conditions not of their own making. Consequently, they are not in control of the multiple and often unintended consequences of their actions."[138] That is not to say people cannot be held accountable for their behavior, but rather that "putting too much blame on subjects for the behaviors they engage in as a response to the environment" comes at the cost of "understanding why such modes emerge."[139] Rather than focusing exclusively on single rhetors, a format theory of participation considers the layers of formatting that come before a sensibility of participation is activated in a given moment, but still appreciates how those sensibilities can be (re)formatted

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[137] Bucher, *If...Then*, 72–73.

[138] Lawrence Grossberg, "Wandering Audiences, Nomadic Critics," *Cultural Studies* 2, no. 3 (1988): 390, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502388800490241; Brittney Cooper, "Intersectionality," ed. Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth (Oxford University Press, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199328581.013.20.

[139] Jenkins, *Surfing the Anthropocene*, 23.

by the inventiveness of participants. After all, sensibilities are educable to some uncertain

degree, as Bennett suggests. She notes that Foucault's point, in his later work, "is to enunciate

the more complex thesis that there is no self without discipline, no discipline that does not also

harbor opportunities for arts of the self, and no effective ethics without such an aesthetic

project."[140] Digital participants are finding opportunities for arts of the self and attempting to

ethically reformat participatory sensibilities.

A format theory of participation can thus guide better rhetorical practice: conducting

better intersectional analyses and prompting creative invention not bound to traditional notions

of situations, agency, and audience. Chaput says that, in a rhetorical circulation model, "the new

goal is simply to increase communicative exchanges that circulate positive affects—to deliberate

in such a way that we all become more open to the world's creative potential."[141] Thinking about

formatted sensibilities attunes *Living a Participatory Life* to all the micro-macro political

complexity belied by Chaput's use of "exchanges." There are parameters, set by deliberative

histories of a participatory format; there are imperatives, set by capital and platforms; and there

is the trans-situated level to which Chaput refers—all influence the possibility of exchange. That

is, it's not enough to simply deliberate in a new way in order to circulate affects. One must see

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[140] Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 145–46.

[141] Chaput, "Rhetorical Circulation in Late Capitalism," 21. This is not to say that we should only talk about positive, happy things and never engage in criticism. As I've clarified elsewhere, "When I say positive affective energy, I do not mean good feelings like happiness; I mean affective energy that opens up the field of potentiality. When I say negative affective energy, I do not mean bad feelings like disgust; I mean affective energy that closes the field of potentiality, limiting new directions of sensation and feeling, and thus limiting the potential new directions conversation, inquiry, and politics can take.… Happiness, although seemingly positive, paradoxically creates negative affective pressure that shuts down argumentation about new ways of living." The feminist killjoy, for example, can spread positive affective energy by opening up what was shut down. Salzano, "Lemons or *Lemonade*?," 48–9.

the relationship between micropolitical and macropolitical. Reformatting in the interest of collective, intersectional justice requires circulating positive affects (micro) to affect infrastructure (macro) such that the infrastructure permits circulation of positive affects (micro). Where the participatory condition's trans-situatedness threatens to make politics impossible, living a participatory life is the project of making participation accessible to *and accessed by* many.

Proceeding with a format theory of participation

Living a Participatory Life offers a format theory of participation to understand demanding, digital times. These four concepts offer an answer in response to RQ1, "What are the rhetorical consequences of the participatory condition?" First, participatory parameters show how our participation is set by literal parameters and model formats, and in the participatory condition, these parameters constrain the reformatting of participation. Second, the participatory imperative explains how participation has been made not just obligatory but compulsory by technoliberal protocols, interfaces, and ideology; this imperative is both generative and restrictive. Third, the trans-situation explains how rhetorical exchange in the participatory condition is structured by context collapse, meaning a rhetorical situation model needs to be updated to focus on the circulation of affect across networks of communicative interchange-. Finally, sensibilities offer a way to think about how rhetors have navigated the parameters, imperatives, and trans-situations of the participatory condition to reformat participation.

With a format theory of participation now formatted, we can now put it to use. The following chapters work to answer RQ2: "How do people navigate the participatory condition in order to participate in collective efforts for social change?" and the beginning of RQ3: "What participatory sensibilities are (re)formatted in these efforts?" To explain how the participatory

condition shapes the environment for participation, each chapter addresses the four layers developed in this chapter in varying degrees and shows how each sensibility responds to these circumstances. Disparticipants navigate restrictive parameters for dissent within social movements, Fictocritics generate shared affects in polarizing trans-situations, and Installectuals draw on the participatory imperative to transform a platform. In turn, each sensibility begins to illustrate how we may go about living participatory lives.

Chapter 2: Disparticipants: Dissent and Participation at the Women's March

Formatting purity, popularity, and identity in social movements

Frederick Douglass's participation in the "Colored Jubilee Day" at the World's Columbian Exposition challenged the racism of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. The world's fair featured racist citizenship narratives and excluded African Americans from leadership.[1] In response, Ida B. Wells and Frederick Douglass, among others, published a pamphlet entitled *The Reason Why The Colored American Is Not in The World's Columbian Exposition*; however, the pamphlet struggled to circulate at the fair and the audience it did reach was divided on how to respond to the fair's racism.[2] Douglass found himself at the center of the divide when he was invited to speak at the jubilee day, which Wells saw as a "mockery intended to patronize them," generating further revenue for the fair and making it seem as if the fair had been inclusive.[3] Douglass accepted the invitation to speak at the fair, but used the speech to "denounce the policies of the fair management." Specifically, he denounced white Northerners for capitulating to white Southerners who did not want African Americans at the fair: "in your fawning upon these cruel slayers you slap us in the face… this exposition denied mere recognition to eight

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[1] See Kristy Maddux, *Practicing Citizenship: Women's Rhetoric at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019).

[2] Maddux, 103.

[3] Elliott M. Rudwick and August Meier, "Black Man in the 'White City': Negroes and the Columbian Exposition, 1893," *Phylon* 26, no. 4 (1965): 359, https://doi.org/10.2307/273699; Maddux, *Practicing Citizenship*, 101.

millions and one-tenth of its own people."[4] Douglass's remarks generated considerable attention in the press, causing Wells to apologize for criticizing him "for an effort which had done more to bring our case to the attention of the American people than anything else which had happened at the fair."[5] Despite Wells's concerns that the radical quality of their critique would be diluted by the fair's attempt at inclusion, Douglass was able to use the moment to circulate a radical criticism in front of a popular audience and bring attention to their cause.

124 years later, Angela Peoples faced a similar situation, as she participated in the 2017 Women's March on Washington to challenge the racism of contemporary white feminism. Peoples, a Black woman, was photographed holding a sign that reads "Don't forget, White Women Voted for TRUMP" while white women behind her took selfies in pink Pussyhats. The photo went viral, landing coverage in mainstream outlets like the *New York Times*.[6] In an op-ed, Peoples explained that her "message stood in stark contrast to the theme of togetherness that dominated the Women's March… in a world where 53 percent of white women voters chose a racist, elitist sexual predator for president, the idea that we all want the same thing is a myth."[7] Peoples's image served as a radical, Black feminist critique of a reformist, white feminist movement.[8] Her critique was made *in situ*, at the march. Peoples showed up to what she

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[4] Rudwick and Meier, "Black Man in the 'White City,'" 361.

[5] Wells, qtd. in Rudwick and Meier, 361, from an unpublished autobiography manuscript.

[6] Jenna Wortham, "Who Didn't Go to the Women's March Matters More Than Who Did," *The New York Times*, December 22, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/24/magazine/who-didnt-go-to-the-womens-march-matters-more-than-who-did.html.

[7] Angela Peoples, "Don't Just Thank Black Women. Follow Us.," *The New York Times*, December 16, 2017, sec. Opinion, para. 2, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/16/opinion/sunday/black-women-leadership.html.

[8] This critique has been extended in contemporary communication studies scholarship about the Women's March, such as: Alyson Farzad-Phillips, "Huddles or Hurdles? Spatial Barriers to Collective Gathering in the Aftermath of the Women's March," *Women's Studies in Communication* 43, no. 3 (2020): 247–70, https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2020.1747127;

perceived as a problematic march but was able to circulate a radical critique in part due to its popularity. In turn, the image's circulation drove attention to the questions begged by her critique of the Women's March: Who—and what—is this social movement *for*? Who gets to decide the answer to that question?

Despite the years that separate these historic moments of participation, both situations reveal similar formatting. This chapter will detail disparticipation, a sensibility that participates while challenging parameters of participation—dissenting from binaries of popular/pure and disidentifying from identitarian politics. Social movements typically generate tension between arguments for increased ideological purity and for appealing to mass popularity. Charles Conrad suggests that social movements balance "the desire to maintain the ideological purity of the movement" and sacrificing "ideological purity in an attempt to obtain enhanced opportunities to affect desired socio-political changes."[9] Inability to navigate this tension can lead to movements with diminished political capacities. Various feminist critics attribute ideological purity as a stumbling block to broad feminist coalitions, especially during the 1960s-70s (amid the so-called second wave).[10] In the 21st century, white feminist and political theorist Brooke Ackerly has

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Jessica Gantt-Shafer, Cara Wallis, and Caitlin Miles, "Intersectionality, (Dis)Unity, and Processes of Becoming at the 2017 Women's March," *Women's Studies in Communication* 42, no. 2 (2019): 221–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2019.1616021.

[9] Charles Conrad, "The Transformation of the 'Old Feminist' Movement," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 67, no. 3 (1981): 285, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638109383573; For a contemporary reckoning with the issue of "purity politics," see Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); Katrin Redfern and Richard Whatmore, "History Tells Us That Ideological 'purity Spirals' Rarely End Well," *The Conversation*, July 1, 2020, http://theconversation.com/history-tells-us-that-ideological-purity-spirals-rarely-end-well-140888.

[10] Barbara Ryan, "Ideological Purity and Feminism: The U.S. Women's Movement from 1966 to 1975," *Gender and Society* 3, no. 2 (1989): 239–57; Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Jennifer C. Nash, "Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality," *Meridians* 11, no. 2 (2013): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.11.2.1; Alyssa A. Samek, "Violence and

described how transnational feminist consensus has constrained the development of methods for

"listening across difference," showing how commitment to an ideologically pure agenda actually

betrays the goals of such an agenda.[11] Movements that desire to be politically effective and act in

the interest of their participants require disagreement that can be sustained without leading to

complete division and dissolution.

To resolve this tension, social movements require participatory dissent. Robert Ivie

suggests that "dissent means advancing a significant difference of opinion or expressing a

substantial disagreement without making a complete break with the prevailing viewpoint."[12]

Ivie's examples of dissent include nineteenth century meteorologists, military critiques of

George W. Bush, and a dissenting opinion from Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Douglass, Wells, and

Peoples, however, prompt me to think about how dissent can work *within* a social movement to

"destabilize a prevailing mindset more or less to allow for some degree of revision sooner or

later. [Dissent] puts differences into play, short of treating adversaries as enemies, often by

means of clever tricks of discourse because dissent is tricky to perform."[13] In both 1893 and

2017, social movement rhetors faced a moment in which purity and popularity were seemingly

Identity Politics: 1970s Lesbian-Feminist Discourse and Robin Morgan's 1973 West Coast Lesbian Conference Keynote Address," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 13, no. 3 (2016): 232–49, https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2015.1127400.

[11] Brooke A. Ackerly, "'How Does Change Happen?' Deliberation and Difficulty," *Hypatia* 22, no. 4 (2007): 10.

[12] Robert L. Ivie, "Enabling Democratic Dissent," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 101, no. 1 (2015): 50, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2015.994900.

[13] Ivie, 50; In a companion essay, Kendall Phillips emphasizes this point. "But the invention that occurs within spaces of dissension seeks to disavow the available means, to disrupt the mechanisms of judgment, and to turn the common places decidedly uncommon. Thus, at the emergence point of dissent is not the forging of a new common sense but a divergence from the common and a daring step into the unconsidered and previously unspeakable." Kendall R. Phillips, "The Event of Dissension: Reconsidering the Possibilities of Dissent," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 101, no. 1 (2015): 64, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2015.994899.

opposed. Choosing to participate could deny their political principles—but choosing not to participate could be a missed political opportunity. What sensibilities do these rhetors generate to resolve tensions of purity and popularity? Participatory dissent, rejecting the arguments for purity but not rejecting the movement; rejecting the constraints of popularity but not the political opportunity presented.

Another tension acts on these connected situations—concerns about participation in movements that are organized in part around shared identities. To appreciate how their participatory dissent creatively defies these identity-based tensions, I build from the late queer of color theorist José Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification. Disidentification describes a queer process that transforms identifications from within oppressive ecologies. Muñoz explains that disidentification is "a survival strategy that works within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously."[14] Muñoz describes how disidentification, in the works that he studies, allows queer people of color to articulate a liminal position that resists the identifications placed by white supremacist heteronormativity while still using these identifications to their advantage. Ashley Ferrell describes the rhetorical work of disidentification, showing that it "engages in the terms established by dominant public discourse, while at the same time using collective utterances to redesign the premises of those terms" by remediating "silenced histories."[15] What is uniquely *queer* about disidentification is how it dissents from a binary of accepting/rejecting a problematic representation, finding a creative way to operate at neither pole set up by what Muñoz would call a majoritarian and phobic (racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic) binary.

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[14] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4–5.

[15] Ashley P. Ferrell, "'Righting Past Wrongs': Rhetorical Disidentification and Historical Reference in Response to Philadelphia's Opioid Epidemic," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 22, no. 4 (2019): 535–36.

Anjali Vats has shown, for example, how Marshawn Lynch's trademarking of the term "Beast Mode®… assert[s] property rights in the stereotype of the black beast while simultaneously reconceptualizing the figure."[16] The disidentifying rhetor queers the representation for their own use, using a dominant form for recognition but rejecting the way that recognition is predicated on subjugation. In this way, disidentification operates both within and beyond problematic ideologies, resisting them but risking the potential of reinforcing them. Both Douglass, a Black man asked to be a token at the exclusionary fair, and Peoples, a Black woman implicitly expected to cave to white feminist organizing at the march, find a way to dissent, disidentify, and participate.

I call this queer sensibility—of participatory dissent and disidentification—"disparticipation." Building from queer theorists like Muñoz and Judith Butler, I define disparticipation as a sensibility of someone who takes part in an assembly queerly, taking advantage of the gathering but subverting its reformist politics. While disparticipants may be seen as not participating, or even counter-protesting, I reframe their participation as a "diss" of a protest for a lack of nuanced politics. Disparticipation generates discourse that expands the *topoi* of protest rhetoric by revealing and responding to broader structural injustices. First, I conceptualize disparticipation by explaining how it integrates rhetorical studies of dissent, participation, and disidentification. Next, I theorize the three steps by which disparticipation ripples through activist discourse. I extend this theory in three cases of the 2017-2019 Women's March. Finally, I consider the future possibilities of disparticipation in the pressing rhetorical ecologies that demand our participation.

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[16] Anjali Vats, "Marking Disidentification: Race, Corporeality, and Resistance in Trademark Law," *Southern Communication Journal* 81, no. 4 (2016): 238, https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2016.1200128.

Disparticipating for survival

Disparticipation emphasizes a major insight from queer theory: that the possibility of transformative political change requires unexpected (queer) coalitions and strategies. In a foundational text in queer of color critique, Cathy J. Cohen describes a queer politics that included "punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens" under the umbrella term queer—eschewing an essentialist, sexuality-driven definition for one that emphasizes "our shared marginal relationship to dominant power which normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges."[17] By extending queerness in this way, Cohen aligns queer politics with a transformational politics that does not "search for opportunities to integrate into dominant institutions and normative social relationships, but instead pursues a political agenda that seeks to change values, definitions, and laws which make these institutions and relationships oppressive."[18] Such a transformative politics does not avoid questions of "specific lived experiences," but recognizes them and sees "interconnected sites of resistance from which we can wage broader political struggles."[19] Queer politics resists status quo political methods that divide marginalized groups and impede the possibility of envisioning transformative futures.

Disparticipation emerges as rhetors in search of transformative futures find themselves constrained by such divisive parameters—especially a rhetorical binary of reformism and

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[17] Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (1995): 458, https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-3-4-437.

[18] Cohen, 445.

[19] Cohen, 462; Cohen's description aligns well with Chávez's findings about coalitions between queer and migrant groups. Karma R. Chávez, "Counter-Public Enclaves and Understanding the Function of Rhetoric in Social Movement Coalition-Building," *Communication Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2011): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2010.541333.

radicalism in social movements. In Robert Cathcart's defining essay in rhetorical social movement studies, he suggests a distinction between reform movements "primarily concerned with adjusting the existing order" and radical movements that "reject the system, its hierarchy and its values."[20] The reform/radical distinction often maps on neatly with the popular/purity distinction. Charles Stewart writes that a "revolutionary resistance movement may have a wide range of tactical choices but a narrow range of channels. A reform movement may have access to many channels but be limited to moderate, socially acceptable tactics."[21] Douglass, in the introductory example, wanted to adopt a reformist strategy for popular support and was critiqued by radicals who saw it as having a moderating effect. But, he participated in a way that ultimately allowed him to take advantage of the reformist, popular channels without losing a radical, purist mindset.

Developed in response to problematic parameters of normative movement participation, disparticipation acts as a sensibility that creates the possibility for dissension without dissolution. Kendall Phillips has described dissenters as "tricksters" whose "cunning violation of the accepted rules is derived from a cleavage—a cleavage between the trickster's understanding and the established consensus, a separation that demonstrates the fragility and uncertainty of the seemingly established rules of deliberation and discussion, and a division arising from the tension between the trickster's sense of the world and the way the world is presented."[22] What is emphasized by disparticipation—making it participatory dissent in a disidentifying mode—is

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[20] Robert S. Cathcart, "Movements: Confrontation as Rhetorical Form," *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 43, no. 3 (1978): 239, 237, https://doi.org/10.1080/10417947809372383.

[21] Charles J. Stewart, "A Functional Approach to the Rhetoric of Social Movements," *Central States Speech Journal* 31, no. 4 (1980): 304, https://doi.org/10.1080/10510978009368070.

[22] Phillips, "The Event of Dissension," 63.

how an established consensus or the presentation of the world is specifically implicated in how

systems of power have constrained possible dissent. Lisa Corrigan posits that disidentification, as

a queer strategy, enables "more radical critiques of power, capital, injustice, state violence, and

political resistance."[23] In a similar vein, Chávez explains that radical politics need not imply an

anti-coalitional, fundamentalist approach. Instead, a "radical act… addresses or confronts roots

in their multiplicity and complexity."[24] Disparticipation offers rhetors the possibility of

participating in radical dissent that queers parameters of radical and reformist, puritanical and

popular.

Much like disidentification, disparticipation is not a sensibility of apolitical personal

rejection; rather, disparticipation contests what counts as political in a given time and place.[25]

Disparticipation is a queer sensibility, informed by queer theory, but not all disparticipants must

be queer, nor, obviously, are all queer rhetors disparticipants. The disparticipants in this essay

occupy a variety of positionalities and respond to injustice related to their identities, but their

approach is not simply derived from their lived experience without further interpretation and

analysis. Inspired by Cohen's articulation of queer of color critique, the queer sensibility of

disparticipation is brought about by someone who can recognize "the link between the

ideological, social, political and economic marginalization" of people from various identities to

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[23] Lisa M. Corrigan, "White 'honky' Liberals, Rhetorical Disidentification, and Black Power during the Johnson Administration," in *Reading the Presidency: Advances in Presidential Rhetoric*, ed. Stephen J. Heidt and Mary E. Stuckey (New York: Peter Lang, 2019), 303.

[24] Karma R. Chávez, *Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 57.

[25] The concept and practice of disidentifying can "generate space for the exertion of productive pressures that expose the racial and temporal contingencies" of contemporary hegemonic discourses. Ferrell, "Righting Past Wrongs," 537.

develop "political strategies effective in confronting the linked yet varied sites of power."[26] Both

Cohen and Muñoz would recognize that participants "who, due to antagonisms within the social

such as race, class, and sex, are debased within the majoritarian public sphere" are necessarily

more amenable toward an intersectional analysis critical of power.[27] But Muñoz also writes

throughout his work that he intends "to enable a project that imagines a position or narrative of

being and becoming that can resist the pull of identitarian models of relationality."[28] Showcasing

a queer act of participation, the disparticipant is both critical and generative in rendering

thinkable the exclusions not yet considered and the possibilities not yet attempted.

Disparticipation advances what Seyla Benhabib calls "democratic iterations [that] aim at

democratic justice."[29] This queer participation generates activist discourse that expands the *topoi*

of reformist protest rhetoric by revealing and responding to broader structural injustices. In the

next sections, I elaborate on this theorization of disparticipation by explaining how (1)

disparticipants recognize the importance of the existing format and "show up," but seek to

reconfigure the infrastructure of participation, (2) disparticipants invent a way to communicate

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[26] Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," 462.

[27] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 55–56; In this way, Muñoz's work reminds me of Black feminist bell hooks's famous theorizing of the margins as a site for creative resistance. hooks recognizes that, even though marginalization has been brought about by intersectional domination and exploitation, one can choose to take advantage of it for inventive theorizing. Regarding encountering the colonizer in this space, hooks writes: "We greet you as liberators. This 'we' is that us in the margins, that 'we' who inhabit marginal space that is not a site of domination but a place of resistance. Enter that space." bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36 (1989): 23.

[28] José Esteban Muñoz, "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31, no. 3 (2006): 677, https://doi.org/10.1086/499080.

[29] Seyla Benhabib, "Democratic Exclusions and Democratic Iterations: Dilemmas of `Just Membership' and Prospects of Cosmopolitan Federalism," *European Journal of Political Theory* 6, no. 4 (2007): 455, https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885107080650.

their "diss"—their partial disavowal of the assembly they join—in a way that straddles the micro- and macro-political, and (3) the illumination of disparticipation circulates trans-situationally, reformatting movement topoi and sensibilities in response to the issue that the disparticipant identified.

(1) Disparticipants recognize the importance of the existing format and "show up," but seek to reconfigure the infrastructure of participation.

What is the participatory infrastructure of a protest in a digital age? The 2017 Women's March was organized for the day after Donald Trump's inauguration as a response to his misogyny. More than 500,000 went to the march in Washington, D.C. and more than 2 million protested around the world.[30] While the movement was enacted in person, it was organized starting with a Facebook post from an "apolitical grandmother living in Hawaii," Teresa Shook, in the Pantsuit Nation Facebook group.[31] The case of the Women's March is representative of digital culture's conceptualization (and fetishization) of mass participation as ignited, to use Jiyeon Kang's term, through digital media.[32] As *WIRED* put it, "The Women's March Defines Protest in the Facebook Age."[33] While the other chapters in this dissertation explore imperative

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[30] Heidi M. Przybyla and Fredreka Schouten, "At 2.6 Million Strong, Women's Marches Crush Expectations," *USA TODAY*, January 21, 2017, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2017/01/21/womens-march-aims-start-movement-trump-inauguration/96864158/.

[31] Carrie Scozzaro, "Women's March Founder Teresa Shook Shares Her Unlikely Path to Activism as She Visits Spokane," *Inlander*, March 7, 2019, https://www.inlander.com/spokane/womens-march-founder-teresa-shook-shares-her-unlikely-path-to-political-activism-as-she-visits-spokane/Content?oid=16768175.

[32] Jiyeon Kang, *Igniting the Internet: Youth and Activism in Postauthoritarian South Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016).

[33] Issie Lapowsky, "The Women's March Defines Protest in the Facebook Age," *Wired*, January 21, 2017, https://www.wired.com/2017/01/womens-march-defines-protest-facebook-age/.

digital infrastructures of participation more exclusively through digital media, the Women's

March is akin to the "Occupy Wall Street" or "Arab Spring" movements as a defining event in

the history of contemporary participation's hybridization of digital and non-digital modes.

The digital mobilization of protesters for the Women's March helped produce a familiar

format of mass participation: the assembly. Judith Butler's *Notes Toward a Performative Theory*

of Assembly explains the power of assembly through digital forums and public spaces:

> I want to suggest only that when bodies assemble on the street, in the square, or in other forms of public space (including virtual ones) they are exercising a plural and performative right to appear, one that asserts and instates the body in the midst of the political field, and which, in its expressive and signifying function, delivers a bodily demand for a more livable set of economic, social, and political conditions no longer afflicted by induced forms of precarity.[34]

In Butler's view, the matter of assembling is important for resistance to oppressive social forces.

By advancing a theory of assembly, Butler sets the parameters of this participation not on

rational citizen-subjects but on embodied participants. The impact of demands from participants

in a protest is not simply reflected in the power of language or signification, but in accentuating a

range of affects that resonate throughout in the mass gathering.[35]

Showing up en masse is a way of making powerful political demands, even if specific

demands are inchoate. For example, Shook's post and subsequent Facebook event that started the

original 2017 Women's March had no list of demands; Shook just wanted to see if a "few dozen

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[34] Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 11.

[35] This is the sort of rhetorical new materialist approach Nathan Crick proffers in the introduction to *The Rhetoric of Social Movements: Networks, Power, and New Media* (New York: Routledge, 2021). Furthering Butler's theory, Kyle Parry has expanded on the value of "assembly" as a form rivaling narrative and representation in the digital age. Kyle Parry, *A Theory of Assembly: From Museums to Memes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023).

friends [would] join her in a protest of the president-elect's inauguration in January."[36] That

simple invite to a few friends to protest Trump generated 10,000 RSVPs and eventually a march

that gathered millions globally.[37] While the official Women's March on Washington

organization eventually developed unity principles one week before the march (addressed later),

Shook's inciting post demonstrates Butler's point about assembly. Just showing up en masse is

an argument: that something must change, that the social must be moved. And showing up with

the masses is one—but not the only—place to develop practical political collaborations, to

develop the specific proposals and actions necessary for advancing a vision of justice.

 The demand made by assembly emphasizes the need for survival across various groups.

In this way, Butler's theory of assembly resonates with queer theory about identity and politics.

Survival requires pushing beyond antagonism and suspicion; it requires pushing beyond identity

politics in order to "furnish a broader conception of what it means, politically, to live together."[38]

Butler notes that she is exploring "how precarity—that middle term and, in some ways, that

mediating term—might operate, or is operating, as a site of alliance among groups of people who

do not otherwise find much in common and between whom there is sometimes even suspicion

and antagonism."[39] Assembly points to shared experiences of precarity, even though that

precarity is unequally distributed across positionalities. In this revelation, assembly both points

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[36] Christina Cauterucci, "Getting the Women's March on Washington on the Road," *Slate*, November 23, 2016, https://slate.com/human-interest/2016/11/the-womens-march-on-washington-faces-uncertain-logistics-on-inauguration-weekend.html.

[37] For a history of how the Women's March was organized, see Marie Berry and Erica Chenoweth, "Who Made the Women's March?," in *The Resistance: The Dawn of the Anti-Trump Opposition Movement*, ed. David S. Meyer and Sidney Tarrow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 75–89, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190886172.003.0004.

[38] Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 27.

[39] Butler, 27.

to the need for change, for "more livable conditions" in order to survive, and creates the potential for coalitions even among those who are suspicious of each other.

Disparticipants see the problem and benefit of the assembly. Despite seeing the structural issue not properly attended to in the activist discourse, they choose to assemble and deliver a "bodily demand." To return to Muñoz's vocabulary, they "partially disavow" the movement to "restructure it from within."[40] They use participation to their advantage as they reconceptualize participation itself. The next step turns to this inventive, partial disavowal.

(2) Disparticipants invent a way to communicate their "diss"—their partial disavowal of the assembly they join—in a way that straddles the micro- and macro-political.

Disparticipation aims not to forward an apathy toward politics and social change, but rather articulates a form of queer participation aligned with transformational politics. Disparticipants, following the queer sensibility Cohen describes, recognize that flexibility is key to resistance and carefully negotiate how they can build solidarity and coalitions while still addressing exclusionary rhetorics (and those who engage in such rhetorics). Disparticipants recognize the potential of assembly but find a queer way to participate in it—that neither participates entirely on the assembly's terms, nor entirely rejects participating on those terms. Muñoz makes clear that, while disidentification "is clearly indebted to antiassimilationist" politics, he also "understands that counterdiscourses, like discourse, can always fluctuate for different ideological ends, and a politicized agent must have the ability to adapt and shift as quickly as power does within discourse."[41] Accordingly, disparticipants attempt to craft

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[40] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 28.

[41] Muñoz, 18–19.

transformative political interventions that are not entirely consumed by either status-quo reformism or fundamentalist radicalism.

When disparticipants arrive at the assembly, they participate, but they neither simply protest nor do they simply counter-protest. Instead, they queerly opt for disparticipation by dissing "protesting" and "the protest" for its lack of nuanced politics. In her article about the Black American cultural practice of signifyin' within the context of Black Twitter, Sarah Florini notes that "the generic conventions of dissing facilitate participation by creating participant structures that mitigate interpersonal conflict or hostility and encourage participants to insult and attempt to outperform each other."[42] In the expansion of activist *topoi*, the disparticipant's diss encourages further dissing of the political injustices that the disparticipant points out. Geneva Smitherman explains that, in Black American oral culture, dissing is a "verbal game" that is "often used to send a message of social critique, a bit of social commentary on the actions or statements of someone who is in need of a wake-up call."[43] These disses are sometimes just for fun, but they can carry subtle critiques of society that are missed unless a listener is attuned to its conventions. That subtle critique puts diss in relationship to *diss*ent—dissent may (traditionally) not be as playful as dissing, and disses may be ad hominem jokes instead of argumentative dissent, but they both perform critique while remaining consubstantial with others in community. The diss in disparticipant retains this character, of remaining *in*, but not entirely *of*, an assembly.

