Social Media, Marginalised Identity and Liminal Publics

Clarice Marie Butkus

Submitted in fullment   of the requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

(PhD)

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

University of Technology Sydney (UTS)

August 2023

Certiﬁcate of Original Authorship

I, Clarice Marie Butkus, declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulﬁlment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

Signature:

Clarice M. Butkus

Date:

22-08-2023

ABSTRACT

Social media platforms have provided more opportunities for marginalised groups to mobilise discourses of resistance to social, cultural and institutional power. Yet, critical questions remain as to the complex, contested and sometimes contradictory nature of online mediation to negotiate both on- and offline constraints, particularly for historically marginalised voices. As scholars have increasingly acknowledged, the extraordinary complexity of women's current engagement with digital spaces necessitates avoiding a reductive binary of good/bad assessments (Glatt 2021; Brown and Phifer 2018) in favour of more nuanced understandings of the dynamic practices emerging in these spaces. This thesis examines projects initiated by women from very different contexts, all of whom have sought the 'liminal' spaces of social media platforms to circumvent or negotiate repression or exclusion of marginalised identities, expression and representation. This research brings together examples that represent identity contexts negotiated at the State level (through civil disobedience), the cultural institutional level (the art museum) and the personal level (family & friends). To do so, it engages with empirical work through three case studies—(1) Iranian women's online civil disobedience against mandatory hijab laws in the *My Stealthy Freedom* campaign, (2) the virtual networked art collective *Black Contemporary Art* and Instagram account @museummammy initiated by queer, Black curator Kimberly Drew and (3) Botswanan women's use of social media in the Marok music subculture. Bridging a contemporary lens on strategies of digital self-performance and civic claim-making, with a new context of liminal publics, this thesis explores how digital thresholds and the spaces they generate between private and public, institutional and extra-institutional, local and global and on- and offline borders, introduce both "empowering and disempowering potential" (Papacharissi 2015). It demonstrates the empowering potential of marginalised identity production within certain structures and strategies of digital publics or what I term, *visual counterpublics,* while elucidating how identity performances are also significantly complicated by contextual and affordance-based digital public dynamics (Boyd 2012; Papacharissi 2015). In so doing, it identifies how *liminal publics* generate both productive and unproductive instabilities online, identifying two key factors hindering ethical allyship, *spectatorship* and *derecognition*. Ultimately, it argues for an analytic of liminality as an effective non-binarising lens through which to assess these engagements.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 3

Chapter 6

Black Contemporary Art (BCA) and @museummammy Case Study...134

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my deepest thanks and appreciation for the kindness and inspiration provided by the following people:

Thank you especially to the interviewees for your generous participation in this research. Your enthusiasm in sharing how your projects have been undertaken, the challenges faced and their meaning to you, has been invaluable.

Thank you Professor Mark Evans for your warmth, encouragement and calm. I deeply appreciate your insights, guidance and support throughout this process.

Thank you Associate Professor Susie Khamis for your kind assistance in providing feedback on drafts, and for helping to navigate across multiple countries, time zones and pandemic disruptions.

Thank you to my husband Stuart for knowing how to deliver the right words of encouragement at every twist and turn.

Thank you to my wonderful daughter Astrid for your liveliness and compassion. You teach me daily about what it means to be on the cusp of new digital worlds.

Thank you to my mother Iona. You are such an inspiration in your perseverance and academic curiosity. Your continuous focus on education to make the world a better place and find oneself within it, is a guiding light.

Thank you to my father, Jim, for your keen visual eye and brilliant mind.

Thank you to my two grandmothers for their lifelong dedication to education.

And to two other vitally important mentors in my life:

Many thanks to Professor Philip Hayward. As an academic mentor, you have sparked great curiosity in so many subjects over the past 25 years.

Finally, thank you to Sophie Ann Terrisse. As a professional and life mentor, you have imparted so many creative and inspiring ways of thinking, writing and being in the world.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

We can enact the future we want now.

This inspiring statement frames an exhibition of the Black feminist history of abolition convened by Che Gossett, Sarah Shin and Lola Olufemi.[1] The exhibition also features Audre Lorde's famous declaration: "Revolution is not a one-time event."[2] Two powerful ideas from leading feminists and artists of colour, these words speak to a fundamental paradox in the search for a more equitable society—the desire to enact the future now, while preparing for every next revolution. This thesis is about these seemingly contradictory impulses and how they are practised through the spaces of digital media. Since the launch of a publicly available internet this space has been linked to aspirations for social freedom. Virtual space has been hailed for its promise to free the physical/cultural body from historical constraints of gender, race, sexuality and other social distinctions, to create an even playing field. Over the course of the last three decades, the technological and social experiences of being online have continually transformed, from the early days of message boards to the explosion of social mediated applications and interactions throughout the 2010s. Each phase has brought with it new speculation—utopian and dystopian—about the path of social transformation and generative possibilities of collectively imagined new futures. For marginalised identity groups, these functions have

---

[1] Lola Olufemi is a writer for *The Guardian* as well as author of the book, *Feminism Interrupted: Disrupting Power.* Olufemi lays out a feminist paradigm explicitly calling for tying more action to feminist philosophy and critiquing commercialised forms of feminism. See the article at *The Guardian* for further detail of the exhibition:
https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/aug/03/we-can-enact-the-future-we-want-now-a-black-feminist-history-of-abolition, accessed online 15 January 2022.
[2] Audre Lorde famously made this statement in 1982 at a gathering in honour of Malcom X.

frequently been vital to larger political projects of feminism and anti-racism and, as scholars such as Nakamura

(2008, 2021)[3] point out, women users of colour often represent the unseen labour and vanguard of

technological intervention 'from the margins'.

As this thesis will explore, women from marginalised groups are using digital media in diverse ways to

reframe political and cultural practices. These social reimaginings are taking place within a landscape marked

by intensified global digital flows, rife geo-political instability and inflammatory digital rhetoric. Efforts at

challenging institutional authority are undertaken within an environment of ever-intensifying "platform

capitalism" (Srnicek 2017), including a tripling of the world's social media user base over the past ten years and

participants currently engaging with an average of 7.2 different social media platforms (*GWI*, cited by

DataReportal, accessed online 13 February 2022). As will be discussed in-depth, the nature of this technology

growth has made selfie/self-documenting public culture a ubiquitous phenomenon. Furthermore, this has

introduced an era in which, as I will argue, self-performance as political vernacular has become a significant

mode of digital political intervention. This research brings together three diverse case studies of women from

marginalised identity groups engaged in digitally mediated self-performance. By marginalised identities this

thesis refers to Women of Colour (WoC) who, as later sections will cover, face multiple, intersecting forms of

marginalisation related to both race and gender. By digitally mediated self-performance this thesis refers to the

visual and textual representations of identity circulated through digital media, more specifically social media.

Investigating multiple countries and contexts, it showcases how this self-performance works to produce,

respectively - functions of civil disobedience, alternative knowledge formation and subcultural social resistance

---

[3] See Nakamura's excellent discussion of this topic in online presentations such as "Women of Colour and the Digital Labour of Repair" posted on YouTube by Microsoft Research 6 Oct 2021.

for these marginalised voices. This work emphasises women's visually produced 'vernaculars of the self' addressed to oppression impacting their identities as Black and Brown women.

The first case study is focused on My Stealthy Freedom, a project that has evolved over the past eight years to encompass multiple digital media formats— incrementally expanding from a website to further presence on Facebook, Instagram and now TikTok. Within this campaign, Iranian women document themselves protesting against compulsory hijab through stealthy acts of civil disobedience caught on their camera-phones in still photography and video. When these protests first began to circulate, Human Rights lawyer Nasrin Soutoudeh noted: "The term 'Stealthy Freedom' is indicative of the pressures that exist within Iran. When thousands of women defy the hijab laws on social media, we cannot deny the existence of pressures for change" (cited in Carpenter 2014 *Washington Post* online). It is important to note that many women within Iran wear hijab and support the practice. The protestors who contribute to the My Stealthy Freedom (MSF) campaign, however, represent a group of women who oppose State-mandated hijab. Many of the MSF protestors are young, middle class, university-educated women seeking to expand women's rights within the country (thus facing gender-based marginalisation, while retaining class privilege). By way of context, the *MSF* protests have ties to the larger Green Movement in Iran that sparked widespread dissent in the country in 2009 that was predominantly led by students. Since then Iran has had both a moderate leader in President Hassan Rouhani, followed by the current hard-line conservative government under the leadership of Ebrahim Raisi sworn into office in June of 2021. The current conditions within the country are of deep civil unrest that already exceeds the 2009 protests and continues to escalate. This unrest is the result of both resistance to the imposition of tighter social restrictions and of a long period of significant economic decline in the country brought on, in part, by U.S. sanctions over Iran's nuclear development. The latest uprisings have been sparked

by the death of Mahsa Amini, a Kurdish woman who was arrested in Iran for not wearing her hijab according to regulations and died in custody. As will be discussed in-depth in this thesis, My Stealthy Freedom represents a long-term social movement fostered by novel engagements of protest through self-performance to create a liminal transgressive space to confront State power within an authoritarian regime. These assertions of transgressive identity across national borders have gained traction with various platform publics. My Stealthy Freedom is not without significant controversy, touching on many of the most divisive issues of transnational feminism, offering a deeply instructive illustration of how visual counterpublic practices form and move/translate across national borders.

The second case study evaluates the use of self-performance and the production of collective identity to address formal institutional exclusions. Cultural institutions have long failed to adequately represent marginalised voices[4] (e.g. Topaz et al. 2022; Embrick, Weffer and Dominguez 2019; Cahan 2016) and, as importantly, *authority* in processes of official cultural knowledge formation (e.g. Sifford and Cohen-Aponte 2019). Leveraging the Tumblr platform, Black Contemporary Art is an eight-year long project that has amassed one of the largest digital collections of Black contemporary art and engaged 200,000 active users. Its creator, Kimberly Drew, built both BCA and her Instagram persona @museummammy, to mobilise multiple techniques of self-performance and identity production to different effects. Black Contemporary Art and @museummammy focus on intersections of race, gender and sexual identity. It is important to note that these projects are circumscribed by Drew's own significant educational resources gained at elite American schools as well as her professionally garnered social and cultural resources. At the same time, these projects address and

---

[4] As a 2022 cross-field study by Topaz et al. recently reported, within the US context, though women comprise 51% of the U.S. population they are "underrepresented at influential levels of contemporary art (28%), high fashion (45%), box office film (27%) and popular music (17%)". Further, "marginalised racial/ethnic groups make up 39% of the U.S. population yet comprise approximately half that figure in contemporary art (22%), high fashion (22%) and box office film (19%)" (accessed online, 13 March 2022).

exist against a backdrop of structural racism and inequality deeply embedded in U.S. institutions, including large, mainstream cultural institutions, that reinforce specific intersections of institutional marginalisation based on categories of race, gender, sexual identity, disability and others. As this thesis will explore, Drew's projects create alternate spaces of Black aesthetic production and Black, female, queer identity that will be explored through a lens of performances and publics.

The third case study documents the dynamics of self-performance in personal publics. This case study addresses female participation in the Botswanan music subculture called Marok, where members "platform" their alternate identities using Facebook to mediate their public representations and advocate collectively for one another online. Brokering transgressive identities built on the Marok Queens' subcultural affiliations, this project demonstrates the use of self-performance techniques to assert marginalised identities. Botswanan women at large occupy many different roles and relationships with regard to forms of marginalisation. Within my case study, the group of women centred negotiate a transgressive form of identity in opposition to the terms of traditional gender-based expectations. This identity position is unique in that it intersects with and is framed through a particular subcultural relationship to a popular cultural form of heavy metal music. This relationship extends beyond ideas of engagements with popular cultural forms as transitory or youthful forms of identity-making. Subcultural identities are increasingly construed as larger, influential, representational and contestatory political practices (e.g. Jenkins 2006). The present research takes seriously such an approach to these types of engagements. It outlines the key factors circumscribing the nature of the Marok subculture as understood by its participants.

These case studies are drawn from multiple entry points to develop a broader understanding of how self-performance is being practised through digital mediation. For example, in the first case study a single

individual initiated the project for civic aims, using self-performance techniques to destabilise the limits of State authority. The second case was similarly started by an individual, in this case for cultural aims, addressing issues of representation by challenging the dearth of a substantive and consolidated digital collection of Black contemporary art. The third contrasts with the first two by being led collectively and focusing on personal aims in the expression of subcultural identity.

In exploring these specific cases, this thesis focuses on developing new conceptualisations of aspects of digital publics to understand these dynamics. Specifically, it examines the notion of self-performance as collective assemblage, or what I term *visual counterpublics.* Visual counterpublics refer to forms of self-performance and self-documentation that build collective identity, representation and witnessing to address larger publics. Selfie imagery is one component contributing to visual counterpublics, however, such formations also incorporate video documentation and other collective identity representations. Scholarly work focused on selfies as projects of feminism has typically emphasised various forms of feminist and queer body politics, where circulation of images of the self are considered to be individually empowering and agentic. Such political work has the purpose of liberating the female body from various forms of normative constraints (e.g. focusing on public representation of breastfeeding bodies to break taboos against such public displays). Meanwhile, scholarly work focused on selfie protest has typically emphasised how political protesters deploy selfie images within the flow of street protests, or as Ibrahim (2020) puts it: "pulling physically bound protests into virtual and voyeuristic forms online where they perform both to the politics of protest and the demands of semiotic capitalism" (1). Each of the case studies represents a small, discrete project, begun by one, or a handful, of women. As movements like #MeToo have shown, the micro-political spaces of the Internet

frequently foster the start of larger movements and ideas. Tarana Burke,[5] for example, posted "me too" first on Myspace to a small group of Black women and girls.

The second critical concept defined and explored is that of *liminal publics.* As several scholars have recently discussed, the #MeToo example, shows how digital movements create numerous iterations of digital publics as they scale up and down, as well as across borders through processes of digital amplification (e.g. Trott 2021). Scholars such as Trott (2021) further point out these processes can paradoxically obscure marginalised voices and stories, even when hypervisible globally. The present research is concerned with understanding these various tensions between the power of digital media in the *reimagining* of institutions, as well as in *re-making* them (Papacharissi and Trevey 2018:93). In so doing, it will be argued that our conceptions of publics in the digital sphere need further re-thinking. In this vein, the notion of liminal publics will be proffered to address contemporary contingency in publics and public formation with specific implications for identity-based advocacy.

1.2   RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To explore these issues, I have honed in on two key elements: marginalised identity performance and networked publics, and centred my inquiry around the following three research questions:

1. *How is self-performance in online platforms used to represent/assert marginalised identities?*

---

[5] Tarana Burke is a Black American activist and original founder of the #MeToo movement. Burke grew up in New York in a low-income housing unit and was sexually assaulted as a child and teenager. The story behind her use of the phrase "me too" originated from her encounter with a young girl who had experienced sexual assault and came to Burke for guidance. At the time, Burke was unable to share her own experience and later wished she had said "me too". She used these words online to drive awareness of the extensive nature of sexual abuse, in particular, for marginalised women and girls.
(Ohlheiser 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2017/10/19/the-woman-behind-me-too-knew-the-power-of-the-phrase-when-she-created-it-10-years-ago/, accessed online 15 January 2021).

2. *What sorts of publics form around these self-performances and to what effect?*

3. *What potential implications does this have for contemporary conceptualisations of the dynamics of publics in a networked era?*

Employing a qualitative approach, this thesis contributes original work in the following areas:

1) Proposed conceptualisation and demonstration of performances of the self as *visual counterpublics* as online identity and protest work by marginalised groups

2) Novel empirical documentation of visual counterpublics from multiple country contexts (Iran, US, Botswana).

3) Proposed new context for understanding the contemporary role of digital publics as what I will term *liminal publics*

4) Identification of specific productive and unproductive instabilities of particular platform publics and how they impact digital allyship around identity-based advocacy

5) Novel focus on long-term (> five-year) initiatives spanning from personal micro-publics to larger scale microcelebrity activist/influencer publics

Before describing how the thesis is structured to respond to my research questions, I now briefly turn to key guiding principles guiding the focus of this research.

1.3   WHY FOCUS ON IDENTITY?

Scholarship focused on digitally mediated social advocacy has often centred on large scale movements, such as #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring. There is, to date, no large-scale, highly visible, global online advocacy movement explicitly *foregrounding* the needs of Black and/or Brown women. Digital mediation is subject to many of the intersectional problems raised in earlier contexts by scholars such as Crenshaw (1989), which regularly force discussion of these needs through the lens of either feminist movements dominated by White Western thinking or racial justice movements that may exclude the specific interests of female-identifying (as well as non-binary) individuals. Thus, Women of Colour (WoC) face a double marginalisation within advocacy movements that do not proceed specifically from their interests and identifications. Further, some contemporary discourse asserts that we are in a "post-racial"[6] and "post-identity" landscape, in which prejudice on the basis of identity somehow no longer exists. Yet, prominent WoC advocates (e.g. Moya Bailey, Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberle Crenshaw, Lisa Nakamura) repeatedly emphasise the importance of key identity-focused concepts and the belief that adequate and visible representation of the nuanced specificity of marginalised identities continues to be a cornerstone in achieving gains for marginalised women. The identity-based advocacy movements in this thesis have been purposefully sampled in order to avoid relegating the issues of WoC identity and representation to a secondary research concern. Further, while sharing in common the rhetorical strategy of self-performance through online media, they provide an illuminating cross-section of contexts to develop new insights into the challenges and opportunities of digital mediation for identity-based advocacy.

---

[6] For example, the notion of a post-racial society gained particular traction in American popular discourse just following the election of the first Black American US President, Barack Obama, in 2010.

1.4   THEORISING DIGITAL PRACTICE BY CENTRING THE PRACTICES OF

MARGINALISED USERS

As Black American scholar, Catherine Knight Steele argues in her book, *Digital Black Feminism* (2021), there

is a long history of Black women's relationship to technology, including contemporary digital strategies of

survival, that are in need of centring within dominant scholarly approaches to networked media. Steele (2021)

and Florini (2019) argue for re-examination of the long history of the Black American relationship to

technology. Further, as several Black feminist scholars have noted, the experiences and voices of Women of

Colour (WoC), both as media makers and theorists, have not been focused upon in discussions of the broader

impacts of social media. Kingston Mann (2014) emphasises:

> *New media, especially social media sites like Twitter and Tumblr, have become important sites of black*
> *and other women of colour media-making and media critique. Black media makers, especially black*
> *women, participate there in numbers far outweighing their participation in other media channels and,*
> *notably, far outweighing their participation in new media scholarship within academia. This fact has not*
> *been taken seriously enough in current debates over the value and import of new media.*
> (Mann 2014:294)

Additionally, in reviewing the literature emerging from contemporary Arab and African feminism(s),

sentiments around the lack of adequate representation were echoed (Mohamed 2019; Byrne 2020). As Florini

(2019) discusses, the key task in engaging with research regarding marginalised voices is two-fold: 1) to centre

marginalised voices and 2) to develop knowledge about technology practices by learning from marginalised

users, rather than solely assessing those practices as reflections on marginalisation itself (15). Florini (2019)

notes:

> *If affordances are imagined through the interaction between users' understanding and practices,*
> *designers' intentions, and the materiality and functionality of technology, then a consideration of*

marginalised users' practices can yield diverse and innovative ways of imagining affordances and, thereby, understanding the possibilities of technology. (15)

With regard to centring marginalised voices, this research focuses on voices emerging from digitally mediated contexts and scholarship by Women of Colour (WoC), and the discourses emerging from non-traditional academic spaces, including online blogs and Twitter, where this thinking has significantly flourished over the past decade (Steele 2021; Kingston-Mann 2014). With regard to seeking out these voices, a prior research approach that was developed and used as a contributor to the *Women Film Pioneers* Project[7] with Columbia University informed my thinking. This project was led by a feminist ethos committed to searching for missing narratives to identify contributions obscured by dominant scholarship and historical approaches. The idea of continually working to reflect on the parallel narratives of Black and Brown feminisms obscured by dominant Global North, white, feminist and public sphere models and voices, became a way in which to approach and prioritise relevant scholarship trajectories.

Another critical challenge for projects like the current one, and for digital scholarship more broadly, is the outsized influence of Western theoretical constructs and models. This becomes particularly problematic for attempting to understand contemporary digital practices from around the globe. For example, one of the most influential models of publics that filters through so many discussions in the literature and central grounding point for public sphere theory, is Jurgen Habermas' model. Though scholars such as Nancy Fraser (1990), Rita Felski (1989), and Catherine Squires (2002) have produced invaluable critiques of this model incorporating perspectives on marginalised voices, it is difficult not to see in the predominance of the Habermassian model, the way in which a canonical text comes to focalise thinking over time. This parallels some of the prevailing

---

[7] *Women Film Pioneers Project* was started in 1993 by film scholar Jane Gaines and launched in 2013 as an online resource consolidating unwritten or not widely circulated early histories of contribution to film by women.

issues raised within particular case studies, such as efforts by the projects in the second case study to disrupt the seemingly intractable canonical forces of Western art traditions. Several scholars have argued the Western public sphere model is not well suited to understanding communication and resistance practices from non-Western contexts. As Winkel (1989) notes, a "criticism may be levied against Habermas, whose ideal communication community merely reproduces and perpetuates so-called modern secular Western epistemologies" (13). In particular:

> *Postcolonial studies challenged the idealisation of rational discourse and deliberation as features of a secularised, Western notion of the public sphere. By addressing bodily practices such as piety, postcolonial researchers have argued for an explicit focus on the corporeal, sensual, and religious dimensions and practices relevant to the constitution of publics.* (Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2012; Martín-Barbero 1993, cited in Winkel 1989:13)

Huang and Kang (2022) situate this critique in the context of the tendency of Western societies to hold themselves up as virtuous standard bearers of such normative conceptions, noting:

> *Western societies are considered models of the public sphere for (post-) authoritarian societies, the US is nonetheless often a source of illiberal practices in the name of regional security or the War on Terror. Such contexts challenge many assumptions about the counterpublic - including dominance, resistance, and liberation - showing that "the private" is the primary locus of oppression and struggle for liberation. Further, positing the presumed liberal West against the illiberal Other is untenable.* (221)

While not being able to entirely avoid these conceptual histories, this research works to situate digital publics within their very specific national and transnational contexts. Further, it is attentive to tensions around reproducing/centring Western and white hegemonic viewpoints and responses that "posit the presumed liberal West against the illiberal Other" through digitally mediated projects and movements.

Finally, it is important to reflect on the complexity around the marginalised voices of Women of Colour (WoC). Kimberle Crenshaw introduced the term intersectionality to describe the processes by which

Black women are specifically rendered invisible. She describes the way in which "Black women have been 'theoretically erased' in the conceptualisation of oppression within 'single-axis frameworks' of either gender, race or class" (Crenshaw 1989:139). It is the prevalence of single-axis frameworks that continues to produce significant erasures of the experiences of individuals at various intersections of identity. Several scholars and activists (e.g. Crenshaw 1989; Trott 2021) have documented how Black American women's interests are frequently erased from the discourses of Black equality movements as they ultimately centre Black men, and Women's equality movements as they ultimately centre White women. Critically, an intersectional framework is not intended to be understood as an additive concept, whereby an individual has a list of marginalised identity categorizations that build up upon one another to characterise a more marginalised condition. Intersectionality is focused on the impact of intersections in processes of marginalisation. So, while some communities can be considered to be in more vulnerable situations than others, it is important to recognise that various combinations of privilege and marginalisation co-exist and are exercised in different ways based on situational context. For example, in Trott's (2021) work, she describes aspects of the way the #MeToo movement were framed that felt exclusionary to LGBTQ communities (1136), with the centring of white, cis women taking place within a social movement understood within a single-axis framework of marginalisation that prioritised the category of "women". Thus, in evaluating interactions within the digital publics under study in the present research, attention is paid to intersectional dimensions, including reflection on the intersectional impacts and tensions of my own position as a researcher.

1.5   THESIS STRUCTURE

To provide a roadmap for this thesis, the following is an outline of its structure organised through

chapter summaries. The thesis is broken up into eight chapters in total including this Introduction. To ground

the research and my approach, I begin with discussion of methodology, followed by a literature review chapter

and framework-building for the particular concepts and definitions guiding discussion of the case studies. The

chapters then cover three case studies in-depth using mixed methods. Finally, my conclusion discusses

comparisons between cases, primary thesis observations and conclusions and future research directions.

In Chapter Two, I discuss my mixed-method approach, which combines textual analysis,

semi-structured interviews and contextual historical data. This discussion includes an overview of approach

and methodology and specific explanation of case study selection, data collection, textual analysis methodology

and ethical considerations.

In Chapter Three, I review the current literature with two considerations in mind: how individuals

mobilise networked publics and the dynamics of engagement in networked publics in an increasingly

fragmented digital public sphere. In so doing, I identify key shifts and gaps presented by the current

scholarship in addressing first, the use of the self as a new kind of political vernacular—termed a visual

counterpublic—and second, the need for alternate conceptualisation of networked publics to actively engage

with this fundamentally fragmented condition. This lays the groundwork for understanding two defining

concepts in this thesis: visual counterpublics and liminal publics.

In Chapter Four, I explain the concept of liminality as it is defined in this thesis and characteristics of

liminal publics. I discuss this concept in two parts. First, I focus on how liminality enables/empowers key

strategies of self-performance. Second, I explore the dynamics at play when self-performances are negotiated in

the contemporary flows of liminal networked publics. Within this latter section, I outline key concepts I

suggest are needed to augment an emergent vocabulary describing networked instability. This offers a

framework for evaluating and contextualising these aspects not only for the case studies in this research, but for

negotiations of identity, marginalised voice and broader inclusiveness in networked publics.

In Chapter Five, I explore the creation of a transnational visual counterpublic circulating between Iran

and Global North contexts in the My Stealthy Freedom campaign. This chapter documents the strategies of

self-performance used to create a collective assemblage of modelling and mirroring protest, as well as collective

witnessing of trauma through acts of civil disobedience from within the authoritarian context of this nation.

This chapter explores how the liminal thresholds between national contexts ultimately complicate

self-performances by creating 'invisible' forms of division, instability and derecognition (i.e. failure to

recognise/denial of recognition) and the relationship of these to questions of transnational feminist digital

allyship.

In Chapter Six, attention is turned to a multi-part case study that compares and contrasts two

approaches to building visual counterpublics to address exclusions of marginalised Black aesthetic production.

This case study evaluates key strategies in the Black Contemporary Art (BCA) and @museummammy projects.

It discusses the tensions arising between these alternate spaces/publics and official institutional discourses. This

case study demonstrates the role of liminality in producing multiple public formations, including both

productive and unproductive instabilities, as well as forms of derecognition.

In Chapter Seven, the dynamics of liminal publics are assessed within a smaller, personal micro-public

setting. The subcultural use by a group of women in the Marok heavy metal culture in Botswana is explored in

terms of activating the "nowhere-somewhere" spaces of digital publics and the liminal politics between on and

offline worlds. This chapter elaborates on how personal publics can create micro-dynamics of counterpublic discourse formation. As is explored in this case study, these micro-dynamics demonstrate how the old feminist idea of the "personal as political" becomes reworked through digital mediation, as traditional (inter)personal dynamics are transformed into functions of networked publics.

In Chapter Eight, I conclude with discussion of how key concepts developed around visual counterpublics and a new context on liminality can be utilised to think about a wide variety of settings and platforms. This includes discussion of how the identification of particular productive and unproductive instabilities of liminal networked publics can be further productively deployed to achieve non-binarising insights into digital engagements by marginalised groups. Finally, this chapter suggests several directions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

The present chapter will cover the methodology used, encompassing discussion of Researcher Positionality, Liminality in the Research Process, Research Method, Data Collection, Language Translation and Ethical Considerations.

2.1   RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

The nature of the topics under study have necessitated close consideration of and reflection on my own positionality as a researcher and how best to develop analysis that would garner key insights into this research. This is critical, in particular, given the differences between my background and those of the participants and

creators discussed. I recognise that my privilege and life experiences as a white, American-born, cis woman and gender politics researcher, all influence my approach to these issues. I am conscious that I have been shaped in and through the theoretical concerns of second, third and fourth wave feminisms, including the raced and classed constructs within these waves, and the centring of white feminism in popular and academic contexts. The negative impacts of white feminism on BIPOC women have been raised by Black and Brown feminists from the beginning of these waves. This includes the poignant *Combahee Statement* (1978) in which Black American feminists unequivocally declared that "we are made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism, which requires among other things that they have a more than superficial comprehension of race, colour and Black history and culture. Eliminating racism in the white women's movement is by definition work for white women to do" (*Combahee River Collective*, cited in Eisenstein 1978:370). In an effort toward building more than a superficial comprehension of these concerns, I have engaged with intersectional and postcolonial methodologies throughout my work researching feminist issues over the past decade. This includes my Master's work in Gender Politics at New York University (NYU), as well as in publishing scholarly analyses on projects that foreground aspects of voice, representation and power. I emphasise the words "work toward building", as I recognise that the work of continually acknowledging, interrogating and centring the tensions in achieving comprehension across social borders is a highly complex process requiring long-term commitments. This includes commitment to developing greater understanding, as well as new languages with which to address unresolved inequities of dominant institutions and practices. This is, I believe, the fundamental task of feminist projects currently—one in which even a term like "feminist", and the particular harmful histories and

erasures it may be associated with, necessitates continual reflexive consideration around its terminological and analytical use.

In reflecting on my own position in this research, some unusual aspects of my life experiences provided useful entry points. As a child growing up in Omaha, Nebraska, I was part of several generations of schoolchildren (from 1976 to 1999) who participated in court-ordered busing between traditionally white and Black neighbourhoods intended to integrate schooling. For several years, I also lived in North Omaha, a traditionally Black neighbourhood. During that time, I developed friendships within my new neighbourhood block, as well as maintained those in my predominantly white primary school from the area in which I had previously resided. These experiences provided an early sense of how white privilege works and the way it grants access to wider opportunities. This was particularly true of the experiences of busing. In the Nebraska program, white school children like myself were bussed for one year of school, presenting minimal disruption to their routines. Yet, Black school children were bussed out-of-area for multiple years. This ostensibly progressive policy aimed at *increasing* equality, *replayed* inequality, and placed the greater burden of overcoming these challenges back on Black students. These differences were apparent to all participants even at eight years of age. I have thought a great deal about these early bussing experiences and the types of material re-negotiations of structural marginalisation they attempted to enact, while fundamentally recreating forms of inequality. Bringing together people of different race, class, gender or other backgrounds within a single space, whether physical or virtual, did little on its own to dismantle deeper structures, largely because the privileged and powerful could only conceive of remedies that continued to place burden back on marginalised groups.

With regard to the case studies from Iranian and Botswanan cultural contexts, my direct experience of these cultures is largely limited to the exchanges with the interviewees with whom I was able to speak. Throughout the research process, this necessitated further careful attention and reflexive processes of questioning of assumptions and dynamics of various relationships between myself as researcher and these participants. The experiences of conducting interviews was invaluable to developing insights beyond the raw digital data and a better understanding of how participants viewed their own participation as creators and followers.

Finally, in terms of digital spaces, I am a pre-"digital native" but I currently split my use of social media platforms in ways that align more closely to millennial patterns of platform consumption (Auxier and Anderson 2021: online), than those of my own generation. This has prompted me to continually consider, reflect on and discuss with others, the multiple viewpoints and assumptions about the role/purposes of digital media for different generational users. I acknowledge, and believe strongly, that digital users from different generations experience technology differently based not only on personal preferences, but in more fundamental ways regarding incorporation of technology to communication, culture and knowledge formation. However, by bringing different generational perspectives together on digital usage, I believe important new perspectives and insights can be generated.

2.2   WHY "STAY WITH THE TROUBLE" OF LIMINALITY?

This thesis was completed through the transitions of COVID-19 and in the context of several global relocations by its author between several American cities and Australia, placing the idea of the "in-between" firmly on the radar. The idea of liminality as a place of in-between where new political acts and reimagining can take place has also been a throughline in research from fields as diverse as anthropology (in Victor Turner's

well-known applications[8]), psychology, literature, education, religion, philosophy and architecture, to name a few. Liminality is imbued with ideas of disorientation, confusion, possibility and reimagining. The conditions of the ubiquitously liminal moment of the pandemic period moved Tania Lewis, Annette Markham, and Indigo Holcombe-James to write an article titled, "Embracing Liminality and 'Staying with the Trouble' on (and off) Screen" (2021). As they note, "the varied concepts of 'becoming', 'not quite yet', 'boundary work', or 'staying with the trouble', elaborated by Karen Barad, Andrew Pickering, Susan Leigh Star and Donna Haraway respectively, all point to ways of being, acting and thinking through and with liminality" (2021:3). The notion of working in the in-between/at the borders resonates profoundly with how digital mediation has emerged as a contemporary political and cultural experience and practice. Increasingly, classic (Western public sphere) models developed for understanding Internet dynamics and publics have been in effect 'breaking' (or at the very least, seriously straining) in their efforts to account for changes in the digital and political landscape. In response to the evolution of networked public dynamics over the past ten years, some scholars have begun to emphasise the more "fragile" (Lünenborg 2019:319) and "refractive" (Abidin 2021:1) qualities shaping users' (situational agentic) relationships to networks in flux. I situate this research within this emerging thread and seek to map some of some of the dynamics of liminality as they relate to how marginalised groups use strategies of self-performance as contingent counterpublic functions in a contestatory sphere. Lewis, Markham and Holcombe-James ask the question:

> *What would it mean then to live with as well as learn from the reflexive sense of being and experience associated with the dis-comforts of living on and off screen ... how might we consider this as the preferred*

---

[8] In 1969, Victor Turner published his influential analysis of rites of passage in human society in "Liminality and Communitas". Turner explores the nature of transition through these passages noting that: "liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony" (1969:359). His insights have been applied extensively in anthropological and other contexts to describe transitional states.

state, rather than being simply a 'rite of passage' that implies some pathway toward more stable identities and structured ways of being?" (2021:online)

While liminality considered in this research does not always result in a "preferred state", the concept does usefully frame many of the issues of digitally mediated spaces. If the dominant metaphor for the computer age is binary code, then perhaps the dominant questions of the human-computer age rightly focus on the (non-binary) liminal social and cultural spaces generated by that code.

2.3   LIMINAL RESEARCH SPACES

As a scholar of digital spaces, my own role is circumscribed by the "liminal space inhabited by the researcher" defined by the space created in the "crafting of the research project, the formation of the writing and critical reflection" (Burns 2012:259). Burns raises "the possibility of 'attentiveness' as a means of revealing issues of power, place and emotion" in the research process (259). As Grbich (2013) notes, reflexivity involves seeking "heightened awareness of the self in the process of knowledge creation, a clarification of how one's beliefs have been socially constructed" (113). "To turn one's critical gaze back on oneself is to be vigilant to the ways in which one's definition of feminisms and its imposition on another may serve to re-inscribe relational patterns of oppression that deny another's dignity, agency and empowerment" (Alvizo cited by Ott 2018:103). In the work of this thesis, I am motivated to engage with projects by BIPOC women and the search, in part, to understand how and where ethical solidarities across differences emerge, are supported and/or become problematic through the digital interactions of publics. This also directs my focus to interrogating and problematising the role of white-centring feminisms in the contexts under study.

2.4   QUALITATIVE APPROACH

Qualitative methods focus on the meanings of messages and interactions rather than quantitative measurements of the frequency at which messages occur. As Snelson (2016:4) notes, key research approaches for qualitative social media research include data collection using techniques such as interviews, focus groups and surveys. Content analysis focuses on analysing comments and posts from Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, as well as videos and comments from YouTube or other types of social mediated content to source data.

Within recent years, in the field of digital scholarship, there has been a significant tendency toward pursuing Big Data and Twitter network analysis to generate greater understanding of digital dynamics. Several scholars, however, (e.g. Florini 2019; Wang 2013, 2016) discuss the need for contributions of "thicker" data to enhance scholarship on digital processes and meaning-making. Thick data is considered to be "the sticky stuff that's difficult to quantify—emotions, stories, worldviews that get stripped through the processes of 'normalising, standardising, defining [and] clustering' that make massive datasets analysable by computers" (Wang, cited in Latzko-Toth, Bonneau and Millettes 2017:201). It can be of smaller sample size, yet generate rich "meanings and stories" (Wang 2016, online). As Latzko-Toth et al. explain, "the process of 'thickening' data is in line with the interpretive/constructivist paradigm of qualitative inquiry, which recognises that a social phenomenon can only be understood 1) in context; 2) through fine-grained accounts; 3) in light of the meaning attributed by actors to their own actions" (Geertz 1973; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Schutz 1967, cited by Latzko-Toth et al.:202). Two key methods for "thickening the data" identified by these researchers employed in this research were "manual data collection" and "agile long-term online observation" (202). A major benefit of this approach has been the ability to not only gather an initial data set to capture images, posts and

interactions and identify baseline patterns, but also to observe content posting and interactions multiple times per day, over a five-year time period. This was particularly useful in garnering insights into both minor and major fluctuations within the case studies over time. This included observing shifts related to usage and consumption of different social media platforms over time, participation patterns, growth in following and shifts in the public status of project founders impacting these projects on a macro-scale.

The case studies of this research operated in very different ways based on situational settings, platform choices, evolution in platform use and types of content circulation. Thus, a qualitative approach was best suited to developing insights in the kinds of discourse, interactions, and meanings produced across these environments. Through close analysis of these discourses and meanings, it was possible to understand in a more in-depth way how interactions framed both the logic of particular public formations, but also their intersection with larger contexts. Textual analysis enabled focus on questions of how different actors become 'present' in digital publics through discursive performances and positions. By complementing this with interviews, I was able to develop meaningful data around factors such as *motivations* in engaging with digital publics as well as bring in the points of view of different types of actors, e.g. founders, moderators, intermediators and broader public participants within specific spaces of engagement. This was the best method for gaining insight into understanding networked publics, both as environments with their own intrinsic characteristics and interactions, but also dynamics where strategies of digital publics intersected with offline worlds. The sections to follow will discuss the specific methods employed in further detail.

2.5   CASE STUDY SELECTION

Case studies were selected through purposeful sampling used in qualitative research for "the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources" (Patton 2002:41). Though

results are not generalisable with purposeful case study sampling, important insights were able to be developed

through illustration of the dynamic tensions between self-performances and publics. While operating as small,

discrete projects that mobilise spaces of identity from the margins, these projects take on the assertion and

shaping of discourses around that identity as their *raison d'etre,* thus offering rich sites to investigate the

strategies invoked and the processes by which publics form around and respond to these projects. These

contexts are explored to shed further light on how dynamics of digital publics intersect with the effects of

offline, institutional and other contexts.

While the selected case studies emerge from very different contexts, they have been selected for their

common use of strategies of self-performance/identity performance as a mechanism for asserting "oppositional

consciousness" in a way that ties the self to collective concerns. While this central logic has informed case study

selection, they are best understood as empirical examples of an understudied set of practices that provide

examples of practices that should be studied with regard to understanding production and circulation of

marginalised identity through digital mediation. Given that the term "feminist" itself can produce major

negative connotations about the role of white feminism in oppressing women of colour, using that term as a

filter for selecting case studies would have led to exclusion of relevant projects. Thus, case studies were included

that were initiated on terms other than *explicitly feminist* undertakings. Because of the range of the case studies

selected with regard to issues of civic, cultural and personal negotiations of identity, this provided an

opportunity to develop insights into how strategies were deployed and adapted within multiple situations.

This enabled discovery not limited to one setting only. Additionally, case studies all focus on marginalised

identity production that works to achieve a mix of 'soft' cultural/representational forms of personal, cultural

and political power. This ensured analysis at a micro-level of political contestation. Such micro-contestations,

however, continued to transform and grow to take on greater cultural and political significance through various strategies of digital mediation.

2.6   TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Textual/discourse analysis was developed in line with key cultural studies frameworks for analysing the socially constructed meaning around texts. As Stuart Hall (1975) notes, texts are "literary and visual constructs, employing symbolic means, shaped by rules, conventions and traditions intrinsic to the use of language in its widest sense" (17). Texts, it is argued, provide insight into construction of reality contained in words and ideas impacted by specific cultural contexts (Atkinson and Coffey 2011). As a project concerned with what takes place in the discursive space of social media images and posts, but also of interactions that take place within the open and ambiguous spaces of digital mediation, it was also important to pay particular attention to meaningful silences. Hall (1985) is attentive to ideas of silence in texts, noting "meaning is relational within an ideological system of presences and absences" (109). Socially-mediated spaces are frequently popularly characterised as a barrage and oversaturation of content and swirling storms of charged discourse. However, in looking closely at specific interactions that take place in more ritualistic ways, rather than viral surges, there is greater opportunity to analyse the consistent 'drumbeat' of daily lived interactions in publics. In particular, these discourses can be understood as occurring within different contexts of cultural and political evolution over time, providing a longer-sighted view into the role such engagements play in tension with outside social and political forces. An important part of these interactions are not only the consistently present discourses observed over time, but also the absent ones. Textual analysis can garner useful insights through attention to what Cormack (1995) describes as "elements which might have been expected to be in the text but which are missing from it" (31). As Cormack notes (1995): "While at first glance this may seem to be a difficult

undertaking, we actually expect to see certain things, and those expectations are based on customs, conventions and experiences ... considering those aspects that are absent, unsaid, missing or avoided allows us to consider how a specific ideological argument may have been constructed" (31). This becomes an important element in looking into the deeper structures and potential meaning of interactions and more importantly absences or *disengagements.* This is particularly the case in communication that takes place across multiple contexts by participants from different geographical and cultural contexts largely unknown to one another across internet platforms.

2.7   DATA COLLECTION

With this project's focus on the liminal spaces that shape how publics are formed within digital realms, but also how they impact/are impacted by outside contexts, it was important to draw on sources of data that combined textual, contextual and interview data to provide the triangulation necessary to develop deeper insights. This included gathering information from more than one social media platform, including Tumblr, Facebook and Instagram (and, in some select cases, Twitter). This was particularly important and useful because the large majority of social media data studies and analysis to date concentrate on single platform contexts which, while providing critical insights, are less able to capture how projects morph in and through different platform environments.

With regard to the textual analyses performed, this research took a systematic approach to close investigation of image/video content and patterns of comments and interactions through likes, views, shares and re-blogs performed in concert with each post. Social media posting formats include a variety of combinations of text, photographic and/or video formats circulated through social media platforms via individual posts and/or aggregated on specific hashtags for circulation within particular campaigns (e.g. see

discussion of #WhiteWednesday campaign in Case Study 1). For this portion of the case study, comment/response interactions were audited to explore how they reinforce, undermine or otherwise inform the goals of these identity projects within the subcultural communities that form around them. The following sections describe the data collection process specifically for each case study.

2.7.1   My Stealthy Freedom

Textual data was gathered from web and social media sites including the My Stealthy Freedom site page, Facebook and Instagram accounts. Data was gathered from selected sites during two time intervals—in June-August and November-December of 2017—to establish a baseline of key categories of content. Main categories observed were:

a) "theatrical" performances of civil disobedience

b) specific hashtag campaigns encouraging particular types of protest action within Iran

c) performed solidarities between protestors and their allies

d) footage and testimony from women both inside and outside of Iran who have suffered acid attack

e) footage of mothers protesting their children's imprisonment or murder by the State as political prisoners

f) broadcasts/live streams by Masih Alinejad as part of *Voice of America (VoA)* as well as replay of global press coverage.