Muñoz, while not explicitly referencing this tradition, conceptualizes disidentification as "dissing" the "fiction of identity." Disidentification, he explains, breaks a "representational

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[42] Sarah Florini, "Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin': Communication and Cultural Performance on 'Black Twitter,'" *Television & New Media* 15, no. 3 (2014): 229, https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476413480247.

[43] Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture, and Education in African America* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 26.

contract" between essentialist and constructivist notions of identity; as a result, "the social order receives a jolt that may reverberate loudly and widely, or in less dramatic, yet locally indispensable, ways."[44] The enactment of disidentifications thus diss a binary theorization of identity that assumes essentialism-versus-constructivism. Much like disidentification "is a working on, with, and against a form at a simultaneous moment," disparticipation acts as a wake-up call that allows for disruption of the format of participation.[45] As the diss encourages further dissing, the diss-participation, the diss-ruption, spurns further participatory imagining and iterating, i.e., participatory dissent. Muñoz explains that disidentification "is not about assimilation into a heterosexual matrix but instead a *partial* disavowal of that cultural form that works to restructure it *from within*."[46] Similar in its theorization, enactment, and circulation, disparticipation is a queer act that disses and dissents from a participatory format.

Disparticipation points out the limitations of the standard formatting of the Women's March, especially its affinity for reformist, institutional politics. At the beginning of the March's history, national organizers set out a broad goal to foreground an intersectional perspective and "galvanize women to resist the surge and visibility of hate, racism, and misogyny in the country as a whole, which Trump's campaign fed and helped reveal."[47] And, on Jan 21, 2017, participants rushed to the street whether at the Women's March on Washington or in "sister marches" around the country and world. At each of these marches, women gathered: often in pink, often in front of iconic symbols of their place (the White House and Capitol Building

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[44] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 6.

[45] José Esteban Muñoz, Tavia Amolo Ochieng' Nyongó, and Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, *The Sense of Brown* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 11.

[46] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 29.

[47] Berry and Chenoweth, "Who Made the Women's March?," 81.

became the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Space Needle in Seattle, the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin),

and often carrying signs with quippy messages about misogyny, racism, Trump, and so forth.[48]

The Women's March occurred in a similar form in 2018 and 2019 and was moved online due to

COVID-19 since 2020.[49] As Berry and Chenoweth conclude in their history of organizing the

Women's March, the long-term strategy of the Women's March as an organization and

movement has been "that of turning away from extra-institutional grassroots mobilization and

toward institutionalized electoral politics."[50] The three examples of disparticipants in this chapter

stand out, to varying degrees, among the sea of "disproportionately white, middle aged, highly

educated, and female" participants and their trend toward reformism.[51]

Disparticipation challenges a standard format of participation by straddling the micro and

macropolitical. A radical critic, acting macropolitically, could walk out of a popular reformist

movement and form a new public, effectively rejecting the terms set out in the hegemonic

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[48] Emily Tamkin Gramer Robbie, "The Women's March Heard Round the World," *Foreign Policy*, January 21, 2017, https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/21/the-womens-march-heard-round-the-world/; Przybyla and Schouten, "At 2.6 Million Strong, Women's Marches Crush Expectations"; Tanner Curtis et al., "Pictures From the 2017 Women's Marches on Every Continent," *The New York Times*, January 21, 2017, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/21/world/womens-march-pictures.html.

[49] Aurelien Breeden and Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura, "Women's Marches Across the World, in Photos and Voices of Protest," *The New York Times*, January 21, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/21/world/europe/womens-marches-london-paris.html; Michael Wines and Farah Stockman, "Smaller Crowds Turn Out for Third Annual Women's March Events," *The New York Times*, January 19, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/19/us/womens-march-2019.html; Claire Rush and Harm Venhuizen, "On 50th Anniversary of Roe, Women's Marches Draw Thousands across the U.S.," *PBS NewsHour*, January 22, 2023, sec. Politics, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/on-50th-anniversary-of-roe-womens-marches-draw-thousands-across-the-u-s.

[50] Berry and Chenoweth, "Who Made the Women's March?," 88.

[51] Berry and Chenoweth, 85.

discourses.[52] Macropolitically and symbolically, the disparticipant seeks to reject existing politics; micropolitically and affectively, the disparticipant recognizes the potential of the assembly, where energy is flowing rapidly and illuminations and shifts and energy can spread more virally than in isolation. Alternatively, a disparticipant could macropolitically affirm existing politics, but seek to micropolitically reformat to generate affective energy, rejecting a stale and standardizing environment. Accordingly, disparticipation works in a "double gesture" of participatory dissent that "consists of one move to disrupt and another to affirm."[53] They show up, but they dissent, acquiescing neither to being a reformist nor a separatist radical. This dissenting position of disparticipation leans into a kairotic, queer sensibility of "weirdness and unpredictability," as Joe Hatfield has articulated.[54] The queer inventional capacity—to be weird, unpredictable, unfamiliar, while still speaking to an exigent time and place—shows how queer rhetoric has "resistant potential . . . to account for the kairotic moment as a possible collective

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[52] For example, Pezzullo's study regarding National Breast Cancer Awareness Month positions a radical counterpublic (the Toxic Links Coalition) against a reformist social movement (the NBCAM). Chávez and Against Equality also describe themselves in similar terms, as a radical challenges to the reformist same-sex marriage movement. These radical groups advocate *separate* from the popular reformist movement. While they remix some dominant discourses (like changing the Human Rights Campaign's = into a >) they do not advocate from within like the examples I will call disparticipation. Phaedra C. Pezzullo, "Resisting 'National Breast Cancer Awareness Month': The Rhetoric of Counterpublics and Their Cultural Performances," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89, no. 4 (2003): 345–65, https://doi.org/10.1080/0033563032000160981; Karma R. Chávez, "Against Equality: Finding the Movement in Rhetorical Criticism of Social Movements," in *What Democracy Looks like: The Rhetoric of Social Movements and Counterpublics*, ed. Christina R Foust, Amy Pason, and Kate Zittlow Rogness (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2017), 175–97; Christina R Foust, Amy Pason, and Kate Zittlow Rogness, *What Democracy Looks like: The Rhetoric of Social Movements and Counterpublics* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2017).

[53] Ivie, "Enabling Democratic Dissent," 51.

[54] Joe Edward Hatfield, "The Queer Kairotic: Digital Transgender Suicide Memories and Ecological Rhetorical Agency," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (2019): 46, https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2018.1549334.

reaction against oppressive rhetorics that support ideological and material concentrations of

power within particular contexts."[55] Analogously, instead of taking their disses of the politics as

reason to go elsewhere and create new publics, disparticipants act in a kairotic way that validate

disses as extending the rhetorical landscape of a movement, to form a new collective reaction

that accounts for concentrations of power. When participation is formatted such that this

sensibility is "unthinkable," to borrow Muñoz's language, the disparticipant renders it thinkable

and public, surrounded by bodies in assembly, disrupting the predictable relation of protestor and

protest. This jolt reverberates—trans-situationally.

(3) The illumination of disparticipation circulates trans-situationally, reformatting movement
topoi and sensibilities in response to the issue that the disparticipant identified.

Disparticipation's queerness puts the *trans* in trans-situational. Here, the trans- in

transgender, transformative, and trans-situational find theoretical overlap. In *Cruising Utopia,*

Muñoz develops the concept of queer futurity, conceiving queerness as a "desiring that allows us

to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present."[56] Queer rhetorical sensibilities, like

disidentification and disparticipation, act as "illumination [that] cuts through fragmenting

darkness" of our present constraints to "allow us to see the politically enabling whole."[57] Andrea

Long Chu has described trans identity in this way — as a liberating, political choice one makes

"like revolution."[58] Transformative politics are enacted with this transness, with the unexpected

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[55] Hatfield, 46.

[56] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

[57] Muñoz, 64.

[58] Riffing off the SCUM manifesto, Chu invokes disidentification, writing: "This was a vision of transsexuality as separatism, an image of how male-to-female gender transition might express not just disidentification with maleness but disaffiliation with men. Here, transition, like

movement across time, place, and formatting. Disparticipation is a queer sensibility that enacts

this illuminating power within social movements, creating the possibility for transformative

politics. Fundamentally, disparticipation questions the broader power structures that animate a

social movement. The sensibility of disparticipation allows critical reflection on a given

movement by contesting dominant logics of representation and recognition, the labels and sides.

In this case, disparticipation circulated such that the *topoi* of the Women's March expanded to

include structural, intersectional issues.[59]

    The Women's March website listed eight key "unity principles" that suggest what *topoi*

are important in this movement: ranging from ending violence to reproductive, civil, immigrant,

worker's, and LGBTQIA rights.[60] In a study of 2017 Women's March participants, Fisher et al.

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revolution, was recast in aesthetic terms, as if transsexual women decided to transition, not to 'confirm' some kind of innate gender identity, but because being a man is stupid and boring." Andrea Long Chu, "On Liking Women," *N+1*, November 29, 2017, para. 11, https://nplusonemag.com/issue-30/essays/on-liking-women/; cf. Caterina Nirta, "Actualized Utopias: The Here and Now of Transgender," *Politics & Gender* 13, no. 2 (2017): 181–208, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X1600043X.

[59] I use *topoi* to refer to the commonsense notion that there are commonplaces for invention in a given movement's rhetoric. Casey Boyle details how the rhetorical exercise of *topoi* involved students compiling notebooks of example arguments that represented a commonplace, and other rhetorical scholarship has used *topoi* as a tool to understand and critique movement rhetoric on digital media. Casey Andrew Boyle, *Rhetoric as a Posthuman Practice* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2018), 128–39; Amanda M. Friz, "Technologies of the State: Transvaginal Ultrasounds and the Abortion Debate," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 21, no. 4 (2018): 639, https://doi.org/10.14321/rhetpublaffa.21.4.0639.

[60] The unity principles were available on womensmarch.com as recently as June 2020, but as of May 2022, they were no longer available. The list of principles is still accessible on the website for Women's March Global, a separate Women's March organization formed at the same original Women's March on Washington, but focused on supporting local chapters. "Women's March Global | About Us," Women's March Global, accessed May 9, 2022, https://womensmarchglobal.org/about/; "Mission and Principles — Women's March 2020," Women's March, accessed June 11, 2020, https://womensmarch.com/mission-and-principles.

found that "Women's Rights" and "Equality" topped the list of reasons for attending the march.[61]

Each of these principles and/or reasons for attending represent a *topos* with many artifacts: all

the signs that had a variation on "my pussy grabs back" may fit in the ending violence *topos*, for

example. As this chapter will show, disparticipants recognize what fragmenting darkness lingers

under these *topoi*, and their response circulates to fundamentally reshape the social movement

ecology.

This illuminating power of disparticipation works ecologically. Transformative queer

politics generate new connections across boundaries, iterating ecologies of relation to challenge

structures of domination and divisiveness. In Cohen's example, a queer politics spreads

affectivity that connects "punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens" despite not seeming

connected at the identitarian level of representation. Rather than working in a single moment or

arena of transition or transformation, rhetoric works by circulating affects that open or close

potential for (inter)action trans-situationally, across many contexts. This means that

disparticipants—and all participants—do not just challenge a particular public sphere, as many

of the theorists of disidentification and dissent would assert. Instead, they engage in a unique

form of what Kavada and Poell call "contentious publicness," or "a continuous activity of

making things public [in which] public contestation in one context can easily spill over to

another, as protest claims, aesthetics, and repertoires quickly move around the globe."[62] While

disparticipants engage in particular assemblies and macro-politically counter its formatting, their

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[61] Dana R. Fisher, Dawn M. Dow, and Rashawn Ray, "Intersectionality Takes It to the Streets: Mobilizing across Diverse Interests for the Women's March," *Science Advances* 3, no. 9 (2017): 2, https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aao1390.

[62] Anastasia Kavada and Thomas Poell, "From Counterpublics to Contentious Publicness: Tracing the Temporal, Spatial, and Material Articulations of Popular Protest Through Social Media," *Communication Theory* 31, no. 2 (2021): 193, 194, https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtaa025.

disparticipation spreads through micro-political contentiousness that spreads ecologically due to its affectivity.

Disparticipation is widely and variously circulated in activist discourse. Disparticipation captures both the sensibility of a disparticipant in the moment of the assembly, and the resonance and spread of their participation trans-situationally. Each case below is re-built from documentation of that disparticipation—I was not a field observer at any marches, but instead found these disparticipants as a result of the resonance of their participation in digital ecologies after the Women's March. These moments of disparticipation connect marches transnationally and across different years of annual marches, without necessarily relying on direct advocacy or leadership to do so. Instead, the disparticipant's illumination of existing and popular *topoi* spreads affectively and creates the ambient conditions for new *topoi*. Casey Boyle notes that the practice of *topoi* is both *in situ* (in place—amidst discourse) and *ad situ* (compiling that discourse into recognizable commonplaces).[63] The affective spread of disparticipation creates new commonplaces (*ad situ)* for further invention and thus expands existing discourse toward intersectional justice. When the disparticipant offers their queer participation that partially disavows the *topoi* within the movement, the trans-situational circulation moves *ad situ*—toward a new commonplace of radical invention. I am not trying to make a case that this circulation causes some easily-measured, instrumental effect.[64] Rather, I want to note that there are

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[63] Boyle, *Rhetoric as a Posthuman Practice*, 135.

[64] Another way to describe the *ad situ* convention of disparticipation is that it surfaces a "rhetorical form" that "enable[s] the force and effects of discourse." This is another way disparticipation functions queerly, as per Rand's argument about rhetorical agency and queerness. Erin J. Rand, "An Inflammatory Fag and a Queer Form: Larry Kramer, Polemics, and Rhetorical Agency," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94, no. 3 (2008): 308, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630802210377.

rhetorical artifacts that evidence the negotiation of the structural exigences that disparticipants pointed out.

Women's march: disparticipating, surviving?

To illustrate the sensibility of disparticipation, I examine examples across three cases. While many more examples could have been chosen, these three act as representative anecdotes to address major controversies about racism, cissexism, and anti-Semitism surrounding the Women's March. First, I begin by returning to the 2017 image of Angela Peoples. Second, I attend to 2017 criticisms of the use of Pussyhats and how trans women problematized the gender essentialism of the Pussyhats through nuanced criticism in the networked public sphere. Finally, I address how Jewish folks navigated the controversy that surrounded the alleged antisemitism of Women's March organizers leading up to and at the 2019 Women's March.[65] While the first two cases reveal unaddressed structural antagonisms—racism and cissexism—the last case shows how Jewish feminists disparticipated to reject the claim about anti-Semitic antagonism and instead commit to the coalitional work of the Women's March. Each example addresses the three-part sensibility of disparticipation—showing up while challenging, communicating their diss, and circulated documentation.

Angela Peoples and white feminism

Angela Peoples disparticipates by contesting the meaning of her presence in an otherwise continuous march and movement. While (mostly white presenting) people behind her seem to

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[65] Farah Stockman, "Women's March Roiled by Accusations of Anti-Semitism," *The New York Times*, December 24, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/23/us/womens-march-anti-semitism.html.

move together—wearing their Pussyhats, moving toward the camera, or pausing briefly to take a

selfie with their hats—Peoples stands out as a Black woman in the center of the photographic

frame. She is not sharing the same sense of protest as those around her—though she can't be

easily categorized as counterprotesting or not participating. One might think she's indifferent:

she is not looking at her phone or moving with the crowd, but instead stands, sucking on a

lollipop, turned almost to a side profile as she looks off presumably at the sea of protestors. But

in sharp contrast to the sea of pink knitwear and vibrant colors, Peoples is wearing a camouflage

jacket and a white baseball hat emblazoned with the text "STOP KILLING BLACK PEOPLE."

Her sign reads "Don't forget": it clarifies and contextualizes, it adds nuance; it does not

invalidate or reject. She has still shown up to participate in this rejection of Trump's

misogynistic policies and rhetoric; however, she refuses to erase *specifically how* Trump's

election was made possible by white women voters, despite the resistance shown by the

marchers that day. As Jenna Wortham writes in the *New York Times*, the "photo cuts to a truth of

the election: While black women show up for white women to advance causes that benefit entire

movements, the reciprocity is rarely shown."[66] This is the genealogy that Peoples reminds white

women to *not forget*, as she encourages them to recognize their complicity in a white

supremacist patriarchal culture.[67] *Don't forget* is not a command to do something or believe

something, but rather a more invitational reminder of a harsh truth, that forgetting is a "tragic

force when it simply destroys symbolic affiliations with the past… without imagining more

conducive symbolic comportments between present and former times."[68] Peoples draws upon a

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[66] Wortham, "Who Didn't Go to the Women's March Matters More Than Who Did," para. 5.

[67] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (London: Routledge, 1984).

[68] Bradford Vivian, *Public Forgetting: The Rhetoric and Politics of Beginning Again* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 9. Vivian's book is in support of civic

violent history of white women not supporting Black women (and Black people) but frames it as

if it's a reminder not to forget something on the to do list. Peoples could have said "You all are

performative bullshitters because more than half of white women voted for Trump." But instead,

her disparticipatory message captures the diss and dissent, prompting awareness about a

shortcoming while remaining in community.

Womanist rhetorical critic Toneisha Taylor reflects on the iconicity of this image by

noting that the image "encapsulates central and competing ideas" about the need for white

women to get involved with intersectional feminist activism and call out the lateness of white

women to this work. She writes that the "truth is that the current political moment (bracketed

between the election of the 45th president and the #MeToo movement) has been waiting for white

women and has been on repeat for centuries. Moreover, whenever in the American past there has

been an intersectional opportunity for white women to do work, history proves that you have

stayed silent."[69] Black feminist activists have been waiting for white feminists to recognize the

"now." The now is rife with anti-Black violence, as Ashley Hall eloquently puts it: "The now is

premature death. The now is incarceration. The now is a lack of access to clean water. The now

is a lack of access to reproductive justice. The now is voter disenfranchisement.…These are the

ways that the afterlife of slavery in the wake manifests in the lived experiences of Black

Americans today."[70] Seeing Peoples as a disparticipant, rather than a counter-protestor or

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practices of forgetting, but he makes this poignant note to emphasize that forgetting can be a destructive force.

[69] Toniesha L. Taylor, "Dear Nice White Ladies: A Womanist Response to Intersectional Feminism and Sexual Violence," *Women & Language* 42, no. 1 (2019): 187–88, https://doi.org/10.34036/WL.2019.022.

[70] Ashley R. Hall, "Slippin' in and out of Frame: An Afrafuturist Feminist Orientation to Black Women and American Citizenship," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 106, no. 3 (2020): 342, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2020.1785630; Mack and McCann have shown that when "the now" goes unaddressed in (white) feminist praxis, the result is a project that is readily co-opted

bystander, allows her to be recognized with the nuance and potential with which she brings "the now" to the politics of the Women's March. Peoples activates her criticism of the movement while still loosely aligning with it. In this transhistorical connecting of the "now" and "then"—of the history of Black women's activism and white women's absence, to the present of the Women's March—Peoples shows the relationship of disparticipation to the trans-situation. Her sign connects this feminist history with the feminist present, showing and making exigent the long trajectory of Black and white women's (dis)participation.

Peoples' transsituational illumination works through a sign that straddles the micro and macropolitical to resist a reformist/radicalism formatting. The poster works on an unquestionably, directly political level to call-out white women's racism and white feminist neglect of that racism. But on the other hand, the poster, lollipop, hat, and pose are gestural—her intervention is not just the thought-out sign but the embodied stance in contrast with those around her. It results in a charged image, where the affective opening of the snarky poster reveals a broader criticality. Writing in an op-ed for the *New York Times*, Peoples herself writes "The point wasn't to antagonize the Women's March participants, who were mostly white. Rather, I wanted to highlight that on a national level, white women are not unified in opposition to Trumpism and can't be counted on to fight it. Instead, it's the identity, experience and leadership of black women that we must look to."[71] She is showing up, but she has been showing up. White women are the ones who are late to join her in "the now"—and white women still have work to do. The receipts are in the exit poll data. Here is her queerly formatted participation: she is in the

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by the anti-Black carceral assemblages of the state. Ashley Noel Mack and Bryan J. McCann, "Critiquing State and Gendered Violence in the Age of #MeToo," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 104, no. 3 (2018): 329–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2018.1479144.

[71] Peoples, "Don't Just Thank Black Women. Follow Us."

movement, she has been in this movement, but she is pushing back on its current, normalized form.

Peoples's disparticipation troubles what it means for everyone else around her to be participating. Indeed, her liminal position reflects the historical contingency of all the positions of the bodies in assembly. In this way, her disparticipation suits what Vats called "prosopopoeic disidentification." Prosopopoeia names the rhetorical figure in which an abstract thing is personified. Vats writes that "Prosopopeic disidentification offers a theoretical framework for understanding how giving face and voice within otherwise constraining contexts can serve as a means of interrupting racist stereotypes, oppressive histories, and assertions of memory and property."[72] White women have not shown up for Black women when Black women have been there for white women. By embodying the historical Black woman in the present, Peoples reminds viewers that Black women have been marching long before the Women's March. Counting Peoples's rhetoric as a counter-protest or as not-participation would be to deny her assertion that Black women have been doing the intersectional feminist work that the Women's March claims to do. Considering her a counter-protestor or non-participant decenters her—it makes her, the Black woman, in 'response to' white women. Instead, Peoples's disparticipation re-centers the participation of Black women and shows the persistence of racism in the lack of participation of white feminist women throughout history.

Elliot Tetreault, a white, trans, queer rhetorician who at the time presented as a woman, reflected on how Peoples and her sign made him rethink his interactions with women at the march.

> [My] impulse to deny association with white women Trump voters—and by
> extension to deny implication in the ways in which white women historically and

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[72] Vats, "Marking Disidentification," 242.

contemporaneously perpetuate white supremacy—is exactly what Peoples' sign calls us white women out for. The issue, in the end, is not whether I could or should have reached out on Facebook to a woman I hadn't spoken to face-to-face in 15 years and asked why she supported Trump. That is impossible to answer and a pointless exercise. The issue is instead why being told that there are any similarities between myself and her makes me deeply uncomfortable.[73]

For the *New York Times*, staff writer Jenna Wortham asks: "The nature of American activism – and feminism – is molting, fast. The coalitions that formed on Saturday will have bigger questions to organize around, questions that will prove more urgent in the years to come. For whom are they marching? Is it only for themselves?"[74] These two poignant reflections show that Peoples' sensibility helped prompt reflection in white people and encouraged black women and women of color to ask questions about race, feminism, and social movements. This, of course, could be noted without calling it disparticipation. What recognizing Peoples' queer sensibility as disparticipation does is validate her participation and her *diss* of participation, recognizing the queer potentiality in this clash. She has assembled in this multimillion mass of marchers to transform it from within, to queer its unquestioned whiteness so that it is brought into question.

Katelyn Burns and cissexism

Katelyn Burns disparticipated in the 2017 Women's March with her contribution to discussions in a digital media ecology about cissexism at the Women's March. Writing for the Medium publication *The Establishment,* Burns, a trans woman, explored her experience with the Women's March in a personal essay entitled "Why I Felt Excluded, Then Welcomed, At The

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[73] Elliot Tetreault, "'White Women Voted for Trump': The Women's March on Washington and Intersectional Feminist Futures," *Computers and Composition Online*, March 2019, http://cconlinejournal.org/techfem_si/01_Tetreault/, n.p.

[74] Wortham, "Who Didn't Go to the Women's March Matters More Than Who Did."

Women's March."[75] Burns points out the structural issue at hand, writing that "wearing

pussyhats, or chanting about vaginas, lays out a hierarchy based on genitals that is exclusionary

and painful."[76] Because of the prominence of the pussyhats as an icon of the movement,

cissexism often prevailed in women's march protests across the U.S., sparking criticism across

the networked public sphere. In their detailed qualitative study of trans responses to the

Women's March, L. Stoltzfuts-Brown notes that "the lack of trans inclusion could be—and

was—interpreted as yet another step in denying trans people existence in historically white and

exclusionary feminist movements."[77]

Burns then continues with her narrative: she attended the Women's March in Portland,

Maine. She showed up alone, cold—without a hat. Then, she encountered a friendly stranger.

> She looked at me with kind eyes and a smile, and my body language relaxed. "I made this…" she began, holding up a knitted pink "pussy" hat. "I noticed you didn't have a hat, would you like this one?" I eyed her carefully and noticed she was wearing a matching hat. "I wanted to make more, but I only found out about this march earlier in the week; I want you to have my extra one! It's acrylic, is that okay?"
> I weighed the decision in my mind. These hats inherently other me from womanhood, and yet… I was really fucking cold, and this stranger probably just wanted me to be warm. I accepted and donned the hat. "Thank you. Oh my god, I was so cold!" I replied. We stood there awkwardly for a few minutes, unsure of what came next. [78]

Here, Burns recounts what motivates her choice to don the pussyhat, despite her reservations

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[75] Katelyn Burns, "Why I Felt Excluded, Then Welcomed, At The Women's March," *The Establishment* (blog), January 23, 2017, https://medium.com/the-establishment/how-pussy-hats-made-me-feel-excluded-and-then-welcomed-at-the-women-s-march-ef11dae19c54.

[76] Burns, para. 13.

[77] Lars Stoltzfus-Brown, "Trans-Exclusionary Discourse, White Feminist Failures, and the Women's March on Washington, D.C.," in *Transgressing Feminist Theory and Discourse: Advancing Conversations across Disciplines*, ed. Jennifer C. Dunn and Jimmie Manning (New York: Routledge, 2018), 90.

[78] Burns, "Why I Felt Excluded, Then Welcomed, At The Women's March," paras. 22–23.

about the white cis feminist politics she understood the hat to represent earlier in her essay. In putting on this hat, she participates in the march at a new level—appearing to assist in the reification of an exclusionary and essentialist gender/genital hierarchy—rather than subtly resist the message by not wearing a hat. But what viewing her hat-wearing as disparticipation shows us is twofold: first, that sometimes people do things just because they are cold. We should certainly assess impact over intent, but there is something to be said for seeing the polyvalent ways people interact with activist rhetorics and appropriate them for their own use. In this case, Burns uses the symbol of the pussyhat to keep her ears warm.

Second, seeing Burns's reluctant wearing of a pussyhat as an act of disparticipation emphasizes how her feelings of exclusion help her adapt her activist rhetoric and encourage the expansion of Women's March *topoi* accordingly. Butler notes that "the insight into persistent exclusion forces us back into the process of naming and renaming, of renewing what we mean by 'the people' and what various people mean when they invoke that term."[79] The circulation of disparticipation, and how each disparticipant points out the exclusion of exigencies important to their embodied concerns, results in a re-formatting of the parameters of the assembly. The renegotiation of the excluded and included is the point of Benhabib's democratic iterations. Iterations render distinctions between excluded and included "fluid and negotiable" because "every iteration transforms meaning, adds to it, enriches it in ever-so-subtle ways."[80] In the liminal space between feeling excluded by the essentialist hierarchy and included by the individual woman who offered her a hat, Burns disidentifies and finds a new way to articulate the parameters of the gendered subject in a queer, transformative coalitional politics.

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[79] Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 6.

[80] Seyla Benhabib, *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents, and Citizens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 191, 193.

> But maybe womanhood is more about the fight and not about the flesh. Maybe vagina symbolism can be more symbolic than exclusionary….
>
> I ended up wearing the pink hat not because I thought it validated my gender, or because I was making some subversive gender statement. I wore the hat because I was really fucking cold, and I had three hours of marching ahead of me with a newfound friend.
>
> My hope is that I wasn't the only one to form a new connection during one of these protests throughout the world. Despite the exclusionary imagery of the protest, I was welcomed warmly, and I was given a hat when someone noticed that I was cold. [81]

In the rest of her essay, she notes how this exclusionary symbolism can only be meaningfully symbolic for inclusiveness if paired with changes in language and recognition of the wide policy changes needed for trans women (e.g., addressing the inadequacies of the health care system and the gendered violence that trans people often face). Burns's critique joins the many trans activists online who appear to have "had an impact on the Women's March, which led to some change by the Women's March official Twitter and Facebook pages to become more inclusive of trans individuals, particularly transwomen of color," as L. Stoltzfus-Brown notes in their study.[82] Seeing this disparticipation validates the emotional and intellectual labor of trans activists who hope to extend the ability of the Women's March to effect more radical, systemic change, but who also see the value of assembly in the way Butler describes it. They put in the work to show up *and* critique it, adding to the energy of the wave without letting its momentum sweep away their demands.

Jewish folks and anti-Semitism

As *Vox* reporter Anna North details, allegations of anti-Semitism threatened the Women's

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[81] Burns, "Why I Felt Excluded, Then Welcomed, At The Women's March," paras. 30, 37–38.

[82] Stoltzfus-Brown, "Trans-Exclusionary Discourse, White Feminist Failures, and the Women's March on Washington, D.C.," 97.

March in 2018. [83] The claims began when a Women's March co-chair "attended a February event with Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan where he espoused anti-Semitic conspiracy theories." [84] Reporting on this issue started in December 2018, about a month before the third Women's March on January 19, 2019, which prompted questions about the status of the Women's March.