50 content posts representing these content categories (5-10 per category) were then observed in close detail. Many of the posts within these categories followed highly similar patterns in terms of the mode of protest for that category, thus selection of the 50 was made on the basis of these posts conforming to and representing

each category, while also enabling close analysis/drill down into relevant micro-differences within categories. Posts were all made by Masih Alinejad (or on her behalf and in her 'voice' by the campaign). In combination with the images posted, between 10-20 participants' comments were gathered for each for analysis. Most images garnered between 20 and 100 comments in total. Selection of the 10-20 was made on the basis of obtaining a consecutive set of comments representing a microcosm of the dominant patterns of reaction to the image conveyed across the full commentary. The set was purposely chosen as a series of consecutive comments in order to capture the dynamics/interaction taking place in a typical exchange from one comment to the next. The full set of comments for each were observed for any demonstrable shifts in conversation overall - i.e. where one point of view was proffered, debated and the tenor of the discourse shifted notably, but none were observed. Comments were extracted into a single document and placed beside the relevant image post for analysis purposes. Broad patterns of likes, views and sharing were observed. Assessments were made of image and language use. Patterns were also observed regarding which posts elicited greater and lesser engagement. Facebook and Instagram accounts were then observed by catching up on daily posts over the five-year period of study and observations of significant macro-shifts made. The primary observation over this period was that the initially identified framework of categories continued to be relevant. Over time, shifts in the technological capacities and visual cultures of each platform resulted in greater and greater emphasis on video footage over still imagery. Finally, with the very recent large-scale uprisings following Amini's death, as extensively covered in global news media, posts have pivoted toward increased coverage of the plight of Iranian citizens persecuted for protest activity.

Based on the historical visual and textual representations referenced by imagery within my online data capture, I also undertook research to deepen my understanding of relevant contexts for interpreting imagery.

In particular this was important for understanding particular knowledge of laws and practices around hijab-wearing in Iran. This included developing an understanding of both official and unofficial practices of hijab-wearing in the country, particularly by young, educated, middle-class women. It was important to develop a sense of the nuances in how Iranian women approached veiling even within official restrictions, with different groups in favour of veil-wearing and others not, some more free to test the boundaries and others not, depending on context. It was also important to understand how imagery of Muslim women and veil-wearing circulates within the Western media and imaginary. As Sarkar (2017) notes: "The discursive production of Muslim women as oppressed, backward, silenced and invisible (secluded/veiled) has a long history in the popular imagination of and writings on Islamic societies in both the geographic West and elsewhere (Alloula; Khanna; Bullock; Hoodfar; Brenner)" (244). Western media stories often revert to showing images of these Iranian women in Western dress from the 1970s, prior to the country's Islamic Revolution that overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty, thus easily reverting to tropes of the once free and unveiled woman as 'modern' and awaiting 'rescue' by the West. Equation of unveiling with freedom in Western thinking fails to perceive the differing views and practices of veil-wearing by women in Iran and Muslim women all over the world. These are important contexts informing analysis of images of unveiling as a form of protest and the pervasiveness of these discourses and stereotypes became readily apparent through the course of research.

2.7.2 *Black Contemporary Art (BCA)* and *@museummammy*

Textual data was gathered from social media sites including Tumblr, Instagram and Twitter accounts. For Black Contemporary Art (BCA), the blog was scanned overall to understand the structure and scope of presentation of artwork and other links to outside resources, artists and links. 30 artwork posts were selected for closer analysis including review of the most recent 10-20 notes and the associated blog sites linked to each.

Patterns of reblogging were observed to understand circulation of aesthetic work. Blogs linking to artwork were examined to understand key associations. For example, cultural iconography and poetic and sonic interpretation of BCA artwork and personal aesthetic associations within these blogs were assessed in terms of what I refer to as "sentiment terrain" as well as relational identifications. Posts were made by Kimberly Drew and a small collective of female curators of colour working together. For @museummammy, post data was gathered from selected sites during two time intervals—November-December 2017 and May-June 2018—to establish a baseline of key categories of content. Main categories identified were:

a) self-performances by Drew interacting with Classical and contemporary artwork and spaces

b) self-performances by Drew interacting in fashion contexts

c) political statements

d) popular cultural references

e) links to activist causes, including LGBTQ rights

f) links to Drew's essays on contemporary issues in the art world.

50 content posts representing these content categories (5-10 per category) were then observed in close detail. Many of the posts within these categories again followed highly similar patterns in terms of the mode of presentation for that category, thus selection of the 50 was made on the basis of these posts conforming to and representing each category, while also enabling close analysis/drill down into relevant micro-differences within categories. In combination with the images posted, between 10-20 participants' comments were gathered for analysis for each. The selection of the 10-20 was made on the basis of obtaining a consecutive set of comments representative of the dominant patterns of reaction to the image conveyed by the full commentary. The set was again chosen as a consecutive set to also capture the dynamics and interaction that take place in a typical

exchange from one comment to the next. The full set of comments for each were observed for any demonstrable shifts in conversation overall - i.e. where one point of view was proffered, debated and significantly altered the tenor or direction of the discourse, but once again this was not present. Comments were placed in a single document beside the relevant image post for analysis. Broad patterns of likes, views and sharing were observed. Assessments were made of images and use of language characteristics. Patterns were also observed regarding which posts garnered more and less engagement overall. Over the longer term, Tumblr and Instagram accounts were more broadly observed by catching up on daily posts over the five-year study period to study for any significant macro-shifts. It was observed that the initial primary categories held consistently over time. Additionally the following observations were made:

- The last new artwork post made to Black Contemporary Art took place in 2019. No announcements explaining this cessation were made on the blog, nor appeared in published materials discussing the blog.
- There was an increased presence and scope of direct activist efforts over the long term, exemplified in collaborations such as that with the GLITS organisation, as described in detail in the case study chapter.

2.7.3   Marok Queens

This case study was incorporated to assess if/how common dynamics of publics would be observed at the personal micro-public level to gain further insight into different settings. Textual data was gathered from Facebook sites from each of the fans interviewed. As personal sites, posting was of much lesser frequency than

the activist and digital museum sites from the first two case studies. 20 posts from each were observed closely along with 10-20 comments with each. Textual data was gathered during two time intervals—in December 2019 and September 2020 —to establish a baseline of key categories of content. Main categories observed were:

a) images of Marok women in their rock persona and attire

b) images of participants attending rock events

c) images of Marok women exchanging subcultural attire and artefacts

d) re-posts of Morok women from heavy metal publications.

Activity was more broadly observed by catching up on daily posts over a five-year period and observations of significant macro-shifts made, through which it was observed that the primary categories held consistently over time. To ensure rich contextual data, public fan and media sites, including member association groups of importance to Marok fans were observed for key themes and patterns of representation, as interpreted through a feminist analytical lens. Additionally, Sarah Vianney's short documentary film, *Queens of Botswana* (2019) was viewed and analysed to build further insights regarding culture issues around Marok female fans. As the film promotional material describes, the film "shows three very different women whose lives have been touched by their love for Heavy Metal, engaged by their involvement with the Marok—as the metal scene calls itself" (IMDb, accessed online, 3 February 2020). Finally, interviews were conducted to provide a rich base of data about fans' personal histories, motivations for participation in Marok and view of their own social media practices and personal investments in these forms. Details of the interview structure for each case study are taken up in the next section.

2.8   INTERVIEWS

Interviews were conducted with content producers and viewers to gain insight into production intentions and decision-making as well as audience meaning-making in the selected projects. Kvale (1996) outlines the seven steps involved in using qualitative interviews:

(1) conceptualising a research question and outlining the theoretical framework guiding the research

(2) designing the research study

(3) conducting the interviews

(4) transcribing the interviews

(5) analysing the information obtained from the interviews

(6) verifying the information from interviews

(7) writing up the findings of the study. (cited in Brennan 2012:30).

Brennan (2012) further notes that following interview transcription, the researcher works to "identify important insights and information, outline key concepts, opinions, patterns and themes and make a note of interesting stories and experiences" (30). To provide greater context for the textual/discourse analysis, I engaged in a series of semi-structured interviews. Interview questions were developed to develop a dialogue with interview participants regarding different aspects of each project, based on their respective vantage points on each project. Interview participants were first approached to participate in the research and provided with a Participant Information Sheet to obtain Informed Consent as outlined in the Ethics Approval application made and granted for this research (HREC Approval #ETH17-1769).

For the My Stealthy Freedom Campaign, I interviewed campaign founder Masih Alinejad in person at the *Voice of America* studio in New York. I had planned to interview additional female participants in the

campaign, however, they were unable to participate due to heavy work commitments. For the Black Contemporary Art and @museummammy case study, I communicated with Kimberly Drew who responded positively to my initial research proposal and request. However, once again due to heavy professional commitments and time constraints within the data collection time period, she was not able to participate. Two factors have helped to mitigate this issue. First, through my personal relationships, I was able to frequently informally discuss these projects with several BIPOC museum curators and social media coordinators over the course of a two-year period. This was particularly important in terms of gauging the impacts of Black Contemporary Art and @museummammy with relevant publics as a core focus in my thesis. Second, Drew's status as a public figure and frequent commentator, panellist, essayist, book author and podcaster, have resulted in unusually extensive documentation of her views and background stories on these projects, providing a great deal of relevant and important context for the project. Finally, for the Marok Queens case study, I was very fortunate to be able to interview two female fans—Gloria William and Ludo Morima—and one scene documentarian, Paul Shiakallis. My interviews with Gloria and Ludo took place through back and forth dialogue via both email and Facebook. My interview with Paul took place over email and Skype.

2.9   LIMITATIONS TO DATA COLLECTION

With regard specifically to the My Stealthy Freedom case study, in discussing my projects with the Ethics Officer for my program, it was decided that due to the highly sensitive nature of interviewing protesters from *within* Iran, it would not be feasible to do so without increasing risks to their safety. Though my focus has been largely on analysing participation by Global North audiences to provide new empirical work on the campaign, it would have been useful to have been able to interview local Iranian participants to develop further context for this study. Additionally, given that protestors submit images to Alinejad to publish on their behalf and she

doesn't publicly disclose any specific criteria for sharing or excluding particular images, the observations and analysis in this research are limited to published imagery and commentary only. More broadly, the COVID-19 pandemic made data collection more challenging than it may have otherwise been. The pandemic impacted various aspects of the process, including changes to the circumstances of prospective and participating interviewees, often placing much higher and more urgent demands on their time. Use of digital media at large was also in transition across this timeframe. This necessitated additional time for data collection and analysis and attention to how later data supported or impacted initial findings.

2.9.1   *Language Translation*

To understand how comments would 'travel' between global language contexts in platform in practical everyday terms, I utilised in-app translation capabilities to observe and analyse instant translations. These translation functions became better over time over the course of my research, with greater ability to rapidly translate multiple comments. However, Arab language translations were on the whole very poor. Questions of language translation are particularly formative in issues of transnational community-building, as is demonstrated particularly in the case study of My Stealthy Freedom. Frances Haugen, a former Facebook employee and whistleblower regarding the company's practices has discussed how deep failings in language translation actively contribute to problems of hate speech in particular national contexts. As one media outlet reported: "Arabic is among the most common languages on Facebook's platforms and the company issues

frequent public apologies after ... botched content removals" (Debre and Akram 2021, accessed online).[9]

Arabic, in particular, is more difficult to address due to the diversity of national and regional dialects. As Debre and Akram report: "Facebook first developed a massive following in the Middle East during the 2011 'Arab spring' uprisings. Users credited the platform with providing a rare opportunity for free expression and a critical source of news in a region where autocratic governments exert tight controls over both. But in recent years, that reputation has changed" (accessed online).

In the current research, for Arabic (My Stealthy Freedom) and Setswana (Marok Queens) content, two forms of translation were relied upon. The majority of posts in the My Stealthy Freedom page include English and French translations. Additionally, commentary is largely directly in English. For the Instagram page, the majority of commentary is in Farsi. For Farsi language material, automated translations were relied upon. The majority of posts in the Marok pages are in English and Setswana. For Setswana language material, automated translations were relied upon. Additionally, Farsi and Setswana translations were periodically cross-referenced using the global translation service, *Tomedes*, to validate/clarify meaning initially generated by in-app and/or Google Translate. Though reliance on campaign-provided and automatically translated text introduces limitations to the data collection/research process, this approach also enabled insights to be generated into how users regularly experience issues of language translation when participating in processes of auto-translated global digital mediation.

---

[9] As critics have noted, these problems do not represent "just a few innocent mistakes", rather "Facebook has understood the depth of these failings for years while doing little about it. Such errors are not limited to Arabic. An examination of the files reveals that in some of the world's most volatile regions, terrorist content and hate speech proliferate because the company remains short on moderators who speak local languages and understand cultural contexts" (Debre and Akram 2021, accessed online). Facebook has acknowledged this issue, but as Eliza Campbell, director of the Middle East Institute's Cyber Programme, notes: "for the amount of political importance and resources that Facebook has, moderation is a bafflingly under-resourced project" (*pbs.org*, 25 October 2021, accessed online).

2.10   ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR DIGITAL SCHOLARSHIP

The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) is the guiding body for understanding the latest in ethical guidelines for digital research. In the 2012 guidelines they note: "individual and cultural definitions and expectations of privacy are ambiguous, contested and changing. People may operate in public spaces but maintain strong perceptions or expectations of privacy. Or, they may acknowledge that the substance of their communication is public, but that the specific context in which it appears implies restrictions on how that information is—or ought to be—used by other parties. Data aggregators or search tools make information accessible to a wider public than what might have been originally intended" (accessed online). Latest updates to these guidelines further redefine "private" with additional attention to expectations of privacy within public spaces. The current research does not identify profile data for individual users, except for those of known public figures—Masih Alinejad and Kimberly Drew—and interview participants who have given Informed Consent. Discussions of posted comments by other individuals do not include their social media profile information. Topics discussed are analysed in a general sense and reference is made to broad identifications (e.g. profile information indicating they were male or female-identifying) for purposes of the discussion. Whereas Drew is a well-known public figure associated with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, who has publicised both the blog and her @museummammy account through engagement with mainstream media, including large circulation media outlets such as *Teen Vogue* and *Essence Magazine,* panel discussions and podcasts, her followers are not. Thus, given that individual contributors may have varying expectations of privacy, their comments have been described as anonymised, generalised and/or aggregated types of comments and commenting behaviours.

2.10.1 *Use of Imagery*

Photographed images shared openly within the online platforms under study have been described, discussed and analysed but not reproduced in this thesis due to: a) the highly sensitive nature of the content and potential risk to participants through the visibility of reproducing the images and b) in the case of anonymous submissions to online campaigns, original permissions are unable to be sourced and granted.

2.10.2 *Data Collection and Storage*

Throughout the process of data collection, storage and analysis, all information has been collected through password-protected forms of correspondence (email and messaging) and stored on a separate hard drive and in password-protected digital documents to ensure the privacy of participants.

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter lays the theoretical groundwork for addressing my research questions—the first about how digital mediation capabilities create new opportunities to assert marginalised identities through performances of the self; the second about what types of public formations and behaviours of publics develop around these identities; and the third about implications for the dynamics of online publics. Digital media, public sphere, and feminist scholarship have all contributed useful frameworks for understanding the transformations taking place in the current mediated landscape. In order to situate my three research questions this chapter will discuss work emerging from two primary lines of thinking:

(1) The first of these relates to identity performance online. Broadly, this theoretical path is concerned with techniques of performing the self, including technologies of self-documentation and representations of particular identities.

(2) The second relates to theories of the formation and dynamics of networked publics. This second path is concerned with issues of the public sphere and its new networked properties, and its trajectory has been guided and influenced by the development of large-scale digitally-enabled social movements over the past decade. Much of this work glosses over significant issues of identity performance *within* these publics.

Discussions of marginalised identity formation and networked publics to date have largely been framed within concepts of "counterpublics", influenced by earlier feminist interventions in public sphere theory in the 1990s articulating this kind of politically motivated, identity-based oppositional public formation. In order to gain stronger insights into marginalised identity production in contemporary networked publics, it is necessary to marry the insights of these alternate paths to better understand contemporary self-performance and identity production online as it is situated in the new, fragmented dynamics of publics.

To discuss how these ideas have been developed by the literature, this chapter begins with exploration of the term self-performance and its emergence as a form of political identity-making online to ground my first research question: *How is self-performance in online platforms used to represent/assert specific marginalised identities?* This is followed by investigation of shifting conceptions of publics over the last two decades. My analysis starts with a review of early feminist ideas framing how digital public space might be used for the assertion of marginalised identity. Following this is a review of key models illuminating how networked

properties have impacted publics. The chapter concludes with discussion of specific theoretical gaps, setting the stage for my proposed analytical framework in Chapter Four.

3.2 PERFORMING THE SELF

3.2.1 *Performing the self in virtual public space(s)*

Early utopian visions conceptualised the internet as an 'open' and unmarked virtual space with the potential to remediate long-standing divisions of gender, race, class, sexuality and nationality. Some scholars and pundits envisioned a realm of borderless and disembodied communications with the potential for users to powerfully engage in the public sphere (e.g. aspects of the work of Negroponte, Rheingold, Plant). Though utopian conceptions of the internet were not without their outspoken critics (Gajjala 1998; O'Brien 1999), they reflected an implicit belief in (and propagation of) the idea that entrenched social oppressions might be swept away with the tap of a keystroke. With the arrival of web 2.0 capabilities, digital spaces were championed for ushering in a new era of 'sociality' and participatory culture. Wikipedia and blogging, for example, were celebrated for enabling "produsers" to engage in participatory media making (Bruns 2009). Applications such as Myspace, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube introduced social networking, self-publishing and self-broadcasting opportunities. As the oft-cited American *Time Magazine* cover story proclaimed in 2006, the Person of the Year was simply "You". Users were entering collective virtual space as the centre of their own mediated universes. They were 'free' to actively express themselves through self-production.

Digital media scholarship has theorised diverse ways these changes have altered the self-public relation. While performing the self in public spaces has been conceptualised and elaborated upon since Goffman's (1959) early analysis of the "presentation of self in everyday life" (1), rapid proliferation of new applications and users began to exponentially multiply the digital spaces and ways in which virtual 'selves' interact with one

another. Such spaces thus became new places in which identity work could (or *must)* be done in the process of representing oneself to virtual publics (Boyd 2012). As Hilsen (2014) notes: "social media ... opens up new possibilities for presentation of self and of managing the self you present to others" (3). Placing the user at the centre of this environment shifts the notion of being a part of a public. Rather than joining others as anonymous members of the public, users were now empowered to *gather* audiences or *publics* around themselves in novel ways. As Florini (2019) notes: "prioritisation of the individual is inscribed into the very structure of our digitally mediated interactions" (23). Boyd (2010) has been influential in charting the transitions of new ways to "see and be seen" in "networked publics". She identifies the technical qualities of persistence, replicability, scalability and searchability, bringing publics together non-contemporaneously in virtual spaces. Boyd further emphasises how these functional capabilities produce both public spaces and "imagined communities", introducing key concepts of "invisible audiences", "collapsed contexts",[10] and "the blurring of public and private", to emphasise that in a contemporary digitally mediated era, public and private domains no longer hold as separate realms (7). As she notes: "without control over context, public and private become meaningless binaries, are scaled in new ways, and are difficult to maintain as distinct" (2010:1). Wesch (2009) understood this shift to have startling effects and provides this vivid description of "context collapse":

> *Like a building collapse, context collapse does not create a total void but a chaotic version of its once ordered self. The would-be vlogger sits stultified as his imagination races through the nearly infinite possible contexts he might be entering, all of which pile up as parts, pieces, and pieces of parts, a rubble that becomes the ground on which he must struggle to get his footing. The familiar walls that help limit and define the context are gone. He must address anybody, everybody, and maybe even nobody all at once.* (23)

---

[10] Boyd notes that "context collapse" is a term 'pre-conceptualised' in discussions of earlier electronic media by Joshua Meyerowitz in his book, *No Sense of Place* (1985), and is specifically applied to social media by Marwick and Boyd 2009; Wesch 2009; and Vitak 2012, among others.

In addition to *places* to be seen, networked publics importantly began to transform some social relationships into new types of public interactions. Through collapse of walls between previously separate social worlds, once private relationships began to play out in front of digital audiences. Baym and Boyd (2012) emphasise this as necessitating "an ever-shifting process throughout which people juggle blurred boundaries, multi-layered audiences, individual attributes, the specifics of the systems they use and the contexts of their use" (320). Digital mediation set the stage for self-presentation to be altered and amplified in politically, socially and culturally consequential ways. It is important to note the term self-performance does not necessarily indicate an emphasis on any particular theatricality in these expressions (though theatricality can and does imbue many instances, as will be discussed within specific case studies), but rather as indicative of the new ways in which mediated productions of self are constructed, circulated and performed as purposeful artefacts across networked publics. While continuing to perform the self for discrete publics in physical spaces with bounded social contexts, many now also do so within digitally mediated environments. Yet, new structural/technical forms have emerged to mediate self-performances across the internet—from new forms of labour via self-commodification to new forms of political expression during political conflict.

3.2.2   *Performing the marginalised self*

There is of course no single monolithic approach to the expression or performance of dominant or non-dominant identities online. Strategies of self-performance online as a potential political praxis for marginalised subjectivities are the subject of debate. Scholars have argued for both positive and negative consequences of these transformations. Some note that in response to the loss of context users feel pressure to present a particular acceptable version of the self—an "authentic", perfected, marketable self to enhance the individual's social capital (Marwick 2010; Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017; Whitmer 2019). Much work has

documented how the social media practices, particularly of influencers, neatly dovetail with the demands of neoliberal capitalism. Users from historically marginalised groups may, for example, "present themselves on social media by self-censoring" or "curating a neutral image" in response to pressure induced by racist stereotypes (Pitcan, Marwick and boyd 2018:163). Dean (2018), for example, critiques particular fourth wave white feminist impulses toward self-documentation as "inadvisable" for marginalised subjectivities.