Jewish disparticipants rejected the relevance of claims about the anti-Semitism of the Women's March to their participation in the march. Jewish feminists have written about the complicated relationship of identity politics, Jewish identity, and feminism.[85] Brooke Lober writes that Jewish feminist praxis is torn between two forms: "one liberal, normatively white, invested in both heteronormativity and Zionism; the other radical, emerging in close collaboration with women of color feminism, attuned to comparative racial relations, lesbian-led, and saturated with discourse and debate on U.S. and Israeli racism, and Zionism's connection to Jewish identity."[86] Disparticipating Jewish feminists draw attention to this divide as they align more with the latter, in rejection of the controversy generated for the former group. Taking this approach, Jewish disparticipants do not deny Farrakhan's comments as anti-Semitic, but rather question: Given his distance from the actual march, should these comments matter enough to divide us from the coalition? And in so doing, they put into question a larger issue: *what are*

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[83] Anna North, "The Women's March Changed the American Left. Now Anti-Semitism Allegations Threaten the Group's Future.," *Vox*, December 21, 2018, https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/12/21/18145176/feminism-womens-march-2018-2019-farrakhan-intersectionality.

[84] North, para. 5.

[85] One classic essay is Jenny Bourne, "Homelands of the Mind: Jewish Feminism and Identity Politics," *Race & Class* 29, no. 1 (1987): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1177/030639688702900101.

[86] Brooke Lober, "Narrow *Bridges* : Jewish Lesbian Feminism, Identity Politics, and the 'Hard Ground' of Alliance," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 23, no. 1 (2019): 83, https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2018.1501537.

movements for? Must movements be formatted such that they recognize each identity, or can movements unite around shared concerns about marginalization, like Cohen's theorization emphasized? By challenging anti-Semitism while still attending, Jewish disparticipants rejected the idea that the existing *topoi* of the Women's March should be dissatisfactory to Jewish women. Instead, they directly highlighted the meta-point about their participatory sensibility: their choice to participate was about making a demand for a new world and not an indication that they identified with every single position circulating in Women's March discourse.

Disparticipation is emphasized from participants in marches and throughout Jewish coverage of the Women's March. In an image from the 2019 San Francisco Women's March, a person identified as Sapphire holds a sign "that said in Hebrew 'justice, justice, I shall pursue,' a paraphrase of a well-known biblical line" and, underneath it: "JEWISH WOMEN REJECT TRUMP!!!" with a much smaller "*AND FARRAKHAN" underneath.[87] This addendum rumbles with the energy of disparticipation. It pushes back on a formatted norm that their participation must reveal some acquiescence to the organizing group (or, at least, one of its co-chairs). The size of the addition—a small footnote—also shows its deprioritization; the important thing is not Farrakhan's comment but that Jewish women joined other women in rejecting Trump. In the *Jewish News of Northern California*, Jewish Community Center of San Francisco CEO Marci Glazer is quoted as saying she was "eager to participate… Women's March S.F. has unequivocally both rejected anti-Semitism and welcomed participation of Jewish women and men, irrespective of their politics… We are all of us in some way clamoring for our voices to be heard, and they are not 100 percent overlapping. The work of coalition-building is a messy one,

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[87] Rob Gloster, "Jewish Identity Rings out at Bay Area Women's Marches," *The Jewish News of Northern California*, January 21, 2019, https://www.jweekly.com/2019/01/21/jewish-identity-rings-out-at-bay-area-womens-marches/.

and it has boundaries, but if we don't show up at the table, then our voice is not heard."[88] This

local coverage trickled up to mainstream news outlets, such as in the op-ed "I'm White, Jewish

and going to the Women's March. Here's why" written for CNN by contributor Rachel Sklar.

"Good Lord, there's a lot to march about these days, and I'm not about to let myself be counted

out because Tamika Mallory has a longstanding history with a dude who thinks I'm a termite.

That just makes me want to show up louder, stronger and angrier to fight for the kind of world I

want to live in, and take my place among those fighting for it, too."[89] Disparticipation hinges on

recognizing an exigence currently unexamined by broader activist rhetoric and/or scholarly

analysis. To suggest that these Jewish folks were disparticipating and critiquing anti-Semitism

would be to suggest that anti-Semitism had been tacitly ignored and not considered as an

exigency by the broader movement. I do not think these Jewish folks are showing that anti-

Semitism is rampant in the broader Women's March. Sapphire's sign, Glazer's quote, and

Sklar's op-ed suggest that they reject a critique of the Women's March as anti-Semitic as too

simplistic. Instead, they recognize the value of assembly and choose to incorporate the

prioritization of this value in their rhetoric.

In begging the question "what are movements for?" these disparticipants are creating

space for reformatting. They are opening up space beyond movement formatting to generate

reasons for sustained commitment to assembly. For Scarlett, the point is to pursue justice, and

that means rejecting bigoted leaders of all kinds. For Sklar, too, the point is to show up and fight

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[88] Dan Pine, "Many Jews Ready to Hit Streets at Bay Area Women's Marches, despite Controversy," *J.*, January 16, 2019, para. 23, https://www.jweekly.com/2019/01/16/many-jews-ready-to-hit-streets-at-bay-area-womens-marches-despite-controversy/.

[89] Rachel Sklar, "I'm White, Jewish and Going to the Women's March. Here's Why," *CNN.Com*, January 19, 2019, https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/19/opinions/womens-march-antisemitism-why-im-marching-sklar/index.html.

for a livable world—ringing close to Butler's exact words in defense of assembly. These agents

show up to protest, but their protest does not easily move in the direction of the other marchers;

it makes all marchers unpredictably question "well, why are you here?" The two Jewish

disparticipants I have mentioned conceive of movement like Butler's assembly: making a claim

for the need for livable conditions, for justice. But as *Vox* reporter North points out, "Media

coverage of the Women's March has never just been about the group. Frequently, it's become a

referendum on whether it's even possible to unite a group as diverse as women in America in a

single movement."[90] Their disparticipation thus leads to the potential for reformatting. Their

participation dissents from an organizing constraint—that the Women's March must represent a

single *movement*—and reformats to prioritize the collective demand of assembling.

So what happened in the 2019 March? Some local Women's March groups disbanded in

the face of anti-Semitism.[91] There were far fewer attendees than the previous two marches, but

there was still substantial participation despite the intense cold. High estimates suggest U.S.

participation in the 2017 march exceeded 5 million; for 2019, under 750,000—the *Washington

Post* called it "bigger than you think."[92] These assessments are made based on the idea that the

Women's March is a single movement with proposals. Jewish disparticipation implicates this

problem of movement itself. Instead, it suggests that what is valuable about movements is the

performative demand of assembling. As Kyle Parry writes, "Assemblies are open-ended

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[90] North, "The Women's March Changed the American Left. Now Anti-Semitism Allegations Threaten the Group's Future.", emphasis mine.

[91] Esther Wang, "The State of the Women's March," *Jezebel*, January 18, 2019, https://jezebel.com/the-state-of-the-womens-march-1831867289.

[92] Erica Chenoweth and Jeremy Pressman, "The 2019 Women's March Was Bigger than You Think," *Washington Post*, February 1, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2019/02/01/the-2019-womens-march-was-bigger-than-you-think/.

interpretations of the shapes the world might take. One assembly begets another."[93] Disparticipants, especially the Jewish disparticipants in this final case, foreground not only the politics of the present situation but an eye for the trans-situational, for the open-ended dimension of their participation. In assembling to demand more livable conditions, disparticipants activate new ecologies of relations that enable future assemblies.

Disparticipation now

Disparticipants queer the parameters of social movement participation along the dimensions of reform, radicality, and identity. Their disidentifying, participatory dissent circulates trans-situationally, generating new topoi to reformat sensibilities of participation. Disparticipants throughout history have found ways to release building tension that could stall out social movements. Whether in 1893 or 2017, disparticipants share a resistance to calcification around radical purity or reformist popularity, balancing their criticism of a moment while still meeting movement goals for attention. Their disparticipation redirected conversation toward identity-based discourses that, if not addressed, could have weakened a movement's potential for transformative political practice. With their disparticipation, these rhetors assemble to iterate, expand, and redirect *topoi* that disses reformism and reformats social movement participation.

Disparticipation is a model of participatory dissent that might be particularly resonant today given the growing power of corporations over collective participation. The participatory condition surfaces an exigent conundrum for advocates of social change. On the one hand, this always-on environment allows for increased possibilities for social movement activity, such as

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[93] Parry, *A Theory of Assembly*, 258.

the mass digital participation in Black Lives Matter discourse in Summer 2020 that Chapter 4 will discuss. But on the other hand, these participatory habits do not emerge purely organically from interaction in the world, they are influenced by the goals of global capital, enacted in the daily practices of surveillance capitalism. Social movements, evermore digitally mediated, can unwittingly help line the pockets of the powerful while attempting to empower the masses. What is needed is a form of participation that can take advantage of digital opportunities to assemble the masses, mediated by precarity, and deliver a demand for justice—without being entirely co-opted by capitalist extraction.

Disparticipation may be (part of) what we need. Dissenting and participating, dissenting while participating, disparticipants gather in mass moments for resistance but do not leave behind their hesitations. They activate ecologies of relation that may make transformation possible. Disparticipation, in its reformatting for transformative politics, sets the stage for the next two case studies of this dissertation. Disparticipation serves as a more traditional example of embodied protest and assembly that was organized, habituated, and circulated via digital cultures, serving as a representative anecdote for social change. Fictocritical and installectual sensibilities anticipate another generation of social change, one that takes place nearly-exclusively online (rather than moving online/offline). Disparticipation everted imperatives and harnessed the affective energy of assembly at the Women's March—what sensibilities will need to be generated to do this sort of transformative reformatting while *in situ* with algorithmized grammars? How do those environments intensify and modify the parameters, imperatives, and circulation of participation that have been outlined here, with regards to radicalism, identity, and affect?

Chapter 3: Fictocritics: ContraPoints, Criticism, and Steamy Participation

"Any knowledge that does not lead to new questions quickly dies out: it fails to maintain the temperature required for sustaining life."

Wisława Szymborska, 1996[1]

Steamy temperatures

As the YouTube video "Jordan Peterson | ContraPoints" autoplays, you are immediately greeted with a character, seated in the center of the frame, who you will learn is named Lady Foppington. She is wearing a tall, gray regency wig draped in pearls and featuring both a pinned, fake peony and a black feather extending out the back. She is dressed in a 19th century style black and white floral dress and flaps a white lace hand fan. The background, set in a deep purple, features a large candelabra and ornate Victorian wallpaper. Speaking in a clearly fake English accent, she proclaims: "My lords, ladies, and those that lieth betwixt. 'Tis evident nor sensation nor the passions possess dominion over the mind of man, which be ruled instead by reason, sovereign of all faculties." She pauses here to use her long navy blue press-on nails to scoop up a white powder and snuff it. She continues: "It must needs be remarked, that the power of the commonwealth deriveth not from the despotical acquisitions of conquerors, but from that covenant amongst men whereby they most resembleth the lobster." Lady Foppington is interrupted as the camera cuts to the same woman, now dressed in contemporary clothing, opening a door. "Ugh, Foppington, are we doing this again? … Get out of my drawing room, you 18th century sexual deviant." Kicking her out of the room, this chronologically appropriate

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[1] Wislawa Szymborska, "Nobel Lecture: The Poet and the World," https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1996/szymborska-lecture.html.

speaker takes Foppington's seat. Set in a dark, red light, she responds to Foppington's

introductory proclamation: "Reason. Power. Truth. These are the kinds of topics that I simply

don't care about. Unfortunately we have to talk about them because of a guy named Jordan

Peterson."

Lady Foppington and her replacement are the work of the YouTuber ContraPoints

(Natalie Wynn), who describes herself as a "leftist propagandist"[2] responding to contemporary

cultural issues with lavish, extravagant, and campy YouTube videos. In this video, which will be

analyzed at length later in the chapter, ContraPoints takes on the right-wing intellectual Jordan

Peterson, whose books' self-help themes belie their anti-social justice aims. She has also

responded to the aesthetics of class divides ("Opulence"), frightening groups of troubled men

online ("Incels," also analyzed in this chapter), theories of pronoun usage ("pronouns"), and

many more.[3] The videos are unexpectedly enjoyable—it is not just a lecture, with dry

deconstructions and diatribes about backward or unenlightened ways of thinking; nor is it simply

a long John Oliver sketch with news clips and expert statisticians. Instead, her "persona is

decadent in the mold of Oscar Wilde by way of Weird Twitter: sexily confident and fearlessly

indulgent, with orations delivered from plush chairs and scented baths."[4] ContraPoints dons huge

Victorian-style wigs and becomes old-English Lady Foppington, defending the ruling class and

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[2]Qtd. in Andrew Marantz, "The Stylish Socialist Who Is Trying to Save YouTube from Alt-Right Domination," *The New Yorker*, November 20, 2018, para. 2, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-stylish-socialist-who-is-trying-to-save-youtube-from-alt-right-domination.

[3] *Opulence | ContraPoints*, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jD-PbF3ywGo; *Pronouns | ContraPoints*, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bbINLWtMKI.

[4]Katherine Cross, "The Oscar Wilde of YouTube Fights the Alt-Right with Decadence and Seduction," *The Verge*, August 24, 2018, para. 4, https://www.theverge.com/tech/2018/8/24/17689090/contrapoints-youtube-natalie-wynn.

the faculty of reason. She puts on glove-like claws and plays a trans lesbian cat-girl, Adria, who flips off a crowd of listeners when they do not like her leftist critique of fascism via Hegel. She even becomes bleach blonde Tiffany Tumbles—Adria's nemesis—a trans woman YouTuber who does makeup tutorials while proudly wearing a MAGA hat. ContraPoints narrates each video, typically seated and staring into the camera, returning to this shot with varied lighting as she bounces between these characters, dramatic readings and screengrabs of the discourse she criticizes, and titles or informative slides.

ContraPoints is a critic, offering the rigorous analysis and contextualization of contemporary culture promised by that craft. In the tradition claimed by rhetorical and critical-cultural scholars, criticism is one participatory art of temperature control made by people who hope to sustain life. Temperature setting is at the heart of the Polish poet Wisława Szymborska's 1996 Nobel Prize address, "The Poet and the World." Szymborska defends the methods of the poet and "all those who've consciously chosen their calling and do their job with love and imagination." The poet and all her inspired allies embrace "I don't know" as a phrase for setting safe temperatures for life. This stands in sharp contrast to those who claim they already know—especially "all sorts of torturers, dictators, fanatics, and demagogues struggling for power by way of a few loudly shouted slogans." They do not seek new knowledge because it "might diminish their arguments' force," and thus intentionally raise temperatures to serve their goals. Much like extreme temperatures invite the risk of heatstroke or hypothermia, "in the most extreme cases, cases well known from ancient and modern history, [this discourse] even poses a lethal threat to society."[5] Joined by *poesis*, the poet and the critic creatively invite more questions and work to maintain the temperature for sustaining life. When everyone seems to already know, the poet and

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[5] Szymborska, "The Poet and the World."

critic point out what isn't known, make the ordinary astonishing, and reveal what was

presupposed. Criticism is a participatory practice with ethical implications.[6] Criticism, like all

participation, is formatted to reject, generate, and adjust sensibilities of participation.

Some now claim that criticism has "run out of steam," as Bruno Latour famously put it,

and is not functioning as an effective method of temperature control.[7] Lynda Walsh and Casey

Boyle note that discourses like "Climate change, gender and identity, genetic engineering,

globalization, homelessness, and automation and agency" are "wickedly complex, resistant to

traditional social analysis, and stubbornly persistent" and despite much attention, "the critical

reflex has produced little change in the[se] wicked discourses."[8] Its temperatures are no longer

felt as hot enough to make us sweat—we've acclimated to the rote practice of criticism.

Criticism's lack of steaminess can partially be explained by its encounter with the trans-situation.

In rhetorical studies, criticism has traditionally been tied to the rhetorical situation. The critic can

detail audience, exigence, and constraints and better understand a discrete oratorical act; just as

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[6] This idea has been expressed by many critics, but I am particularly fond of the way Klumpp and Hollihan put it: "The critic that emerges—the interpreter, the teacher, the social actor—is a moral participant, cognizant of the power and responsibility that accompanies full critical participation in his/her society." James F. Klumpp and Thomas A. Hollihan, "Rhetorical Criticism as Moral Action," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 75, no. 1 (1989): 94, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638909383863; see also Lawrence Grossberg, "Wandering Audiences, Nomadic Critics," *Cultural Studies* 2, no. 3 (1988): 377–91, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502388800490241.

[7] Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225–48, https://doi.org/10.1086/421123; Mariaelena Bartesaghi and Kate Pantelides, "Why Critique Should Not Run out of Steam: A Proposal for the Critical Study of Discourse," *Review of Communication* 18, no. 3 (2018): 158–77, https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2018.1479884.

[8] Lynda Walsh and Casey Boyle, "From Intervention to Invention: Introducing Topological Techniques," in *Topologies as Techniques for a Post-Critical Rhetoric*, ed. Lynda Walsh and Casey Boyle (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 1, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-51268-6_1.

the rhetor who understands these parts can be more persuasive for it. But, as established in the introduction, the rhetorical situation struggles to account for the digital trans-situation, where audience, exigence, and constraints are constantly in flux, indeterminable for both rhetor and critic. The trans-situatedness of the participatory condition makes evident how participation operates not just at the rational and ideological level but in an affective format. Criticism, too, works affectively. Indeed, criticism can gauge and help reset the temperature—but one has to make sure the thermostat works.

Can criticism be saved as a meaningful temperature regulator for increasingly hot times? How should criticism be updated for the trans-situation? This chapter will argue that ContraPoints's self-described propaganda stands out as a decidedly *steamy* form of criticism. I'll show how ContraPoints's participatory sensibility shows the possibility for contemporary alliances between poetry and criticism in a sensibility of fictocritical participation. This style results in videos that draw on criticism to elaborate leftist perspectives on contemporary society and culture and draw on fictional methods to remain steamy. As *Current Affairs* editor Nathan Robinson writes, "Contra is funny and delightful and weird, and she shows that you don't have to be an idealogue or a buzzkill in order to believe that the world needs to be a more humane and just place."[9] Each spectacular new video works to set temperatures for participatory life. She invites not just other leftists but the people she criticizes into a reconsideration of their views, a consideration of a more equitable worldview and, perhaps, world.

In this chapter, I'll show how ContraPoints (literally) draws hot baths to offer temperature-setting criticism in demanding, digital times. First, I'll detail the relationship of

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[9]Nathan J. Robinson, "God Bless ContraPoints," *Current Affairs*, May 6, 2018, https://www.currentaffairs.org/2018/05/god-bless-contrapoints.

digitality, criticism, and affect, shedding more light on criticism in the trans-situation. Then, I'll

talk about the sensibility of fictocriticism as embodied by ContraPoints. Specifically, I'll detail

how ContraPoints navigates formatted participation on YouTube and how she reformats

sensibilities of participation to resist conditions of fascism in her digital fictocritical methods.

Criticism, digitality, and steaminess

Writing a format history of criticism could take up an entire dissertation.[10] Thankfully,

literary critic Rita Felski has already written the book on it—*The Limits of Critique*—where she

suggests the parameters of criticism:

> The idea of critique contains varying hues and shades of meaning, but its key elements include the following: a spirit of skeptical questioning or outright condemnation, an emphasis on its precarious position vis-à-vis overbearing and oppressive social forces, the claim to be engaged in some kind of radical intellectual and/or political work, and the assumption that whatever is not critical must therefore be uncritical. [11]

In these parameters, criticism is formatted as the production of a performative unmasking.

Performative, here, is in the speech act sense: as if, once a criticism was spoken, an

unenlightened, uncritical reality has substantively changed. This format of criticism that

"unmasks," what Jane Bennett calls demystification, has not always produced the intended

results. Recognizing that it "is an indispensable tool" to hold democratic officials accountable,

Bennett reveals "there are limits to its political efficacy, among them that exposés of illegality,

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[10] This chapter spans "criticism" across many fields. In literary studies (and in science and technology scholarship heavily influenced by literary studies, e.g., Latour) "critique" is often used interchangeably with criticism, although sometimes the former is used as a more specific category of the latter. Given that in rhetorical studies we call our work "criticism," and that the post-criticism call has begun to be heeded in communication studies and humanistic social sciences (e.g. with *critical* discourse analysis), I have opted to understand "critique" and "criticism" interchangeably, usually relying on the latter term.

[11] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 2.

greed, mendacity, oligarchy, or hypocrisy do not reliably produce moral outrage and that, if they

do, this outrage may or may or not spark ameliorative action."[12] According to Latour, criticism's

deconstructive impulses accompanied postmodernity's fragmentation and criticism's unmasking

presuppositions complemented conspiratorial thinking.[13] A critical impulse can be marshaled to

discredit anything and anyone, indiscriminately appearing as—without necessarily performing—

radical political work that helped resist oppression. For example, Latour suggests how the

science studies insight that science was always already rhetorical was mimicked in climate

change denial discourses to suggest scientific findings were made up. Latour also critiqued this

format of criticism as always serving the critic and justifying their position. Unlike

Syzmborska's poet-critic that circulated knowledge leading to more questions, criticism became

formatted such that audiences were placed in a double-bind—either some audience had agency

but had been naïve and uncritical about some object/concept, or some object/concept had more

agency than some audience that could do nothing about it. The former operates in the vein that

Boyle calls current-critical rhetoric (CCR), where reflection on cases leads to increased rhetor

agency; technological determinists are often accused of the latter. In the former, audiences are

given undue credit for their agency; in the latter, they are not given enough. But in both cases,

this demystifying, interventional criticism can serve as a performative spectacle for the critic's

gain, rather than an inventive, performative act of participation toward collective justice.

To counter this, post-critical scholars like Walsh and Boyle have asked: "How do we

move beyond intervention to invention in these wicked discourses that entangle us in our

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[12] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), xiv–xv.

[13] Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?"

common lives?" [14] The demystifying format of criticism seeks to negate: what's your intervention? Even if those interventions serve as inventions, in the sense of producing more rhetorical material, they do so in negative modes of contradiction and refutation. Donna Haraway has poignantly said that "Feminists have to insist on a better account of the world; it is not enough to show radical historical contingency and modes of construction for everything." [15] And pragmatist Richard Rorty suggested that the "left will have to stop thinking up ever more abstract and abusive names for 'the system' and start trying to construct inspiring images." [16] Criticism has been successful in identifying problems, in finding things problematic everywhere—its theoretical project is sound, creative, and sometimes even well-written. Even authors like Felski, who readily champion that "critique has made certain things possible," also say that "it has sidelined other intellectual, aesthetic, and political possibilities—ones that are just as vital to the flourishing of new fields of knowledge as older ones."[17] These authors ask: how can we make criticism affirmative? Not in the sense that criticism needs to be positive, but reformatting criticism to center *inventing the world we want* instead of interventions that sense the world as constantly lacking.

Put differently, the very question of post-criticism is *how can we make criticism more participatory?* It implies the participatory condition is at play. It implies that what criticism *could and should* do, in prompting more "I don't knows," is help guide participation. Take, for example, the introduction to the 2019 *Debates in the Digital Humanities* volume, which calls on

[14] Walsh and Boyle, "From Intervention to Invention," 2.

[15] Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 579, https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066.

[16] Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, 1997 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 99.

[17] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 190.

digital humanists to "contribute in concrete and meaningful ways to improving the situation of those most affected by the toxic turn brought about by the 2016 presidential election and its aftermath."[18] And—in a rare uptake of this post-criticism question in Communication Studies—Mariaelena Bartesaghi and Kate Pantelides write that critical scholarship "must move us to do something that matters. For critique to gather steam, we must therefore enact and manifest our concerns about what is critical, as an actionable project that materializes."[19] The desire to "do more" with critique is a manifestation of the participatory imperative. It is expected, in this condition, that we must all be compositionists, as Latour suggests—"while critics still believe that there is too much belief and too many things standing in the way of reality, compositionists believe that there are enough ruins and that everything has to be reassembled piece by piece."[20] In the participatory condition, critics are charged to take up participatory practices of steam-building.

But has criticism "run out of steam"? No—it's not that criticism has run out of steam, but that our thermostats for generating steam require an update. Much like an old thermostat can still turn on the heat, but can't always sense the temperature; older formats of criticism still retain steaminess today. But a thermostat only heats a room, and the steam generated by this format of criticism is not single handedly capable of powering an engine of social change. Nonetheless, all the tales of criticism gone wrong are still stories about the allure of criticism. Many want to soak

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[18]Matthew K. Gold and Laura F. Klein, "Introduction: A DH That Matters," in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Laura F. Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), para. 4, https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled-f2acf72c-a469-49d8-be35-67f9ac1e3a60/section/0cd11777-7d1b-4f2c-8fdf-4704e827c2c2.

[19] Bartesaghi and Pantelides, "Why Critique Should Not Run out of Steam," 159.

[20] Bruno Latour, "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto,'" *New Literary History* 41, no. 3 (2010): 471–90.

in the steamy, alluring waters of criticism, and it remains a potentially fruitful site for participation. The post-critical turn alerts us that, if we want critical steam hot enough to help run an engine of social change, then we need to make some changes—to amp up the temperature, our tools require intensification.

The trans-situational quality of the participatory condition poses both opportunities for and challenges to raising the temperature. First, affective and algorithmic publics provide an opportunity for harnessing steam. In general, social media feeds are engineered to keep users engaged. YouTube algorithms help keep people in their ideological happy place, pushing users farther and farther from contradicting opinions.[21] Your feed is shaped to keep you on, alluring you with views escalating in ideological radicalism: on my feed, each video is gayer than the last; on another feed, it may get increasingly homophobic! Scholars in the social sciences have rigorously studied how the YouTube algorithm runs hot enough to power a steam engine pipeline of increasingly right-wing content.[22] But the flipside of the personalized steam engine is that it can also drive further left-wing content. On YouTube, a group of leftist YouTubers known as "Breadtube" use the algorithm to counter the alt-right: "BreadTube, a loose crew of socialist

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[21] Zeynep Tufekci, "YouTube, the Great Radicalizer," *The New York Times*, June 8, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/10/opinion/sunday/youtube-politics-radical.html.

[22] Homa Hosseinmardi et al., "Examining the Consumption of Radical Content on YouTube," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 32 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2101967118; Manoel Horta Ribeiro et al., "Auditing Radicalization Pathways on YouTube," in *Proceedings of the 2020 Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency* (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2020), 131–41, https://doi.org/10.1145/3351095.3372879; Rebecca Lewis, "'This Is What the News Won't Show You': YouTube Creators and the Reactionary Politics of Micro-Celebrity," *Television & New Media* 21, no. 2 (2020): 201–17, https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419879919; Luke Munn, "Alt-Right Pipeline: Individual Journeys to Extremism Online," *First Monday* 24, no. 6 (2019), https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v24i6.10108; Derek O'Callaghan et al., "Down the (White) Rabbit Hole: The Extreme Right and Online Recommender Systems," *Social Science Computer Review* 33, no. 4 (2015): 459–78, https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439314555329.

creators who named themselves after a 19th-century anarchist book, *The Conquest of Bread*, has made modest stars out of leftists like Natalie Wynn, a YouTube personality known as ContraPoints."[23] Researchers have found that the BreadTube community has developed practical knowledge of the YouTube algorithm to increase engagement (and, in turn, spread socialist messages) without sacrificing their values to the neoliberal platform.[24] And socialist writers have celebrated BreadTube: "Rather than being stuck on rails, Lenin's train now takes the form of smartphones and online videos, allowing emancipatory politics to integrate seamlessly into everyday life."[25]

Both BreadTube and the alt-right benefit from YouTube's radicalizing algorithm in its ability to facilitate affective publics. Zizi Pappacharissi coined the term to describe how, in contrast to traditional publics drawn together by texts and discussion, digital publics are drawn together by "the moods, instantiations, and singular space-time blocks that mark kairos; the affectively sensed and internalized atmosphere of the here and now; and the ways in which this is collaboratively, digitally, and inadvertently imprinted into our personal and collective subconscious."[26] Criticism created for and circulated by algorithmic sorting and

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[23] Kevin Roose, "A Thorn in YouTube's Side Digs In Even Deeper," *The New York Times*, February 12, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/12/technology/carlos-maza-youtube-vox.html.

[24] Kelley Cotter, "Practical Knowledge of Algorithms: The Case of BreadTube," *New Media & Society*, 2022, 9–10, https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221081802.

[25] Dmitry Kuznetsov and Milan Ismangil, "YouTube as Praxis? On BreadTube and the Digital Propagation of Socialist Thought," *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 18, no. 1 (2020): 13, https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v18i1.1128.

[26] Zizi Papacharissi, "Affective Publics and Structures of Storytelling: Sentiment, Events and Mediality," *Information, Communication & Society* 19, no. 3 (2016): 311, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1109697; See also Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

recommendations create steamy publics, where the radicalizing imaginary of criticism, in which the critic reveals something new to the audience, and now the audience participates more critically because of it, may be more possible.

But this opportunity of steaminess online is also the challenge: the sorting function of the algorithm means that one only has the discursive sensibilities of their own affective publics. Criticism, as an act of revealing something to some specific audience so that they can exert agency to shift their perspectives and/or participation, requires an awareness of the audience and their context. This is challenged by the state of digital trans-situations. For a potential leftist rhetor, like ContraPoints, who is hoping to address an audience beyond those who already agree with her, it is difficult to know how to intervene. Affective, algorithmic publics will not reliably respond to simple rational, argumentative intervention that does not suit the affective climate of the public (trans-situational), even if it seems like the correct argument (situational). For example, classicist Donna Zuckerberg has described her experience with the argumentative climate of the alt-right manosphere. When she has attempted to argue with men online about their misinterpretation of Greco-Roman classics, men in the manosphere use her response to further justify their claims about her snowflake-ness, her uncalled-for sensitivity, her weakness compared to their misogynist greatness. This constantly-shifting politics of transgression results in a situation where a leftist interlocutor can rarely say anything resembling the right thing in response, for a response is simply a new way for an alt-right affective public fed by transgression to spread.[27]

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[27]Donna Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2018), 8. Yes, Zuckerberg is the sister of the Zuckerberg you're thinking of.