Online spaces have also been used, however, in diverse ways to personally politicise this public space. There is a significant body of scholarship, however, drawing upon research with women of colour, trans women and non-binary people, demonstrating positive experiences of self-documentation as a way "to 'make visible' bodies, individuals and stories which have been historically marginalised and purposefully kept invisible as a means of resisting processes of othering and marginalisation" (Matich, Ashman and Parsons 2022:397). In this view, such self-performance can be "a radical mode of self-representation with the power to forge culturally significant forms of self-representation, solidarity and visibility" (398). Some navigate networked publics with the express purpose of asserting identities in ways that are oppositional to dominant discourses and expectations (Clarke-Parsons 2017; Peterson-Salahuddin 2022), or do so in ways that reflexively and consciously play within/negotiate the bounds of these expectations through multiple modes of "productive ambivalence" (Glatt 2021:2). Further, Florini (2019) discusses the tensions, in broad terms, between social technologies' inherent neoliberal modi operandi (and dominant repertoires of the self-branding subject) and potential *alternative uses* of contemporary digital architectures:

> *Despite the imprint of neoliberalism on digital architecture and modes of sociality, digital networks are discursive formations as much as they are technological ones. Thus, though users of colour exist within the technological structures that promote networked individualism as the primary social "operating system", these users can program their digital and social media spaces with cultural logics and communicative*

strategies that negotiate and, to varying degrees, resist neoliberal regimes of race and technology. (25)

3.2.3   Strategies of self-presentation, documentation and witnessing

Specifically, strategies of *self-documentation* have played an important role in many projects and movements. Papacharissi (2015) explains that self-presentation, even at the everyday level, can take on a political dimension, noting: "the sheer presence ... of such a wide variety of individuals—with distinct gender presentations, races, sexual orientations and so on—can have an everyday political character, clashing with, and disrupting dominant narratives" (99–100). Beyond the everyday presence of different identities online, there are specific movements that place self-documentation at the centre of their praxis, including online queer visibility and body positivity movements. Such initiatives take place within multiple platforms, however, many favour the visually-focused spaces of Instagram and TikTok. In these movements, non-normative bodies and identities are presented either individually or as collective assemblages to challenge normative constraints and discourses (e.g. Vivienne 2017). As Gross (2001) notes, "while photographically mediated self-representation is not new, queer and feminist scholars have welcomed online opportunities for greater subaltern engagement with self-representation" (cited in Vivienne 2017:128). As several scholars suggest, self-documentation technologies and cultures have been instrumental to the creation of new forms of civic and institutional claim-making. The selfie, in particular, has received considerable scholarly attention in this regard (Senft and Baym 2015; Frosh 2015; Kuntsman 2017; Hess 2015; Walsh & Baker 2017; Kuo 2018). Selfies are a form of self-documentation enabling users to express a myriad of social information and identifications in the context of photographing oneself. Some scholars (e.g. Kuntsman 2017; Aziz 2017) emphasise selfie photography as a means to engage "selfie citizenship". In terms of selfie protest, participants make civic claims to their fellow protestors as well as to the State and global media. Frosh explores the selfie as expressing a relation of "see me showing you me". As

Senft and Baym (2015) note: "any time anyone uses a selfie to take a stand against racist, classist, misogynist, homophobic, ageist or ableist views of what a worthwhile representation is, or should be, issues of political power are clearly at stake"(1597). Though Senft and Baym (2015) note that selfies are not a requisite for participation in forms of what Senft (2008) terms "network reflective solidarity", they argue they can carry a particular weight depending on the circumstances of circulated publicness (1596).

Widespread availability of mobile phone cameras have played a significant role in these protest forms. Anden-Papadopoulos (2014) notes the advent and pervasive use of camera-phones has produced new practices of "ritualised self-representation". Individuals now reflexively turn to mobile phones to record themselves using such technology as a "personal witnessing device". Further, she argues this form of "citizen camera-witnessing" recasts the "field of witnessing", such that individuals have the power to bypass "discourse elites" and make powerful first-hand claims by conveying their version of crisis events to networked audiences (Anden-Papadopoulos 754–756). Citing Reading (2009), she notes this "entails the swift translation of a private sensory experience into public mediated testimony" (757). Such forms of witnessing have been crucial to documenting and protesting against State violence and racist and misogynist attacks, when circulated within broader publics as evidence of harm.

3.2.4   Visual counterpublics

The present research considers use of what might be called a portfolio of techniques of the self to assert *collective spaces* of identity. This portfolio includes selfies, self-documentation and witnessing, as well as the production of specific types of identity assemblages, all drawing on aspects of the techniques and technologies described in the previous sections. The primary significance of this portfolio of techniques for the present research is the way in which they are deployed to create what I term, "visual counterpublics". It is important to

note at the outset, that visual counterpublics as "visual activism" (Allbeson 2020) precede networked environments. For example, public art projects and memorials might well be considered a visual counterpublic response to hegemonic discourses. However, as this thesis describes in-depth, visual counterpublics as coined here are enabled through digital mediation. To explain how this thesis has arrived at using the term visual counterpublic, I'll provide a deeper discussion of two adjacent concepts - the "selfie assemblage" and "visible solidarities". Regarding the power of selfie solidarity, Senft and Baym (2015) note that "arguably, the network level of the selfie assemblage is where authenticity may be taken most seriously" (1596). Hess (2015) discusses the way in which the selfie as form comes together as a constellation of multiple elements of existence within contemporary technological culture that expresses—even copes with—the affective tensions of networked identity" (1631). His focus is on the way in which the selfie as a form represents the intersection of "the longing for authenticity through digitality, the conflicted need for fleeting connection with others, the compulsion to document ourselves in spaces and places and the relational intimacy found with our devices" (1631). Assemblage thus gestures toward the selfie as assembling these multiple relationships of affective connection between the self, the technology and the network. These qualities are important in the discussion of uses of selfies in the case studies, however, the use of the selfie is only one technique. Kuo (2018) meanwhile discusses the concept of "visible solidarities" in her work on racial counterpublics in the #Asians4BlackLives campaign. She describes the "visual modes of storytelling that affectively mobilise publics and ... solidarity as discursively mediated, embodied and affective phenomena" (41). Her work identifies the way in which selfie images, specifically of Asian American participants holding up signs with messages of support for Black Lives Matter conveys "the logic of revealing and 'outing' in making oneself seen—this shift from the seemingly invisible to visible - depends on the singular confession as reaching towards community" (50). I want to dwell

on this last part of "reaching towards community". The projects under study in this research reach toward community through individual acts of self-definition/self-performance that become collective. They gesture toward community *through* the act of self-definition, which resonates with others who mirror the process of self-definition. In a visual counterpublic, visual acts of self/identity performance are fundamental to the construction of the counterpublic voice. The visual counterpublic refers to a ritualistic, repeated set of performances over time that build toward both self-definition *and* community. Gestures are performed through acts of physical protest and/or witnessing of trauma (both personal trauma or through aesthetic forms bearing witness to historical trauma). Visual counterpublics of the form under study are enacted on the terms of 'radical' self-definition. Self-definition is significant because it implies defiance and an autonomous relationship to hegemonic constraints, even while attempting to challenge mainstream public norms. Other examples of radical self-definition (though not visual counterpublics per se) include projects like celebrity singer Lizzo's Instagram where she celebrates non-normative physical attributes in "strategic use of hyper-embodiment" (Pickett Miller and Platenburg 2021:51). Her Instagram performances ritually repeat this strategy relying on a logic of radical positive self-definition against mainstream cultural beauty norms. As a form of oppositional consciousness in networked publics it attempts to enact "the future we want now" by engaging processes of self-performance, self-definition and self-acceptance in one.

3.2.5   Visibility politics

This is not to say that creating visibility around self-definition is not a risky strategy. As discussed earlier, visibility for marginalised voices presents risk in the form of hypervisibility and personal physical risk of becoming subject to further violence, both on and offline. Nor does it make irrelevant key issues related to histories of the gaze and the visibility of raced and gendered bodies. As Matich et al. (2022) note:

This back and forth in the debate around representation and visual culture poses important questions about when visibility is useful and when it is not, and how we might navigate and potentially circumvent those gazes and systems which aim to limit our agency and freedom of expression. In short, our findings suggest that we can neither reject or fully embrace selfie culture as either all good or all bad, rather as somewhere in between the two – a complex and shifting mode of representation that is inherently contradictory, complicated and context-specific, and far more nuanced than the bulk of the literature would suggest. (2022:398)

Importantly, as several scholars have argued, for marginalised identity groups managing the risks and rewards of visibility within dominant groups has long been both a necessity and conscious strategy. As Mann (2014) notes: "feminists (as well as womanists, critical race theorists, afro-pessimists, and indigenous people) are well positioned to point out that being visible or accessible to others is not necessarily liberation" (293). Strategic *invisibility* can also empower marginalised groups with a space for internal debate without becoming subject to intervention that preys on division. Scholars emphasise not only the importance of enclaves as spaces of debate, but of "world-building" (Bailey 2021:103), legitimation of identity through relational processes (Kanai 2016:6), and the emotional need for sharing cultural experience and freedom outside of the dominant gaze. As later sections will discuss, managing the stakes of visibility frequently becomes an ongoing burden and form of emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) in pursuing strategies of self-performance.

3.2.6   Key concepts of self-performance in this research

Self-performance and self-documentation are thus understood in this research as specifically tied to the broader collective form of "visual counterpublics". While not employing any single visual format these projects of self-performance express an "oppositional consciousness" grounded in strategies of collective self-presentation. Embracing Matich, Ashman and Parsons' (2022) notion of "culturally significant forms of self-representation, solidarity and visibility" (397), this research discusses three empirical case studies in depth from disparate geographical, cultural and platform-mediated contexts. In my conceptualisation of visual counterpublics, I am

led by Catherine Knight Steele's reframing of counterpublic space for Black American and, as she argues, also for other marginalised voices, in locating the "public and the political" not within a "singular online counterpublic" (114). She emphasises the ways in which the public and political operate within diverse digital domains. She notes:

> *I argue that examining the African American blogosphere as a counterpublic erases the important work of enclaved communities and satellite publics. In disrupting the notion of a singular online counterpublic as the aim of black social media users, I attempt to reorient our consideration of other important black discourse online. To understand the complexity of the relationship between the public and the political, we should explore participation outside of traditional political institutions (Dahlgren 2013). This reorientation shifts our focus of this study to life-style and entertainment blogs wherein blackness is centralised and blogging communities address issues of importance within the affordances and constraints of the platform.* (115)

Visual counterpublics as exemplified in the case studies of this research emerge from outside of "traditional political institutions" and within the alternative spaces of protest, culture and personal digital mediated expression. While drawing attention to the ways in which performances of the self are constructed as novel strategies within the (contested) popular feminist and neoliberal contexts of their making, my emphasis is on situating these practices within the specific contemporary landscape of networked publics and publicness. Rather than interrogating these self-performances as 'good' or 'bad' forms of public contention, my analysis traces the patterns by which these projects are able to mobilise specific types of publics and to what ends. In taking this approach, this thesis works to break up binary thinking around social media use. I argue, instead, for the productivity of evaluating the ways in which these forms of self-performance assemble/connect with these specific publics in processes of relational identity formation, while also being subject to new complexities of contemporary dynamics of networked publics. This approach represents a conceptual shift toward delving

more deeply into the dynamics impacting structurally and historically marginalised subjectivities *within the flow* of digital publics.

3.3   SITUATING NETWORKED VISUAL COUNTERPUBLICS

3.3.1   *Early concepts of networked counterpublics*

Two dominant trajectories have emerged in discussions of internet publics over the past two decades. First, within the fields of digital, race, gender and feminist scholarship, there has been significant empirical work tracking the formation of specific *networked counterpublics,* e.g. anti-racist counterpublics (Kuo 2018; Jackson and Foucault Welles 2015), queer and asexual counterpublics (McInroy and Zapcic 2022; Schudson and Anders 2019; Renniger 2015), and a wide range of studies on feminist online work (e.g. Berridge and Portwood-Stacer 2015; Williams 2015; Clark 2014; Thrift 2014; Weber 2015; Keller 2015; Shaw 2012; Taylor 2011; Lindemann 2010; Mowles 2008; Wood 2008; Gregg 2006). The vast majority of this work, however, concentrates on single issue campaigns and single platforms, most predominantly through Twitter, frequently (though not exclusively) situated within U.S. contexts. Second, has been a trajectory interrogating *properties of publicness* and their impact more broadly on the formations in networked environments, particularly in terms of their *affective flows, growing types of fragmentation* and *discursive conditions* (Boyd 2012; Papacharrisi 2018; Lünenborg & Raetzsch 2017; Kaiser 2017; Wonneberger et al. 2021; Chan 2018; Gallagher et al. 2018; Jackson and Foucault Welles 2016; Lien 2022; Toepfl and Piwoni 2018; Trott 2021). Lesser focus has been on developing a greater understanding of the interactions and engagements between online counterpublic discourses and hegemonic reaction and exchange, with some notable exceptions (e.g. Holm 2019; Eckert et al. 2021; Lowenstein-Barkai 2022; Thorsen and Sreedharan 2019; Trott 2021). Overall there has been less attention paid in the research to platforms outside of Twitter and efforts at marginalised identity production

and circulation in contexts outside of the U.S. The current research is situated within these gaps. In order to elucidate dynamics of contemporary networked publics for such projects of marginalised identity production, I ground my second research question: "*What sorts of publics form around these self-performances and to what effect?*" beginning with review of the dominant models impacting the field. This section begins with a short reflection on early internet ideals of publics and counterpublics to provide a frame of reference, followed by discussion of new dynamics and models.

A number of digital scholars initially approached analysis of the internet and its virtual interactions as offering the potential for a revitalised public sphere. Public sphere theory has centred on Habermas' conception describing this space of public discourse as "made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state" (1991:176). In the early 1990s, Fraser developed her highly influential critique in response to the Habermassian model. In her view, Habermassian conceptions of the public sphere were constructed on the basis of a normative and universalising frame reflecting upper class white male heterosexual experience. Fraser instead advanced the concept of subaltern counterpublics, noting that "history records that members of subordinate social groups—women, workers, peoples of colour and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics" (Fraser 1993:14). As Fraser describes, counterpublics are spaces in which these groups "invent and circulate counterdiscourses, so as to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" (1993:14). As Travers notes regarding Fraser's critique, the latter identified that the "so-called universality of the public sphere actually amounts to the presentation of the subjectivity of a particular elite group as the objective category of normalcy". Travers (2003) further applied this concept to internet spaces identifying "parallel subaltern feminist counterpublics in cyberspace" (223). The internet was initially hailed as capable of providing public

and counterpublic sphere conditions by ostensibly giving people equal access to engage in public deliberation and consensus as key functions of democratic society. Travers was (cautiously) optimistic about the potential of shaping the public spaces of the Internet in ways that would drive greater inclusiveness of feminist concerns, but by "feminist" her interest was in inclusiveness of multiple marginalised groups as a broadly feminist value. This inclusivity, she suggested, would be built on using cyberspace to model a particular form of public discourse based on "communicative virtues". Here Travers builds on Burbules and Rice's (1991) articulation of values of "tolerance, patience, respect for differences, a willingness to listen", among others, required for building this inclusiveness. She notes that in Burbules and Rice's formulation "it is the construction of difference and how differences are assigned meaning and practices of communication around them that minimises or maximises inclusion" (cited in Travers 2003:231). Therefore, what Travers envisioned was not only a parallel virtual space to accommodate marginalised voices, but a space to demonstrate how to make this space genuinely *public,* by applying a feminist ethos of communication and respect for difference. Travers does reference the "chilly climates" of the male-dominated internet for marginalised identities at the time of her writing, but nevertheless emphasises the promise and necessity of feminist values in shaping the future of these spaces. Fundamentally, these models were voiced around collective, inclusive ideals that in themselves somewhat 'universalised' ideas of subaltern counterpublics based predominantly on U.S. (white) feminist counterpublics, in order to understand the structure by which marginalised voices would seek to form their identity and interests. These early feminist conceptions were also significantly invested in bringing private sphere concerns into the official spaces of a (normatively masculinised) public sphere. Such a frame of reference was premised on the notion of women being predominantly associated with the devalued domestic spaces and concerns of the home.

Assessing the Black American public sphere, Catherine Squires presented a vocabulary of types of "marginal publics" including "enclave, counterpublic and satellite" to provide a model of "how we might incorporate considerations of the kinds of resources different publics have available to them" (2002:461). Squires noted that "although counterpublics create more opportunities for intersphere discussions, the members of dominant publics may monopolise these opportunities" (Squires 2002:461). Squires' emphasis opened up space for thinking about how particular marginalised groups and subgroups may strategically choose to interact or not with larger hegemonic publics in more than one way. She asks "does the label 'counterpublic', in its multiple uses, help us understand the heterogeneity of marginalised groups?" (447). In describing the difference between an enclave and a counterpublic, she notes that an enclave may shield "counter hegemonic ideas" from larger publics to "survive or avoid sanctions, while internally producing lively debate and planning" (448). At the same time, "it is also possible to create a counterpublic which can engage in debate with wider publics to test ideas and perhaps utilise traditional social movement tactics (boycotts, civil disobedience)" (448). Squires' perspective introduced a more nuanced view of how marginalised groups might negotiate identity through multiple public formations. These early conceptions of marginalised identity production continue to strongly influence conceptions of a contemporary networked public sphere. However, as the following sections will discuss, that sphere, and such models, are increasingly pressured by transformation in networked spaces that have evolved over the intervening decades.

3.3.2 Affective publics

Boyd (2010) describes the significant changes to digital spaces emerging through social networking applications as catalysing important shifts in the configuration of publics. She notes:

Together, profiles, Friends lists, and various public communication channels set the stage for the ways in which social network sites can be understood as publics. In short, social network sites are publics both because of the ways in which they connect people en masse and because of the space they provide for interactions and information. They are networked publics because of the ways in which networked technologies shape and configure them. (45)

Networked properties enabled the assembly of publics across a wide variety of platforms, bringing together friends, family, acquaintances and strangers in configurations around shared cultural interests, social functions, news consumption and political activity. As Boyd (2010) emphasises these publics are multi-layered. As she notes, technical features of *persistence* and *searchability* moved publics out of the space of real-time, in-person interactions to virtual exchanges. Boyd (2010) places important emphasis on publics as both the "space" created by networked technologies as well as the "imagined collective" that "emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology and practice" (39).

With the increasing prominence of digitally mediated social movements, scholarly work shifted toward understanding the *affective* qualities of these public assemblages. Building on study of the Arab Spring and Occupy movements, this work looks at political expression through trending Twitter topics, Papacharissi (2015) introduced the term "affective publics" (39). This concept outlines the fluid, fragile and temporary nature by which networked publics form around shared sentiments, most particularly in situations of crisis. Papacharissi and Trevey (2018) emphasise these as "affectively bound" (92) as well as "mobilised and connected or disconnected" (92) through these "shared sentiment" (95). They argue that while not conforming to conventional understandings of deliberative public sphere theory or collective politics, affective publics are important conduits of connection. While recognising their dynamic nature, some emphasis is retained on the affective 'bounded-ness' of sentiment that assembles the public. Papacharissi and Trevey (2018) further suggest this creates temporary openings or "windows of opportunity" for social change (87). They note: "depending

on context and according to punctuated equilibrium theory, these modalities permit windows of opportunity for social change to emerge, by affording actors liminal access to power and specific pathways to agency" (88). This points to a key aspect of how public sentiment is structured through networked environments and how publics "feel their way into" (2015:12) an event or contentious issue, as well as the potential opportunities for such affect to drive visibility of counterdiscourses. Papacharissi and Trevey (2018) also note:

> *The traditional view of political action assumes that action is only impactful when the cost to individuals is high and the goal is achieved. This line of reasoning is problematic for two reasons: (1) it assumes that the higher the cost of an action is to an individual, the more it matters politically, which is an unsupported claim, and (2) it looks only at goal-oriented action, when in fact, everyday, non-goal-oriented actions could reasonably be considered politically impactful (Puig-i-Abril & Rojas 2007; Bayat 2009). (90)*

Three important dimensions to collectively emerge from these concepts are:

1) insight into the new spaces in which political engagement takes place in relation to digital mediation

2) capture of the notion of publics as temporal flows

3) diversification of what constitutes political action.

Papacharassi and Trevey (2018) importantly acknowledge the importance of curation in creating shared affect, pointing out that on Twitter and Facebook "narratives … will have collaborative but also potentially fragmented texture" and "the cohesiveness of the narrative produced and the story that it tells depends on curation" (92). Overall, however, emphasis on affective publics tended toward centring (at least somewhat) compatible and purposefully directional flows of sentiment.

3.3.3   *Fragmentation of publics*

Critical insights, however, have emerged with regard to the *fragmentation* of publics into smaller and smaller formations. Returning to spatialised conceptualisations, research in this vein frequently looks at nodes within

Twitter, visualising network data to identify how groups coalesce in different sized formations and make assessments about particular power relations within these spaces. In this regard, Bruns & Highfield (2016) discuss the need to understand the public sphere as much more divided than the original Habermassian conception. They identify both "public sphericules" and "micro-publics" (98) as smaller formations at play noting these characteristics:

> *Unpacking the traditional public sphere into a series of public sphericules and micro-publics, none of which are mutually exclusive but which co-exist, intersecting and overlapping in multiple forms, is one approach to understanding the ongoing structural transformation of the public sphere. It is also important to note that these publics may follow their own logics and norms, making use of affordances of social media platforms for their own purposes, which may differ from established practices. The various publics, whether issue or personal, might operate in combination, providing further prominence or activity for each other, but they might also work in opposition, counteracting one another.*
> (Bruns & Highfield 2016:125)

Concern with the fragmenting aspects of publics has assumed increasing urgency with the rapid growth of anti-progressive movements around the world. Holm (2019) describes this as the emergence of "non-subaltern" counterpublics (52). She discusses past scholarly emphasis on counterpublics as directed most predominantly at assessing "good" counterpublics or progressive issues undertaken by historically and structurally marginalised groups. Yet, as she notes, non-subaltern counterpublics pose challenges for notions of social inclusion by competing with structurally marginalised groups to re-assert privilege. Within a U.S. political context, for example, such counterpublics work through strategies of reframing themselves as 'marginalised' at the hands of a biassed left-wing media complex. This is despite such non-subaltern counterpublic group members being historically and structurally privileged (52).