If your feed is suited only to your political interests, it is hard to appeal to people who do not share your own views. As Zuckerberg's example shows, it is hard to appropriately style your response when your sensibility is formatted by a different affective public. In addition, content moderation further obfuscates the sensibilities of these publics. Real people are paid low wages to remove the worst of the content on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Reddit (just to name a few). They encounter child pornography, obscene acts of violence, hateful commentary about marginalized groups, and much more.[28] Those of us who rarely if ever have content moderated, and do not have to moderate content, are oblivious to the process and to the worst of the possible rhetoric we could encounter in the digital spaces we regularly inhabit. Any piece of digital rhetoric is ultimately negotiated by content moderation and the assumed lack of it; even the content moderation interventions that *seem* effective are missing an entire frightening part of the web. For someone like ContraPoints, who wants to address the misogynistic, patriarchal, and white supremacist cultures of the web that motivate mass killers, this mediating moderation is particularly salient.

Yes, the algorithm can help criticism pick up steam, but the platform's default formatting creates two steam powered trains, both engineered with the assumption they are running on separate, parallel tracks. But the algorithm's formatting is not (yet) all-encompassing. Political life shows that these two tracks are actually meeting in frequent, horrific head-on collisions as far-right and left-wing parties, candidates, and voters envision—and seem to participate in—completely different worlds, despite actually sharing one. How can criticism happen productively, given the state of digital trans-situations? We have examples in the work of

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[28]Tarleton Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

scholars dealing with rhetorical ecologies and ambient rhetoric. These methods help follow

discourse around its varied contexts. But as discussed in the introduction, these methods need

political animation. Yes, theories of affective, ecological publics brought together by algorithmic

sorting help us see how we have arrived at this situation—revealing that criticism can gain steam

when speaking to like-minded audiences. But, those interventions power steam engines set on a

collision track. What can we use to go off the rails? We need *poesis*: "the activity in which a

person brings something into being that did not exist before."[29] What methods can be marshaled

to invent new connections? Szymborska ends her talk that began this chapter with the line: "It

looks like poets will always have their work cut out for them." This chapter engages

ContraPoints's poetic work in demanding, digital times in which the poetic charge is ever-

present.

Toward steamy fictions

Since her videos began gaining mainstream attention around 2019, ContraPoints has been

celebrated as a rare voice able to convince people, especially men, on the alt-right to change their

views. Media theorist Florian Cramer says ContraPoints has "disproved the popular assumption

that 'the left can't meme.'"[30] Major radio shows and podcasts like WNYC's *On The Media* and

Crooked Media's *Offline with Jon Favreau* have covered stories about ContraPoints's success in

converting people from the alt-right, and every comment section of a ContraPoints video features

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[29] Donald Polkinghorne, *Practice and the Human Sciences: The Case for a Judgment-Based Practice of Care* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 115.

[30] Florian Cramer, "What Is Urgent Publishing?," *APRIA Journal* 3, no. 3 (2021): 33–43, https://doi.org/10.37198/APRIA.03.03.a3.

similar narratives from commenters.[31] As the opening anecdote of this chapter reveals, ContraPoints's methods are a bit untraditional. Other critics of the right-wing, like philosopher Jason Stanley or rhetorician Jen Merceica, are not donning regency wigs and pretending to do cocaine, nor are they speaking regularly to millions of viewers and seemingly convincing them to shift their perspectives, no matter how great their critical work is. ContraPoints does something different—her poetic fictions supplement her criticism, blending critical intervention and affective invention.

To explain ContraPoints's unique sensibility, I compare it to a method originating in anthropology known as fictocriticism. Fictocriticism grew out of the work of Michael Taussig in anthropology. In the late 90s, anthropology was in a time of theoretical and methodological flux. Challenged with questions about the ethics of ethnography and the bias of ethnographers, Kathleen Stewart described that "Much of anthropology backed off asking basic questions about what culture is. Michael Taussig is one of the few people who was able to continue to ask those questions."[32] Taussig's goal was to push beyond an ethnographic epistemology of identifying some singular, authentic, non-Western(ized) other, rationally represented in findings.[33] Taussig responded by writing experimental ethnography that blended "fact and fiction, ethnographic observation, archival history, literary theory and memoir," which a *New York Times* reporter

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[31] Jon Favreau, "How To Change Alt Right Minds with ContraPoints," Podcast, *Offline with Jon Favreau* (blog), August 28, 2022, https://crooked.com/podcast/how-to-change-alt-right-minds-with-contrapoints/; Micah Loewinger, "How YouTube's Left Is Changing Minds," Podcast, *On The Media* (blog), July 19, 2019, https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/otm/segments/how-youtubes-left-changing-minds.

[32] Emily Eakin, "Anthropology's Alternative Radical," *The New York Times*, April 21, 2001, para. 10, https://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/21/arts/anthropology-s-alternative-radical.html.

[33] Fazeela Jiwa, "Beyond Autoethnography: Fictocriticism as a Feminist Writing Strategy," *South Asian Review* 34, no. 3 (2013): 103–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2013.11932943.

described as reading "more like beatnik novels than sober analyses of other cultures."[34] That method became known as fictocriticism.

Fictocriticism, as it traces and deforms, has enlivened the work of theorists, historians, and critics. It draws on theoretical insight—using rooms built by criticism, theory, and history—but is made alive by the introduction of steaminess in storytelling. Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* are both fictocritical books that serve as demonstrative examples of how to build a better life with the insights of humanist research by performing on the page their experience of critical consciousness in their own lives.[35] Each combines the insight of literary and social theorists with performative prose about their lived experiences with sexuality and gender and racial microaggressions in the U.S., respectively. In two ways, they are exemplars of fictocriticism. First, each creatively traces how they got to their position, drawing on scholarly and experiential fragments.[36] In one powerful section of the lyric poem that is *Citizen*, Rankine enlivens her reflections on a racist incident at the World Cup by splicing in quotes from thinkers like Franz Fanon, Maurice Blanchot, and Homi Bhabha. Second, they combine the recognizable forms of creative and the critical "to make them 'say' something else."[37] Nelson cites Judith Butler and incorporates her prose as if it were from the narrator's consciousness as she deals with interpersonal conflict. Both show what is possible when one starts to *build* with the fragments that exist in the world rather than deconstruct it. This allows

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[34]Eakin, "Anthropology's Alternative Radical," para. 3.

[35] Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2016); Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2014).

[36] Heather Kerr, "Sympathetic Topographies," *Parallax* 7, no. 2 (2001): 113, https://doi.org/10.1080/13534640110039631.

[37] Amanda Nettelbeck, "Notes Toward an Introduction," in *The Space between: Australian Women Writing Fictocriticism*, ed. Heather Kerr and Amanda Nettelbeck (Nedlands, W.A.: University of Western Australia Press, 1998), 3–4.

many possible *inventions* built alongside *interventions*: imagining what may be ahead, appealing to a reader's affect *and* reason, and showcasing the nuance of living a participatory life.

Fictocriticism tries to create the experience of feeling alongside a culture and its texts and practices, showing a multiplicity of perspectives and possibilities in researching across cultures. Amanda Nettelbeck says that fictocritical "interpretative practices have less to do with theories of the text than they have to do with performances, or ritualistic practices, of the self in relation to the text."[38] As an orientation, fictocriticism centers on generating new ideas from texts instead of interpreting texts for "deeper" messages. Fictocritical ethnography, for example, still strives to impart knowledge about culture but does not reduce it solely to the necessary but insufficiently acknowledged selections, reflections, and deflections in the language of the ethnographer.[39] A fictocritical approach to texts follows a Deleuzean lineage in approaching texts affirmatively, in contrast to one rooted in a hermeneutic of suspicion, using texts as instigations for invention.[40] As Stephen Muecke describes it: "The ficto- side of fictocriticism follows the twists and turns of animated language as it finds new pathways. The -criticism part comes in the risky leap of taking the story to a different 'world.'"[41] Fictocritical work breaks out of unsteamy academic criticism but does not leave behind its commitment to engaging with rich theoretical sources and rigorous

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[38]Nettelbeck, 9.

[39] As Burke says, "[Humans] seek for vocabularies that will be faithful *reflections* of reality. To this end, they must develop vocabularies that are *selections* of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a *deflection* of reality." In a sense, fictocritical ethnography recognizes that the ethnographer is always generating a representative anecdote. Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1945), 59.

[40] For an intellectual history of this approach, and one attempt to do it in rhetorical studies, see John Muckelbauer, *The Future of Invention: Rhetoric, Postmodernism, and the Problem of Change* (SUNY Press, 2009).

[41]Stephen Muecke, *The Mother's Day Protest and Other Fictocritical Essays*, Place, Memory, Affect (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), xii.

inquiry. It also breaks out of fiction's completely imagined world but does not leave behind its inventiveness and its embrace of making a reader feel.

Traditional critique, as Walsh and Boyle pointed out, intervenes more than it invents; it points out what it is lacking in or missing from contemporary discourse. When it does invent— e.g. in finding new relations among concepts or phenomena, or by proposing some language, metaphor, theory to describe something—it still primarily does so in a rational register for the sake of intervening into some ongoing conversation. Fictocriticism, as a way to channel critique's steam, aims to generate "new kinds of social texts" in the way social theory does with concepts but adds percepts with the work of fiction.[42] Muecke explains that

> Gilles Deleuze thought of a contrast . . . between concepts and percepts. Criticism uses concepts and fiction percepts. Philosophy, according to Deleuze, is about the invention of new concepts which have the abstraction and flexibility to be taken up by others and used. Art, on the other hand, invents percepts, monumental perceptions if you like, which are just there, either they work or they don't. They can stand alone. You can use someone else's percept, but it will be an imitation. And percepts and concepts chase each other around successively masking and unmasking. [43]

Fictocriticism is thus uniquely resourced for addressing the micro and macropolitical. At the macro level, criticism's abstraction allows for political insight, addressing in symbolic exchange the working of abstract structures. The move from the macro to micro, from words to sensation and feeling, has been more challenging. As I argued in Chapter 1, rhetoric does not flow from discursive interventions alone but by the circulation of affect(s). But the fields in rhetorical studies that have addressed the micro—new materialism, affect studies, posthumanism—have proposed micropolitical inventions that are unsatisfying (and even problematic) given our demanding, digital times. Fictocriticism draws on the form of fiction to make macropolitical

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[42] Nettelbeck, "Notes Toward an Introduction," 8.

[43] Stephen Muecke, "The Fall: Fictocritical Writing," *Parallax* 8, no. 4 (2002): 109, https://doi.org/10.1080/1353464022000028000.

insight shine at the micropolitical level—in percepts, to "not simply [make] ideas travel but also [let] ourselves . . . be moved by them."[44] Instead of attempting to determine what practices must be taken up after the macropolitical insight of criticism, the fictocritic uses their fictional and creative devices (e.g., characters, plot, setting) to generate the sort of influential affective stickiness that could be missed in an argumentative, critical mode.

Fictocritical participation is inventional and interventional: it contributes to knowledge about something, it offers a new way to think about it, and it activates ecologies of affect. To show how this participatory sensibility plays out in ContraPoints's videos, I will first explain a bit about her method on YouTube. Then, I'll closely analyze moments from two 2018 ContraPoints videos—"Incels" and "Jordan Peterson"—to argue that ContraPoints's fictocritical sensibility responds to the vexed trans-situational context for participating on YouTube by combining the micro-and-fictional with the macro-and-critical.

Blending fiction and criticism on YouTube

Analog criticism and fiction have distinct formats based on their media. Each print culture or film culture is unique in its differences: think of the differences between video documentary and print journalism, horror film and thriller novel. Fictocritics reformat based on the existing formats of their medium. A literary fictocritic may think about the print dimensions of a book (ink, paper, folding, binding, and so on) and existing genres and their conventions (e.g. the protagonist and antagonist in a novel). In the case of ContraPoints, she appeals to existing formats on—and does some reformatting of—YouTube. ContraPoints specifically "hacks" the

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[44] Dennis Mischke, "Stephen Muecke's Fictocriticism and the Cosmopolitan Vision," ed. Jana Gohrisch and Ellen Grünkemeier (Amsterdam: Brill, 2013), 329.

YouTube algorithm. In their study of ContraPoints, Jessica Maddox and Brian Creech explain that ContraPoints's "video titles are purposefully vague, resembling clickbait… often simply titled in ways that resemble other overtly reactionary content… By her own admission, ContraPoints' strategy is to insert her content into YouTube's recommendation algorithm to break into alt-right playlists."[45] What Maddox and Creech point out is that ContraPoints attempts to exploit the pre-existing "logics" of the platform—this is both infrastructural (using knowledge of the algorithmic sorting) and rhetorical, adapting to the genres already circulating on the platform.

Speaking to genre, ContraPoints builds a fictocritical format from existing YouTube genres of criticism and queer humor. First, ContraPoints draws upon a critical tradition exemplified by atheist YouTubers who make videos detailing concepts of atheism and debunking religious faiths. ContraPoints explicitly cites these people as a reason for her entry into YouTube video making.[46] They mostly look into the camera and deliver lecture-esque monologues about a certain topic; these lectures may include a few jokes but largely resemble what you might imagine from, say, a college debater who had prepared a speech on a given topic.[47] Wynn had

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[45] Jessica Maddox and Brian Creech, "Interrogating LeftTube: ContraPoints and the Possibilities of Critical Media Praxis on YouTube," *Television & New Media* 22, no. 6 (2021): 604, https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476420953549.

[46] "'In grad school, I led a bit of a double life,' she said. 'I don't mean gender-wise—I just mean intellectually.' By day, she struggled to parse Husserl in the original German; by night, she watched a lot of YouTube—"'Christopher Hitchens destroys creationist in debate," that kind of thing,' she said. She stumbled on a subculture of YouTubers who called themselves skeptics. 'A lot of smug young men who wanted to prove how sophisticated they were by saying "There is no God" over and over,' she said. 'I can't judge them too hard, though, because I was one of them.'" Marantz, "The Stylish Socialist Who Is Trying to Save YouTube from Alt-Right Domination."

[47] Such as the atheist YouTuber ThunderF00t, analyzed in Christopher Smith and Richard Cimino, "Atheisms Unbound: The Role of the New Media in the Formation of a Secularist Identity," *Secularism and Nonreligion* 1 (2012): 17–31, https://doi.org/10.5334/snr.ab.

spent years watching skeptics destroy creationists, for example, but suddenly, these skeptics had made a right turn into the alt-right. She says, "some of them became straight-up Fascist sympathizers. I was, like, 'What is happening? Is no one else seeing this?'"[48] This motivation drives ContraPoints's critical style—how to speak to an audience of intelligent skeptics who have gone astray?

Second, ContraPoints draws upon a subgenre of autofictional videos we might refer to simply as "queer humor." For example, one popular YouTuber named Michael Henry creates humorous videos that address contemporary queer sexuality, especially how gay men interact with straight people. They are short, usually set in only one location, and take up one issue in the gay male community. For example, in his video "CHEERS TO US," Henry and two friends ironically toast mimosas on a rooftop, getting drunk, while discussing how they use drinking as a coping mechanism for their internalized homophobia, socio-economic marginalization, and estrangement from family.[49] This ironic mocking of one's own identity to reveal some deeper truths about it—and play with potentials for it—is fundamental to ContraPoints's fictocriticism.

How does ContraPoints blend these forms, broadly speaking? She faces the camera and monologues, like the YouTube critics. But unlike their single-voiced monologues, maybe occasionally splicing in news or other videos, she creates a multivocal experience with multiple characters, multiple scenes, multiple acts. She further deforms this critical form by bringing in fiction: ContraPoints relies on that same identity irony I mentioned from Michael Henry. Take, for example, a trope identified in her videos by a Wiki of TV tropes: "AS A TRANS WOMAN."

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[48] Wynn qtd. in Marantz, "The Stylish Socialist Who Is Trying to Save YouTube from Alt-Right Domination."

[49] *CHEERS TO US*, YouTube Video, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BBxwyubk4FM.

[50] When ContraPoints speaks to her experience as a trans woman, she will change her voice to be more nasal, cut the camera in closer, and say "AS A TRANS WOMAN…" What follows tends to be her reading a situation through her experiences as a transgender woman. But this accentuated form of the "as a" statement pokes fun at the identity politics implicated in this statement. [51] It points out how she can choose to center her identity (or not) and that her experience does not speak to all trans women even while ironically claiming to with that positionality statement. ContraPoints uses moments where she plays with her identity, blending fiction and criticism, to take inventive turns in her videos, which I will discuss in the next section.

ContraPoints engages shared being and becoming across difference

As a writing practice, fictocriticism focuses on producing argument, narrative, and poetics—writing rich with both ideas and storytelling. This is particularly useful in the participatory condition. When faced with *anything and everything, all of the time*, fictional strategies can create stories out of mountains of content that are seemingly un-story-able. The micro- and macro-political straddling made possible by a fictocritical sensibility appeals to the complex, trans-situational digital audience such as in ContraPoints's video about incels. Incels, a portmanteau for involuntarily celibate, are a community of men who have created a largely self-hating culture about their dissatisfaction with their sex lives. In the mid-2010s, the community

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[50]"ContraPoints (Web Video)," in *TV Tropes Wiki*, November 4, 2019, https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/WebVideo/ContraPoints.

[51]cf. Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Go Ahead, Speak for Yourself," *The New York Times*, August 10, 2018, sec. Opinion, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/10/opinion/sunday/speak-for-yourself.html.

made headlines as two mass murderers claimed that affiliation as a motivator.[52] Both shootings

happened near college campuses: there is something to be said about this relation of the incel to

the academic, the feminist—the incel versus the college snowflake, the social justice warrior.

Incel opposition to feminists, critics, intellectuals and their seriousness is part of what sustains

them. A key part of the "manosphere," the incels occupy the "corner of the Internet where boys

will be boys, girls will be objects, and critics will be 'feminists,' 'misandrists' or 'enemies.'"[53]

As ContraPoints details in her videos, incels use attempts to intervene as ways to further commit

self harm. When incels are told to just clean themselves up, pick up hobbies, and attempt to live

a fuller life so that women pay more attention to them, they respond with memes that mock the

suggestion for its unawareness of how biologically determined they are to be unsuccessful with

women. Here, with a target audience of incels, ContraPoints faces an affective climate where

intervention simply fuels more misogynist incel rage. ContraPoints blends the forms of fiction

and criticism to speak to this challenging affective climate: she leads with ironic dispassion to

conclude with sympathy toward the challenges of contemporary culture that has birthed incels.

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[52] Adam Nagourney et al., "Before Brief, Deadly Spree, Trouble Since Age 8," *The New York Times*, June 2, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/02/us/elliot-rodger-killings-in-california-followed-years-of-withdrawal.html; T. Rees Shapiro, Caitlin Dewey, and Lenny Bernstein, "Probe in College Slayings Peers into Web Rants and Possible Religious Rage," *Washington Post*, October 2, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/probe-in-college-slayings-peers-into-web-rants-and-possible-religious-rage/2015/10/02/d250007a-68ea-11e5-8325-a42b5a459b1e_story.html.

[53]Caitlin Dewey, "Inside the 'Manosphere' That Inspired Santa Barbara Shooter Elliot Rodger," *Washington Post*, May 27, 2014, para. 1, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/05/27/inside-the-manosphere-that-inspired-santa-barbara-shooter-elliot-rodger/.

As ContraPoints introduces the video, she attempts to strike a disinterested stance of the critic. ContraPoints's video begins with a man's voiceover reading an r/Braincels[54] post. The post is written like erotica, describing the sexual experience of a man penetrating a woman: "Imagine how a woman feels." But it ends with "you will never get to experience this because your skeleton is too small or the bones in your face are not the proper shape. Have a nice day." The music goes silent during this last part; when the narrative ends, the music switches to slow jazz. A skull appears, the camera slowly zooming away from it, then it cuts to ContraPoints, holding a glass of white wine, relaxing on a chaise lounge. She addresses the men she intends to address: "Hello Boys. Let's talk about bone structure." ContraPoints continues, centering her object of criticism and positioning herself as the disinterested interpretive critic: "In this video, I don't want to mock incels or lecture them or even sympathize with them. I just want to understand who they are and why they're like this."

Her video is then organized into five acts that she playfully refers to as "bases," drawing on the popular metaphor of baseball and sex, where each base describes a different, purportedly-increasingly-intimate sex act. First base, incelese, is set in purple light with a pink undertone, the dark color casting an ominous glow as ContraPoints details the language incels use to degrade women and themselves as incapable of being loved. Second base, the red pill, is set in red light. The red pill follows the *Matrix* symbolism of the pill one swallows to suffer the 'true' knowledge of society. The red also symbolizes the bloody revenge sought by murderous incels who believe women have wronged them.

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[54] r/Braincel is a subreddit of the forum-like social platform Reddit. r/Braincel hosts a community of incels who post memes, links, photos, and have discussions.

On the third base, tinder is garbage, ContraPoints implicates herself and loses her disinterested stance. This third scene is set in a green light, with some pink. It marks a shift in tone from red (on a far end of a color spectrum) and purple colors (on the other end of the spectrum) toward green, which is smack in the middle of an infrared/ultraviolet color spectrum. Here, in this in-between light, ContraPoints strikes a balance between groups that are seemingly opposed. After a slide introducing third base, She says "I know I said I wasn't gonna sympathize with incels, and I know they don't want my sympathy anyway, and I know it's bad praxis to sympathize with the devil—but on some level, I can't help it." She admits that she is not really disinterested, but that she is human. She feels bad for these men, and she wants to do something about it. ContraPoints inhabits green: you can move, you can pass go, you can be better, something can be done; but the affective environment she hopes to push back on is often red: stop, you are not deserving of empathy, your destiny is biologically determined, you cannot move on.

ContraPoints's empathetic intervention is not just vacuous sympathy, however. Instead, she's offering her story in this work of criticism to show a different conceptual way for incels to live. ContraPoints shares her experience on Tinder to further empathize with incels. Her tinder profile, she says, is now "woman seeking men" but used to be a man seeking women.[55] She can thus dually relate to the experiences of incels and the experiences of the women that incels feel are wronging them.

> on Tinder, you're just browsing a catalog of faces, and gatekeeping who even gets to talk to you in the first place…. And this is where I do have sympathy for the incels, because as a trans woman I know what it's like to obsess over millimeters of bone…. I mean I'm just as obsessed with bone structure as the goddamn incels, because I think

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[55] At the time, ContraPoints identified as straight (a woman seeking men). As of February 2020 ContraPoints now identifies as a lesbian. See *Shame | ContraPoints*, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7WvHTl_Q7I.

certain parts of my face make me look like a man, and I worry about it every day. [56]

Rather than forcing the incels to swallow a red pill that resembles criticism by deconstructing and interpreting society in a masochistic way that builds a public of lonely, despairing men, she offers something else. She is inventing by showing affective resonances across groups— feminists and trans women vs. incels—that could be cast as opposed. This digital-sexual culture is a shared experience; she invents this coalition instead of letting the claim that "feminists have helped destroy incel chances of sex" stand.

In the conclusion of the fourth base, she returns to her point about why it is important to invent across difference instead of solely intervene in a problematic group. A Reddit screenshot is displayed with a bokeh-ed background that mimics the color scheme of the set ContraPoints occupies, now in the fourth act of her video. The dramatic reading sounds like a man who has to call a suicide hotline, explaining "I gleefully indulged in this subreddit the moment I discovered it, since I loved uncovering secrets that society had been hiding from me, but it has affected my mental health in a bad way."[57] In her response, ContraPoints explains why "rational debate" is inadequate—both for dealing with this trauma and for generating change.

> I'm not going to respond to your worldview like its an intellectual position worthy of rational debate. Because these ideas and arguments, you're not using them the way rational people use arguments. You're using them as razor blades to abuse yourselves. . . . And the solution to that has to be therapeutic, not logical. A lot of you are lonely. You've been bullied and neglected. You feel left behind by society. . . . So what you have to do is get off those forums as fast as possible. I'm going to post a link in the description of this video to instructions on how to block certain websites from your computer, because for me, that's what it took.

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[56] *Incels | ContraPoints*, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fD2briZ6fB0&t=3s.

[57] Qtd. in *Incels | ContraPoints*. Eerily, this redditor's account sounds a lot like what can happen with criticism—"uncovering the secrets of society."

She suggests digitally-accessible support for a digital community. She speaks to their abuse and use of digital technology to hurt themselves. She offers "micropolitical action… that actively alters conditions of emergence," and she "engages becoming, rather than judging what is."[58] Rather than blame the patriarchy and get on with it, she offers empathy, a similar story, and the prospect of becoming different. Holding a glass of red wine in a glittery dark purple set, ContraPoints is looking through the camera to her viewers. It is a moment not any more dramatic or sincere than the rest of the video—it is straightforward, not pandering, not a tearful altar call. But it is something new, and it is meaningful.

ContraPoints exaggerates critical proximity

Key to traditional critique is a sense of critical distance. Sheldon Wolin describes how theory and criticism are in contrast to more run-of-the-mill political commentary because it is done at a distance, with space and time to see things differently than one can see them when engaged in the fast-paced action of politics.[59] Fictocriticism challenges this distance requirement with what Muecke calls critical proximity: critique in "an intimate tone in a minor key, or a critical proximity, as opposed to critical distance."[60] Muecke specifically cites Latour's theorization about critique and lovers. "[Lovers do not] attempt to decrypt [an utterance] as if it transported a message, but as if it transformed the messengers themselves . . . Are we not ready to give anything and everything to be able to detect truth from falsity in this strange talk, which

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[58] Brian Massumi and Joel McKim, "Of Microperception and Micropolitics," *Inflexions: A Journal for Research-Creation* 3 (2009): 14.

[59] Sheldon Wolin, "Political Theory and Political Commentary," in *Political Theory and Political Education*, ed. M Richter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 190–204.

[60] Muecke, *The Mother's Day Protest and Other Fictocritical Essays*, xiv.

transports persons and not information?"[61] The last section shows how ContraPoints offers

connective inventions in her fictocriticism. The "strange talk" of lovers is another way that

ContraPoints offers connection. But much like a healthy coupling, intimacy is not just

compliments but argument and commitment. This transformation is not just about the words

exchanged but the intensity and connection generated, the proximity achieved. Put in the

language of micro-macro politics, the interventions of macropolitics require sustained

micropolitical inventions. As Massumi says, "success at the macropolitical level is at best partial

without a complementary micropolitical flourishing. Without it, the tendency is toward

standardization."[62] Fictocriticism offers a sensibility for criticism that gets intimate, challenges

problematic discourse while resisting standardization, and generates affective stickiness.

ContraPoints's video "Jordan Peterson" shows how she uses fictional strategies to

exaggerate critical proximity for political effect. Peterson is a psychology professor at the

University of Toronto. His ascent into the public eye began when, outing himself as a

transphobe, he "inserted himself into a national Canadian debate over transgender rights —

specifically by refusing to refer to a student by their chosen gender pronouns" in Fall 2016.[63] He

is known as a harsh–and, frankly, unfair–critic of postmodernism, social justice warriors, and the

intellectual left in general.[64]

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[61] Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 102–3.

[62] Massumi and McKim, "Of Microperception and Micropolitics," 19.

[63] Zack Beauchamp, "Jordan Peterson, the Obscure Canadian Psychologist Turned Right-Wing Celebrity, Explained," *Vox*, March 26, 2018, https://www.vox.com/world/2018/3/26/17144166/jordan-peterson-12-rules-for-life.

[64]Daniel B. Klein, "On Jordan Peterson, Postmodernism, and PoMo-Bashing," *Society* 55, no. 6 (2018): 477–81, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-018-0295-1.

ContraPoints begins noting that Jordan Peterson has not been engaged with seriously by leftists, who make it seem "as if leftists are like, afraid of his actual ideas." Peterson symbolically represents the rhetorical ecologies of explicit misogynists that surround him (and he seems to do so eagerly). ContraPoints suggests that, while this is one level of his public persona, his appeal is also from ideas he offers beyond this. She wants to, in an act of criticism, dig into those "actual ideas." ContraPoints is not afraid, she says. But she makes clear that she isn't taking this too seriously, she is still a fictocritic who is aware of the ecology of misogyny that has surrounded him: "I'm not afraid of anything. I just smoked a bunch of fuckin' PCP." After (jokingly, we presume) smoking a potent drug, the scene cuts away from ContraPoints in her studio, into a deeply purple-lit room, where a mannequin lies on a bed. It bears Peterson's head, cut out from printer paper, pasted simply onto the mannequin. The camera is handheld in a point-of-view shot; the viewer hears heavy breathing as a hand, presumably ContraPoints's, reaches out to caress his face. She says "Daddy," and it is modulated to sound as if in a drugged-up dream world. The scene quickly cuts—as soon as the *ee* in Daddy has been said—back to ContraPoints in the studio.