One of the key dynamics to develop as a result of these changes is the fundamentally intertwined nature of multiple voices within networked publics. The notion of intertwined here is significant. This relation

contrasts with early ideals of deliberative consensus-building or Travers' virtuous communication described at the beginning of this chapter. These views were premised on ideas of speech as deliberative, respectful and dialogic exchanges of views. The radically open nature of most networked publics, in fact, more typically produces the space of publics as directly contestory, within fields of actors unknown to one another. Lünenborg & Raetzsch (2018) emphasise that contemporary networked publics are "temporally and situationally sustained in the mediated and/or localised co-presence of actors", (320) which "creates not exclusive but alternating positions in communicative relations" (324). Classic public sphere conceptualisations were developed in reference to face-to-face spaces and settings (i.e. the town square, the coffee shop) and later in counterpublic physical and discursive spaces (e.g. feminist bookstores and DIY zines). Critique and consideration of these concepts as adapted to a networked sphere have followed different trajectories that include both positive and negative assessments. In the positive camp, Benkler (2006) praises networked spaces as providing a better alternative to mass media in enabling more people to assert their points of view, with less possibility of corruption by commercial forces and centralisation of media owners. In more recent years, however, scholars such as Lünenborg & Raetzsch (2018) have stressed how contemporary manifestations of publics and counterpublics have become situated as a part of the affective publics producing conflictual dynamics between "co-present (networks of) actors" (320). The public sphere as originally conceived was understood in *normative* terms, meaning in terms of the *possibilities* for fair access to contribute to public discourse, rather than representative of the activity of all publics. However, as the work of scholars such Holm (2019) identify, current transformations continue to significantly pressure the idea of networked publics as articulable through these older public sphere models. Papacharissi, further, refers to the resulting landscape as one of "pluralisation" over "democratisation" of voice (90).

Indeed, the degree of pluralisation of voice comes into sharp relief when looking at localities within platforms, across platforms, and within and across national contexts. Dispersals of publics according to specific platforms are often framed in popular and industry contexts as associating particular sites and their cultures with specific age groups, eg. Facebook as a Baby Boomer platform, Instagram as a millennial platform and TikTok as a Generation Z platform. Use of specific platforms by demographic groups has been discussed with regard to users' engagement patterns based on race, particularly in terms of Myspace, Tumblr and Twitter (Boyd 2011; Florini 2019). Platform usage within specific country settings also varies greatly, based on the rise of country-specific platforms (e.g. Weibo and QQ in China, Telegram used in 175 countries including Iran). Additionally, platform choice is influenced by in-country availability. In authoritarian contexts, for example, particular platforms may be banned at a given time. In Iran, for example, Instagram is used more heavily than other platforms, as platforms such as Facebook are (at least officially) banned (though some users continue to gain access by technically circumventing these restrictions). In Botswana, just over one million people are on Facebook, whereas just 176,000 users are on Instagram and approximately 85,000 on Twitter (Kamer 2022). Differences in platform demographics and uses can create variously connected or disconnected publics and discourses between multiple platforms.

Networked publics also assemble around particular movements differently from country-to-country. In the original peak wave of the #MeToo movement, for example, the majority of #MeToo tweets—or about 71%—were English-language tweets, as documented across five high-usage time periods (Anderson and Toor 2018), concentrating this initial wave around Global North voices. In particular, as Trott (2021) notes, this clustered around nodes connected to high-profile celebrity figures and a dominant sub-cluster from the Women's March movement (1134). Thus, despite its visibility as a global movement and the media attention

this has garnered, as a networked public, it represented a more centralised configuration amplifying specific voices, rather than the global grassroots equal expression of voices from around the world. Lukose (2018) discusses the "politics of location" (43) in analysis of the #MeToo movement within an Indian context, for example, citing the ways in which #MeToo served as a tipping point, but for activities that were already largely in place in the country, but not globally visible (45). These differences across platform and local usage in networked publics play, I suggest, an important role in shaping the liminal spaces and borders over which digital publics spill and flow across different spheres to engage different constituents.

Users are connected to a huge array of publics through their specific choices. Flows of public sentiment come through an individual's feed via multiple platforms, based on personal connections and interests. Though users may participate together as part of one platform community, each is potentially part of many other communities. The contemporary hybrid media environment thus increases unknowability as a broader public to each member through fragmented discursive terrains. Each may reinforce a different aspect of a counterpublic discourse, right down to the specifics of each and every individual. Building on studies of influencer cultures, Abidin (2021) provides a companion model to Boyd's concept of "networked publics" by conceptualising "refractive publics", as a response to many of the new dynamics and practices to emerge throughout the 2010's. She emphasises how a "saturated" (6) field has produced particular techniques to manage issues of maintaining attention within this saturated space, as well as to obscure 'in plain sight' politically contentious ideas and discourses, via multi-layered practices of discursive coding (4). She notes that the presence of "both human and machine audiences" that are "not always visible to a user" (3) are an important element in constituting the shape of these publics. In Livingstone's (2005) articulation, publics are "bounded by a shared text, whether a worldview or a performance" (cited in Boyd 2010:2). In the current

environment, however, through which performance or worldview is the public formed? Is it defined by platform? By hashtag? By circulating micro- and sub-discourses? In between the layers of a multiply coded post? In fact, the current context of publics puts deeply into question the idea of a shared text as bound to a particular worldview. Rather publics are bound by a much more literal definition of "shared text" in the sense of tagged together.

Bouvier (2022) suggests that fragmentation within affective publics can border on discursive "chaos" (193). In her analysis of #MeToo tweets, she argues that the visibility of the movement is tied to "the flow of effect by a single buzzword" that "may well, on its surface, represent democratic ideals" (193), but which deeper analysis of sentiment reveals is "also driven by things like the need to gain moral capital, perhaps simply for branding purposes" (193). Thus, she concludes that ultimately, affect in the campaign becomes the circulation of "buzz", rather than of shared feeling or desire to collectively resolve a complex social issue. She notes:

> *These hashtags can carry a wide range of discourses and perspectives – they sew together what is, in simple terms, a chaos chamber. This is, I would suggest, is exactly what worried Habermas when he spoke of the breakdown of communicative rationality into violent abstractions.* (193)

Within this landscape of fragmentation, interactions around identities at the level of digital publics, it is argued, frequently play out in a field characterised by the opposite of deliberation and consensus. They become, instead, perpetual liminal border zones to be ritually defended. As Byrne notes: "new media publicness and the overwhelming popularity of online communities is unequivocally tied to creating and defining borders" (Byrne 2008:21).

3.3.4   Key concepts of networked visual counterpublics for this research

The primary concept relevant to this research is that contemporary networked visual counterpublics are produced within a highly fragmented landscape of digital publics. As this research argues, this fragmentation becomes one of the irresolvable paradoxes of digital publics, necessitating an understanding of the space of identity production online as *perpetually* liminal and hyper-contingent. When a visual counterpublic produces a powerful collective assembly which challenges normative constraints, including through the impulse specifically for collective self-definition, it may be subject to forms of derecognition or manipulation in virtual realms. As a result, it is impossible to reduce the overall impact of such counterpublics to any single calculation or understanding of agency or empowerment. The act, promise and legacy of self-definition are, according to Patricia Hill Collins (2002), central tenets of Black American feminist thought. Self-definition is fundamentally enacted in and by the self alone. Yet, virtual spaces are rife with examples of derecognising (i.e. through trolling, reframing or other means) the discursive identity production of others in the attempt to counter that right to self-definition. One of the biggest problems with producing a blanket dismissal of image-based articulations of resistance online is how this implicitly demands that marginalised bodies and voices 'perfect' the terms of their own resistance through a lens of 'that which cannot be (digitally) refuted'. The idea of perfecting resistance to meet this requirement is directly contrary to the idea of self-definition *as* resistance. In their book, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism*, Milner and Philips (2017) describe the resulting paradoxes within a frame of "ambivalence" noting:

> *On the one hand, digital media allow individuals to control, in unprecedented ways, how they play with their own identities. These media provide a set of tools that can be used to earnestly express, deliberately deceive, or amorphously blend biographical fact and biographical fiction. On the other hand, these same media and tools can strip individuals of control, also in an unprecedented way: they allow users to play*

with the identities of others—essentially weaponizing someone's mask—by collapsing context, spreading secrets and hijacking selves. (73)

Digital spaces are thus defined by both productive and unproductive stabilities that must be closely explored in context. Strategic and selective forms of visibility are engaged in as part of counterpublic dynamics. Warner (2002), for example, elaborates on the freeing aspects of operating within a counterpublic space outside of dominant "speech protocols" (87). He makes the point that by circulating within a closed venue, "circulatory space" is "marked by the very suspension" of normative disciplinary speech. Warner says through this process "the individual struggle with stigma is transposed" becoming instead a matter of conflict "between modes of publicness" (87). Ultimately, "the expansive nature of public address will seek to keep moving that frontier … to seek more and more places to circulate where people will recognize themselves in its address; but no one is likely to be unaware of the risk and conflict involved" (87). Toepfl and Piwoni (2018) meanwhile define these two spaces at the border of the counterpublic as "inward-oriented" and "outward-oriented", with the first directed at the more secluded space of "alternative identities, interests, and needs" and the second as the set of goals directed toward "engaging with wider audiences and targeting dominant publics with 'counterpublicity'" (Asen 2000: 441). Bailey (2021) cites Myers to articulate the conflicted emotions emerging in this process:

> *When it feels precious to us, then we hold it close and near and dear because it came from us, because it was for us, and it never really had any intentions of being anything but what it was. When it reaches external communities, when it reaches other eyes, when it begins to catch on, when it grows larger than itself, doesn't that medicine begin to weaken?* (Myers, cited in Bailey:171)

Warner (2002) further argues that when counterpublics grow into social movements they are forced to adapt themselves to the "performatives of rational-critical discourse" and in so doing may "cede the original hope of transforming, not just policy, but the space of public life itself" (89). The visibility politics of these oscillations

between micro-publics, enclaves, counterpublics and publics are not new, however, navigating them within highly fragmented and contentious mediated publics sets these functions within a different field. That field is demarcated by higher potential reward by gaining quick and broad scale visibility for a particular idea or movement. It also presents risks, however, of negatively impacting participants along the way. As some activists of colour have stressed, identity claims become rapidly mobilised within larger global publics through the demands of spectacle, e.g. of death or suffering. This is exemplified through the involvement of high-powered celebrities involved in #MeToo, or of the video-witnessed murder of George Floyd in the Black Lives Matter movement. Ultimately, not all projects and movements will have a tipping point (or desire to). Some will continue to live on in smaller publics, that nonetheless create significant meaning for participants. Others will have tipping points, that while sparking a global wave, may suffer erasures of voice as well as active backlash, targeting, and discursive "chaos" along the way. Oppositional identity formation and circulation, thus take place within this terrain. The key question arises: how is marginalised identity negotiated within digital publics and what specific patterns emerge within these heterogeneous flows? Significant to understanding negotiations of identity online is understanding the dynamics that take place at digital borders.

CHAPTER FOUR

LIMINAL PUBLICS

The previous chapter reviewed the key theoretical models and empirical concerns within which the major questions of this research are situated. Having reviewed major public sphere, feminist and digital scholarship analysing networked public transformations and concerns they raise, this section will cover the specific

framework within which my case studies will be assessed. The next sections will outline the concept of *liminal*

publics advanced by this thesis, as well as further conceptual terminology for illuminating patterns of

engagement within these publics. The first part of the chapter focuses on why the concept of liminality is

useful in this regard. It will then build a framework for an analytic of liminality, incorporating three central

aspects: self-performance as the activation of liminal spaces, the multiple roles of ambiguity/unknowability and

patterns of participant engagement at the borders of digital publics.

4.1   WHY LIMINALITY?

4.1.1   *Defining a new context of digital liminality*

Lünenborg (2019) emphasises the need for models of publics that are able to describe a "performative, fragile

and dynamic understanding of publics and counterpublics" in a "more complex and dynamic mode of

characterising public articulations than in the past". The "plurality and polyvocality and modes of

articulation," necessitate, she argues, "an analytic approach to describing and understanding ongoing

turbulences and new opportunities in public articulations" (322–323). I contend that to respond to this need,

it is critical to further shift the analytical lens toward understanding what types of contestations are taking

place at the borders—*within* digital public formations and between digital publics and outside contexts that

shape their impact, either offline, across national borders, or in and outside of institutions, to name just some

of the possible interactions impacting negotiations of identity. Papacharissi refers to liminality as an important

aspect of networked publics. Her emphasis is on the way in which digital in-between spaces enable individuals

to feel their way into processes of news storytelling. This permits them to "make space for their own place in

the story, and potentially lay claim to how these stories combine to form histories" (Papacharissi 2015:28).

Drawing on anthropologist Turner's theory of liminality, Papacharissi emphasises his understanding of the

"position of social and structural ambiguity" (2015:32) created by these spaces that gives rise to, as Turner expresses it, "a realm of *pure possibility* whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise" (1967:97). What is perhaps most striking about Turner's description are the words *pure possibility*. This would seem to cohere with the earliest ideas about what the Internet held for social relations. Liminality in Turner's sense was also associated with thresholds between one state that progresses to another, for example, in rites of passage where adolescence becomes a liminal phase between childhood and adulthood. Within a liminal state, individuals detach from a prior state to a zone in which cultural standards and categories become ambiguous (Turner 1969). As earlier sections have argued, digital publics are constitutively unstable, ambiguous and, in many ways, unknowable. The realm of *unimagined audiences* as opposed to imagined ones is large and considerably overlooked. There are a number of reasons why, I contend, we should think of networked publics as liminal—not, however, in the sense of moving in a linear or deliberative fashion forward through thresholds. Rather, by liminal publics, my focus is on in-between spaces characterised by continually re-setting of borders within and outside of digital publics, including the emergence of more complex processes of recognition and derecognition. As Lünenborg and Raetzsch (2017) describe:

> *Although it is now common to identify publics by a hashtag (e.g., #blacklivesmatter, #occupy or #weareallkhaledsaid), we are still challenged to acknowledge—analytically and theoretically— that publics may not be entities (in the sense of a fixed set of actors) but continuously emerge from an ongoing process between different actors becoming aware of each other.* (13)

Thus, liminal publics, is intended to point to a zone of both productive and unproductive instabilities in networked spaces. UndIn the contemporary environment, digital liminality is perhaps best understood as an in-between space of opportunity that is nonetheless also shaped by specific dynamics and patterns in these instabilities. Put simply, there is no single way to view digital mediation—the use of the form to produce

counterpublic discourse and assert identity is always a combination of positive *and* negative dynamics happening simultaneously, sometimes within the space of just a few posts. The opportunity to use digital mediation as a way to perform the self offers higher risk/higher reward forms of visibility. The ability to bypass gatekeepers enables quick access to connect with others. Self-performance can initiate gestures of response and (ideally) create reciprocal connections across these spaces with some publics. Self-performances activate the liminal spaces of digital mediation through collective self-presentation that can function as a visual counterpublic. Such performances, however, when not shielded or enclaved in safe spaces as Squires discusses, circulate through platformed publics in ways that can be both connective, as well as disconnective and diffusive. erstanding the flow of affective publics in shaping and mobilising visible sentiment (e.g. in the Occupy or #MeToo movements) is only part of the story. These movements raise, but also obscure, different voices through their peaks, experience transitory tactical benefits and sometimes suffer inglorious ends. Thus, this thesis suggests a somewhat modified context of liminality is needed to address the landscape of digital publics than those characterised by theorists such as Lünenborg, Abidin and Bouvier.

4.1.2   *Experiences of publics at digital borders*

I suggest more broadly that the properties of networked publics and cultures have collectively reframed sociality and public discourse along the following trajectory—from being in public, to being in publics, to *experiencing publics.* As was discussed in the previous chapter, many of the interactions seemingly present in digital publics are indicative of *intensified* social borders, within a larger sphere of network-enabled instability. The performance of identity even within the smallest online interaction (say of a tweet or a like) itself becomes political contestation. With publics increasingly in processes of mobilisation against one another, participants may be subject to (or even bombarded with) the discourses of antagonistic publics. Hence, experiences of

publics, in which particular publics circulate in the presence of one another, each articulating pre-established frames of reference sutured into particular spaces. These experiences of publics do not always appear overtly hostile. As the case studies in this research demonstrate, some of these experiences happen in the form of 'shallow' publics, that express their own kinds of derecognitions in the 'silences' of social media as will be discussed in the next section.

4.1.3   Platform ambiguity and unknowability

The liminal spaces of publics are also importantly impacted not by pure possibility, but by structured forms of ambiguity/unknowability. In order to explain further some of how these characteristics work in context, it is first necessary to discuss particular structures of specific social media platforms, Facebook and Instagram. I'll discuss some of the features of platforms and the practices they engender, as they specifically relate to issues of engaging with marginalised identity. First, in all projects in this research utilising Facebook and Instagram as platforms, dominant patterns of engagement typically evidenced a larger number of likes and shares (Facebook, Instagram) and views (Instagram) than comments. While individual posts garner different proportional distributions of each type of engagement between the likes, shares and comments received, in general the simplest forms of responses (i.e. likes and shares) tend to predominate. Scholarship from multiple disciplines has sought to make sense of various patterns and practices of liking, commenting and sharing, largely within marketing frameworks in an effort to establish best practices that will garner deeper engagements for commercial purposes (e.g. Colicev 2021). These investigations have, for example, attempted to identify particular types of content as either more emotionally affective or cognitively engaging, thus producing different responses as a result (e.g. likes = affective, comments=cognitive). Such distinctions are contested, however, by research showing, for example, that comments are more often an affective (rather than cognitive)

response generated in response to controversial content. As Jungselius (2019) notes in research on participants' underlying motivations for liking particular content "acknowledging an ambiguity ... participants' descriptions show that there is no universal meaning of likes and no obvious interpretation that may be applied to every like [on Instagram], neither given nor received" (accessed online). There is thus a considerable degree of ambiguity/unknowability in these structures, which is significant in the sense that most day-in, day-out engagement takes place through practices of liking and viewing. Review of actual comments, by contrast demonstrates a multiplicity of attitudes/dispositions toward specific content. Comments thus demonstrate some of possible types of reactions/engagements that publics are producing in response to this content. Yet, these comments cannot be considered in any way directly representative of the larger public constituted through more commonplace use of simpler forms of engagement (likes and shares). Put simply, what factors are behind a like? Moreover, what (multiple) publics are formed through the imprint of likes and views?

Further, it is problematic to frame a community as constituted by its total number of followers, because content may be viewed elsewhere in other contexts by non-followers. Simultaneously, followers who are less engaged with an account may see specific content less and less frequently, as dictated by algorithmic shaping that feeds content back based on engagement. These particular platform publics are thus constituted by ambivalent structures that result in:

1) much of the nuance of sentiment behind likes and shares unknown

2) comments gaining an outsized role in appearing to reflect the broader tenor of that public

3) comments demonstrating particular dispositions that may or may not be held by a majority of the platform community.

Of the many possible types of participants in such communities, those who regularly just "like" or view are by far the dominant category, projecting a community that is ironically quite ambiguous in terms of sentiment, underneath the banner of a seemingly straightforward action as "liking".

Within a platformed community built through practices of self-performance and identity construction, particular dispositions to posted content are particularly significant. Affirmation through likes and emojis can become an important part of ritualistically reinforcing and legitimating a particular assertion of identity. However, if used to affirm that identity for reasons connected to other motivations they can exercise counterproductive functions such as performativity or, for example, exotification. Expressed as a function of likes and views then, is an unknown public. In this sense, socially mediated functions can have paradoxical effects in relation to the same central discourse or text. Because marginalised identity projects, in particular, aim at asserting non-dominant identity in public spaces, a deeper understanding of this engagement is critical to understanding interactions as functions of allyship, performativity or other motivations, which could be, for example, relationships of shallow support or other types of derecognition or (dis/)engagement. Contradictory types of sentiment that become evident in the comments, suggest potentially divided publics, or at the very least ones that are 'unknowable' in consequential ways. Though these characteristics are particular to Facebook and Instagram, it is useful to compare this to Bouvier's description shared earlier in this chapter of how Twitter hashtags can sew together participants from similarly disparate dispositions/motivations into "chaos chambers". Hashtags appear to articulate a singular proposition, e.g. #MeToo. However, as Bouvier rightly points out, motivation for the circulation of this hashtag can come from many directions, including purposes of branding and moral capital. Retweeting may amplify an overall movement, but it is still underpinned by ambiguous structures of engagement. Gillespie (2012) uses the metaphor of "hieroglyphs" to describe Twitter

publicness: "the shape of the 'us' on social media platforms is by no means transparent. What the Twitter algorithms produce are "not barometric readings but hieroglyphs" (Gillespie 2012:20).

Importantly, these issues are not the result solely of ideological differences, but of how such differences combine with social media affordances in a way that is prone to ambiguity, while appearing as cohesion. This is not to say that such publics might not be largely unified, just that they are (practically speaking) unknowable. Practices of liking are, in a sense, more cohesive from the point of view of marketers and governments with interests in commercialised and surveilled publics—meaning that in terms of targeting individuals/eyeballs for to sell to or control, a schematic imprint of *what* individuals will engage with, and how intensively/virally they engage, is useful. For platform companies, engagement has the purpose of producing first and foremost, a commercial imprint identifying and promoting monetisable patterns of participation that favour the greatest affective engagement, regardless of how or why that engagement is produced. Further, from the point of view of surveilled publics, liking becomes a way to map and crack down on dissent, for example, in forms of "digital dictatorship" (Feldstein 2021:26). As Papacharassi and Trevey (2018) note:

> *Think of technology and politics as two uneasy buddies. On the one hand, politicians and the public hope that technology will somehow revive democracies or bring about revolutions in non-democratic regimes. On the other, technology is rarely created to serve political purposes, and doing so frequently undermines its potential (e.g. Papacharissi 2010; Curran, Fenton & Freedman 2012).* (87)

Put another way, as high-profile whistleblower Edward Snowden expresses: "Technology doesn't have a Hippocratic oath" (cited in Mathur 2020, online). Case in point, social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook are subject to the gamification of publics for politically antagonistic purposes—for example, when flooded with fake publics through the use of bots to destabilise counterpublic functions (e.g. in the recent attack on Iranian feminist #MeToo activists with one million bots (*Quirium* 16 June 2022). Ultimately, of

course the danger here is in the collective networked sphere becoming so dominated by mobilizations of antagonistic publics that we are faced with one more institution in need of, in Papacharrisi's words, re-imagining.

As a point of contrast, the liminal spaces of Tumblr, shaped by both design and cultural practice, work through a different set of (potentially more productive) relationships to online ambiguity. Tumblr blogging cultures produce relational spaces of identity largely through "knowing dispositions" (Kanai 2017). As Abidin and Brown (2018) note citing Kanai:

> *The relational experience of Tumblr connects users through social presentation and affect based on "revealing a set of knowing dispositions, instrumentalization, and distillation of situations and feelings".* (Kanai 2017:922)

Because Tumblr does not require profile identity in the same way as Facebook and Instagram, users are free to remain more anonymous. As scholars have noted, this capability has been important for marginalised voices, such as in black feminist and queer communities, for example, to achieve powerful forms of relational identity and enclaved (in Squires' terms) forms of identity and discourse production. Ekland et al. (2021) notes that online "anonymity is a complex process played out on different levels and defined by various actors" (accessed online). The role of ambiguity/unknowability thus plays a significant role in the liminal publics of digital spaces. Each platform has particular anonymity affordances provided in the liminal spaces it shapes and each context of practice within those platforms is impacted differently by the exercise of those affordances. This is not to say that Tumblr is immune to the de-stabilising effects of trolling, for example. However, it simply underscores the point that liminality in publics is a function of particular opportunities and foreclosures based on specifics of platform use. Though most of the case studies in this research take place within Facebook and

Instagram, a Tumblr public is also discussed as a good point of comparison for how structures of

ambiguity/unknowability work in liminal publics.

4.2   DERECOGNITION

Bennett & Segerberg (2012) refer to the contemporary era of politics as connective, rather than collective.

Through such politics, it is argued, rapid dissemination and organisation around easily personalised themes,

such as the Occupy Wall Street Movement's "we are the 99%" slogan, can take place. Connective politics

produce viral flight lines that are incredibly important to raising visibility. The patterns of engagement *within*

digital publics, however, reveal shallower engagements of consequence. When comments are made within

platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, these are more easily assessed for particular discursive relationships

to the posted content. This thesis tracks comment patterns within each case study related to reciprocal gestures

and affirmations and participation in projects of self-performance and world-building that create relational

dynamics. It also tracks, however, forms of engagement that speak to different relationships to identity

performances. As Florini (2019) notes:

> *The current technological landscape is one in which convergence and participatory media are more*
> *prevalent than ever and social media connect and circulate information at unprecedented speeds. This*
> *presents powerful opportunities for … marginalised voices, while simultaneously allowing existing*
> *mechanisms for erasing, silencing, and denying these voices to be adapted and extended into the same*
> *technological terrain.* (16)

Before discussing specific patterns I identify, I want to situate these in the context of a nascent vocabulary

emerging to describe how erasure is socio-technically enacted. Scholars such as Trott (2021), Holm (2019) and

Kuo (2018) have begun to identify various erasures that take place within Twitter campaigns specifically,

through particular discursive framings, as well as centralisation of activity within specific nodes or groups of

users, and factors of social movement leadership that produce stratifications and hierarchies of voice. They

raise ideas of "exclusionary framing" (Trott 2021:1136) through discourses that tie particular movements to the experiences of particular groups, for example, only women rather than of all victims of sexual assault in #MeToo, processes of de-centring in which participants respond to critique of marginalised groups by centring their own discomfort, and "delegitimisation" (1138), in which bad actors participate in racist and misogynist trolling. Such work traces inequalities of voice and agenda-setting within a number of movements. For example, Black American women founded two of largest global movements in history, #MeToo started by Tarana Burke and #BlackLivesMatter by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. Yet, the success and visibility of these movements has not prevented either its founders or other black women, including trans black women, from having their visibility and/or interests frequently obscured (Trott 2021; Locke 2016). Lesser broadscale recognition of Tarana Burke, in favour of high-profile white Hollywood actress Alyssa Milano, as the face catapulting #MeToo into public consciousness, is a prime example of the difficulty marginalised women face in gaining visibility. Such exclusion is not only from hegemonic discourses, but also from (their own) social protest narratives. This is, I suggest, a critical and still developing area of study for understanding the conditions and practices that influence the conditions for marginalised identity production and discourse online. Such derecognition happens in diverse ways within different settings, platforms, and movements and an important contribution of the work of the current research is to document patterns emerging from the formations of publics under study. I will now discuss the patterns of dis/connection/derecognition observed.

4.3   SPECTATORSHIP

To begin discussion of spectatorship, it is important to recall early utopian ideas imagining how the internet would shift interaction with media. By this I refer to the view that, in contrast to older forms such as TV and

film, it was anticipated that two-way media would emphasise the presence of co-actors, rather than actors and spectators. This would functionally break older notions of the passive audience, in which viewers are perceived as receiving and absorbing a one-way flow of information.[11] However, the dynamics of social media created different sorts of relationships than were originally envisioned. In particular, on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, dominant practices have tended more toward participants playing specific roles around content. Theorists have documented and debated some of these roles, for example, the "lurker" pejoratively understood as what most do in social media in simply viewing without engaging or the "listener" which offers a more favourable view of this less visibly active participation (Barnes 2018:123). A considerable degree of theorisation has tended toward identifying these actions as aligned to certain psychological characteristics, for example, the "narcissistic" qualities of the active content producer (Fenne große, Mehl and Eid 2014:165) or the voyeuristic "lurker" (Munar 2010:412). What interests me in questions of spectatorship, however, are the ways in which specific spectator positions are enacted through patterns of commenting and other forms of metavoicing (likes, shares) rather than as transparent expressions of innate personality characteristics. With regard to marginalised identity and protest, this has potential implications for what social media "does" around identity. Thus, spectatorship here refers to several types of interaction which are the combination both of affordance-based interaction and also social positionality with regard to identity performance. One such example is what I'll call the 'cheering fan'. Cheering fans are not by definition morally suspect. A cheering fan who has experienced the same forms of marginalisation as a protestor, for example, may evince relational solidarities based on shared experience. However, when a cheering fan from a hegemonic identity group

---

[11] It is important to note that by "functionally break", I refer to the creation of digital media that enables audiences to observably participate and engage as active audiences with comments and content production. The notion of the "passive audience" had largely been conceptually debunked by Stuart Hall by 1973 through his questioning and critique of the presumed passivity of audiences viewing TV and film.

congratulates a protestor from a marginalised identity group for their "bravery", in particular, using "phatic"

(i.e. conversational) communication styles, gifs and emojis, when that protester may have risked their life to

protest, the question becomes, what kind of solidarity is being performed? Miller (2017) argues that the "rise

of a phatic online culture in social media activism has atrophied the potential for digital communications

technologies to help foster social change by creating a conversational environment based on limited forms of

expressive solidarity as opposed to an engaged, content-driven, dialogic public sphere" (251). Spectatorship in

this sense draws on Chouliaraki's (2013) work outlining the asymmetrical and disconnected relationships that

emerge in the mediated viewing of the suffering of others, within the construct of a post-humanitarian and

post-emotional condition, in part intensified through processes of digital mediation. She notes:

> *What the term [post-humanitarianism] refers to is the ways in which emotion becomes increasingly*
> *detached from the contexts in which it is produced, that is to say, from the domain of immediate subjective*
> *experience (and its aesthetics of realism), and is inserted into contexts of technological communication*
> *where it becomes the object of self-conscious reflection and regulation. Whereas still dependent on realistic*
> *imagery (of the poor, the wounded or the about-to-die), the key feature of post-humanitarianism lies*
> *precisely in loosening up this 'necessary' link between seeing suffering and feeling for the sufferer and, so,*
> *in decoupling emotion for the sufferer from acting on the cause of suffering. At the heart of this*
> *communicative structure lies, in this sense, a particular form of subjectivity that Mestrovic calls*
> *'post-emotional' – 'the post-emotional individual', he says, 'takes cues from … the media and cyberspace as*
> *to when he or she should rationally choose to exhibit a vicarious indignation, niceness or other pre-packaged*
> *emotions'—emotions, Mestrovic continues, that are 'easy to slip on and off' and, therefore, remain*
> *'detached from genuine moral commitment and or meaningful social action' (1997: xi–xii).* (cited in
> Chouliaraki 2013:91)

Mortensen and Trenz (2016) suggest that commenting practices can invoke a "moral spectatorship" (343)

through particular practices of commenting and engagement with the suffering of others. However, this

research suggests the use of phatic communication and/or language that centres the commenter's authority

with regard to that suffering, fundamentally undercut ideas of moral spectatorship by emphasising an

asymmetrical power arrangement and detachment from the context of suffering. Another key aspect of

spectatorial engagements with regard to marginalised identity performance relates more broadly to the issue of "liking" as a mode of engagement. As discussed, individual motivation for liking content is indiscernible in the absence of specific comments. As a broad structure in which participants ritualistically engage in "liking" this content, rather than engaging with it in comments, a number of potentially complex and paradoxical relationships emerge around identity. On the one hand, likes can be understood as a form of validation that may bring positive emotional effects and feelings of support for a specific projected identity. On the other hand, processes of spectatorship—of making the decision to grant a "like" or not—may simply reinforce and ritualise unseen/unknowable oppressive/regressive power relationships.

4.4   RECIPROCITY OF GESTURE

This is another important dimension of issues of spectatorship - one without simple resolution. As will be described in more detail in case study chapters, reciprocity of gesture is an incredibly powerful tool for those who share a similar experience to mirror and model each other in collective assembly. The relationship of those outside that shared experience, however, is more ambiguous. Amplification and elevation of marginalised voices (e.g. through retweeting, sharing) can provide a powerful form of support (though underlying motivations for doing so remain unknowable, e.g. the issues of performativity). Additionally, the sharing of protest avatars can demonstrate a reciprocal gesture (again, still potentially performative in terms of allyship). However, in terms of reciprocal gestures that perform more active, less spectatorial engagements, this becomes far more complicated. The problems of performing specific reciprocities will be discussed in each case study.

4.5   SELF-AUTHORISING/LEGITIMATING SPEECH AND DISCURSIVE HIJACKING

Self-authorising/legitimating speech and discursive hijacking refer to comments addressed to identity performances that drift thematically and/or refute direct claims expressed via an image or video post. This is

different from an act of trolling. Self-authorising/legitimating comments situate themselves still as 'support', but contest or redirect—in a sense "speak back" to and/or refute—aspects of the identity discourse presented. The comment appears as a corrective mode of speech and self-authorising/self-legitimating function drawing attention to the commenter as 'expert'.

Additionally, while not a new concept in digital media scholarship, "hijacking" refers to commentary that uses a particular post to further an agenda different to that expressed by the content. Jackson and Welles (2015) discuss how hijacking can be used as a technique of positive disruption of dominant narratives. They explore this in their work on the #NYPD hashtag that participants used to "generate and promote counterpublic narratives about racial profiling and police misconduct" (932). Abidin (2021) notes the numerous ways in which hijacking takes place, for example, to "mock or criticise" a specific hashtag sponsor. However, hijacking can also be used in other ways, as demonstrated in case studies of this research as a form of de-recognition in which a commenter may 'rant' about another topic consequently shifting and re-framing the terms of the discussion away from the topic at hand to meet other pernicious agendas. This is absolutely not to say that forms of derecognition somehow delegitimise the terms of an identity performance or protest. Rather, it simply points to the need to delve more deeply into the liminal spaces of digital media to understand the patterns of interaction, as framed through affordance and ideology, but also recognition of the role of the unknowns, including the silences in "likes".

4.6   PERFORMANCES AND PUBLICS: APPLYING A LIMINAL FRAMEWORK

Thus, to recap the primary components of the liminal framework developed in this thesis, my use of the term *liminal publics* is designed to capture the following areas of emphasis:

1) The concept of liminal publics does not embrace digital space as one of *pure possibility.* Rather, it is one in which specific opportunities emerge to assert marginalised identity, as well as patterns of ambiguity/unknowability and (dis/)engagement in digitally mediated publics.

2) Liminal publics are (increasingly) border contestations. Contestation is between both individuals and aggregate publics (at the extreme end, fake publics created through technological disruption).

3) Structural ambiguity and unknowability throughout is shaped by particular platform affordances. Ambiguity is structured in different ways, but is a universal quality of networked publics with particular implications for marginalised identity.

4) Liminality emphasises interactions in the in-between digital spaces as well in relation to offline, institutional and global contexts. These liminal spaces play an important role in how, and how far, assertions/representations of marginalised identity 'travel'.

5) Liminal publics as a concept is not intended to replace concepts of counterpublics or enclaves. Much scholarly work has demonstrated the strength of counterpublics online as one type of formation. However, it directs attention to the ways in which, in the contemporary networked environment, counterpublic-building intersects with other types of public formations and interactions.

6) The primary form of counterpublic under study in the present research is what is termed a visual counterpublic. Visual counterpublics are situated within the broader environment of liminal publics.

A liminality focus points an analytical lens at the specific negotiations of the in-between spaces of publics. In doing so, it enables us to look at the formation of particular kinds of publics and observe patterns that take place in those negotiations. This approach is attentive to structures of ambivalence/unknowability/instability

as a constitutive part of the landscape of digital publics, rather than a necessary by-product without consequence for participants online. The contemporary, fragmented, digitally-mediated public sphere thus introduces what I've termed liminal publics. The perpetual contingency of liminal publics lies not only in large-scale shifts in affective flows, but in intensifying and fragmented everyday 'micro'-experiences of publics, even from one post to the next. Visual counterpublics, which are manifestations of countermainstream voice produced through collective self-performance, operate as part of liminal publics.

Counterpublics, including feminist, Black and queer counterpublics, have historically operated in a variety of pre-digital mediated forms, e.g. from feminist bookstores to Black hair salons to queer film festivals. With digital mediation, and particularly social media, counterpublic spaces have arguably become much more porous, primarily functioning in "plain sight" in open and unregulated virtual public spaces. This, in my view, requires a shift in thinking from older notions of the public sphere, publics and counterpublics. The collective digitally mediated environment becomes less a binary division between a mainstream public sphere of dominant hegemonic values and a subsphere of opposing countervoices. While scholars such as Lünenborg and Abidin have rightly noted a fragmenting polarisation of voice, as I'll contend, contemporary digital publics go beyond this to a state of hyperfragmentation, hyper-speed in micro experiences of publics, hyper-instability, and ambiguity, all best encapsulated as *liminal* publics. Public and counterpublic commentary continually overlay collective virtual communication like 'graffiti' perpetually re-claiming the same semantic space for opposing concerns, and consequently amplifying noise, dilution, de-recognition, and ambiguity, sometimes to the point of, as Bouvier describes, discursive "chaos". Visual counterpublics in this space remain an important form of resistance by enabling marginalised voices and identities to self-define, but increasingly operate in the deeply contingent space of liminal publics. In contemporary virtual public space there are few adequate

regulations to address the virtual 'vandalisation' of digital counterpublic production, as would apply in pre-digital settings, e.g. if offensive commentary were spray painted across a feminist bookstore this would constitute a punishable crime. Though legal frameworks are attempting to catch up with internet speech, the sheer volume and diffusion of such speech makes this far more difficult to police. (Consequently, the rise of liminal publics has also seen the growth of counter-strategies such as the use of coded in-group language e.g. on Black Twitter (Florini 2014) or in TikTok (Abidin 2021) to virtually enclave counterpublic discourse within the visible flow of liminal publics.) Having proposed this conceptualisation of visual counterpublics and liminal publics to better understand the interplay within digitally mediated spaces, I will now turn to applying this framework to my three case studies. I am using examples of visual counterpublics that have been explicitly "called into being" for the purpose of asserting particular marginalised identities.

CHAPTER FIVE

TRANSNATIONAL SELF-PERFORMANCE: MY STEALTHY FREEDOM

5.1   INTRODUCTION

Before beginning discussion of the My Stealthy Freedom case study, it is useful to provide a brief review of the contemporary political context of Iran. Iran is currently governed as a theocratic Islamic Republic based on Sharia law derived from the Quran and adjudicated under the rule of clerics. Prior to this, Iran was under the leadership of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi whose government was overthrown in the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Leader of the revolution Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini became the Supreme Leader of Iran until 1989. Upon his death, Ali Khamenei replaced him as Supreme Leader. Within this setting, mandatory hijab is a

key pillar of the government's populist religious rule. Women who are found to be wearing "poor hijab" or loosely tied head scarves can be detained by officials known as the morality police.

The Iranian Women's Rights Movement has a long history tracing back to the Iranian Constitutional Revolution in 1910. This movement was responsible for achieving women's suffrage in 1963 and the expansion of women's political participation and laws in 1975 through the Family Protection Law empowering women with further divorce and custody rights. The Women's Movement continues to today including the *One Million Signatures Campaign to End Discrimination Against Women* which garners petition signatures for reforms. Within the Revolutionary Period, there emerged two schools of thought creating disagreement among women in approach to religious rule. As Mahdi (2004) notes "the most important division contributing to conflicting expectations from and outcome of the revolution is the division between secular and religious women" (436). Mahdi (2004) explains that secular middle and upper class women were restricted in their public sphere access and required to comply with mandatory dress codes and curtail some of their professional and educational pursuits. By contrast, "traditional women, who were often banned in the past by their parents or religious authorities from having a presence in the public sphere, now found the dominant Islamic atmosphere in society less socially intimidating and more religiously acceptable" (436–437).

Despite the strong religious influence of the government currently, as the BBC has reported, Iran today has "the lowest mosque attendance of any Islamic country" (Soleimani 2008, accessed online). The population of Iran is about 68 million people, with approximately 70% of the nation aged 30 or younger (Berson 2009). This large generation of young people has faced numerous struggles including tight social restrictions, frequent political unrest, poverty and unemployment, with around 50% unable to find work (Bazoobandi 2018). Many

Iranian young people use various forms of digital media, however, the Iranian government has also banned

many independent political organisations, censored media, and officially blocked social media platforms

including Facebook, Telegram, Twitter and YouTube and, most recently, Signal. Citizens can be arrested for

social media posts categorised anti-Islam or anti-government and the State participates in Internet shutdowns

and are working to increase surveillance as well as crackdown on digital tools that enable the citizens to get

around censorship (Esfandiari 2022).

Within the latest uprisings beginning September 2022, the issue of forced hijab and the arrest of Mahsa

Amini became a tipping point for much deeper concerns within the country, setting off months of protests.

Protests have incorporated unveiling, marching, singing and sharing protest footage where possible through

applications like Instagram and WhatsApp. In response, the government has pursued a consistent strategy of

shutting down/slowing Internet services to create a "chokehold" on protest momentum. As *Wired Magazine*

recently reported, Internet shutdowns began on 19 September. They note:

> *Multiple internet-monitoring organisations, including Kentik, Netblocks, Cloudflare, and the Open*
> *Observatory of Network Interference, have documented the disruptions. Mobile network operators,*
> *including the country's biggest providers—Irancell, Rightel, and MCI—have faced rolling blackouts, the*
> *groups say. Multiple mobile providers have lost connectivity for around 12 hours at a time, with Netblocks*
> *saying it has seen a "curfew-style pattern of disruptions." Felicia Anthonio, who leads NGO Access Now's*
> *fight against internet shutdowns, says the group's partners have reported that text messages containing*
> *Amini's name have been blocked.* (Burgess, 23 September 2022, accessed online)

Eight years prior to these events in 2014, My Stealthy Freedom (MSF) began as the personal project of Masih

Alinejad, a female Iranian journalist who lives and works in the US in self-imposed exile from her home

country. *MSF* is a campaign against Iran's mandatory hijab restrictions that has operated through Telegram,

Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to publish and promote images of Iranian women protesting hijab laws by

removing their veils, originally in stealthy moments, singing unaccompanied in public, and/or performing

other acts of civil disobedience in protest of gender-based restrictions. Since its initial launch as a simple webpage, the campaign has evolved into a multi-platform initiative. The *MSF* campaign and its founder have significantly featured within the Western press, including *The New York Times, Washington Post, Economist* and *The Guardian,* among others, gaining wider global public prominence, while also achieving significant social media metric benchmarks, including reaching greater than 1M followers on Facebook and amassing 8.3M followers for Alinejad's Instagram account. At the start of the research period, the MSF campaign web page featured a very basic and informal 'homegrown' structure with a few images of women protestors. Over time the website presence has grown and evolved considerably into a more formal structure including, as of completion of this thesis, a descriptor as a "non-proft public foundation, with no political affiliation, dedicated to promoting the actions of women struggling for their rights in Iran" and "using cross-cultural dialogue to strengthen the voices of Iranian women" (My Stealthy Freedom website, accessed July 2022). Campaign volunteers help with general campaign coordination. The website has also expanded to include journalistic-style feature stories and a donation page. As will be discussed in this case study, MSF's declaration of having "no political affiliations" operates in considerable tension with campaign framing in specific social media platforms and media coverage. Further, as will be discussed, the facilitation of "cross-cultural dialogue" has faced significant challenges within digitally mediated settings. Additionally, from a platform perspective, over the period of study the campaign's focus shifted toward greater emphasis on Instagram. This can partially be traced to the banning/filtering of content on Facebook by Iranian authorities, and the rise of a new generation of younger users rapidly adopting the platform. While some scholars have previously suggested that lack of Instagram regulations in Iran is based on its perceived modest affordances for politically contentious communication (Khazraee & Novak 2018), the present research finds evidence to suggest otherwise. In fact, as

recently as May 2022, reports emerged that Iranian intelligence officials approached Persian-language content

Instagram moderators with attempted bribes to remove particular accounts. As one content moderator

reported: "I was offered 5,000 to 10,000 euros ... to delete an account. They were especially after removing

Masih Alinejad" (Ghobadi 2022). Self-performances as activism, including short narrative video formats

popularised by Instagram, are integrated with a broader set of awareness, protest, and promotion efforts within

the campaign to increase viability and relevance to younger generations of protestors and participants.