ContraPoints describes the Peterson materials she's read and suggests that she's started to understand why he's being well-read—young men require self-help that offers them the basic insights of world religion on how to live meaningful lives. But she also recognizes these self-help principles are "a Trojan horse for a reactionary political agenda" about the totalitarian, evil agenda of "postmodern neo-Marxists." She wants to understand and challenge that. Finishing her introduction of Peterson, she says:

> So Jordan—sorry, Dr. Peterson, Professor, Daddy—Let's talk.
> And for once I'd like to actually treat this discussion with the seriousness and respect I
> think it deserves—

Her captions note that "Sultry sax music" begins, and a point of view shot returns as ContraPoints draws a bath. She lights a candle, and then the camera cuts back to a medium close-up shot of her stepping into the bath, wearing an A-shirt and the same gaudy, jeweled necklace and earrings as in her studio. "Mm, that's good, it's a good temperature," she says. "Hand me the oil, would you daddy?" and the mannequin of Peterson returns, now wearing a blazer and dress shirt, arm extended, handing ContraPoints of oil. He "beeps and boops," according to her captions, like a robot, incoherently without any translation. ContraPoints responds "Thanks, Daddy. It's really an honor to bathe with a public intellectual of your [a pointed pause here…] stature."

ContraPoints treats Peterson as a lover—she gets intimate with him, she calls him daddy, she treats him as a person who is misguided and not just as a vessel for bad ideas.

> You know, I never like to argue in the bath, so I want to start by telling you the things I like about you… you talk about deep shit. I was watching a video where you and a couple of 'zany goons' were talking about Plato and Aristotle and the meaning of life and I thought 'huh, on the Left we don't really talk about that kind of thing, all we talk about is how society oppresses people.' And that might not be enough, because people need to have a positive purpose in life.

The lover starts with recognizing the person, their shared intimacy in living in a world they build together. ContraPoints recognizes that her and Peterson co-exist in a global, digital culture that requires cooperation for solving wicked problems. So she recognizes the things he does to help build this world and how she wishes the left would do them too, such as making better propaganda that offers "positive purpose" beyond deconstruction about nuanced oppressions. But this intimacy, as Muecke noted, is in a minor key—she is not forgiving of Peterson when he does not treat her right.

ContraPoints is a trans woman and is acutely aware of the transphobic rhetoric Peterson promotes. So she treats their conversation, as she said, "with the seriousness and respect I think it

deserves." By putting him in bed and in the bath with her, instead of simply cutting to clips of

him in formal interviews, she visually refutes his transphobia and his desire to be seen as some

Cartesian rational man who has escaped embodiment. Pickering and Lake's concept of visual

refutation applies neatly here, updated for this text:

> Removed from the visual frame constructed by [Jordan Peterson himself], a frame that
> encourages audiences to interpret [his rhetoric] as objective and scientific fact, these
> images are placed in a visual frame consisting of expert critique, a frame that encourages
> audiences to interpret [him] as the manipulative propaganda of an unethical charlatan.[65]

Taking Peterson out of visual framing that reifies his purported position as a properly-educated,

credible intellectual, realizes how manipulative his rhetoric is. It sets a minor tone, where, even

though ContraPoints is lending some charity to his arguments, the viewer is aware that he is

meant to be understood as a person that is being mocked.

Representing critical proximity visually, in a clearly mocking tone, allows for

ContraPoints to meet the needs across the various overlapping rhetorical situations at play here.

The tune of her video may resemble a straightforward criticism in many ways, but the minor key

helps keep at bay the leftist criticism of ContraPoints—that she may be assisting in the spread of

Peterson's message by taking him seriously—and the right-wing criticism, that she's simply

overreacting to him. Instead, by putting him in the bath, she does not argue in a way that turns

off the listener, it asks them to be amused, disgusted, and even turned on: so that the point sneaks

amidst the minutes of laughter, cringes, or shifting in your seat.

Despite treating Peterson as a lover throughout, ContraPoints concludes the video

centering her faux-disinterest. She references Peterson's argument that naturally-occurring

lobster hierarchy analogically justifies human hierarchy as natural: "But again, and I really can't

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[65] Randall A Lake and Barbara A. Pickering, "Argumentation, the Visual, and the Possibility of
Refutation: An Exploration," *Argumentation* 12, no. 1 (1998): 88.

stress this enough, I don't care either way. I make YouTube videos because I enjoy mood lighting and set design. So… what do you people want from me? The lobster queen is dead, long live the queen." Or, as Szymborska would say: "I don't know." ContraPoints's seemingly-disinterested conclusion is really a care-ful invitation to build together from the critique she has provided with the fictions she has offered. Her sarcastic disinterestedness mocks her own passion for proselytization, for getting Peterson bros to turn away from their alt-right Trojan horse and embrace a progressive worldview that does not require throwing out any of the (surface-level) important life lessons or meaningful historical thinkers that Peterson promotes. She has deconstructed Peterson's ideas but, through humor and bath oil, built a new ground for these men to see the diversity of thought outside of Peterson's straw-person arguments. These, she shows in her performance, may offer better solutions for living than the sad reality Peterson provides. It allows donning wigs and costumes and doing mood lighting, rather than succumbing to the hierarchy of the lobster.

(Re)setting demanding temperatures

ContraPoints's attempts to address the alt-right have now become subject to scholarly analysis. While recognizing and celebrating her ability to "challenge extremism within the bounds of YouTube," these analyses also claimed that ContraPoints's appeals to the alt-right are "ambivalent" or "ambiguous."[66] Meagan Malone writes that "Anyone who watches the entire 31-minute video, however, knows that Wynn does not provide any real answer to the questions that animate Beauty… Wynn's composition, unlike some traditional essay in which

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[66] Maddox and Creech, "Interrogating LeftTube," 596.

counterarguments are met with rebuttals, will remain ambiguous."[67] Given ContraPoints styles

herself as a "leftist propagandist," this conclusion about ambiguity is surprising.

Jessica Maddox and Brian Creech express concern that ContraPoints's ambiguity might

amplify problematic talking points. Maddox and Creech do celebrate ContraPoints's "empathy in

her snark…she does not let those young white men off the hook" with calls to action toward

addressing structural conditions.[68] But they also argue that this dialogically-driven empathy has

limitations:

> Dialogic techniques risk making ContraPoints' own intentions opaque, but there is a
> larger and more intractable issue at hand that illustrates the risk of hosting a critical,
> dialogic project in digital spaces. Namely, how can (and should) a critic engage with
> problematic ideas and identities, at scale, when doing so runs the risk of harming the
> vulnerable? … Given ContraPoints' use of discursive strategies that directly engage with
> alt-right ideologies, her empathy and presentation of multiple viewpoints foreground a
> polysemy whose complexity may not always translate.[69]

In Zadie Smith's fictional short story about cancel culture, she suggests that seeing moral nuance

in complicated situations has become equivalent to sympathizing with the guilty and "looking

the wrong way." [70] But ContraPoints embraces the nuance, even at some risk. If ContraPoints

responds to the incels with sympathy, her leftist supporters may see her as sympathizing with

evil misogynists who deserve prima facie exclusion. As Paul Gilroy has remarked, "among

radicals and what is left of the Left, the ideas of empathy and sympathy have been allowed to

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[67] Meagan E. Malone, "Expression of the Embodiment Contradiction in Natalie Wynn's ContraPoints Video, Beauty," *Computers and Composition* 63 (2022): 14, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2022.102696.

[68] Maddox and Creech, "Interrogating LeftTube," 607.

[69] Maddox and Creech, 608, 609.

[70] Zadie Smith, "Now More Than Ever," *The New Yorker*, July 16, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/07/23/now-more-than-ever.

sink into disrepute."[71] Any attempts to sympathize with underlying problems animating the right-

wing are seen as corrupting the political goodness of left positions. On the right-wing,

ContraPoints faces a politics of transgression where a "call-out" (you're racist, you're sexist,

etc.) would further fuel alt-right ideas about social justice warriors and political correctness.

ContraPoints navigates these tensions in a way that may seem ethically murky from a perspective

that sees only argumentative and epistemological division. Maddox and Creech view

ContraPoints's videos as criticism and argument, so the videos become about battling ideologies

with an "oppressed person" vs. the "dominant and problematic" people. But this chapter has

appreciated ContraPoints's fictocritical strategies—that recognize and generate shared affects

despite different identities, offering new ethical practices that would otherwise be discarded

under the rubric of ideological argument-exchange. What is being missed in these scholar's

assessment of ContraPoints is that they don't leave room for the "I don't know."

In this conclusion, I want to emphasize how ContraPoints's fictocritical sensibility

creates space for the "I don't know" as a practice of resisting fascism not just at the level of left

resistance to right-wing movements, but also at the level of leftist ways of thinking and being. As

Brad Vivian explains, "potential preconditions for fascism…condition people to crave authority,

abolish cultural differences in the name of universal paradigms, and mistake violence for

justice."[72] Driven by a rise in fascist rhetorics in the U.S. and around the world, rhetoricians have

been actively exploring what it means to resist fascism today, driven by the idea that fascism

"may in fact be merely an extension and amplification of motivations we might otherwise think

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[71] Paul Gilroy, "Agonistic Belonging: The Banality of Good, the 'Alt Right' and the Need for Sympathy," *Open Cultural Studies* 3, no. 1 (2019): 13, https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2019-0001.

[72] Bradford Vivian, "The Incitement: An Account of Language, Power, and Fascism," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 51, no. 5 (2021): 362, https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2021.1972134.

ordinary or even laudable."[73] ContraPoints joins the challenge in figuring out rhetorical practices that prevent the intensification of otherwise ordinary motives into fascism.

The corrective ContraPoints offers is to circulate affects that reject formats attempting to make fascists out of all of us. Deleuze and Guattari have (famously) written that "Leftist organizations will not be the last to secrete microfascisms. It's too easy to be antifascist on the molar level, and not even see the fascist inside you, the fascist you yourself sustain and nourish and cherish with molecules both personal and collective."[74] Affect theorists in the wake of Deleuze and Guattari have tried to reckon with how to do politics given the intention to resist microfascisms. When prompted about why he didn't consider politics in terms of the generation of a common language, Massumi replied:

> I just don't think that the possibility of a common language exists anymore, if it ever did. And if it did, I wouldn't want it. I don't think I'd be alone. That in itself uncommons it. It would have to be imposed.... I wouldn't want it because in my way of thinking it would be… de-intensifying. It would flatten affect by standardizing response. It would put politics back on the uncreative road to reflex. Consensus is always the product of a power-over. It is a habituation to it, even if it's a soft form of it.[75]

This sort of imposed consensus can happen protocologically in the algorithms of digitality.[76] Maddox and Creech conclude that, while ContraPoints can "offer interpretive techniques that allow myriad audiences to navigate alt-right texts more ambivalently… Given platform dynamics that commodify identity-based conflict, there seems to be no room for ambivalence in

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[73] Nathan Crick, "Introduction: The Rhetorical Devices of Fascism," in *The Rhetoric of Fascism*, ed. Nathan Crick (Tuscaloosa: University Alabama Press, 2022), 9.

[74] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1987), 236.

[75] Massumi and McKim, "Of Microperception and Micropolitics," 14.

[76] See the discussion of Pfister in Chapter 1. Damien Smith Pfister, "Digitality, Rhetoric, and Protocological Fascism; Or, Fascist Ants & Democratic Cicadas," *Journal for the History of Rhetoric* 23, no. 1 (2020): 3–29, https://doi.org/10.1080/26878003.2020.1693440.

YouTube's culture wars."[77] But YouTube is not just an empty container for pre-existing good people vs. bad people, the left vs. the right, us vs. them. YouTube actively participates in the formatting of this moral and cultural "war," and feeds off of participation that feeds such war, whether left or right. YouTube's us vs. them war that ContraPoints has been prompted to engage in is a prime example of this—it encourages seeing some as beyond the pale, as needing cancellation and extermination. ContraPoints's fictocritical strategy may seem ambivalent, but it allows her to creatively offer options for shaping intensities away from fascism(s) and toward generating new possibilities. Seeing that this protocol functions to circulate microfascism, she looks to "keep the intensity in what comes next."[78] She offers moments of empathy and invention without caving to sexist, homophobic, and transphobic views in order to show how a more just future can be achieved without turning to fascist methods.

ContraPoints models why fictocriticism is a participatory sensibility uniquely suited for setting the right temperature in demanding, digital times. Working within the parameters of YouTube, facing participatory imperatives that encourage micro-fascist tendencies, and, seeking to reformat sensibilities across a trans-situation of men in the manosphere and socialists on BreadTube–she uses fiction to engage in micropolitical critique. ContraPoints's critique cannot be easily summarized as a leftist advocacy for turning away from alt-right and manosphere online communities and instead turning toward one's local chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (though she may support you in doing that). Yes, ContraPoints tries to convince alt-right fascist sympathizers to embrace a more equitable vision of society, especially with regards to gender and sexuality, and her sensibility retains important macropolitical insight accordingly.

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[77] Maddox and Creech, "Interrogating LeftTube," 610.

[78] Massumi and McKim, "Of Microperception and Micropolitics," 12.

But her fictocritical sensibility is deeply micropolitical, as she ultimately advocates for everyone to resist fascist tendencies that can occur in oneself—even when attempting to be anti-fascist.

Ultimately, ContraPoints advocates for a participatory life by striking a comic frame in contrast to fascist ways of thinking. In the preface of *Anti-Oedipus,* Foucault asks: "How does one keep from being fascist, even (especially) when one believes oneself to be a revolutionary militant?" To advance revolutionary goals without succumbing to the fascist inside, Foucault summarizes from Deleuze and Guattari that living a non-fascist life embraces freeing "political action from all unitary and totalizing paranoia."[79] What does freeing political action from such paranoia look like? Perhaps Burke's comic frame: an approach that pictures "people not as vicious but as mistaken."[80] Celeste Condit aptly says: "The comic frame tells us that we are all, inevitably, impure. To the extent that we strive for understanding and a better world, we must forgive each other our failings, for we are each equally the clowns of our dramas. Rather than a tragic challenge and defense that requires one of us to win and one to lose, one of us to be scapegoat and one scapegoater, I suggest we step out of the tragic mode."[81] ContraPoints offers an example of how to apply the comic frame while living in the participatory condition. On a platform full of people who "already know," ContraPoints often ends her videos with "I don't know." This is not problematic ambivalence and empathy, but rather a desperately needed model for a steam engine that can help power participatory lives. In this model, criticism's

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[79] From Michel Foucault's preface to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 11.

[80] Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 41–42.

[81] Celeste Condit, "Framing Kenneth Burke: Sad Tragedy or Comic Dance?," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80, no. 1 (1994): 81, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335639409384057.

macropolitical steam is pushed through micropolitical fictions that connect flawed individuals across many situations.

At the end of the last chapter, I asked: what sensibilities will need to be generated to do transformative reformatting while *in situ* with algorithmized grammars? Both sensibilities of fictocriticism and disparticipation helped generate Szymborska's temperature for sustaining life as they straddle the micro-and-macro political, participate in ways attentive to affect, and prompt reformatting of participation. While disparticipation looked at intra-movement deliberation, fictocriticism as a participatory sensibility shows how participation can be formatted to challenge political allies and address so-called opponents. Fictocriticism shows how this sort of transformative reformatting can happen through creative use of platformed and algorithmic formats—in their algorithmic sorting, affective publics, and genres of fiction and criticism. The next chapter introduces a new platform and a more widespread sensibility—in the Instagram slideshow's installectuals—one with questionable steaminess.

Chapter 4: Installectuals: #BlackLivesMatter, Slideshows, and Summer 2020

Introducing the Instagram slideshow

In Summer 2020, after the murder of George Floyd and before COVID-19 vaccines were widely available, Black Lives Matter (BLM) activism flourished on social media.[1] Infamously, on June 2, 2020, Instagrammers posted millions of black squares on Instagram for #BlackoutTuesday, hijacking a social media stunt originally meant to stay within the recording community.[2] As more and more users shared black squares, some started to add #BlackLivesMatter and began drowning out the content on that hashtag, which had previously been a gathering place for information about the movement.[3] The black squares became a key example of "performative activism"—and what not to do. In contrast stood a practice that became known as "PowerPoint activism," "social justice slideshows," "Instagram activist slideshows," or "Instagram infographics." Instagram users uploaded multi-image slide decks that described concepts about racial justice, prepared people for police violence while protesting, and advertised nonprofits in need of donations. Major media outlets like *Vox* described "How Social

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[1] Kalhan Rosenblatt, "A Summer of Digital Protest: How 2020 Became the Summer of Activism Both Online and Offline," *NBC News*, September 26, 2020, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/summer-digital-protest-how-2020-became-summer-activism-both-online-n1241001.

[2] Joe Coscarelli, "#BlackoutTuesday: A Music Industry Protest Becomes a Social Media Moment," *The New York Times*, June 2, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/02/arts/music/what-blackout-tuesday.html.

[3] Rebecca Jennings, "Who Are the Black Squares and Cutesy Illustrations Really For?," *Vox*, June 3, 2020, https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2020/6/3/21279336/blackout-tuesday-black-lives-matter-instagram-performative-allyship.

Justice Slideshows made by activists took over Instagram," and the *New York Times* said, "Swipe-through activist guides are the new zines."[4]

Slideshows spread virally to instruct wide audiences about participation in the Black Lives Matter movement, whether by providing information, offering scripts for awkward conversation, or suggesting methods for sustained engagement. For example, "Keeping Up Anti-Racist Momentum After The News Cycle," received more than 384,000 likes.[5] Set in a light pink background, creator @officialmillenialblack describes in all-caps black and white sans-serif lettering how to "keep on holding yourself and your community to account."[6] The slideshow suggests things like understanding the history of structural racism, thinking about diversifying one's social circles, forming habits like turning one-time donations into monthly contributions, and acting locally by connecting with organizations in your locality. Other slideshows focused on countering racism in interpersonal interactions. @domrobxrts's slideshow, "Did someone just say something offensive, but you don't know how to correct them?" received more than 144,000 likes. Again relying on all-caps sans serif text, this time in red and black on a grainy white background, the slideshow offered all-caps templates for correcting someone ("WHEN YOU SAID '___' IT MADE ME UNCOMFORTABLE. SO COULD YOU STAY AWAY FROM

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[4] Terry Nguyen, "PowerPoint Activism Is Taking over Your Friends' Instagram Accounts," *Vox*, August 12, 2020, https://www.vox.com/the-goods/21359098/social-justice-slideshows-instagram-activism; Melissa Guerrero, "Swipe-Through Activist Guides Are the New Zines," *The New York Times*, August 19, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/19/style/instagram-activism-graphics-zines.html.

[5] I will mention the number of likes throughout this chapter to signal the wide circulation of slideshows, not to validate Instagram's metrics.

[6] @officialmillennialblack, "Keeping up Anti-Racist Momentum after the News Cycle (June 2020)," *Instagram Slideshow Archive*, June 2, 2020, https://instagramslideshows.omeka.net/items/show/21.

SAYING THAT?") and for responding to being corrected ("THANK YOU FOR TELLING ME! I WILL MAKE SURE TO THINK BEFORE I SPEAK").[7]

This chapter reckons with how such Instagram activist slideshows operate as a format of participation and formatted a participatory sensibility I call "Installectual," in a portmanteau of Instagram (itself instant + telegram) and intellectual. In their book *Instagram*, Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin explain that "While Instagram is well known as an app which changed photography, it's worth remembering that the immediacy of 'instant' was the most important thing at the beginning. The communication that photography allowed, rather than fidelity to the photographic form, is at the very root of the platform's success."[8] Prioritizing prompt communication and application to current events, an installectual participatory sensibility is resonant with the temporality of networked publics (instantaneous) and accessible to a wider audience than a major newspaper (Instagram).[9] "Installectual" draws on the instantaneity and visuality of Instagram to resonate.

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[7] @domrobxrts, "DID SOMEONE JUST SAY SOMETHING OFFENSIVE, BUT YOU DON'T KNOW HOW TO CORRECT THEM? (July 2020)," *Instagram Slideshow Archive*, July 9, 2020, https://instagramslideshows.omeka.net/items/show/22.

[8] Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, and Crystal Abidin, *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures*, Digital Media and Society Series (Medford, MA: Polity, 2020), chap. 1.

[9] I use intellectual here in the sense of reporting and criticism—intellectual work that can be done by movement leaders, journalists, creatives, and not just scholars. In this way, the citizen journalist and the public intellectual share some rhetorical ground, and drawing distinctions between them is not my project. See Zeynep Tufekci, "'Not This One': Social Movements, the Attention Economy, and Microcelebrity Networked Activism," *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 7 (2013): 848–70, https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764213479369; in rhetorical studies, see Anna M. Young, *Prophets, Gurus, & Pundits: Rhetorical Styles & Public Engagement* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2014); Daniel C. Brouwer and Catherine R. Squires, "Public Intellectuals, Public Life, and the University," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 39, no. 3 (2003): 201–13, https://doi.org/10.1080/00028533.2003.11821587.

To understand this sensibility thoroughly, I proceed in three different sections. First, to understand the Instagram Activist Slideshow as a format of public address whose antecedent is the speaker with slides, I trace a brief format history of slideshow participation from the 17th century to 2020. In a participatory format history, the slideshow is understood as both a genre of public presentation and a collection of interfaces, infrastructures, and protocols that make presenting slides possible. After historicizing this format, I theorize how slideshow participation is reformatted by the participatory condition, specifically as it relates to technoliberal platforms. Second, I detail three conventions of an Installectual sensibility that have emerged, building on the format of the slideshow presentation within the trans-situational context of the participatory condition and the global resurgence of Black Lives Matter protests in Summer 2020. An Installectual participatory sensibility claims the resistant potential of digital activist strategies, demands intersectional justice, and prioritizes technoliberal judgment in theorizing social change; it risks over-prioritizing brandedness, certainty, and posting that is satisfying and profitable but does not offer an adequate response to demanding, digital times. However, in the third and final section, I suggest a micropolitical re-reading of the sensibility that more optimistically considers the promises of Instagram Slideshows.

Formatting slideshow participation

In May 2020, Instagram creators and activists gave the image-sharing platform new use, organized by the introduction of an older format: the slideshow. Some media scholars and writers have considered these posts as extensions of infographics and information activism, even cheekily referring to the "Instagram Infographic Industrial Complex."[10] However, what I am

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[10] Regarding infographics generally, see: Delia Dumitrica and Hester Hockin-Boyers, "Slideshow Activism on Instagram: Constructing the Political Activist Subject," *Information,*

calling an Instagram slideshow exceeds the format of the infographic. I see these as an extension

of a form of public address we all know well—the verbal presentation with slides, a slideshow.

Much like infographics were remediated for Twitter, as Amit-Danhi and Shifman have studied,

understanding Instagram Slideshows as remediating an older format of participation can shed

light on what's unique about their digital emergence and its implications for participation and

civic life today. Slideshows are an ecology of media technologies and rhetorical genres that

format participation.

I now recover a short *format history* to explore the rhetorical life of the slideshow. Like

media archaeology, format histories recognize "the new is 'dressed up' in formulas that may be

hundreds of years old, while the old may provide 'molds' for cultural innovations and

reorientations" and avoid "the temptation of lapsing into easy or self-fulfilling narratives of

technological progress."[11]Understanding Instagram Slideshows *as slideshows* allows us to see

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Communication & Society, 2022, 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2022.2155487; Max
Halupka, "The Rise of Information Activism: How to Bridge Dualisms and Reconceptualise
Political Participation," *Information, Communication & Society* 19, no. 10 (2016): 1487–1503,
https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1119872; Eedan R Amit-Danhi and Limor Shifman,
"Digital Political Infographics: A Rhetorical Palette of an Emergent Genre," *New Media &
Society* 20, no. 10 (2018): 3540–59, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817750565. Regarding
Instagram Infographics as an industrial complex, see: Cierra Bettens, "Unpacking the Instagram
Infographic Industrial Complex," *Lithium Magazine*, September 14, 2020,
https://lithiummagazine.com/2020/09/14/unpacking-the-instagram-infographic-industrial-
complex/; Nicolas Ng, "Just What Is the Instagram Infographic Industrial Complex?," *Conscious
Magazine*, April 14, 2021, https://consciousmagazine.wordpress.com/2021/04/14/just-what-is-
the-instagram-infographic-industrial-complex/.

[11] Media archaeology is both a type of media history and exceeds it by focusing on strange and
underappreciated media (like word processors in contrast to the television). As a field, it resists
definition, but I have built this one from Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, eds., *Media
Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications* (Berkeley: University of California
Press, 2011): 14; and Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, *Track Changes: A Literary History of Word
Processing* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016): xv.

how it follows in a specific tradition of formatted participation and offers antecedents to the

Instagram Slideshow that reveal what it makes sensible. Following a slideshow's history shows

how a format history can expose "subterranean connections among media that we previously

thought separate," as Jonathan Sterne writes, in turn showing "the embedded ideas and routines

that cut across" many contexts.[12] A history of a *participatory format* traces the evolution of

certain forms of participation across time, space, and culture. It offers a valuable way to see how

formats are crafted and recrafted, shaping participation accordingly, and shows what is unique

about the digital conditions of the Instagram slideshow and its attendant sensibilities.

In the late 17th century, Europeans used hand-drawn or painted slides for presentations;

by the mid-18th century, "traveling exhibitors used them to tell traditional stories or to narrate

Biblical parables."[13] In the late 19th century, the technology had developed into lantern slides,

allowing the projection of photographic images and simulation of cinematic motion. The

former—projecting images—will be the focus of this short history. Lantern shows featured a

presenter who displayed images using lantern slides with a lecture or performance. They were

popular entertainment at the turn of the 20th century. Katie Good writes that "these sorts of

respectable, bourgeois visual attractions enjoyed enduring popularity among American audiences

because they fulfilled multiple cultural needs. Illustrated travel talks provided not only edifying,

but also entertaining and excursionist experiences for a growing middle class that craved greater

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[12] Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012): 16-17.

[13] Maren Stange, "Jacob Riis and Urban Visual Culture: 'The Lantern Slide Exhibition as Entertainment and Ideology,'" *Journal of Urban History* 15, no. 3 (1989): 276.

geographic and social mobility."[14] Examples abound: Muckraker Jacob Riis used lantern slides

to tell audiences about the living conditions of New York Tenements.[15] The Chicago Daily News

hosted a citywide illustrated lecture series by equipping "volunteer lecturers [with] prefabricated,

mail-order slides and scripts researched and written by Daily News journalists."[16] Slideshows

were even sold to schools around the U.S. to teach students units about "world citizenship."[17]

In the 1930s and 40s, two technological developments made these slides even more

accessible. First, Kodak developed the Kodachrome color slide—16mm for cinema and 35mm

for still images—in 1936.[18] Around the same time, overhead transparencies were developed in

the 1940s for police use.[19] By the 60s and 70s, these technologies were becoming widespread. In

the 1960s, Kodak created a hugely popular carousel slide projector that precipitated the

slideshow form we are all now familiar with, transitioning seamlessly from slide to slide using a

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[14] Katie Day Good, "Listening to Pictures: Converging Media Histories and the Multimedia Newspaper," *Journalism Studies* 18, no. 6 (2017): 699, https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2015.1087813.

[15] Stange, "Jacob Riis and Urban Visual Culture"; see also Bruce E Gronbeck, "ISSA Proceedings 2006 – Theorizing Visual Argumentation: Three Approaches To Jacob Riis : Rozenberg Quarterly," 2006, https://rozenbergquarterly.com/issa-proceedings-2006-theorizing-visual-argumentation-three-approaches-to-jacob-riis/; Leslie A. Hahner, "'It's Always More Complicated than That': Bruce Gronbeck on Visual Method," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 18, no. 3 (2015): 607, https://doi.org/10.14321/rhetpublaffa.18.3.0607.

[16] Good, "Listening to Pictures," 697.

[17] Katie Day Good, "Sight-Seeing in School: Visual Technology, Virtual Experience, and World Citizenship in American Education, 1900–1930," *Technology and Culture* 60, no. 1 (2019): 98–131, https://doi.org/10.1353/tech.2019.0003.

[18] Nancy Martha West, "Introduction," in *Kodak & the Lens of Nostalgia* (University of Virginia Press, 2000), 1–18.

[19] Ian Parker, "Absolute Powerpoint," *The New Yorker*, May 28, 2001, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/05/28/absolute-powerpoint.

preloaded set.[20] By 1985, 120,000 overhead projectors were sold in the U.S.[21] These technologies allowed people and organizations of all sorts to hold their own slideshows: churches, offices, families, and neighbors could now bore their audiences.

Since Kodak discontinued its last slide projector in 2004, the most likely place one might see a "carousel" is in Instagram's skeuomorphic design. Instagram's carousels allow posts of up to 10 images in carousels, where users can then swipe through the ten images. After the feature was launched in 2017, it first developed cultural significance when users started to reveal new romantic partners and make them "Instagram official" within a slide in a carousel—the effortlessly casual and entirely coordinated "carousel reveal."[22] The digital carousel replicated the form and function of the previous Kodak slideshow. Instagram's carousels are inspired by the Kodak slide projector's ability to project photographic images on 35mm slides, arranged into a slideshow. But both carousels also afforded the ability to display slides with text and images, even if designers imagined photographs as the primary use.

PowerPoint, a word now nearly synonymous for the slideshow, arrived in the late 80s to intentionally assist in the creation and presentation of text slides (not primarily photographs) for office needs. In the workplace, 35mm slides and overhead projectors afforded different purposes. 35mm slideshows could be prepared by a corporate art department to deliver professional-grade slides. Alternatively, businesspeople could use typewritten or felt-pen-written overhead slides to

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[20] Monica McTighe, "The Family Slide Show as Critical History in Renée Green's Video *Partially Buried Continued*," *Third Text* 21, no. 4 (July 1, 2007): 443, https://doi.org/10.1080/09528820701433943.

[21] Parker, "Absolute Powerpoint."