MSF has received considerable scholarly attention as a test case for evaluating social media affordances

and effectiveness in facilitating collective identity processes (Khazraee & Novak 2018; Stewart & Schultze 2017;

Talebian and Talebian 2017; Khiabany 2015; Koo 2016; Karimi 2014). Overall, prior analyses of MSF focus

predominantly on its early launch content and examples of unveiling only. Scholars continue to debate

whether MSF constitutes a form of "slacktivism" (Talebian and Talebian 2017), i.e. digital activism with little

effort, commitment or impact, or a successful protest movement driven by transformative socio-material

engagements with digital technology (Khazraee & Novak 2018; Stuart & Schultze 2017). More recently,

Tafakori (2021) has explored MSF in comparison with the Girls of Enghelab Street movement, discussing the

affective engagements of each and their reception within a Farsi-speaking digitally mediated context. Khazraee

& Novak (2018) discuss the "affordances for discourse" and the "affordances for performance" (1) that social

media platforms enable in the campaign. Their analysis primarily affirms the ability of these affordances to

build a cohesive group identity and campaign narrative, based on its participants' "shared sense of risk" in

participating in these acts of civil disobedience and local connections made within Iran. As they note:

> *Social media offers an infrastructure for digital protest while physical protest is restricted. Such*
> *infrastructure offers affordances for framing processes required for collective identity and social*
> *movements. Through diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames, and the transgressive*

photobiographies of MSF, the protest movement gained momentum and traction within the Iranian political environment. (2018:11)

My Stealthy Freedom exists alongside and (sometimes) interconnectedly with other similar protest movements within Iran, such as the *Girls of Enghelab Street* in which a number of activists—inspired by Vita Movahed's actions standing on a utility box and waving her white headscarf as a flag—reenacted her protest in various Iranian cities including Tehran, Esfahan and Shiraz. As a diasporic US-led campaign, My Stealthy Freedom has been both credited—as effective in engaging "affective strategies of authentication around individual self-empowerment" (Tafakori 2021), and critiqued—as an outsider movement that garners claims of inauthenticity and is aligned to neo imperial aims and sanctions against Iran (Shirazi 2019; Tafakori 2021). Existing research on MSF has paid less analytical attention overall to the highly varied nature of the the campaign's content over time, including not only stealthy and creative acts of unveiling, but women's street protest, including defiant singing and dancing, intense physical and verbal resistance to street harassment, camera-witnessed and/or recounted acts of State violence, and founder Alinejad's self-broadcasts as an Iranian exile and diasporic journalist, citizen activist and public spokesperson residing in the United States. In particular, analyses have not looked in-depth at global audience sentiment emerging within the digitally mediated context of the campaign nor the role of Alinejad's specific curatorial practices as a "networked activist microcelebrity" (Tufekci 2013:848). Over the past five years (2017–2022), MSF has continually evolved and adapted, and as this research argues, represents a far more complex form of political and cultural mediation largely through the activation of this wider spectrum of performances and the engagements they produce with networked publics in the liminal or in between spaces of global and local mediation.

One of the key liminal thresholds that digital mediation brokers is a space between the boundaries of

local, national and global. In *What's the Matter with the Internet?* (2001), Poster draws emphasises the

multiple new formations arising from global digitally mediated communications capabilities and how "the

Internet transgresses the limits of the print and broadcast models by:

> *(1) enabling many-to-many communications*
> *(2) enabling the simultaneous reception, alteration, and redistribution of cultural objects*
> *(3) dislocating communicative action from the posts of the nation, from the territorialised spatial relations of modernity*
> *(4) providing instantaneous global contact*
> *(5) inserting the modern/late modern subject into an information machine apparatus that is networked.*
> (16)

Through instantaneous global contact and the dislocation of communications from local and national terrains,

virtual spaces function simultaneously as spaces in which local, national, transnational and global discourses

flow. As Sreberny (2001) notes, "Globalisation is about the many processes—economic, political, cultural,

social, even psychological—that connect people who are far from each other" (61). Massey identifies the

"power geometry" of globalisation in which predominantly white male elites gain from these flows, while the

"old, the poor, the non-white and women are for the most part invisible" (cited in Sreberny 2001:61). The rise

of digital mediation has created liminal threshold opportunities for women around the world who have access

to the Internet to use the (self-)performative opportunities of social media to enter these flows. These flows

have been multiplied and accelerated through increased digital and camera phone access reducing (some of the)

barriers to participation. Again, this does not equate to a level playing field for all those who enter. Numerous

scholars have identified the ways in which social media platforms reinscribe white cis-heteronormative

patriarchal norms and exclusions through interrelationships with other forms of mass media and through

algorithms that reproduce inequalities (e.g. Bozdag 2013; Benjamin 2019). However, women's participation in

global movements such as #MeToo has demonstrated the use of digital mediation to raise global awareness of

issues significantly impacting women. The distinct ways in which such discursive flows traverse, transcend and/or translate across borders, however, continue to be evaluated. For example, the #MeToo movement has only begun to be significantly assessed outside of a Global North context (Quan-Haase et al. 2021).

In early press interviews, Alinejad emphasises that MSF campaign participants are "not women activists, but just ordinary women talking from their hearts" (cited in *BBC interview* 2014, accessed online). Elsewhere, she has commented to potential participants: "You, every single one of you, can be a media" (cited in Khiabany 2016:227–228). Alinejad notes:

> *When it's easy for the government to shut down women's rights organisations, student organisations, to shut down newspapers or political organisations, this is the time to empower ordinary people to be their own leaders. To be their own storytellers. To find that they have their own agency. They can represent themselves.* (Interview with Masih Alinejad. Conducted by Author. 25 July 2018.)

Alinejad's concept of "becoming the media" resonates with Papacharissi's discussion of the ways in which digital communications enable individuals to "insert themselves" into official narratives that define global news storytelling. As Duranti (2013) notes, expressing dissent through visual means, as in MSF, has a particular history in Iran:

> *The development of press and photography in Iran has exerted an enduring influence on the strategies of struggle employed by different Iranian dissident movements since the Qajar era. These advances allowed a broader circulation of new ideas and made possible the denunciation of state violence by means of visual elements.* (1345)

Khazraee & Novak (2018) note that the transgressive photo-(auto)biographies of MSF join collective protest repertoires as a "form of claim-making performance to advocate for the shared interests of women in Iran" (10). Tafakori further specifies the types of claim-making performances that specific protests acts by Iranian women engender. Tafakori counters critiques of MSF as inauthentic, noting that such claims suffer from a

"retreat" to "national particularism" by Iranian digital publics (54). However, Tafakori does distinguish the particular form of the Girls of Enghelab Street claim-making performances as comparatively more effective than MSF self-performances in connecting the *local* to the national and to the international. She argues that by Girls of Enghelab Street protesters standing in "risky urban locales" atop telephone boxes in the town square, they stage a call to the national through emulating the symbolic form of a public monument. They also, in her view, stage a call to the international by grounding their authentic connection within Iran, while creating an affective opening through the staging of vulnerability that challenges multiple publics to recognize the suffering at hand (Tafakori 2021). My critique of this analysis is two-fold. First, despite having the opposite intention, Tafakori's comparisons nonetheless imply that the stealthy anonymous engagement with MSF is a lesser form of protest. As this chapter will detail, many of MSF's stealthy protests are performed from cities and contexts across the country, including both urban and rural settings. In this sense, I suggest that they make a claim to Iran as a nation as embodied through the presence of the women grounded across the country, rather than tied to official monumentalising state forms. As Lakkimsetti and Reddy (2021) note: "digital activisms have enabled a shift away from rights-based discourses that rely upon the state as a guarantor of those rights to a feminist disaffection with the state to more creative appeals for gender justice" (228). MSF reveals a wide range of "creative appeals" including those performed as stealthy acts—e.g. via unveiling with one's back to the camera. By privileging a "monumentalising" form of protest, Tafakori's view reinscribes validation of agency through (traditionally masculine) State public forms rather than opening up to transnational feminist solidarities built on circumventing the "state as guarantor". Second, as will be discussed in depth, there are several forms of protest published in MSF and not addressed by Tafakori that can be understood as challenging local and global publics "to recognize the other's suffering".

As the following sections will discuss, self-performances presented in MSF are highly varied and produce distinct forms of what this research terms self-performance, which enable marginalised identities to perform the self in ways that traditional mass media practices have precluded through practices of gatekeeping, and do so to new audiences. For marginalised identities, digital mediation offers the promise of new forms of political visibility collectively sought in formations 'singularly-together' as visual counterpublics. This thesis understands self-performances as necessarily grounded within contemporary real-lived contexts and constraints in alignment with conceptualizations of agency in popular feminisms, including those emergent from Black American and Global South contexts (e.g. Davidson 2017; Ringrose 2007), incorporating ambivalent, hybrid, partial and negotiated practices of individual and collective empowerment. Tafakori (2021) describes MSF protest as a form of popular feminism in the sense of aiming for "authentication, and hence recognition, through a performative visual language of individual self-empowerment that is frameable in terms of popular feminism as a digitally mediated global phenomenon (Baer 2016; Banet-Weiser 2018)". Tafakori's emphasis on both the "language of self-empowerment" and a "digitally mediated global phenomenon" aptly qualify particular aspects of My Stealthy Freedom. Feminism takes on many forms in Iran, including both secular and Islamic schools of thought. Some embrace practices of hijab-wearing as articulations of a feminist practice within Islamic tradition.[12] The use of social media to circulate such practices - eg. hijabi bloggers - can equally be thought of as a form of "popular feminism" through use of "languages of self-empowerment" and "global digital mediation". The term popular feminism is definitionally quite open, on the one hand embracing what might be seen as very culturally specific Western phenomena [e.g. as in Banet-Weiser's (2018) descriptions of a self-aware, highly commoditised, White Western feminism exemplified in mass production of feminist slogans]

---

[12] See detailed discussions of Islamic feminism in Mir-Hosseini 2007.

while on the other, encompassing multiple, potentially conflicting global interpretations. Thus, it is important to note that this case study, as well as the others of this thesis, all bear different, partial, relationships to aspects of popular feminism.

The use of the term agency in this thesis is importantly *not* aligned to a neoliberal (feminist) emphasis on the individual's singular responsibility to assert and cultivate one's own empowerment (e.g. Sheryl Sandberg's off-cited and heavily critiqued *Lean In* brand of feminism[13]). Instead, it focuses on forms of self-performative politics that work to politically/theatrically/agentically re-stake the terms of the self. This is done as a means not only to claim new subject positions and visibilities of citizenship, but also build collective forms of public testimonial/witnessing and encourage particular types of solidarities. By concentrating on the nature of how protesters' self-performances produce actively empowered claims not only to public citizenship, but to a myriad of affective and political openings, this research's conceptualisation of self-performance turns our attention to both the creation of visual counterpublics and the behaviours of digitally mediated global publics. This research starts from the premise that threshold spaces of the virtual—and particularly in this first case study of local/global—represent (in utopian terms) the greatest potential for performances of the self to 'remake' the conditions of feminist identification in the breaking of past boundaries and acquisition of global political visibility through sheer reach, but also the potential for the greatest degrees of context collapse. Observation of digitally mediated in-between spaces enables us to 'see better' what takes shape in the resulting

---

[13] In 2013, high-profile Facebook executive Sheryl Sandberg wrote a book titled: *Lean In*. Its premise was that women in corporate life should embrace their ambitions and "lean in" to a seat at the leadership table to achieve more. While initially an influential bestseller that globally impacted the language around women's work participation, Sandberg's philosophies have subsequently been highly criticised for failing to recognise the systemic and structural inequalities impacting women in work environments, particularly for those of marginalised groups.

thresholds, making them ideal for assessing the interplay between self-performances and the responses of publics—including misrecognitions and foreclosures.

The following sections will discuss the variety of performances published and distributed predominantly through photo and video imagery in the MSF campaign, across the following categories:

a. *"Theatrical" performances of civil disobedience (unveiling or without hijab, prohibited bicycle riding, dancing, and singing) in various cities throughout Iran, captured as selfies or photographed by a third party.* In the early days of the campaign through a webpage and then Facebook, many of these images were still photos often leaving the protester anonymous through a turned back. (Video footage became more prominent later in the campaign, particularly through the increased use of Instagram).

b. *Specific hashtag campaigns encouraging particular types of protest action within Iran,* most prominently #WhiteWednesdays, encouraging women to wear white headscarves on Wednesdays as a symbol of protest against compulsory hijab and #MyCameraIsMyWeapon, encouraging the capture of footage of women being harassed by morality police and/or men in the streets.

c. *Performed solidarities.* Footage of family members and friends supporting a protester out of hijab, including men and women who wear hijab for themselves but oppose compulsory hijab.

d. *Footage and testimony from women both inside and outside of Iran who have suffered acid attacks.*

e. *Footage of mothers protesting their children's imprisonment and/or killing as political prisoners.*

f. *Broadcasts/live streams by Alinejad including Voice of America (VoA) and global press coverage.*

5.2   SELF-PERFORMANCE: THEATRICALISATION AND AFFECTIVE DIVERSITY[14]

Tafakori (2021) briefly notes that the "theatrical" nature of self-performances in the MSF campaign should not be a basis for dismissing them as "inauthentic". Her argument builds on Chouliaraki's emphasis on theatricalisation as an effective means of creating the conditions of recognising the suffering of others. The theatricalisation of protest across several modes also produces, as I argue, a diversity of affect that creates both multiple points of engagement for other Iranian protesters to engage with and model collectively, and a symbolic basis for the recognition of women's diverse claims to agency. In fact, several modes of protest theatricalization in MSF dramatise a wide range of discourses, emotions, experiences, circumstances and perspectives impacting Iranian women (and men) and engaging various forms of action and support. From its early days, MSF featured numerous images of women engaged in both joyous and defiant stealthy acts of unveiling, but also dancing, singing and bicycling as forms of civil disobedience. Most are performed/staged in selfies and stills/videos taken of women alone or in groups. Common imagery featured throughout the campaign is of women shown with their backs to the camera and their veils raised above their heads, riding down city streets on bicycles without a veil or while waving their veil above their heads, and in various locations, including city streets, rural settings and the beach. For example, in one image a row of women is shown with their back to the camera all holding their veils above their heads. Also frequently featured are images of young female students in classrooms, captured on phones in playful camera-witnessed pranks (outside the view of teachers or administrators). In one video, a group of teen girls whose faces are covered by

---

[14] All images in this case study have been sourced from the My Stealthy Freedom Facebook page, except where explicitly noted otherwise.

their veils perform a dance routine together to protest bans on public dancing. Another series of videos features women breaking a bicycling ban, such as one protester from Najafabad who rides her bike down the streets unveiled, smiling with a victory hand gesture.

Not all protests are performed in stealth mode, with some protesters speaking directly to camera, particularly in later iterations of the campaign. In many of these such videos, women passionately address their beliefs regarding compulsory hijab, frequently discussing their criticisms of the government, of their harassment by morality police, and of their hopes and aspirations. As Khazraee & Novak (2018) note, part of the efficacy of MSF is the ability to generate "motivational frames" around ideas of "injustice", "agency", "joy" and "identity". As they note, some of the impetus for these Iranian feminist protesters' desire to share "their 'tiny victories' with other people as they experience momentary freedom" (2018:8).

Such representations solicit multiple responses from feminist supporters, including many local Iranian women protestors who respond by sending similar footage of themselves to be posted on MSF. As Frosh notes: "The selfie invites viewers, in turn, to make conspicuously communicative, gestural responses. Sometimes, viewers respond to selfies in kind, taking reactive selfies that themselves summon further response" (1622). MSF and its sub-campaigns, such as #WhiteWednesdays and #MyCameraIsMyWeapon are highly successful in producing what this research terms, *gestural solidarities,* on the basis of Frosh's conception. New participants are encouraged and guided to gesturally respond with mirror protest actions, including by diversifying the call for others to join the cause, e.g. when a protestor says:

> *If I'm arrested right now, are you an artist? Are you ready to voice my voice?*
> *Are you willing to support me? Women are not against women.* [English caption]

Gestural solidarities here are encouraged through an invitation to expand protest beyond the individual (whose voice is at risk of being silenced through State retribution) by mirroring, reproducing and amplifying that voice through new chains of agentic creative production. These solidarities open up to other modes of mirrored protest engaged in by allies. For example, MSF posts images conveying 'performed' solidarities between Iranian men and women, and between veiled and unveiled Iranian women. Sometimes, this simply includes the image of an ally (husband or other relative) present with the protester, while at others, allies perform their own gestures. As Shirazi (2019) notes:

> *This campaign against the compulsory hijab motivated women to defy the morality police in public. Some women shaved their hair and came to the street protesting that they should be left alone, since they no longer had hair and therefore did not need to cover their head. Men also joined the women to fight compulsory hijab by voicing their support or donning the veil in solidarity with the women who are forced to wear it. Images of men wearing scarves are posted.* (18)

As Tafakori (2021) notes, MSF and the White Wednesdays campaigns have likely influenced the form and trajectory of other campaigns in Iran:

> *The White Wednesdays campaign ... seems to have acted as a transitional space, in some aspects, between the "stealthier" methods of My Stealthy Freedom and the defiantly "unstealthy" actions of the Girls [of Enghelab Street], in that many of the videos posted to the White Wednesday pages in 2017 show women walking unveiled through city streets. It seems plausible, then, that the bodily focus of the Girls of Enghelab Street's protests, the visual and performative character of these actions, can be situated in relation to the set of strategies and tactics developed through My Stealthy Freedom and White Wednesdays.* (67)

Many of the self-performances featured in MSF show women participating in the White Wednesday campaign wearing a white veil and speaking to camera about their participation.

Self-performances published in MSF draw on multiple affective modes to drive gestural solidarities, including emotions of joy, relief, struggle, playfulness, stealthiness, a sense of danger, hopefulness and mounting frustration, among others. This mobilises mirrored gesturing, exchange, adaptation and

proliferation locally on the basis of shared affect and identification into a collective performance of dissent as a

visual counterpublic. The following sections will explore in greater depth two specific forms of

self-performance that play an important role in the campaign—camera-witnessed public resistance and the

representation of women's trauma. As will be discussed, these forms further contribute to the collective visual

counterpublic by reclaiming and reframing the oppressed or persecuted marginalised self.

5.3   REFRAMING A MARGINAL COUNTERPUBLIC GAZE

Put in Alinejad's words, "one woman can take her mobile phone, film herself, and make the whole regime react

to it" (Interview with Masih Alinejad. Conducted by Author. 25 July 2018). #MyCameraisMyWeapon is a

campaign initiated by *MSF* as an explicit call for participants to engage in camera-witnessing to attest to their

harassers and intervention they face in public spaces. As the name suggests this type of footage is significantly

marked by women as active, 'weaponised' gaze holders, even in moments of being threatened or accosted.

Stealthy, but not silent, the protestors are positioned as gaze holders. This exchanges the ('passive') aestheticised

female body for the active technologically extended body through the mobile camera (Reading 2009). This

refigures it in emancipatory ways (Haraway 1985) digitally 'presencing' female resistance and reversing the

"male gaze" (Mulvey 1989:19) that is ever trained on the female body. Ultimately, the process invites

identification with the camera and by default with the stealthy protester, and the authenticity/power of the

camera holder works to destabilise the normative power dynamic between participants.

In one video, a female protester records a man chastising her for refusing to veil. He comes out of his

car to approach her and shouts: "I am ordering you to wear hijab" (sourced from the My Stealthy Freedom

Facebook page). The video conveys the threat of the man's physical approach toward her and his sense of

entitlement in 'policing' her behaviour. The woman's bodily policing by an ordinary citizen bears witness to

the impacts of everyday surveillance and intervention, as a stranger attempts to regulate her actions, demonstrating the mobilisation of "disciplinary power" (Foucault 1975). The (mostly) stealthy nature of such recorded events renders the woman's dissent through her words and anonymous bodily presence as she captures the scene. As camera-witnessed events, these self-performances produce an active visual and aural language of a female brown body refusing containment. The very stealthiness of the woman's presence, combined with her fixed gaze (through the camera) on the accoster, amplifies her performance and presence, including through its refusal to give visual access to her body and its material identity markers as subject of the shot. In another video, a man is shown addressing a stealthy female protester, whose presence is again indicated only through her calm and measured responses. They have the following exchange:

He says: *"When you are walking unveiled, 10 men can bother you."*

She calmly responds: *"No one has bothered us sir."*

He goes on to say: *"But one girl has been kidnapped recently."*

She asks: *"Just because of not covering the hair?"*

He says: *"They offered her something she refused. Then the boys grabbed her into their car."*

She responds: *"This is because we don't have secure societies. It doesn't have anything to do with your hijab."*

He says: "So you wait for society to be safe and then you wear your hijab? If you don't wear hijab, you are getting your own self in trouble."