[22] Anna Iovine, "The Carousel Reveal Is the New Way to Make a Relationship Instagram Official," *Vice*, September 24, 2019, https://www.vice.com/en/article/gyzdb9/instagram-carousel-official-way-to-announce-relationship-on-social-media.

give a presentation to a crowd without nearly as much preparation or cost. PowerPoint creators Robert Gaskins and Dennis Austin wanted to create something that looked as professional as the slide with the ease of use of the overhead.[23] In 1987, PowerPoint was released for the Macintosh computer by Gaskins and Austin's startup Forethought Inc. Before that year ended, Microsoft acquired Forethought for $14 million so it could add PowerPoint to its Microsoft Office suite.[24] In 1990, PowerPoint was released for Microsoft Windows, and by 1999, users were on average creating nine PowerPoint presentations per month.[25]

Slide technologies afforded four common genres of slideshow presentations. As media historians like Brenton Malin have explored, media technologies provide "the ground on which a set of institutional and visual arguments converge to exert a particular kind of pressure on their audience."[26] Put differently, genres are "not only symbolic, but also material."[27] Slide genres emerge not just from the symbols displayed *in slides* but by the *display of slides*. These different genres of slideshow that I've identified are not meant to be exhaustive, but they do represent a recognizable typology of slides that mostly emerged in the 20th century and continue in some form today.

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[23] David C. Brock, "The Improbable Origins of Powerpoint," *IEEE Spectrum* 54, no. 11 (2017): 42–49, https://doi.org/10.1109/MSPEC.2017.8093800.

[24] "COMPANY NEWS; Microsoft Buys Software Unit," *The New York Times*, July 31, 1987, https://www.nytimes.com/1987/07/31/business/company-news-microsoft-buys-software-unit.html.

[25] Parker, "Absolute Powerpoint."

[26] Brenton J. Malin, "Looking White and Middle-Class: Stereoscopic Imagery and Technology in the Early Twentieth-Century United States," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 93, no. 4 (2007): 418, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630701593998.

[27] Carolyn R. Miller, Amy J. Devitt, and Victoria J. Gallagher, "Genre: Permanence and Change," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (2018): 271, https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2018.1454194.

The first, and likely most obvious use to the reader, is the office slideshow. One corporate study found that "1 out of 3 financial and legal employees use PowerPoint Daily," and 63% of those studied considered "PowerPoint to be important in their daily work."[28] You have probably encountered the mystical consultant on a recent flight building a "slide deck" for their latest client. This slide genre includes all those business gatherings where one shares work plans, sales figures, or the like.

Second, the community slideshow: the slideshow at church, or at a family gathering. Writing in local newspapers, columnists who claim to be "of a certain age" wax poetic about their memory of "the old family slide show. The family would gather around the living room, and dad would wrestle the collapsible screen out of the hall closet, set it up in one end of the room, and then dig out the slide projector."[29] In a column about the then-recently-deceased local Wight family, one writer remembers how "they would put together slide shows. Yvonne Wight developed precise commentary to go with each frame. . . . They also screened the slide shows for church groups and other community organizations and, of course, for their photography class."[30] And art critics argue that the family slideshow functions as a "nostalgic pleasure of the family" that connects an artist "with her viewers."[31] These slideshows were addressed to a community one knew at least moderately well, an audience engaged enough with the speaker's life that they

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[28] "5 Stats about Using Word and PowerPoint at Legal and Financial Firms," *Templafy Blog* (blog), June 12, 2018, https://www.templafy.com/blog/5-interesting-stats-about-using-word-and-powerpoint-at-legal-and-financial-firms/.

[29] Wendy Johnson, "In Our Own Backyard Column," *The Pine Journal*, August 17, 2012, sec. State and Regional News, Nexis Uni.

[30] Bonnie Rochman, "A Journey in Pictures: Jim Wight Recorded World Travel in Thousands of Slides," *News & Observer*, April 20, 2008, Nexis Uni.

[31] McTighe, "The Family Slide Show as Critical History."

wanted to see all the photos of the trip (e.g., back east or to the holy land) and listen to every possible story to accompany it. The speaker can use the slides in various ways: to show that they care the audience knows what they have been up to, to prove that they are credible about some new place or topic, or to simply entertain a crowd.

Third, the educational slide lecture. In 2000, art historian Robert S. Nelson discussed this at length in "The Slide Lecture, or the Work of Art 'History' in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," referencing Walter Benjamin's media theories in the title.[32] Before slides were widely available in the later 18th century, lecturing art historians explaining a piece of art would have to rely on their audience: to have a vivid imagination, seeing a work based on the historian's description; a vivid memory, remembering a work based on a tour of a museum; or a rare printed re-creation that would be circulated through students so slowly that most did not see it until long after the lecture.[33] Nelson reflects on how the art historian's role changed as slides technology improved—"words no longer overwhelmed art" as ekphrasis was replaced with the audience's vision.[34] The art historian's descriptive role was reduced as the reproduced image supplanted the oral re-presentation of visual art. Media scholar Clifford Nass reflected on educational PowerPoint usage in 2001, suggesting it "lowers the ceiling" of lectures in favor of what could be shown on the slide: "What you miss is the process. The classes I remember most, the professors I remember most, were the ones where you could watch how they thought. You don't remember what they said, the details. It was 'What an elegant way to wrap around a

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[32] Robert S. Nelson, "The Slide Lecture, or the Work of Art 'History' in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 3 (2000): 414–34; Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, and Harry Zohn, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986).

[33] Nelson, "The Slide Lecture," 423–24.

[34] Nelson, 432.

problem!' PowerPoint takes that away. PowerPoint gives you the outcome, but it removes the process."[35] In the educational lecture, the slides become an authority: the art historian defers to the image rendering a work of art, the communication professor to the bulleted list on the PowerPoint. The slide presents the audience with the information they need, the speaker supplements it with their commentary.

Fourth, and finally, the activist slideshow. As mentioned earlier, muckraker Jacob Riis used lantern slides to alert people to the living conditions of the poor. Artist Darsie Alexander has compiled a book about activist uses of slides. Alexander writes that: "During the 1960s and 1970s, public projection of slides became a vehicle for social and political activism. Slide projection's portability made this possible, enabling artists (Krzysztof Wodiczko, for example) to project powerful, challenging images onto public buildings. When Lucy Lippard wanted to publicize the exclusion of women from the Whitney Annual of 1970, she projected slides against the surface of the museum to protest its curatorial policies."[36] One of the primary audiences of this sort of activist slideshow is anyone who happens to view: someone who can be shocked, interrupted, educated by a projection in an unexpected place. For example, artist Robin Bell projected language like "The President of the United States is a Known Racist and Nazi Sympathizer" on the Trump International Hotel in D.C. through the Trump presidency.[37] These

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[35] Parker, "Absolute Powerpoint."

[36] Alexander summarized this history in an interview with the press. Darsie Alexander, "SlideShow: Projected Images in Contemporary Art," Penn State University Press, 2005, https://www.psupress.org/books/titles/0-271-02541-7.html; M. Darsie Alexander, Charles Harrison, and Robert Storr, *Slideshow* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).

[37] In an interview, Bell spoke to the genre's conventions of drawing attention to the unacceptable: "We started with the 'Experts Agree: Trump is a Pig' because it felt good. When you bottle things up and don't say something, you feel terrible. This was us saying something.

slideshows show the unshown and authoritatively state something is amiss—tenement

conditions, curatorial policies, racialized sympathies. Of course, activists also use slides in a

business sense ("here is a map of where we should gather," or, "here's a draft of our statement,"

for example) and they certainly give lectures to train members or educate communities, but this

provocative use of the slideshow is particularly resonant with the activist position.

Instagram slideshows exceed and blend these genres. As I'll show, some slides function

as educational lectures; some as activist provocations; some as a community presentation

originally meant for their small group of followers but expanded to a much larger audience for

education and/or activism. While Instagram slideshows draw on these genres, what they share

with earlier iterations of slideshows is in how it formats participation—how it relates the

individual and collective. I identify three ways slideshows format these relationships: slideshows

create publics and participants in publics, influence the ethos of the participant, and set

parameters for participation in templates. For each, I'll suggest how the slideshow's appearance

on Instagram has intensified this formatting in the participatory condition.

We, as a society, need to be visually reminded that things are not okay right now. We chose the Trump Hotel because it's a Trump beacon on public property. He's taken it over and could be using foreign profits to enrich himself. It's important we don't shy away from calling that out." qtd. in Lora Strum, "This Projection Artist Is Using the Trump International Hotel to Protest the President," PBS NewsHour, August 19, 2017, https://www.pbs.org/ newshour/arts/projection-artist-using-trump-hotel-protest-president; see also, Mikaela Lefrak, "Robin Bell Spent Four Years Projecting Protest Messages On The Trump Hotel. Now What?," NPR, January 26, 2021, https://www.npr.org/local/305/2021/01/26/960753513/robin-bell-spent-four-years-projecting-protest-messages-on-the-trump-hotel-now-what.

Slideshow technology can create publics and participants

First, slideshows invite audiences into a shared community. Each slideshow presentation has the potential to constitute a viewing public: a community of people experiencing something together. Recall that lantern slideshows were popular events that alerted audiences of social issues in hopes they would act; prompting a sense of how that group of individuals (lantern slide lecture attendees) belonged to some larger collective (say, the city of Chicago) and where they should direct their participation (e.g., toward regulation of tenement housing). Good suggests that traveling slideshows presented to "dispersed audiences [allowed them] to feel part of an 'imagined community' of similarly world-minded and media-savvy people."[38] Put familiarly: texts create publics.[39]

This format history of slideshows suggests that each new technology offered increased access to the means of slideshow production. 35mm slideshows turned the traveling lantern slideshow into household technology; overhead projection made it possible for anyone to quickly design something for display instead of relying on the designers and printing of slides; and PowerPoint made it possible to easily create and present nearly professional level slides. Each new technological product offered the potential for more participants and publics. Habermas theorized that market capitalism drove mass culture—because, idealistically, literary and cultural spheres were open to anyone who could pay instead of just those with sovereign power. Different eras of capitalism offer different relations of the technological, capitalist, and public; different eras of capitalism have unique rhetorical ramifications.

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[38] Good, "Sight-Seeing in School," 699.

[39] Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics (Abbreviated Version)," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88, no. 4 (2002): 413–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630209384388.

Instagram's technological, capitalist, and public change can be understood under the rubric of platform capitalism. Platform capitalism refers to how the contemporary web is dominated by just a few platforms that host all content—e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok—instead of linking to other platforms, which is what many social networking sites were originally used to do. Instagram is a prime example of this phenomenon: it was created in 2010 and purchased by Facebook in 2012. Since then, it has experienced massive growth and become a key player in social media, rivaling if not outpacing Facebook and Twitter. For example, in 2019, Facebook reported that 500 million users used the Instagram stories feature every day.[40] It has facilitated the circulation of text and creation of publics, as this chapter will show. But, Instagram's role in Facebook's data collection means that it also can act in ways that are unhelpful to public life—by using users personal data to feed them content that will keep them on the platform, even if that means misleading users by not confronting them with content that is necessary, but hard, to see.[41] As Kelty explains, "Social media and other winner-take-all platforms are designed to . . . rigorously isolate individuals from the collective at the same time as providing tools and pathways for the creation of a kind of private collective of friends, followers, or links."[42] People rely on Instagram as a primary communication infrastructure while

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[40] Josh Constine, "Facebook Plans New Products as Instagram Stories Hits 500M Users/Day," *TechCrunch* (blog), January 30, 2019, https://social.techcrunch.com/2019/01/30/instagram-stories-500-million/.

[41] Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019); Nick Couldry and Ulises A Mejias, *The Costs of Connection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

[42] Christopher M. Kelty, *The Participant: A Century of Participation in Four Stories* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 255.

the platform remains invested in its own capital interests—that is, despite being used to build publics the platform is only invested in sustaining collective life insofar as it generates profits.[43]

One of the most seemingly-democratizing new features that Instagram brings to the slideshow format is to serve as a platform for display *and* circulation. Earlier iterations of slideshow formatting required splitting up every piece (e.g., the Kodak Carousel required the production of slides from a photo or design lab and then circulation through physical means; PowerPoint allowed creation and display, but circulation had to be through other digital means like e-mail or USB). Instagram users, like the Kodak carousel users, must use an external platform for design—something like Canva or Adobe InDesign—and then return them to the platform for display.[44] Instagram stands out among these slide technologies as facilitating the circulation of these slides. Instagram slideshows specifically benefited from a feature change made in 2018, when Instagram allowed re-sharing of posts to a user's disappearing Instagram story where each entry only remains available for 24 hours.[45] Users took advantage of the feature to promote posts for viewers leafing through stories, to congratulate a friend, to share a fun meme. Before this feature was released, users could encounter posts in a few ways within the platform: from following an account and the account's post appearing in the user's timeline;

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[43] "While the private sector's constant churn of exciting new technical developments has added so much to the quality of life, its total infiltration of basic needs also imposes potentially dire political, environmental, and ethical risks." Jean-Christophe Plantin et al., "Infrastructure Studies Meet Platform Studies in the Age of Google and Facebook," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 1 (2018): 307, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816661553.

[44] Canva even now offers an extensive suite of Instagram Slideshows templates for advertisements and advocacy. Plenty are free to access, others require subscriptions to premium versions of Canva.

[45] Sarah Perez, "Instagram Officially Launches Re-Sharing of Posts to Stories," *TechCrunch* (blog), May 17, 2018, https://social.techcrunch.com/2018/05/17/instagram-officially-launches-re-sharing-of-posts-to-stories/.

from seeing a post on the Instagram "explore" page, which offers algorithmically-curated suggested posts given data collected about the user; and from having a post sent to the user by another user. With the addition of the post-to-stories feature, users could now encounter posts that accounts they followed found worth sharing. Take, for example, @juliaorjula's, "Terminology to Know as a Social Justice Activist."[46] @juliaorjula has only 2,263 followers— but this post received 139,917 likes. Instagram does not publicly show how many times a post was viewed or shared to stories, but the feature change allowed for posts to gain much larger audiences than they normally would have.

Instagram's intensification of the relationship of capitalism and public participation is indicative of the participatory condition. With earlier slide technologies, one's interaction with the direct corporate oversight ended. Take, for example, Microsoft PowerPoint. After you installed it on your computer from its CD-ROM, you (as a user) were only responsive to Microsoft's power as you used it within the functions set out by the software. Now, Microsoft Office 365, including PowerPoint, is constantly collecting information on your usage AND requires a regular contract for use (or Microsoft makes the software unusable). Rather than being a discrete software package, Microsoft Office is now suited to the ubiquitous cloud computing model. Not only does this allow Microsoft to collect user money and scrape user data more frequently, it also allows Microsoft to constantly update the software, shaping its use. Similarly, one's interaction with Instagram's oversight endure through the life of the slideshow on the platform. Instagram's protocols are always controlling how content is displayed and distributed. The shift in participatory formatting shows a move from culture to condition. Whereas former

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[46] @juliaorjula, "Terminology to Know as a Social Justice Activist (June 2020)," *Instagram Slideshow Archive*, June 4, 2020, https://instagramslideshows.omeka.net/items/show/19.

technologies promoted participatory culture, where one could engage and participate in specific situations, Instagram's trans-situations are less-determinable, if determinable at all, as slides circulate widely and with less human intention and more algorithmic attention—creating publics and participants out of the willing and unwilling, aware and unaware.

Slides influence the ethos of the participant

Second, the use of slides can build (or break) ethos. The professor must have a slide to keep the student engaged, the use of the image of a work of art shows the critic's prowess, the projection of a slide onto a building projects confidence, and the artful use of the slide at home makes one feel like a moviemaker. Ethos, colloquially defined as credibility, is more fully understood in the Aristotelian tradition as consisting of good sense, good will, and good character. Ethos works ecologically, established not by a single speaker's command of truth but by their connections in trusted ecologies.[47] Instagram slideshows draw on their connections to historical slideshows and neoliberal brandedness. They offer resources for establishing good sense and good character.

First, slideshows extend an aesthetic of expertise by appealing to other authoritative media. According to McTighe, Kodak manuals referenced the storytelling strategies of "Hollywood epics" to be used for home slideshows, connecting them to professional media and idealizing them in the process.[48] The family slideshow was an experience worth attention like the

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[47] As Noah Wilson writes: "You do not have ethos because you discovered a divine truth that transcends the social but rather because you have dwelled with your audience and have collided in an ecology of people, nonhumans, ideas, contexts, and other ethe in order to create a new space." Noah Wilson, "Algorithmic Dwelling: Ethos as Deformance in Online Spaces," *Rhetoric Review* 39, no. 2 (2020): 220, https://doi.org/10.1080/07350198.2020.1727605.

[48] McTighe, "The Family Slide Show as Critical History," 444.

movie theater. Similarly, the Instagram slideshow takes on the authority of the educational

lecture—much like the information on the professor's slides will be on the test, the influencer's

slides will be the metric for success. Second, slides can easily create internal validity: within the

created world of the slideshow, everything is on the same footing. Writing about the art history

lecture, Nelson remarks that:

> Similarly, in the art history lecture, slides are accepted as paintings, the normal state of
> affairs, then arguments based upon slides alone are persuasive, even if the evidence
> exists within the rhetorical/technological parameters of the lecture. Such is the case, for
> example, when objects of greatly different sizes from unrelated cultures are regarded as
> comparable because they sit side by side in the slide lecture.[49]

The immediacy of the slideshow builds from the enthymematic quality of the photograph:

images can be taken as the truth without much questioning.[50] A lecturer's verbal descriptions

might be confusing and prompt questions or the lecturer might emphasize certain unique

qualities of different works to prompt dissensus. In the slideshow, the visual is taken as if it

speaks for itself. In addition, following up on side-by-side slides takes work: students would

need to research the difference between two paintings, and it is easier to trust the presentation.

Slides, once accepted as a form for presentation, show everything at the scale of the projection,

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[49] Nelson, "The Slide Lecture," 422.

[50] There is much more to be said here about the enthymematic qualities of images. Finnegan
famously showed how images were enthymematically accepted as truth; Pfister and Woods
suggest that the common knowledge of digital photo editing has challenged that naturalistic
enthymeme. I would point to widespread misinformation over the past few years to suggest the
naturalistic enthymeme is still very much dominant. See Cara A. Finnegan, "The Naturalistic
Enthymeme and Visual Argument: Photographic Representation in the 'Skull Controversy,'"
Argumentation and Advocacy 37, no. 3 (2001): 133–49,
https://doi.org/10.1080/00028533.2001.11951665; Damien Smith Pfister and Carly S. Woods,
"The Unnaturalistic Enthymeme: Figuration, Interpretation, and Critique after Digital
Mediation," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 52, no. 4 (2016): 236–53,
https://doi.org/10.1080/00028533.2016.11821872.

not the scale of the object projected. The parameters of the slideshow, to some extent, make this

credibility possible. At the most basic level, lectures (like those delivered by the traveling magic

lantern slideshows) were possible without slides, but slides authorize a certain sort of credible

evidence: that which can be visualized in the image and summarized in the bullet point.

Second, the effective slideshow presenter also builds credibility in their persona, another

component of ethos.[51] Jacob Riis developed a personality suited for performance as a slideshow

purveyor, just as a teacher develops a teacherly persona as they work through slides. The

relatively new category of "influencer," a labor position strongly associated with Instagram, now

regularly generates slideshows about contemporary issues meant to be shared widely.[52]

Influencers attempt to become spokespeople for anything zeitgeisty, peddlers of cool content for

their social networks. Crystal Abidin defines influencers as:

> an established and mature form of internet celebrity who intentionally engage in
> practices of microcelebrity; they usually begin as everyday, ordinary internet users who
> adopt techniques of relatability coherently in the textual and visual narrations of their
> lifestyles across multiple digital states, to accumulate a following whom they then
> monetize through advertorials.[53]

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[51] More than "good will" and "good character," slides as a format offer a reputation that builds ethos. As Collin Bjork emphasizes, "repeated displays of ethos can, over time, erect or erode a reputation and, in so doing, serve as a prime example of the chronic power of rhetoric," fitting with the trans-situational frame of this dissertation. Slideshows allow slideshow presenters and influencers to draw on a longstanding ethos of slideshows. Collin Bjork, "Plato, Xenophon, and the Uneven Temporalities of Ethos in the Trial of Socrates," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 54, no. 3 (2021): 258.

[52] Rachel Hawley, "The Lazy Liberalism of Instagram Slideshows," *The New Republic*, August 19, 2020, https://newrepublic.com/article/158972/instagram-black-lives-matter-posts.

[53] Crystal Abidin, "Communicative ❤️ Intimacies: Influencers and Perceived Interconnectedness," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* 8 (2015), https://adanewmedia.org/2015/11/issue8-abidin/.

Microcelebrity has been explored in social movement studies by Tufekci in the Arab Spring,

when citizen journalists and activists with followings on social media became unappointed

spokespeople for the movement because of the legitimacy of their microcelebrity.[54] In the 2020s,

being an Instagram influencer has become a legitimate career option.[55] Contemporary Instagram

research on wellness influencers, for example, suggests that (1) credibility is, in part, due to a

consistent brand, which aligns well with theorizations of neoliberalism, and (2) slideshows were

used by wellness influencers in 2020 because their aesthetic templates matched their brand.[56]

Other researchers have explored how accounts dedicated exclusively to activist slideshows build

an authoritative voice as providers of information.[57] Slideshows offered influencers a format for

Instagram participation that boosted their existing brand ethos, whether that brand was self-care

or social justice.

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[54] "Networked microcelebrity activism refers to politically motivated noninstitutional actors who use affordances of social media to engage in presentation of their political and personal selves to garner public attention to their cause, usually through a combination of testimony, advocacy, and citizen journalism." Tufekci, "'Not This One,'" 850; See also Alice E. Marwick, "You May Know Me from YouTube: (Micro-)Celebrity in Social Media," in *A Companion to Celebrity* (Maldon, MA: Wiley, 2015), 333–50, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118475089.ch18.

[55] Naomi Fry, "'Fake Famous' and the Tedium of Influencer Culture," *The New Yorker*, February 20, 2021, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/on-television/fake-famous-and-the-tedium-of-influencer-culture.

[56] Mariah L. Wellman, "Black Squares for Black Lives? Performative Allyship as Credibility Maintenance for Social Media Influencers on Instagram," *Social Media + Society* 8, no. 1 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221080473; see also Colleen Derkatch, *Why Wellness Sells: Natural Health in a Pharmaceutical Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022); Catherine Chaput, "Trumponomics, Neoliberal Branding, and the Rhetorical Circulation of Affect," *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* 21, no. 2 (2018): 194–209, https://doi.org/10.1080/15362426.2018.1474051.

[57] Dumitrica and Hockin-Boyers, "Slideshow Activism on Instagram."

This ethos, derived from matching the templates of the slide with the brand of the influencer, is not always to be trusted. Some influential accounts have generated controversies about trustworthiness. For example, the account named @SoYouWantToTalkAbout (now @so.informed) gained popularity during Summer 2020. Its titular similarity to *So You Want to Talk About Race,* authored by Ijeoma Oluo, caused confusion because the account was anonymous and Oluo had said she did not run it. In 2021, the creator, Jessica Natale, revealed she was a white woman who planned to publish a book based on the slideshows. In response, Oluo, a Black woman, told her Instagram followers that she had found it "really frustrating to see these celebrities, these huge pages, share the work of a white woman that is capitalizing off of the work of other people of color and other marginalized populations."[58] Natale's book has not yet been published, despite previously having an anticipated release in Fall 2021. Despite so.informed's problematic past, the account now has 3 million followers and regularly shares quality information about U.S. and international social justice issues. However, the problems with the slideshow's credible aesthetic are not just simply that they might platform well-meaning but problematic white women. Instagram slideshows and similar strategies have been used by anti-Vaxxers and Qanon types to promote dangerous misinformation.[59] Giving the single speaker with slides such credibility in this formatted participation offers dangers as much as it offers

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[58] qtd. in Mia Mercado, "What's Going on With the @SoYouWantToTalkAbout Instagram?," *The Cut*, August 12, 2021, https://www.thecut.com/2021/08/whats-going-on-with-the-soyouwanttotalkabout-instagram.html; Vanessa Willoughby, "Here's Everything You Need to Know about the 'So You Want to Talk About' Instagram Controversy.," *Literary Hub*, August 13, 2021, https://lithub.com/heres-everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-so-you-want-to-talk-about-instagram-controversy/.

[59] Christophe Haubursin, "The Instagram Aesthetic That Made QAnon Mainstream," *Vox*, October 28, 2020, https://www.vox.com/videos/2020/10/28/21538763/save-the-children-qanon-instagram.

possibilities. As I'll discuss in the next section, this formatting continues to highlight the individual speaker over collective action, a model predicated on ideas of human agency that were better suited for different media ecologies.

Slides set parameters for participation in templates

Lastly, the form of the slideshow privileges certain epistemologies in templates, a feature that is intensified on Instagram. One part of Microsoft PowerPoint's origin story is that, to help users intimidated by blank slides, developers created automatic content and templates to build slideshows. In his infamous screed against PowerPoint, "The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint," Edward Tufte claimed PowerPoint served to "replace serious analysis with chartjunk, over-produced layouts, cheerleader logotypes and branding, and corny clip art," in what he called "PowerPointPhluff."[60] Tufte's essay has been rightfully critiqued, but he does persuasively demonstrate how PowerPoint's bullet points and linear slides privileges "a deeply hierarchical single-path structure as the model for organizing every type of content."[61] Such a logic necessarily excludes important communicative styles and purposes that are not easily turned into slides. One *New Yorker* reporter summarized that PowerPoint "risks squeezing out the provider of process—that is to say, the rhetorician, the storyteller, the poet, the person whose thoughts cannot be arranged in the shape of an AutoContent slide."[62] Slide templates simultaneously facilitate participation and restrict the parameters of that participation.

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[60] Edward R. Tufte, *Beautiful Evidence* (Cheshire, Conn: Graphics Press, 2006), 158.

[61] Tufte, 158; David Stark and Verena Paravel, "PowerPoint in Public: Digital Technologies and the New Morphology of Demonstration," *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 5 (2008): 30–55, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276408095215.

[62] Parker, "Absolute Powerpoint," para. 43.

Instagram, similarly, is marked by a templatable logic. Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin explain that "user agency, the capacity to take charge of one's decision-making, and activism, the capacity to make meaningful political action, are at the core of the mythos of visual social media" like Instagram.[63] But there is a potential roadblock to these capacities. "Aesthetics on Instagram," Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin explain, "are readily repeated by users to make their content appealing and recognizable to others. This logic, that they term *templatability*, "may well diminish the feeling of individuality and individual contributions to Instagram, and with that a sense of being able to meaningfully communicate aesthetically, or contribute to change."[64] While the concept of templatability precedes the rise of the Instagram slideshow in summer 2020, the comparison to the history of slides reveals that templatability is not necessarily limiting. From a rhetorical perspective, templatabilty is often incredibly generative because it offers a way for participants to learn basic forms. For example, public speaking is a class overflowing with templates: problem-cause-solution, claim-data-warrant. From a media history perspective, slideshow templates generated innumerable private and public events of massive popularity. Traveling lantern shows were popular events, and many nostalgically remember "watching travel and holiday images in square slide format projected onto a white lounge room wall [as] a hazy pre-memory of Instagram."[65] Of course, Microsoft PowerPoint has made possible many a meaningful communicative exchange, not least in public speaking classrooms where templates for effective speech are shared through projection.

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[63] Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin, *Instagram*, n.p.

[64] Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin, n.p.

[65] Lachlan MacDowall and Kylie Budge, *Art After Instagram: Art Spaces, Audiences, Aesthetics*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2021), 15, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003001799.

But templatability is always limiting, too, and those limitations are intensified in technoliberal platforms. Clifford Nass once guiltily admitted that he "removed a book from my syllabus last year because I couldn't figure out how to PowerPoint it," opting to just recommend the book to students because he couldn't "get the book into bullet points."[66] As the genres of educational and business slideshows became dominant modes of public address in their respective fields, a bullet-pointed and linear epistemology of slides was privileged over the more messy and open-ended lecture or presentation from notes.[67] But in personal and activist life, the slideshow has not been a dominant mode of addressing publics, outside the occasional projection on the side of a government building as part of a protest. Instagram slideshows have made slideshows a more dominant mode of discourse in a platform that 500 million people use every day. Whereas audiences only encountered Microsoft PowerPoint in specific settings and situations, Instagram users encounter slideshows every hour of every day, across trans-situations they are implicated in by opening their apps. Slide templates are now circulating more rapidly and in more communication contexts because of the algorithmic attention and everyday activism made possible by Instagram.

Instagram's parameters, guided by demands of platform capitalism, can be circulated in slideshows and slide templates. As the analysis in this chapter will show, some slides were tethered to the technoliberal modes of judgment proffered by Instagram. For example, Instagram

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[66] Parker, "Absolute Powerpoint."

[67] Misti Yang and I have made this argument about other interfaces that attempt to optimize human communication. "It dehumanizes the practice of relating to one another, messy and ripe with opportunity for serendipitous/spontaneous connections to a mechanical task of labor that seeks to limit and repair messiness." Matthew Salzano and Misti Yang, "Going off Scripts: Emotional Labor and Technoliberal Managerialism," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 39, no. 2 (2022): 84, https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2021.2011349.

suggests that liking is important by highlighting it in the Instagram interface and quantifying the number of likes, which can then be clicked through to see which of the people you are following (and other users of Instagram) liked the post. Meanwhile, comments are mostly hidden without being clicked through. So not only do slideshows privilege the bullet point, but the Instagram slideshow privileges the quantified likes over the dis/agreement and exchange of the comment section. In another example, Instagram prioritizes posting by listing number of posts on a person's page as a viable metric, and as mentioned earlier made public re-sharing of posts to your 24-hour story possible to circulate other posts you found notable. The ramification is that posting and sharing becomes more important than engaging in dialogue. This is consistent with the technoliberal ideology I outlined in Chapter 1, where technological connection is framed as necessary for the good (personal, social, and political) life. The analysis in this chapter will suggest how this templated interface for the presentation of slideshows relates to the content of those slideshows.

Installectual participation

The slideshow, especially in its latest iteration via Instagram, formats participation: it creates (trans-situational) publics, generated from (technoliberal) templates, and offers credibility to the (Influencer) speaker with slides. In this section, I explore how these formatted slideshows circulated an installectual participatory sensibility and analyze its potential implications for living a participatory life. I outline three features of this sensibility. First, an Installectual sensibility unabashedly claims the potential for resistance using digital strategies, drawing on the slide's ability to create publics and participants. Second, the installectual slideshow draws on the ethos of the slide lecture to circulate information that aids in demands for intersectional justice.

Third, an installectual sensibility is constrained by technoliberal heuristics because of the templated constraints of Instagram and slides.

(1) Claims the resistant potential of shamelessly digital strategies

Emerging at the intersection of the participatory condition and the COVID-19 pandemic, the slideshow offered means to participate in demanding, digital times. In June 2020, reporters Emily Stewart and Shirin Ghaffary noted that slideshows shifted Instagram from being an "escape from the real world — and politics" to "*the* platform for widespread conversations in the United States about racism and how to combat it."[68]

> There are multiple explanations for this shift. A feature Instagram introduced in May 2018 that lets you share other accounts' posts to your story makes it easy for people to participate. Before that, and unlike other social media platforms, Instagram had no easy, built-in option for reposting content. . . . And during a pandemic, as many people are still living under lockdown, many are more likely to have the time and motivation to start posting about topics outside of vacation photos and aspirational lifestyle shots. . . You can only take so many pictures of the bread you baked. And after months of quarantine, you might not be feeling super selfie-ready.[69]

The pandemic challenged the platform's demand to constantly share content to stay relevant on the feeds of your followers. Leaver, Highfield and Abidin note that Instagram was primarily a platform for sharing photographs.[70] But without a new mural to be photographed against, without visiting new restaurants and snapping a pic of the latest plant-based-alternative meal, what would one share? This existential threat to the need for a constant stream of new content was paired

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[68] Emily Stewart and Shirin Ghaffary, "It's Not Just Your Feed. Political Content Has Taken over Instagram.," *Vox*, June 24, 2020, para. 1, https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/6/24/21300631/instagram-black-lives-matter-politics-blackout-tuesday, emphasis in original.

[69] Stewart and Ghaffary, paras. 14–15.

[70] Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin, *Instagram*.

with the feature of being able to share others' posts (which are permanent, unless deleted) on

one's own Instagram story (which disappear after 24 hours). So creating and re-sharing political

content on slideshows provided a way to participate on Instagram. While stuck at home, one

could create or re-share text-based content. The slideshow thus offered a format for participating

in fulfillment of the participatory imperative given social and platform demands to participate.

To fulfill the imperative, users took to a design platform like Adobe InDesign or Canva.com,

created a few square slides, and uploaded them in a carousel post on Instagram. Then, others

share the posts on their story, signaling: I read (looked at) this, you should read (look at) this, this

is important!

Several slideshows offered distinctly online approaches to participation during this time.

Rather than be stymied by debates about clicktivism and slacktivism, these slideshows

capitalized on what scholars have long said is meaningful about seemingly low-stakes digital

participation.[71] @sa.liine's tie-dye themed "Virtual Protesting 101" provided a guide for how to

use Instagram to protest. @sa.liine posted the slideshow in May 2020, and it received more than

461,000 likes.[72] In the caption, they wrote: "I am not an activist, I don't know much about

politics but I am a designer. When designing we have to think about who our target audience is.

Who are we designing for and why?" In response, the first slide offered: "Black people do not

need reminders that Black lives matter. Let's target our posts towards the people that need to see

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[71] Henrik Serup Christensen, "Political Activities on the Internet: Slacktivism or Political Participation by Other Means?," *First Monday*, 2011, https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v16i2.3336; Max Halupka, "Clicktivism: A Systematic Heuristic," *Policy & Internet* 6, no. 2 (2014): 115–32, https://doi.org/10.1002/1944-2866.POI355; Nora Madison and Mathias Klang, "The Case for Digital Activism: Refuting the Fallacies of Slacktivism," *Journal of Digital Social Research* 2, no. 2 (2020): 28–47, https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v2i2.25.

[72] @sa.liine. "'VIRTUAL PROTESTING 101' (May 2020)." *Instagram Slideshow Archive*. Instagram, May 29, 2020. https://instagramslideshows.omeka.net/items/show/12.

and hear it. Time to use the algorithm to our advantage." To shift strategies, the next slides

offered advice on how to "optimize your posts by using hashtags that are geared toward your

desired target audience (the oppressor)." In order to disrupt anti-Black Lives Matter content, they

suggested posting in hashtags such as #blueline, #buildthewall, and #womenfortrump. The

slideshow did not waste time on whether this digital activism was valuable but instead offered

practical ways to do more than just resharing content that was preaching to the choir by "Ranting

and screaming to more BLACK PEOPLE." The last slides offered additional guidance on doing

this digital activism: posting images that did not identify people without their consent who could

be targeted by those who see the images, using a burner account to post in order to avoid

targeting on a personal page, and giving warnings when sharing graphic content.

While slideshows eschewed debates about slacktivism, they still engaged in

conversations about performative activism. Circulating alongside massive turn out in protests

movements was valid concern—"Black Activists Wonder: Is Protesting Just Trendy for White

People?", as the *New York Times* summarized the concern nicely in a headline. Black Lives

Matter co-founder Opal Tometi asked: "When the social media posts die down, will the actions

and people's conviction for change die down too?"[73] This question is different than that of

slacktivism—slacktivism presumes the performative part is *because it is digital*. Slideshows

instead presumed the digital could be a sustained place for action, but that those posts were

performative for other reasons. So, slideshows offered examples of how to continue to do this

activism online without it being performative.

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[73] Nikita Stewart, "Black Activists Wonder: Is Protesting Just Trendy for White People?," *The New York Times*, June 26, 2020, para. 13, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/nyregion/black-lives-matter-white-people-protesters.html.

For example, @mireillecharper's slideshow, "10 Steps To Non-Optical Allyship," detailed how allies could engage online and was liked more than 645,000 times.[74] A peachy background accompanied a listicle set in black serif font across seven slides. The 10 steps begin with "understanding what optical allyship is," citing Latham Thomas, a Black businesswoman, as "allyship that only serves at the surface level to platform the 'ally.'" Continuing, the slideshow offers steps like "Check in on your [B]lack friends, family, partners, loved ones," "read up on antiracist works," "avoid sharing content which is traumatic." The last slide includes a list of author-influencers to follow. Throughout, the slideshow centers the experience of the individual desiring to be the non-optical ally—"It is necessary to feel feelings of guilt, shame and anger throughout the process"—and prompts that reader to ask themselves questions like "How are you making a long term impact or affecting change?" Emphasizing action, @mireillecharper's slideshow authoritatively instructs its audience to participate in non-optical allyship during demanding times.

These two widely-circulated posts primarily focus their call to participation on the individual, aligning an Installectual sensibility with the dominant formatting of the platform rather than suggesting collective alternatives. As Wellman writes of wellness influencers engaged in Black Lives Matter content, "Ultimately, influencers participated in performative allyship on an already performative platform, within an industry thriving through performativity. These layers of expectations regarding one's brand and oneself led to a focus on the public presentation of 'wokeness' almost overnight."[75] This desire to appear woke and non-optical

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[74] @mireillecharper, "'10 Steps to Non-Optical Allyship' (May 2020)," *Instagram Slideshow Archive*, May 30, 2020, https://instagramslideshows.omeka.net/items/show/13.

[75] Wellman, "Black Squares for Black Lives?," 8.

means focusing the project of these slides on the self.[76] After one completes the steps of a slideshow—only then can community and collective action become possible. As Dumtrica and Hockin-Boyers summarize, "By foregrounding the individual as an organizing principle, social media platforms work against the recognition that a collective 'we' is a prerequisite of collective civic action."[77] Instagram, as a technoliberal platform, has constituted subjects as such that they see the individual as the fundamental unit of political action. As an example, the two slideshows in this section primarily opt to address the "you" and "your"—"There is no excuse for your silence" in Virtual Protesting 101, "Understand that coming to terms with your own privilege will not be a pretty or fun experience," in 10 Steps to Non-Optical Allyship—and not a collective "we" or "our." In this inversion of *the personal is political*, the political follows only after the never-ending project of the personal and obligatory.

The promise of collective flourishing *following* personal edification is a promise that deprioritizes collective practices of social change that do not generate (any or as much) data for technoliberal platforms. In neoliberalism, personal edification becomes a public process in service of one's individual brand, rather than something engaged with as part of a collective movement for liberation. I mentioned in Chapter 1 that technoliberalism valorizes "participation" because users must generate the data sustaining a technoliberal economic model. What matters, in a technoliberal model of social change, is that individuals (users) participate in change in ways that continue to generate data for the platform. Proposing participatory practices that result in displays for one's brand might generate meaningful edification, but it may shift attention away

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[76] 72% of slides analyzed by Dumitricia and Hockin-Boyers included advocacy "for action that requires some form of work on the self." Dumitrica and Hockin-Boyers, "Slideshow Activism on Instagram," 13.

[77] Dumitrica and Hockin-Boyers, 4.

from participatory practices that are not readily branded. In their book *Mutual Aid,* Dean Spade

comments on how social media attempts to turn radical practices of mutual care into an

experience of branding.

> Social media has encouraged our individualism and has enhanced the desire to "brand"
> ourselves as radical or as having the "right" politics. It is in the interest of corporations
> like Facebook and Twitter that we spend as much time as possible creating free content
> for them, and that we feel compelled to get approval on their platforms. All of this can
> motivate us to want to be perceived to be doing things, rather than actually doing them.
> Much mutual aid work is very ordinary, sometimes boring, and often difficult. … It
> means cultivating a desire to be beautifully, exquisitely ordinary just like everyone else.
> It means practicing to be nobody special.[78]

These slideshows, in the interest of developing non-performative and engaged activists, risk

simply creating new brand guidelines for a less-performative aesthetic for the performative

activist. This aesthetic does not look like what is usually labeled performative, so it seems

engaged—but that engagement is still ultimately performative branding. Rather than cultivating a

desire to be exquisitely ordinary, as Spade writes, slideshow activism offers modes of address

amenable to Instagram's economic system, creating many microcelebrities producing content

and thus money for platforms. The cost is not simply lining Zuckerberg's pocket, but in creating

a model of social change focused so much on the individual speaker-influencer who must be

educated and eloquent before they can craft collective action. What is needed in demanding,

digital times is the same as has been needed in social movements throughout history: collective

action accompanied by edification, a sensibility with tenacity and flexibility for the volatile

interpersonal, social, and political work of coalition-building and collective action.

Not all slideshows fell into this trap of individualized edification. One exception to this

focus on the individual can be found in the slideshow "this is to my white friends with feed

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[78] Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity during This Crisis (and the Next)* (Brooklyn:
Verso, 2020), Chapter 5, subsection "A Cautionary Note on Fame."

fatigue," creator @beescolnick addressed at least 311,000 likers about performativity under the

rubric of "feed fatigue."[79] Feed fatigue, in this context, describes an "excuse white people make

for remaining racist"—namely that they are exhausted by all the political and emotional content

on their timelines. As *Philadelphia Magazine* editor Ernest Owens argues: "Those who claim to

be fatigued need to reprioritize how they plan to fight against racism beyond complaints of

sensory overload — remaining silent, whether online or off, is violence. No ifs, ands or buts

about it."[80] Directly speaking to white people who'd "like [their] Instagram feed to go back to

'normal,'" @beescolnick's slideshow uses the Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to suggest that feed

fatigue is "a completely valid trauma response to the loss of safety that comes from rapid change

and instability." However, they argue, safety needs come "only after securing Physiological

Needs, specifically the first human Physiological Need - Air. Breathing." On the fourth slide, in

orange text on beige background, they list names of Black people who have been murdered by

police, ending with "and countless others, can't breathe." In conclusion, the slideshow prompts

readers to advocate for the basic right to air, and to use social media in that advocacy: "Social

media is by definition a place where folx in a community gather to communicate collectively. It's

our narrative, our point of view, it tells us what to care about. We HAVE to care about this. We

HAVE to care, publicly and ceaselessly, that White Supremacy strips Black folx of their basic

right to Air and we HAVE to do the work to change things." Much like Matthew Houdek and

Ersula Ore have suggested "relearning to breathe in/as/through collective action, radical care,

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[79] @beescolnick, "'this Is to My White Friends with Feed Fatigue' (May 2020)," *Instagram Slideshow Archive* (Instagram, May 30, 2020), https://instagramslideshows.omeka.net/items/show/11.

[80] Ernest Owens, "The Problem With 'Feed Fatigue' and Other Excuses White People Make for Remaining Racist," *Philadelphia Magazine*, September 22, 2020, para. 14, https://www.phillymag.com/news/2020/09/22/feed-fatigue-anti-racism/.

and mutual exchange might cultivate breathable futures beyond relations of extraction," this slideshow invokes the "we" and focuses on the possibility of communicating collectively.[81] Instead of seeing social media activism as a chance to simply display the right politics, the slideshow envisions permanently disrupting the "normal" of social media that upholds status quo white supremacy and its suffocating logics.

Perhaps this is the promise in all three slideshows in this section: they do not shy away from deliberating about important issues, and take advantage of Instagram's need for users to constantly interact with new content to continuously share important ideas about (anti-)racism and activism. Rather than be stymied by meta-activist discourse, they offered means to participate, even if the sensibility doesn't always format participation as meaningfully as it could. There is still the possibility that, even if some fail to introduce a collective we, that they might disrupt a sense of normal and orient audiences toward intersectional justice. Let us examine that dimension of slideshows next.

(2) Demands intersectional justice

As a participatory sensibility, installectual participation helpfully authorizes the space for digital, intellectual conversation to be taken seriously as activist work. Specifically, Instagram slideshows were attuned to sharing abolitionist and intersectional concepts in ways that could be elevated through digital circulation. Dumitricia and Hockin-Boyers noted that "in more than half of the sample," of one major account, "problem definition often frames the source of the

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[81] Matthew Houdek and Ersula J. Ore, "Cultivating Otherwise Worlds and Breathable Futures," *Rhetoric, Politics & Culture* 1, no. 1 (2021): 86, https://doi.org/10.1353/rhp.2021.0008; see also Matthew Houdek, "In the Aftertimes, Breathe: Rhetorical Technologies of Suffocation and an Abolitionist Praxis of (Breathing in) Relation," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 108, no. 1 (2022): 48–74, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2021.2019301.

issue/cause as systemic, generally avoiding blame-placing on specific individuals or institutions."[82] An Installectual sensibility, as found in my archive of activist slideshows, uses slideshows to authoritatively spread an orientation toward intersectional analysis.

Some slideshows advanced understandings about specific controversial topics. A slideshow by @wretched_flowers_ entitled "Abolish the police? But how would we stay safe?" was liked more than 142,000 times and explored abolition as a "gradual process of strategically reallocating resources, funding, and responsibility away from police and toward community-based models of safety, support, and prevention."[83] Set in a forest green background, with pinkish-brown text, the slideshow laid out what policies were behind the phrase Abolish the Police. Citing MPD150, a Minneapolis-based community police accountability group, the slideshow explained that "to really 'fight crime,' we don't need more cops; we need more jobs, more educational opportunities, more community centers, more mental health resources, and more of a say in how our own communities function." Each slide offers an explanation in response to a question, much like an FAQ: e.g., "But why not fund the police and fund all these alternatives too? Why is it an either/or?" and "What about reforms like body cameras, civilian review boards, implicit bias training, and community policing initiatives?" In response to the final question, "This all sounds good in theory, but wouldn't it be impossible to do?," they offer historical antecedents in the 1960s, and conclude: "The police, as an institution around the world, have existed for less than 200 years--less time than chattel slavery existed in the Americas. Abolishing the police doesn't need to be difficult--we can do it in our own cities, one dollar at a

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[82] Dumitrica and Hockin-Boyers, "Slideshow Activism on Instagram," 8.
[83] @wretched_flowers_, "'ABOLISH the Police? But How Would We Stay Safe?' (June 2020)," *Instagram Slideshow Archive* (Instagram, June 1, 2020), https://instagramslideshows.omeka.net/items/show/1.

time, through redirecting budgets to common-sense alternative programs. Let's get to work!" The

slideshow expands on an existing slogan, explains an abolitionist framework, and prioritizes

collective engagement. It focuses on a system of violence and policing rather than relying on

moral claims about good/bad individuals or groups of people.

Similarly to this clear explanation of abolitionist thinking, other slideshows demonstrated

an intersectional, materialist approach. Intersectionality has been misunderstood by some as

synonymous with diversity and inclusion–but intersectional analysis is not just one that includes

lots of people, but rather one that sees how systems of oppression are mutually constituted.

Intersectionality began by addressing how "social interventions designed to ameliorate the

results of only racism, or sexism, or poverty would be insufficient to address the needs of a

woman of color marginalized by the interaction of all three systems of power."[84] Slideshows

continued in this tradition of intersectional analysis by addressing racism in intersection with

other marginalized experiences. For example, "Things not to say to a Black woman" by

@averyfrancis received more than 362,000 likes and addressed common misogynoir

microaggressions and the controlling images that spawned them.[85] And "8 Facts About Black

History That We Didn't Learn In School," a post with more than 65,000 likes by

@thekingofkamaahrbook, centered 8 examples from Black history showing the intersections of

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[84] Brittney Cooper, "Intersectionality," ed. Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199328581.013.20.

[85] @averyfrancis, "Things Not to Say to a Black Woman (June 2020)," *Instagram Slideshow Archive*, June 5, 2020, https://instagramslideshows.omeka.net/items/show/20. Black feminist Moya Bailey originated the term misogynoir, see: Moya Bailey, "More on the Origin of Misogynoir," Tumblr, *Moyazb* (blog), April 27, 2014, https://moyazb.tumblr.com/post/84048113369/more-on-the-origin-of-misogynoir.

racism, capitalist exploitation, and state power.[86] The slideshow highlighted the Black Panther

breakfast program and introduced audiences to how "President Roosevelt's New Deal Essentially

Excluded Black Americans." In contrast to slideshows in the first section, these slideshows were

less focused on how to post and perform allyship but instead focused on educating their audience

about important issues in/related to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Installectual participation, following the aforementioned ethos of slides, simply and

authoritatively summarizes complex political issues. In turn, they can claim to speak for entire

movements and/or identities and simplify their controversial deliberative histories. The form of a

slideshow—brief, bullet-point-able, linear, and hierarchical—lends itself to this sort of voice.

This quality is emphasized on Instagram, since Instagram images aren't hyperlink-able like a

webpage. If a viewer wanted to check the sources, they would have to leave the platform to do

their own research on every point being made.[87] Given this constraint, it's easier to trust the

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[86] @thekingofkamaahrbook, "8 Facts About Black History That We Didn't Learn In School (June 2020)," *Instagram Slideshow Archive*, June 17, 2020, https://instagramslideshows.omeka.net/items/show/18.

[87] I feel prompted to share a short format history of hyperlinks-as-evidence here. Lev Manovich famously expressed concern that hyperlinks were distracting and would be detrimental in the practice of argumentation in the blogosphere. Authors like James G. Webster thought hyperlinking could help create marketplaces of attention, or in Damien Pfister's revision, agoras of attention, that would serve democratic function. Instagram's lack of hyperlinkability throughout the platform—except for with the infamous "link in bio"—merits returning to this conversation! Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, Leonardo (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001); James G. Webster, "Structuring a Marketplace of Attention," in *The Hyperlinked Society: Questioning Connections in the Digital Age*, ed. Lokman Tsui and Joseph Turow, Illustrated edition (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008); Damien Smith Pfister, *Networked Media, Networked Rhetorics* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014); regarding the "link in bio," see Alyssa Bereznak, "'Link in Bio' Is the Worst Thing About Instagram," *The Ringer*, October 1, 2016, https://www.theringer.com/2016/10/1/16040398/instagram-link-in-bio-nightmare-tech-

research of the Instagram user, a response already encouraged by the format of the slide lecture. On one hand, this is positive—it encourages engagement from people beyond the elite few who benefitted from and/or survived problematic gatekeeping structures in academia, politics, and publishing to become "experts."

But on the other hand, this authoritativeness also takes on the same tone of these traditionally gate-kept experts, speaking down to the presumably uninformed masses about the "correct" way to participate. In *Activist Literacies,* rhetorician Jennifer Nish suggests that these "posts specify the uptake that they are looking for."[88] These posts ask for listening and acceptance of their perspectives as if they were stable and determined *doxa* rather than active *topoi*. Paired with Instagram's interfaced prioritization of quantified likes over comments, a well-liked slideshow appears as *doxa* even if the comment section reveals it more as an active *topos*. Installectual "slideshows advocate a normative stance; they act as a rolodex of supporting stats and quotes enabling the reader to competently defend their stance."[89] The potential for invention and creation of political space because of the disruption of Instagram's apolitical normality—that I suggested in the last section could be praised—is not as hopeful if the participation is formatted to fill echo chambers instead of open forums for rhetorical exchange.

Participation that simply encourages agreement or exclusion simplifies and totalizes. And Dumitrica and Hockin-Boyers sound an appropriate alarm in response to this finding: "While this can help individuals engage in political discussions, lack of awareness on the interweaving

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8706186b3ec; Alexis C. Madrigal, "'Link in Bio' Keeps Instagram Nice," *The Atlantic*, August 23, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/08/link-in-bio/537624/.

[88] Jennifer Nish, *Activist Literacies: Transnational Feminisms and Social Media Rhetorics* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2022), 124.

[89] Dumitrica and Hockin-Boyers, "Slideshow Activism on Instagram," 15.

between ideological resonance and argumentation risks demonizing disagreement as irrational and misinformed."[90] Rather than using the platform's participatory imperative to generate affective energy for diverse inventional initiatives, it channels that intensity toward upholding a "correct" way to engage. That rigidity risks excluding voices (especially from marginalized perspectives) that might challenge these standard definitions and prompt more nuanced analysis. This credibility may authorize the circulation of standardized heuristics that do not serve intersectional justice but serve the influencer and the technoliberal environment from which they emerge.

(3) Prioritizes technoliberal judgements in theorizing social change

Analogue slideshows derived their authoritative quality, in part, from how the format prioritized what could be visualized as the truth and deprioritized what could not be visualized. And, as established earlier, slides prioritize a specific epistemology that is linear and easily made concise. Katie Good explains that educational lantern slide shows, using these format qualities, "reinforced dominant racial hierarchies not just through their individual content but through their assemblage into educational sequences of images," for example, by sorting races according to their "dominance."[91] Instagram slideshows use this same authoritative quality to suggest how to create social change. In addition, akin to how analogue slideshows prioritized the visual, the slideshow in its digital intensification, prioritizes the digital, manifesting a technoliberal orientation.

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[90] Dumitrica and Hockin-Boyers, 15.

[91] Good, "Sight-Seeing in School," 118–19.

For example, a post by @norajmaxwell, titled "your solidarity shouldn't follow the news cycle," centers one visual across several slides: a set of colored dots in a grid resembling a calendar, representing the days between the killings of George Floyd and Walter Wallace Jr.[92] The author fills in this imagined solidarity calendar, using dark blue calendar dots to represent days where "you practiced your best version of allyship" and the palest shade of blue to represent "day that you didn't do anything to advance antiracism or practice allyship." Then, on the solidarity calendar, the author uses a gradient from pale to dark blue to represent "the trend in white people's allyship that i've noticed over the past 91 days." The author claimed these days lined up with news coverage, ultimately arguing: "your solidarity shouldn't require the witnessing of another viral video of a Black person being injured or murdered." The author has since made two more slideshows, with lengthier versions of this calendar, adding slides with "data" from additional news cycles to further evidence their point.[93] The imagined calendar looks a lot like the month summary in Apple Fitness, powered by the Apple Watch—days with fully-closed red circles are days the wearer closed their move ring and burned the amount of calories they set, days with incomplete semi-circles are to be avoided. In general, @norajmaxwell is right that solidarity should not follow the news cycle, just as the Apple Watch is right to encourage everyday movement. But like closing move rings on an Apple Watch, participation is assessed in this slideshow via technoliberal methods of tracking that aren't necessarily tied to what makes

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[92] @norajmaxwell, "'Your Solidarity Shouldn't Follow the News Cycle' (August 2020)," *Instagram Slideshow Archive* (Instagram, August 29, 2020), https://instagramslideshows.omeka.net/items/show/8.

[93] @norajmaxwell, "'Your Solidarity Shouldn't Follow the News Cycle' 2 (October 2020)," *Instagram Slideshow Archive* (Instagram, October 28, 2020), https://instagramslideshows.omeka.net/items/show/9; @norajmaxwell, "'Your Solidarity Shouldn't Follow The News Cycle' 3 (April 2021)," *Instagram Slideshow Archive*, April 13, 2021, https://instagramslideshows.omeka.net/items/show/2.

change. The Instagram solidarity calendar valorizes public displays of activism. But just as high-calorie burning exercise that quickly closes move rings may not accurately reflect long term health, social justice work requiring reckonings with self and communities are not as easily tracked.

Installectual participation thus prioritizes *posting* as the valuable metric for participation. @ghostdump's slideshow, "Why the refusal to post online is often inherently racist: an explanation of why something as simple as an Instagram story, can mean so much" has received more than 400,000 likes.[94] Set in a black and white theme, with a ghostly hand-illustrated title and a basic sans serif font for the content, the post explains that "the absolute least you can do is repost the millions of Instagram posts helping people spread the message on how to help, donate, protest, and converse." Specifically, the post explains its title:

> If you're anxious about what your peers will think, or if people will try to fight you, take a look at the people you surround yourself with. If they would fight or make fun of you, they are the problem. They are the oppressor we are trying to educate and get rid of. . . . A refusal to post is, at its core, a refusal to give up your comfort. A refusal to give up your power as a privileged individual. To sit in silence is to let people die.

The post is right to call out the hypocrisy of people who wish for change but are silent and unwilling to call out injustice and risk being uncomfortable in their communities. But its participatory imperative hinges on posting, on sharing the very Instagram slideshows that support influencer logics! The sharing of posts are highlighted here as the primary way to break silence and engage in activism. As Kuntsman and Miyake write, "With no selfies, stories, comments and pledges, there would be no followers, no sharers and no visitors to these websites.

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[94] @ghostdumps, "'Why the Refusal to Post Online Is Often Inherently Racist' (May 2020)," *Instagram Slideshow Archive* (Instagram, May 30, 2020), https://instagramslideshows.omeka.net/items/show/4.

Without the social media users… there is no data that feeds platform capitalism."[95] Prioritizing posting as key to activism serves the platforms that format these slideshows, showing how an Installectual Sensibility is formatted around technoliberal desires associated with connectivity, publicity, and visibility.

An Installectual sensibility sees information exchange as key to social change, and posting as the key mode for that exchange. In "How to use my voice," @_nanders explained a sort of trickle-down theory of posts—that sharing a slideshow to your network may mean it contributes to an echo chamber for some, but it also may trickle down to less-woke folk who need the information.[96] This slideshow received almost 100,000 likes. It is an exemplar of the theory of social change embedded in @norajmaxwell's and @ghostdump's slideshow, and in all of the slideshows in this paper. In this logic, more information leads to better awareness of the relationship of self, history, and power, and that leads to individual action, justifying the sharing and creating of more information.[97] For example, the logic of these slideshows goes something like "I'm a white person, I need to complete tasks to solve my internalized white supremacy, and I need to share posts on social media so that others have this information." This theory of change is insufficient for such lofty (and important) goals for at least three reasons.

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[95] Adi Kuntsman and Esperanza Miyake, *Paradoxes of Digital Disengagement* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2022), 143.

[96] @_nanders, "'How to Use My Voice' (June 2020)," *Instagram Slideshow Archive* (Instagram, June 5, 2020), https://instagramslideshows.omeka.net/items/show/10.

[97] I'm completing a loop here from Dumitrica and Hockin-Boyers, who note that "The logic behind slideshow activism as an activist strategy… is that when individuals are better informed, they are more likely to take action." I'm adding this logic justifies the *action* as simply: sharing information again. So it's an informative loop, with information-sharing as the prioritized participatory action. Dumitrica and Hockin-Boyers, "Slideshow Activism on Instagram," 11.

First, this theory of change is contradictory with the actual practice of slideshow sharing. While the creators of these slideshows declare that they imagine uninformed people who have not yet been activated by a social movement as their audience, the actual discourse they present is better suited to an audience of like-minded users simply looking for fodder to support the arguments they already support. When these slideshows are presented to people who already agree, it is just simply giving them more information. And, as public interest communicators have explored, "people who are simply given more information are unlikely to change their beliefs or behavior."[98] So this information sharing becomes simply more noise for an echo chamber, amplifying and simplifying correct views that are unlikely to motivate further action besides more information sharing.

Second, posting as an abstract rhetorical directive misses the subtleties of context that could make a post persuasive. At the most obvious level, the authoritative tone taken within a perceived community of like-minded-leftists is going to land differently among a group of white supremacists. But in Instagram's algorithm, who is even to say if the imagined user's problematic followers will even see their post? Research group Algorithm Watch suggests text is deprioritized on the feed of many Instagram users, especially if they do not already seek out that content.[99] And in August 2020, the Tech Transparency Project revealed that "since at least June, searches for Biden-related content returned hashtags with counter-messaging, while searches for

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[98] Ann Christiano and Annie Neimand, "Stop Raising Awareness Already," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Spring 2017, 36.

[99] Nicolas Kayser-Bril, "Politicians Can Do Well on Instagram. Political Posts, Less So.," *AlgorithmWatch* (blog), March 3, 2021, https://algorithmwatch.org/en/instagram-algorithm-politicians.

Trump-related content did not return any hashtags at all."[100] Both of these reports suggest that

Instagram is not exactly a place where much ideological challenging happens naturally—despite

the technoliberal imaginary that our social media connectedness will solve our rhetorical ills.

Third, prioritizing posting only helps assuage how overwhelming contemporary civic life

is. As Chris Ingraham writes, "Amid the bewilderment of today's globally corporatized,

information saturated age, having an impalpable sense of civic involvement is often more

compelling than being involved through a more substantive investment, particularly when such

investments are a heavy emotional burden and so seldom seem to pay off."[101] Posting is

meaningless if it doesn't carry the substantive work of actually changing one's perspective and

behavior, prompting connections to new communities, and commitments to new practices.[102]

Posting can be a way into that—but posting alone is not enough to stop being inherently racist.

In sum, prioritizing posting benefits a platform capitalism without seemingly offering

many benefits for living participatory life. As a participatory sensibility, Installectual

participation centers the technoliberal platform in activism, bringing along with it its metrics for

judgment. Inviting participation via Instagram slideshows includes more people and circulates

information to a broader network—but this practice also facilitates the use of technoliberal

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[100] Oliver Effron, "Instagram's Algorithm Blocked Negative Hashtags of Trump, but Not Biden," *CNN*, August 6, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/06/business/instagram-biden-trump-algorithm/index.html.

[101] Christopher Ingraham, *Gestures of Concern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 26.

[102] In this way, Installectual slideshows can recreate the "declarations" of whiteness and anti-racism Ahmed describes as non-performative: they don't do what they claim they do. Sara Ahmed, "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism," *Borderlands* 3, no. 2 (2004), http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2_2004/ahmed_declarations.htm.

heuristics in deliberating about ethical participation. These ethical queries may be a task too nuanced for slideshow templates to serve as the guide for our answers.

Must we all be Installectuals?

If the previous section performed a macropolitical rhetorical criticism of slideshows, then this concluding section performs a micropolitical and ecological re-reading: the former focused on symbols and format, the latter on sensibilities and reformatting. What if we look past the content of the slideshows and think about them as a new practice of participation that might muster micropolitical energies *as a practice*, even as they may threaten to standardize in their language? Rather than seeing Installectual sensibilities on just the level of symbols and information, I want to highlight how it may be a sensibility that reformats participation toward sustained engagement, rehabilitating the political.

Three years after the Instagram activist slideshows first garnered headlines, slideshows are still being made and shared. On the Instagram Slideshow Archive, contributors have added slideshows that show how the practice has extended to other issues. For example, "Why is it so hard to stand with Asian Americans?" from March 2021, addressed anti-Asian violence and political coalitions in the U.S.[103] And "The War on Drugs" in April 2022 capitalized on famous pothead holiday 4/20 to discuss how Black people were targeted in Nixon and Reagan's drug

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[103] @pattiegonia, "'Why Is It so Hard to Stand with Asian Americans?' (March 2021)," *Instagram Slideshow Archive*, March 28, 2021, https://instagramslideshows.omeka.net/items/show/14.

policies.[104] The recurrence of Instagram slideshows around new issues suggests that an Installectual sensibility is oriented toward further concern.

As a gesture of concern, Installectual participation generates commitment to coalitional movements and intersectional justice. Ingraham details what this means—"Gestures of concern matter not primarily because of any message they may or may not forward. They matter because they contribute to forming a background of expectation and desire around how worlds are configured."[105] Put in Ingraham's terms, these slideshows expanded the resources in our affective commonwealth. Taken as gestures of concern, we can see how an Installectual sensibility has implicated many different social justice concerns—Black Lives Matter, violence against Asians and Asian-Americans, attacks on Palestine, just to name a few—and is generating energy toward coalitional efforts for intersectional justice. The sensibility has contributed to forming a background expectation that our communicative spaces *should* generate concern about controversial, political issues.

We can be encouraged that Installectual participation is orienting a platform—that had originally eschewed anything explicitly civic—toward shared concern. As of 2021, Instagram is considered the primary source of news and commentary for young people aged 13–21.[106] The slideshows are examples of a culture rich with information and rhetors who want to arrange it, deliver it, and use it for more invention. As our attentions are being redirected, let us not lose

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[104] @so.informed, "'The War on Drugs' (April 2022)," *Instagram Slideshow Archive*, April 20, 2022, https://instagramslideshows.omeka.net/items/show/15.

[105] Ingraham, *Gestures of Concern*, 94.

[106] Kate Taylor, "Gen Z Gets Its Political News From Instagram Accounts," *Business Insider*, July 1, 2019, https://www.businessinsider.com/gen-z-gets-its-political-news-from-instagram-accounts-2019-6.

sight of the opportunity at hand—to see how slideshows may be one part of a thriving rhetorical culture that we can build together. My micropolitical praising of Installectual participation does not negate the macropolitical criticisms I surfaced in the last section. Instead, I want to use this final case study as an exemplar for how micro-macropolitical toggling can inspire our living a participatory life.

Using macropolitical critique to understand what conventions are made sensible and to surface their constraints, and inspired by the possibilities revealed as a sensibility, we should tinker with formatting changes at the symbolic and infrastructural level. That is, neither the symbolic nor the perceptual are completely agentic, but rather we must experiment with both in an attempt to drive change. Thinking as communicators, we should develop slideshows that try to create the collective we, that showcase conflicting perspectives engaged in disagreement, and that offer more specific calls to action—in the interest of making slides that can align symbolically with their affective orientation toward intersectional justice. Thinking as technologists, platforms like Instagram must be compelled to make fixes like allowing hyperlinks in slideshows and captions and to make their algorithmic practices more transparent. We should also demand more robust discourse features. For example, Instagram deprioritizes comment sections and doesn't offer any public comments on stories, where so many slideshows were shared. By adding more public fora, the authoritative influencer with standardized discourse might be more readily disrupted in charitable ways rather than subjected to either trolls or tacit agreement.

In the conclusion of *Viral Justice,* Ruha Benjamin discourages people invested in social change from spending their time critiquing superficial versus substantive modes of participation: "We mustn't mistake small with inconsequential actions or assume that all substantive change

requires grand gestures. Too often, we can dismiss certain efforts as performative if they do not provide instant or obvious results. Nor can we always predict how what gets dismissed as performative might compel people to act, politically grow, and create community."[107] This chapter, and all the ones before it, has tried to present the possibility that sensibilities being developed in the participatory condition, despite–or perhaps because of—their strangeness and limitations, might be offering us models for living a participatory life. Installectuals may seem performative and limited, Fictocritics may seem too fantastical, and disparticipants may seem too compromising—but they all might also be compelling action, growth, and community. In the last chapter, I'll attempt to summarize how we might use these sensibilities to help us guide our own participatory lives.

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[107] Ruha Benjamin, *Viral Justice: How We Grow the World We Want* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 274.

Conclusion: Living a Participatory Life

Jon Stewart's argumentative bit

On Friday, March 3, 2023, Oklahoma State Senator Nathan Dahm appeared on *The Problem with Jon Stewart* in an interview with the host for an episode about gun violence. In a viral clip, Stewart lambasts Dahm for the inconsistency of his position in wanting to protect children from drag shows but not from gun violence.

> ND: The government does have a responsibility in certain instances to protect children.
> JS: What's the leading cause of death amongst children in this country? And I'm going to give you a hint, it's not drag show readings to children.
> ND: Correct, yes.
> JS: So what is it?
> ND: I'm presuming you're going to say it's firearms.
> JS: No, I'm not going to say it like it's an opinion. That's what it is. It's firearms. More than cancer, more than car accidents. And what you're telling me is, you don't mind infringing free speech to protect children from this amorphous thing that you think of. But when it comes to children that have died, you don't give a flying fuck to stop that because that shall not be infringed. That is hypocrisy at its highest order.[1]

In the clip uploaded to YouTube and circulated on Twitter, the segment ends immediately after "hypocrisy at its highest order" with a flash of the show's title card, now streaming on Apple TV+.[2] On social media and in TV columns, Stewart was praised for "blasting" Dahm's "shameless hypocrisy" in a "brutal confrontation."[3] This is Stewart's bit: he gets a guest to take

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[1] *Interview with Oklahoma State Sen. Nathan Dahm | The Problem with Jon Stewart*, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tCuIxIJBfCY.

[2] In the full episode on Apple TV+, the interview continues for about 4 more minutes past the clip uploaded online. So, even though the clip's content represents a commitment to a situational, rational-critical sensibility of participating, the actual cutting and circulating of the clip feeds into the trans-situational breakdown of context characteristic of digitality.

[3] TrumpsTaxes (@TrumpsTaxes on Post and Mast*don) [@TrumpsTaxes], "Holy Cow This Is Good. Jon Stewart Easily Lures a pro-Gun/Anti-Drag Queen Republican into a Trap…and Then

their arguments to their logical conclusions and shows that their positions are untenable. And, as

a viewer myself, I have to say this is quite satisfying to watch–*that's right, he doesn't give a*

flying fuck! Get him, Jon!

Online leftists, however, critiqued the liberal satisfaction with the latest viral instantiation

of Stewart's bit. One Tweeter wrote that the clip was an example of how "liberalism is useless

and utterly ill-equipped to put up any substantive fight against fascism," suggesting that

"conservatives are motivated by power & dominance, not by actually being right. Naming their

hypocrisy does nothing."[4] Writing for the web magazine *Defector,* Laura Wagner described the

encounter as "nearly 10 minutes of painful middle-school-debate-club rhetoric." She asks:

> What is it going to take for liberals to understand that "hypocrisy" is not a charge for
> which right wing authoritarians must answer at the risk of losing clout, but a tenet of and
> testament to their power? It's really not complicated: Dahm and his ilk don't care about
> protecting children; they care about "protecting" certain children from certain things
> (like books and drag queens) that they consider threats to a white supremacist patriarchal
> social order. That's it! With this understanding, what's even the point of pretending to
> debate a creep like Dahm on policy particulars? ...
>   Pointing out so-called right-wing hypocrisy might make the Jon Stewart-watching
> crowd feel superior to their political foes, but it does nothing to actually build a
> movement capable of overcoming them. In fact, it does worse than nothing; its smugness
> serves to flatter the sensibilities of its liberal viewers while obscuring the way political

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Blasts Him over His Blatant, Shameless Hypocrisy. Https://T.Co/XbdzbGqf1f," Tweet, *Twitter*, March 3, 2023, https://twitter.com/TrumpsTaxes/status/1631696696374710272; James Hibberd, "Jon Stewart Brutally Confronts Republican Lawmaker Over Gun Deaths," *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 3, 2023, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/jon-stewart-gun-debate-video-dahm-1235340328/.

[4] Bare(back) Necessities [@angryblkhoemo], "Yet Another Example of How Liberalism Is Useless and Utterly Ill-Equipped to Put up Any Substantive Fight against Fascism. It Should Be Abundantly Clear by Now That Conservatives Are Motivated by Power & Dominance, Not by Actually Being Right. Naming Their Hypocrisy Does Nothing," Tweet, *Twitter*, March 4, 2023, https://twitter.com/angryblkhoemo/status/1632101426087247872.

power is built and used in this country.[5]

One of the grounding premises of *Living a Participatory Life* is that rhetoric does not primarily function rationally and situationally, but is instead primarily about cultivating sensibilities developed trans-situationally. As the responses of Wagner and other leftists online show, this premise is beginning to be more widely accepted as our contemporary rhetorical culture reckons with the rise of fascist, authoritarian discourse. Stewart's commitment to reasoned argument with an ideological opponent concludes in the revelation of the opponent's hypocrisy—as if it weren't already a given. Presupposed is the idea that a rational democratic citizenry will respond to such a revelation of right-wing hackery by reconsidering their ideological commitment. As Wagner writes: "If such problems could be solved by merely pointing out politicians' perceived hypocrisy, they would've been solved by now."[6] We know that's not exactly how it works— reason and argument alone will not convince fascists to suddenly support a harmonious, diverse, and equitable society.

Stewart follows liberal humanist fantasies about rhetoric and democracy that Casey Boyle called Current-Critical Rhetoric (CCR), as I detailed in the introductory chapter, and Wagner and others reveal that we are still discovering what model should replace CCR. If appealing to someone's reason through argument is not possible, are right-wing fascists completely beyond the pale, fundamentally unpersuadable? If so, what are we to do, as people who do not want pro-gun, anti-trans politicians determining gun-filled, drag-free story hour is more important than stopping mass gun violence? Do we advocate for the shunning and

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[5] Laura Wagner, "It's Not About Hypocrisy | Defector," March 7, 2023, paras. 5, 8, https://defector.com/its-not-about-hypocrisy.

[6] Wagner, para. 9.

exclusion of those we don't agree with, in hopes of being left with a society where everyone is close enough within our sense of what is right and reasonable? As I detailed in the conclusion of Chapter 3, this is just replicating fascist standardization with different politics. Even then, if we do not have some faith in reason or argument, what do we practice when disagreement eventually breaks out among the so-called more reasonable?

Living reformatted participatory lives

Living a Participatory Life has articulated how to participate in these conditions: responding to demanding exigencies without resorting to rational fantasies and without cultivating the fascists within us. In the introduction and Chapter 1, I answered RQ1 (What are the rhetorical consequences of the participatory condition?) by conceptualizing a format theory of participation in the context of changing and intertwined technological, social, and economic power. With the concepts of participatory parameters, the participatory imperative, trans-situations, and sensibilities at hand, I proceeded by detailing RQ2 (How do people navigate the participatory condition in order to participate in collective efforts for social change?) across the cases of Chapters 2-4. We saw how participants engaged in efforts for intersectional justice resisted fascism, racism, misogyny, cissexism and more in their unique mediated trans-situations, understood in the conventions of the sensibilities these participants surfaced.

In this concluding chapter, I want to return to the final part of RQ3: What participatory sensibilities are (re)formatted in these efforts, and what models do they offer for living participatory lives? The three participatory sensibilities explored in *Living a Participatory Life*—Disparticipants, Fictocritics, and Installectuals—offer different means for reformatting participation to make rhetoric possible as a collective, inventive practice of living together in diverse societies. Disparticipants at the Women's March found ways to generate new argument

topoi without triggering endless bickering or virtue signaling. Fictocritics like ContraPoints found lines for connecting with those who seemed beyond the pale. And Installectuals transformed an environment hostile to thematizing challenges of contemporary civic life into a thriving site for information about intersectional justice. They are examples of living participatory lives without clinging to liberal fantasies of revealing hypocrisy nor advancing reactionary exclusions. They are not completely sufficient for rising to our present challenge, but they offer us methods to begin the task.

Keeping with the formatting theme, I want to suggest three ways we should go about reformatting participation. Aiming to synthesize from the models provided by Disparticipants, Fictocritics, and Installectuals, these suggestions attempt to articulate how to reformat participatory lives without giving up on rhetoric or returning wholesale to a CCR model. They are neither comprehensive nor cohesive: they won't fix all our problems, and one person probably can't practice each without prioritizing one or contradicting another. They are also suggestions for both scholars and practitioners alike—by which I mean, these are not just goals for rhetorical and digital studies researchers, but for all of us as members of communities we want to participate in (better).

(1) Reformat platforms

Living a Participatory Life has proceeded from the reality that the so-called participatory cultures of early internet culture are largely over. The chronological RSS feeds and community forums that once structured our attention and distributed information have been replaced in a participatory condition in which increasingly-demanding and increasingly-knowledgeable algorithms and data collection tools mine our participation to serve corporate overlords at Meta (Facebook), Alphabet (Google), Twitter, and so on. I've shown how the resulting technoliberal

governing rationality and the ideologies it circulates have seeped into our rhetorical cultures in limiting imperatives, stalemated disagreement, and disappointing heuristics.

Our digital platforms do not have to be technoliberal. The participatory condition in which we find ourselves is not necessarily our *final condition*. Authors like James Muldoon have called us to action with books like *Platform Socialism: How to Reclaim our Digital Future from Big Tech.* Muldoon defines platform socialism as "the organisation of the digital economy through the social ownership of digital assets and democratic control over the infrastructure and systems that govern our digital lives."[7] As recent controversies have shown, technoliberal overlords like Alphabet, Meta, and Microsoft are not going to act in the best interest of the most vulnerable—in fact, they've shown they'll always choose investing in growth and stakeholders over (and even at the expense of) ethics and community.[8] In contrast, Muldoon articulates that

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[7] James Muldoon, *Platform Socialism: How to Reclaim Our Digital Future from Big Tech* (London: Pluto Press, 2022); see also Mark Graham, "Platform Socialism," in *Twentyforty: Utopias for a Digital Society*, ed. Benedikt Fecher (Berlin: Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society, 2020), https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.3677158.

[8] Two controversies stand out to me here: first, in early 2023, Google and Facebook have been in the news for sharing data (that Google, at least, had promised to protect) about people seeking abortion with police in states that have criminalized the right to abortion access. Second, since 2020, Google has been systematically removing Ethical AI researchers like Timnit Gebru, Margarte Mitchlle, and Satrajit Chatterjee, who sought to articulate ethical parameters for the development of AI, sometimes by publishing (or attempting to publish) research that challenged the ethics of Google's approach. Microsoft has just begun following Google's lead. Regarding sharing abortion-seeking data, see Katherine Tangalakis-Lippert, "Police Are Prosecuting Abortion Seekers Using Their Digital Data — and Facebook and Google Help Them Do It," *Business Insider*, March 4, 2023, https://www.businessinsider.com/police-getting-help-social-media-to-prosecute-people-seeking-abortions-2023-2. Regarding ethical AI, see Tom Simonite, "A Prominent AI Ethics Researcher Says Google Fired Her," *Wired*, December 3, 2020, https://www.wired.com/story/prominent-ai-ethics-researcher-says-google-fired-her/; Zoe Schiffer, "Google Fires Second AI Ethics Researcher Following Internal Investigation," *The Verge*, February 19, 2021, https://www.theverge.com/2021/2/19/22292011/google-second-ethical-ai-researcher-fired; Daisuke Wakabayashi and Cade Metz, "Another Firing Among

our digital platforms could and should work like public utilities with collective oversight and ownership, in the interest of providing a community service over profits.

     If we want our participation to matter, we should be inspired not just to participate in creative ways given our conditions but to try to reformat our very conditions. Muldoon suggests four lines of defense against big tech: epistemic resistance, worker's resistance, regulating big tech, and recoding big tech.[9] Participatory sensibilities can help us engage in this fight: Installectual attunement to information and language may help epistemic resistance, disparticipation may offer a way for tech workers to engage in resistance, and fictocritics might help us imagine what our recoded tech will look like. In our work as researchers, educators, and digital participants, we should look for opportunities to make this reformatting sensible. In my classes, I've used Tarsa and Brown's research to inspire a speculative redesigning project. Students begin by analyzing the ramifications of their digital media interfaces, and then visually design a better interface rooted in a specific critique of digital platforms—and hope for what they *could* do.[10] As participants, we might start using different platforms like Mastodon, a free and open-source software that rejects the business models of platforms like Twitter.[11] Platform socialism is an ideal, but it is not so lofty that we cannot start our practices of reformatting now.

Google's A.I. Brain Trust, and More Discord," *The New York Times*, May 2, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/02/technology/google-fires-ai-researchers.html; Zoë Schiffer and Casey Newton, "Microsoft Just Laid off One of Its Responsible AI Teams," *Platformer* (blog), March 14, 2023, https://www.platformer.news/p/microsoft-just-laid-off-one-of-its?publication_id=7976&isFreemail=true.

[9] Muldoon, *Platform Socialism*, 137–49.

[10] Becca Tarsa and James J. Brown, Jr., "Complicit Interfaces," in *Precarious Rhetorics*, ed. Wendy S Hesford, Adela C Licona, and Christa Teston (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2018), 255–75.

[11] Mastodon has been the destination for many who have chosen to leave Twitter due to Musk's ownership. However, it hasn't sustained active membership after an initial surge. For what it's

(2) Reformat evaluation of rhetoric and/as poetics

Putting together media scholarship on context collapse and the decline of symbolic

efficiency and a rhetorical circulation model, *Living a Participatory Life* has understood context

as fundamentally in flux, unstable and indeterminate. Other media environments have been more

amenable to imagining a discrete situation—e.g., arguments in the local newspaper about an

article a few days ago relating to local issues. But time, place, audience, and speaker are not as

given in the circulation made possible by digital media. In turn, crafting the right argument from

the most relevant elements of context *and* understanding an argument in its context is incredibly

challenging. In response, some scholars in the axiological turn have focused on micropolitical

practices of habits and subtle infrastructure shifts—sometimes missing insight about

macropolitics in the process. By contrast, I've tried to show how participants have relied on both

the micro- and macropolitical and formatted their participation trans-situationally.

Let's reformat our ideas about how to evaluate our engagements with each other:

thinking comically and poetically. Recognizing the futility of situational engagement, our trans-

situational engagement must proceed comically, to use Burke's language. As discussed in

Chapter 3, Burke named a comic frame to suggest we all had flawed interpretations, and should

not approach disagreement as a process of mediating good and evil.[12] We might update the

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worth, I've been using this dissertation as an excuse to delay learning a new platform, so I'm still begrudgingly tweeting. See Amanda Hoover, "The Mastodon Bump Is Now a Slump," *Wired*, February 7, 2023, https://www.wired.com/story/the-mastodon-bump-is-now-a-slump/.

[12] "Human enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as vicious, but as mistaken. When you add that people are necessarily mistaken, that all people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that every insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle, returning again to the lesson of humility that underlies great tragedy." Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 41.

comic frame for our trans-situational times to suggest that *no one may know what they are talking about, or who they are talking to.* Engagement taken with too much seriousness leads to "all discourse today being an inflammatory essay," to riff off Elisabeth Weiser. "In our inflammatory times," Weiser writes, "the world no longer believes that one person can truly tell the rest of us 'that's the way it is.'"[13] But that's not a bad thing! Instead it opens us to think of all situations as potential spaces "to be okay with not 'getting it' immediately, and to become more reflective about our world."[14] Rather than trying to convince others that they are mistaken, we should try to cultivate more opportunities for poetic reckonings (like Szymborska in Chapter 3) with "I don't know" and "I don't get it." In a trans-situation, we often do not know, we often do not get it. When we take this as our fundamental starting point, we can't imagine rhetoric as a practice of devising persuasive strategies for winning a contest of wits and/or ideologies.

Instead, we need to focus on rhetoric's inventive qualities: on encouraging encounters that might lead to knowing and relating. This reformatting is not a change, but rather a **bolding and <u>underlining</u>** of what has always been true about rhetoric: it is the collective practice of living together.[15] Sensibilities and formats give us a language for thinking about our

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[13] M. Elizabeth Weiser, "What If All Discourse Today Is an Inflammatory Essay?" (Gallery Talk, Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH, November 20, 2019), 5, https://www.academia.edu/41038383/What_if_all_Discourse_Today_is_an_Inflammatory_Essay .

[14] Weiser, 10.

[15] See Peter Simonson, "Reinventing Invention, Again," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2014): 299–322, https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2014.938862, for a history of rhetoric and invention. Also relevant is McKeon's idea of rhetoric as an "architectonic" art, an art of design that undergirds every other art, making life together possible. Richard McKeon, "The Uses of Rhetoric in a Technological Age: Architectonic Productive Arts," in *The Prospect of Rhetoric: Report of the National Developmental Project, Sponsored by Speech Communication Association*, ed. Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black, Prentice-Hall Speech Communication Series (National Conference on Rhetoric, Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1971); and for a

engagements differently: rather than assessing our rhetorical exchanges as arguments won or lost, ideologies changed or not, we should attend to what is being made sensible. On one hand, that means trying to build things: How can we reshape the environments we are in such that they facilitate an openness to potentiality, to new capacities for creating shared life together? Disparticipants and Fictocritics generate new modes of engagement that can inspire future practice. And we might think about how we reframe our meetings and classrooms to be oriented toward slow shifts of sensibilities and finding strange approaches to familiar questions. But it also means appreciating that our contributions, even if still made in a rational-critical style, may contribute to broader reshapings. While Stewart's hypocrisy-exposing bit can't be our only approach, it needn't be totally eschewed. Even disappointing argument exchange can still contribute to broader shifts of formatted ecologies. Installectuals are a testament to this: while individual slideshows may seem lacking, as a habitual practice, it has transformed a platform. Attending to the interplay of the micro and macro should compel us to reformat how we engage (encouraging us to find moments to "not know" together) and how we understand that engagement (attentive to slowly shifting senses that may encourage inventiveness).

(3) Reformat imperatives

The participatory imperative describes how digitality—in its media and its movements—demands our participation, and *Living a Participatory Life* has explored what it means for our participation to be imperative rather than obligatory or freely-given. In the opening anecdotes of the introduction, Bo Burnham expressed his overwhelm at the internet making apathy a tragedy

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contemporary update, Jonathan S. Carter, "Transindividuating Nodes: Rhetoric as the Architechnical Organizer of Networks," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 49, no. 5 (2019): 542–65, https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2019.1671606.

and boredom a crime, feeling he had to engage in anything and everything, all of the time; in juxtaposition, Michaela Coel offered the prescription to log off. Finding neither option entirely satisfying, I tried to show how one could reject some of the conditions of engagement without completely disengaging. Disparticipants protest but dissent, Fictocritics critique but construct, and Installectuals share but challenge.

We should make room for *less* participation. Artist Jenny Odell is widely advocating for such a corrective in her book *How To Do Nothing*, in which she proposes rehabilitating the senses after their abuse in the attention economy. She concludes "Sometimes boycotting the attention economy by withholding attention is the only action we can afford to take."[16] And Eric Jenkins, whose concept of the big tension I used to help explain demanding, digital times in the introduction, suggests another solution to such mounting problems in an environment hostile to solving them: regular, paid sabbaticals. Jenkins writes that "sabbaticals would offer rest to address these affective strains, recharge for affective capacities, and the extended time necessary to undertake projects that extend beyond the roles of consumer and worker into creative and democratic outlets."[17] Jenkins illustrates what that world might look like:

> Picture a society in which people had the necessary time, space, and capabilities to be more than a digital consumer but to also become a citizen, neighbor, parent, friend, artist, writer, thinker, gardener, hobbyist, activist, reader, writer, hiker, exerciser, gamer, photographer, deliberator, engaging in a variety of modes based upon their choices and desires rather than being limited to the attentional and immeditative modes such as viewers and venters, followers or ignorers, gamers and trolls. Digital technologies can facilitate such a polyculture of modes, yet they will only do so if the rest of the social

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[16] Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2019), 199.

[17] Eric S. Jenkins, *Surfing the Anthropocene: The Big Tension and Digital Affect* (New York: Peter Lang, 2020), 280.

environment provides the time and space for their actualization.[18]

Paid sabbaticals and platform socialism may not be realistic yet, but they remind us of something important. In designing participation to make the world a better place, we shouldn't forget that we want to create a world where we don't have to feel so demanded, so overwhelmed; a world where our participation may be challenging but is ultimately satisfying and energizing.

Committing to the bit

I was once asked what I had meant by the term *ethics* as I'd used it in a publication. I hesitated and then I said, 'I think I mean commitment to a bit.' The audience laughed, but I meant it; they laughed *because* I meant it. In stand-up comedy, a bit is a comic sequence or conceit, often involving a suspension of reality. To commit to a bit is to play it straight—that is, to take it seriously. A bit may be fantastical, but the seriousness required to commit to it is always real.
—Andrea Long Chu[19]

Living a Participatory Life has looked at a specific time period of participation that most would consider contemporary but is already starting to feel historical. Two of the three chapters focus on events prior to COVID-19—and the third chapter focuses on events before COVID-19 Vaccines were widely available. Trump was president for the entirety of the cases, Elon did not yet own Twitter, and Generative AI models like GPT-3 were not at the forefront of everyone's mind. Participatory sensibilities may feel like futile protection against the pressure of new pandemics, politicians, or protocols, but living a participatory life requires commitment to a new bit. Stewart's bit of exposing bad arguments, while satisfying and not incorrect, is not sufficient. It may seem fantastical, outrageous, ridiculous to commit to being comic, to commit to seeing past our situations, to commit to imagining a better world. But: I mean it.

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[18] Jenkins, 277.

[19] Andrea Long Chu, *Females* (London ; New York: Verso, 2019), 18–19.

I began this dissertation suggesting I wanted to make participation an alive question and a life question, as a part of an axiological turn in rhetorical studies. You may not participate like the participants in this dissertation, and you may not follow every suggestion for reformatting in this conclusion. But at minimum, I hope *Living a Participatory Life* has reminded you that we must commit to each other—to living lives that demand all are given access to participation and that many access it for flourishing. This is a sensible project for our demanding, shared future. I plan to participate.

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