She responds: *"We don't have any problem by being unveiled."*

He: *"Cover yourself."*

She: *"We won't cover ourselves."*

The man walks away and is then approached by other men in support of the women who tell him: *"It is their decision."* (English captions, My Stealthy Freedom Instagram account)

The video bears witness not only to the women's refusal to back down/be silenced, but to the support of Iranian male allies, importantly on the basis of these women's choice/agency to make the decision. In another video, a woman asks: "why would men want to pick me up?" and her accoster replies: "Because of the state of you. It's demeaning and degrading without your hijab." The woman filming counters by shouting back at the man criticising him and the government. The following caption appears with this video on the My Stealthy Freedom Instagram account (translated to English in the post):

> *This pro-regime vigilante in Iran harassed me in the street. He said women like me who don't wear hijab are dishonourable. This is how I filmed his insults. We women of Iran have had to endure these people for 4 decades. I asked him: "Am I the one who is dishonourable or Saeed Tusi, a famous Quran preacher, who molested young kids in Iran, but still roams free because he is connected to the regime?*

In another highly globally publicised example, MSF posted a video of a woman attacked for wearing 'bad hijab'—or a headscarf deemed too loose to meet modesty standards. A female morality police officer wrestles a young woman in loose hijab to the ground, and within the first few seconds, the footage becomes extremely shaky and muffled as both women's struggling bodies move in and out of view. Multiple officers appear to detain the woman grabbing her arms and legs and pulling her to the ground. Bystanders unsuccessfully attempt to intervene and witness (as do viewers) the woman's intense emotional distress and the sounds of her screaming "let me go, let me go!" Her screams grow higher and more urgent until the footage abruptly cuts off. *The Guardian*, citing information received by Alinejad, reported that "the victim became so frail after being wrestled that the forces did not take her to the police station, but arrested a couple who had intervened on her behalf" (accessed online, 26 April 2018). The footage was viewed by more than three million people, and drew

an immediate response from female politician Masoumeh Ebtekar, Iran's Vice-President for Women's Affairs. Ebtekar publicly renounced the attack via Twitter saying: "How could this treatment be justified?" While encounters with State forces can be witnessed via news stories or other storytelling forms, the technological capacity, immediacy and scale of social media enabled participants to film this event in real time and have it published to a large existing global network. Invoking the trauma experienced by this woman, this footage circulates within the MSF campaign as a citizen-witnessed account. By choosing to submit the footage to MSF, the victim bears witness to State repression for both local Iranian publics and feminist audiences as well as international audiences.

Khazraee & Novak (2018) importantly emphasise that Iranian women's attempts to publically resist hijab dress codes and protest against State suppression through MSF places them at significant physical and emotional risk. This is due to the illegality not only of their unveiling, but of their participation in social protest, and use of the Facebook platform. Yet, campaign participants choose to repeatedly re-present their bodies at risk, in conflict and resistance-publicising highly charged events to elicit the awareness, support, and solidarity of campaign audiences. Such actions provide a form of collective witnessing to the lived experiences of protesters as they work to assert (public) space for new feminist identifications and resistance. In doing so, they invite others to share their own experiences of harassment. As many global movements have demonstrated (e.g. Black Lives Matter, Hollaback and others) camera-witnessed footage is particularly powerful in generating claims by laying bare the confrontational encounters that challenge broader publics not only to "recognise the other's suffering".

5.4 RE-MEDIATING TRAUMA IN A VISUAL COUNTERPUBLIC

Rajabi discusses the "agentic" and "generative" nature of online spaces for individuals to make meaning from their experiences of trauma. Another important category of self-performance in MSF are processes of protest and meaning-making through the (re-)staging of trauma. The two most prominent types of protest presented here are (1) women who have been victimised in acid attacks and (2) mothers of injured, imprisoned or killed political prisoners. This footage produces accounts of Iranian (and other) women's suffering doing so in a manner that draws upon demonstrating the self as (re-)inhabiting the space of trauma to elicit the affective charge of anger/horror.

Veena Das' work (2003) on the role, structure and meaning of trauma and embodied forms of testimony tells the story of a group of Delhi women who refused to re-normalise their social behaviour following traumatisation by the 1984 anti-Sikh riots and intense violence that devastated their community. They continued to mourn by sleeping in groups in the streets, leaving their houses uncleaned, and not washing their bodies or combing their hair—a collective refusal to return to normal domestic rituals. Das characterises these actions as symbolic refiguring of the signs of mourning, undertaken to shame perpetrators of violence. She describes this as a "form of creating oneself as a subject by embracing the signs of subjection" (2003:301). As she notes:

> *Their testimony can be constructed from the new way in which they occupied the space of symbolic representations in the collective imaginaire ... what the women were able to 'show' was not a standardised narrative of loss and suffering but a project that can only be understood in the singular through the image of reinhabiting the space of devastation again ... the social space occupied by scarred populations may enable stories to break through routine cultural codes to express counter discourse that assaults and even perhaps undermines the taken-for-granted meaning of things as they are.* (301)

Advocacy for victims of such attacks has been a key issue addressed in MSF, driven by the rise in such assaults in the city of Isfahan in 2014. For example, several images are presented of injured women as they lay in hospital beds or next to images of their faces prior to the attacks. The following caption translated into English accompanies this set of images:

> *The judiciary in Iran announced today that the case of acid attacks has been closed. Welcome to the Islamic Republic, the so-called safest country in the Middle East. Welcome to a place where girls who dress differently, those who dance, the girls who burn in school fires (like Shinabad incident), girls that get raped (as in the case of the girls of Iranshahr) all suffer from injustices. Meanwhile, the culprits of all of these incidents are free.* (Sourced from the My Stealthy Freedom Facebook page)

MSF shares these women's trauma at a moment when official public discourse had declared their cases closed. Another example of this type of footage is a video posted to Instagram of a young woman disfigured by an acid attack by a man whose overtures she refused. Speaking directly to camera, she talks about the lack of support from/and suppression by authorities and her desire to "return to life". The post links back to the woman's own Instagram account, which intersperses photos of her prior to the attack with an extended series of graphic images of her recovering from facial burns. Her choice to self-document her extreme trauma through hospitalisation and the aftermath of the attack is further intensified as pictures taken prior to the attack are posted chronologically later than present-day photos, producing a temporally jarring and oscillating performance of the self between the pre-traumatised and traumatised body. This visual biography is presented not as a journey to recovery or a sense of closure. Instead, it is a performance of the self that continually (re)presents the traumatised female body, without resolution/return to normality. As in Das' example of the women's refusal to let violence be normalised, these efforts attempt to shame the State before a global viewership. This creates a particular form of testimony, one which brings understanding through, in Das' words, "reinhabiting the space of devastation" (2003).

Mothers choosing to send footage in which they are shown breaking down, crying or appealing to the camera in reaction to their childrens' plights (imprisonment or death) as political prisoners also appear frequently in the campaign. Such videos document the distraught holding photos of their son or daughter or crying inconsolably at the loss of a child. For example, several posts present the mother of a young man who died while in police custody for his part in the general political protests between 2017–2018 against government corruption. In one, Alinejad interviews the young man's mother, while in another she holds a picture of him in tribute. The figure of a mother in trauma is a powerfully resonant witnessing subject. As her suffering is made plain to networked audiences, the "space of devastation" is perpetually re-activated. This is a particularly complex form of embodied self-performance, as trauma to the body politic is 'written' on the body of the grieving mother. It draws on notions of the sanctity of a mother's love and loss and the role of "political motherhood" or the expansion of the political public sphere through the mobilisation of "motherism" as a base of authority from which to speak and gain visibility/resonance against a patriarchal set of power relations (Werbner 1999:221). Through presentation of this grief, with highly affective imagery of mothers huddled over grave sites or vocalising the distress of losing a child, trauma is (re-)presented and an embodied discourse of resistance produced as social media forges a space for MSF participants to perpetually occupy a state of very public grief through continuous re-circulation within the campaign. Rituals and symbols of mourning captured as footage and shared in the campaign, such as imagery of a mother placing flowers on her son's grave, shift from a private or community expression of grief and tribute to a public function of bearing witness to larger social conditions. Though such footage often plays a role in traditional media narratives of traumatic impacts of violent events, the visibility of trauma described above circulates in different ways within social media spaces.

As Rajabi (2017) notes, "traumatised bodies are told not to speak, or if they speak their narrative is meant to fit within the context of the survivor … ever recovering, ever triumphant" (67). The tendency of traditional news and current affair formats to either present such traumas as one-off and not tied to systemic concerns—i.e. to temporarily make hyper-visible this trauma, while in the longer term rendering it invisible—or to frame these within a story of triumphant recovery, closes off the powerful continuous "inhabitation" of that trauma expressed in Das' analysis. Within MSF, a mother's trauma continues to be represented in later posts, through interviews and footage of her in everyday rituals where "acts of everyday life become important tactics of defiance and spaces for the subaltern to speak from" (67). In this sense, Iranian women facing physical and psychological trauma resulting from repression and violence continue to give visibility to their pain. This has parallels in narrative structure with genres that have historically emerged (albeit in fictional/semi-fictional contexts) to articulate the counternarratives of subaltern publics. As Foley (1993) argues, in the genre of proletarian fictional autobiography, didacticism is "encoded in the building blocks of the narrative" itself (274). In such forms, a mix of fictional and non-fictional elements, are intertwined to tell stories of the marginalised in a way that focuses on the repetitious recounting of an unrelenting series of traumatic events. Though drawn from fictionalised didactic forms, Foley's discussion of the structuring of autobiographical accounts or testimony that uses a "high degree of redundancy" to ensure that "incidents pile up in such a way that their implication becomes overwhelming" (406) also characterises the way in which MSF transgressive autobiographies build collective resonance. The "unrelenting account" (295) produced in the day in, day out accumulation and reinforcement of a spectrum of traumatic events invites receivers to begin to seek the roots of social injustice. Social media offers the vehicle by which that unrelenting account is produced in common virtual spaces day to day. In so doing, the relentless account of intrusion and violence into lives/everyday reality,

which can be obscured in official (juridical) discourse, is framed for receivers as the collective, open wound of repression/trauma experienced by Iranian women who are against mandatory hijab or who are involved personally or by association with dissent against the State.

MSF campaign participants thus engage in ritual constructs of embodied witnessing—that is, by engaging self-performances of the body in conflict, in resistance, and in trauma. The use of digital mediation capabilities produces this form of collective witnessing on a scale heretofore unknown, given the global platform by which it reaches networked macropublics. The increasingly embodied nature of protest runs contrary to egalitarianism originally envisioned for virtual spaces through participation by disembodied virtual selves free of identity markers. In such a conception, Internet societies were touted as having the potential to initiate a liberating form of disembodiment, unfettered by traditional identity categories in a new digital frontier (see Marwick's [2018] discussion of early techno-utopianism[15]). In fact, the discussed MSF self-performances addressing bodies in protest, resistance and trauma have quite the opposite effect, continuing to adapt and evolve as performances of dissent that once again, challenge publics to recognise the suffering of others, specifically through their forms of embodiment.

Khazraee & Novak (2018) emphasise that in MSF social media's "affordances for performance make it possible for a series of collective modular acts of protest to turn into a massive collective performance of protest staged to be seen globally and to attract attention to the unjust situation of women." These self-performances thus stage particular types of collective witnessing and representation of Iranian women's plights and

---

[15] Marwick discusses the enduring influence of the "Californian Ideology" based on Barbrook and Cameron (1996). As she explains, this ideology is libertarian in nature, merging lack of trust in institutional structures and unwavering belief in the power of technology to create social change. Marwick notes: "this ideology has remained more-or-less constant through sixty years of boom-and-bust cycles, from transistors and micro-computers through to the dot-com boom and Web 2.0" (Marwick 2018:3).

identifications in the form of political resistance, aspiration, as well as allyship from Iranian men and

hijab-wearing women. These performances are grounded in producing multiple forms of affect and engaging

gestural solidarities at the local and national level, as well as staging this resistance as opportunities for affective

engagement with global audiences. The following sections will analyse how and where these opportunities are

(and are not) effectively responded to, specifically by Global North publics, through digital mediation.

5.5   VISUAL COUNTERPUBLIC SELF-PERFORMANCES IN LIMINAL PUBLICS

As a diasporic campaign led from within the United States, MSF aspires to build not only engagements and

solidarities within Iran, but also transnationally through publishing the wide variety of self-performances

described. As the following sections will discuss, the campaign is successful in producing support with some

global feminist audiences, however, several facets of the campaign's framing and the ways in which its

networked communities/publics are structured complicate these practices. Much of the scholarly attention

paid to digitally mediated social movements has focused on the concept of "affective publics" predominantly

created through hashtag capabilities (Papacharissi 2015). MSF brings together "affective and intimate publics"

(Tafakori 2021) in part through hashtag campaigns such as #WhiteWednesdays and #MyCameraisMyWeapon,

but also cultivates different publics through platform-specific audiences on Facebook and Instagram.

Papacharissi and Trevey (2018) note:

> *All too often we assume that social media use will have the same results for all types of movements or*
> *publics. We detect similarities, but also key differences in affective public formations.* (92)

As the following discussion will demonstrate, MSF publics are much messier and divided—i.e. liminal—than

those typically understood in Papacharissi's concept of affective publics. The following sections will discuss

public responses evident in this campaign in depth. There is evidence of a range of posts facilitating dialogue/education between English and Persian-speaking global audiences on the nuances around Islam and hijab wearing, for example, discussions about the differences between compulsory and chosen veiling, with individuals posting comments such as:

> *me + hijab = freedom*
>
> *In our Islamic countries there are alot of women does not cover thir selves that does not mean they are not muslims, the real Islam grants to all kinds of people free expression.*

Such responses are generally reactions to blanket dismissals of the choice to veil, which spark further discussions and knowledge-sharing of different opinions on the issue, and act as counterweight to narrower, closed responses to the issue. These types of productive debate and exchange of opinion do periodically emerge in public conversations throughout the campaign's Facebook comments. However, over the observation period of this research, this was found to be a rarity, rather than the norm. As the following sections will explain, there are also several components structuring digitally mediated publics in MSF that significantly complicate the production of effective transnational solidarities in relationship to the campaign's self-performances. Taken as a whole, these might be described as comprising the multiple dimensions of: *divided transnational publics; contextual ambiguity* and *spectatorial relationships.*

5.5.1   'Invisibile' Contention

First, as Tafakori notes, networked publics that form around the *MSF* campaign are highly divided. While *MSF*'s Facebook following (which predominated earlier in the campaign) primarily consists of global followers with comments in English (and European languages), the campaign's now much larger Instagram following

features mostly Persian-language engagement. As Shirazi (2019) notes, "based on the 2018 Iranian Center for Strategic Studies, a research arm of the President's office by the Iranian government, 49% of the population is opposed to the compulsory hijab" (15). While this is a significant percentage, local public opinion still remains split. As Tafakori (2021) documents, the most "affectively charged" Farsi social media exchanges regarding MSF accuse protest associated with the campaign as being inauthentic with anger over sanctions utilised to block emotions around the injustices faced by Iranian women (47). At the same time, she notes that feminist anger at women's oppression in Iran becomes a path toward the derecognition of Iranian women's suffering under (U.S.-led) economic sanctions. In terms of the specific digital mediation of the transnational, however, these derecognitions start at a much more fundamental level.

Language barriers produced transnationally by the constitution of publics in different platforms mean that much of the current local Iranian discussion remains effectively invisible to most global supporters. Though Facebook's Farsi/English translation capabilities have been in place since 2009 and Instagram's since 2017, AI translations still produce incomplete and often unintelligible renderings of sentiment/intent, leaving global followers to rely largely day-to-day on the campaign's English language captions and raw video footage. As Gibbs et al. (2015) note different vernaculars emerge from both user practices and affordances together within a specific digital medium. Current technological aspects of language translation and how transnational publics come to be structured in multiple digitally mediated platforms can thus effectively erase or make less visible defining differences between responses to the campaign. In essence, the campaign becomes split between a largely English-speaking group of supporters on Facebook and currently, a far larger group of predominantly Farsi speaking Instagram followers with much more divided and contentious sentiment to the campaign. Lack of (practical) visibility works against a transnational feminist basis for knowledge- and solidarity-building that

might otherwise take place through access to locally grounded, nuanced and importantly confrontational Iranian dialogue that could form the basis of greater reflexive practices of understanding (e.g. around sanctions). Simultaneously, the large-scale number of Persian-speaking followers and affective interactions boosting Alinejad's Instagram presence 'blindly' bolsters her authority (and visibility) as spokesperson with Global North media outlets. Such outlets take their cue from the credibility suggested by levels of engagement and her authority in generating them as a diasporic Iranian with links to Iran rather than deeper analysis of the true complexity of public sentiment. As Tafakori notes, "the contentiousness that has surrounded My Stealthy Freedom since its inception in Iran rarely appears in English-language outlets" (2021:50). Western media are also able to easily suture Alinejad's public interview statements into predictable Western (neo imperial) frames reinforcing the "lead of the [US] policymaking elite" based on the type of "emancipation narrative" (Nakahara and Shahin 2021:77) she espouses and her own personal story/trajectory exemplifies (as will be discussed in depth in later sections).

5.5.2   Discursive Hijacking

Another characteristic of MSF public response driving up digitally mediated engagement (followers, engagement, interaction) and therefore campaign visibility is *hijacking*. Hijacking, in this case, refers to ostensible support for a cause that masks a different underlying purpose or political disposition. The liminality of digitally mediated publics and their inability to translate, in some cases, to physical publics demonstrates some of the (practical) inscrutability introduced by digital mediation. Hijacking indicates inconstancy between ostensible intent and the effects of mobilising those publics that are produced and amplified through the liminality or in-between states of digital media spaces. In the case of MSF, this refers to the group of global supporters who post populist and anti-Islam comments trying to link or the campaign to their cause—their

primary reasons for engagement are not to support the protesters, but to reinforce these other political

agendas. Though some of these types of comments may be blocked, those that remain can become a significant

part of the flow of traffic and engagement with its platforms. For example, global supporters who express

sentiments ranging from outright refusals to validate women's choices to make a choice to wear hijab, to

racialised misogynistic epithets that emerge around descriptions of female morality police wearing chador, for

example, in one supporter's comment: *"Get a life, you witch!"* Other comments universally malign the

symbolism of hijab with Islamophobic comments such as: *"Just as hammer and hammer are the signs of*

communism and a broken cross are the signs of Nazism, Hijab is the sign of Islamic fascism." Thus,

Islamophobic sentiment as 'engagement' risks becoming a driver of visibility/attention capital (Tufekci 2013)

for the campaign.

Further, is the broader ambiguity (and therefore unknowability) of digitally mediated public

sentiment. When support is demonstrated through short comments and, in particular, emojis, this produces

forms of support that cannot (easily) be read/interpreted for original context or intent. When a particular

participant supports the campaign with only a "like" this could stem from feminist support or Islamophobic

sentiment (or both). Ultimately, the effects/scope of these kinds of 'backstories' of campaign support cannot

be easily ascertained, particularly by participants engaging emotively and rapidfire within the individual space

of a post. In this sense, affective charge is amplified through the build of emotional responses to campaign

footage, without a (macro) understanding of what participants are liking 'together'. Thus, the engagement

here between ambiguous digital mediated public sentiment and traditional Western media receptivities make a

de facto virtue—in the form of attention capital—of the ambiguous or unknown intent of particular publics.

5.5.3 Spectatorial Global North (Feminist) Publics

As discussed in earlier chapters in her excellent analysis of solidarity in "the age of post-humanitarianism",

Chouliaraki diagnoses the current condition of Western audiences as characterised by a shift toward becoming

"ironic spectators" of others' suffering in place of a previous era's model of engaging "pity" for this suffering.

Liminal publics operate as a fundamental border space between the visual counterpublic acts of

witnessing/testimony described earlier and diverse forms of public engagement, including spectatorial

positionality. Spectatorial positionality specifically refers to specific interactions of detached spectatorship that

may reinforce unequal power dynamics. For example, much of the engagement with English-speaking global

audiences takes the form of what might be termed the *cheering fan.* This refers to support shown

for/reinforcement of protesters' performances most consistently by reactions to their bravery and defiance. For

example, in one protester's video, a woman speaks directly to camera discussing her belief in her right to choose

not to wear hijab, and then turns to a group of men in the park behind her and asks if they mind her being

hijabless, to which they answer "no". Typical responses to posts such as these are: "I also encourage you to keep

on! Admiration and respect from Belgium!" and "she is SO BRAVE! She is AMAZING!" Other acts of

protest, such as school girls mocking compulsory rules in stealthily captured video, garner such support as:

"very courage [sic] girls!" to "Yasss girls! Swag, groove, sass. Werkkkk it" to "You rule the world girls!!" This

type of engagement implicitly emphasises and reinforces a number of inequalities between participants and

protesters. The opportunity to stand by and cheer on protestors suggests an understood positionality of

superiority, underpinned by Western neoliberal narratives of progress observing the subjugated Islamic woman

on the path to Western emancipation. As was noted at the start of this thesis and as Jarmakani argues, from a

Western cultural standpoint, there is "a simplistic equation of being uncovered or revealed, with being modern

and emancipated" (2008:152). Global North neoliberal White feminisms have been critiqued for playing a role in uncritically characterising women's rights in universalising terms that emphasise these distinctions, discounting self-definition by women of the Global South and also contributing to "operationalisation of … women's rights discourse as a tool of Western (neo) colonial and imperial power" (Tafakori 2021:57). The nature of Global North feminist discursive responses to the campaign evidences self-perception as on the other side of an 'emancipation divide' rather than as co-collaborative, coalitional allies supporting, for example, self-determination and bodily autonomy of all women. It is important to address here the issue of spectatorship from my particular standpoint as a Global North feminist researcher. Though the current work is aimed at elucidating the processes by which allyship may be impeded, my opportunity to explore these issues is simultaneously predicated on a number of aspects of my own privileged positionality as an academic observer/spectator, complexifying the issue of how to define 'good' and 'bad' spectatorship. With regard to Western supporter-generated discourses observed within the My Stealthy Freedom campaign, frequently reinforced were notions of unveiling as a "freeing" of beauty by "these beautiful women." These specific types of discourse seem to further link a neoliberal emancipation narrative with an undercurrent of exoticisation of brown female bodies and failure to recognise other forms of body policing.

Spectatorial positionality is also evidenced in the lack of gestural solidarities produced by Global North feminist supporters. Technologies of digital mediation clearly offer the capacity to produce gestural solidarities, for example in the gestural mirroring of protest actions by outside allies, as demonstrated in the early part of this case study. Transnational supporters who may not face the same constraints as protesters, are (technologically) able to demonstrate their support other than as passive spectators, for example, they could make use of the image/text/video/gif functions of Facebook to share other types of imagery in response. Such

reciprocal gestures could more directly connect to activating protest that opposes bodily policing in other forms - for example, taking the protestors' lead by mirroring and replicating the model of the 'performed' solidarities of veiled and unveiled women together. Participants could extend their protest against the policing of hijabi women's right to choose to wear veils in other cultural/national contexts.

Even without investing the self in this way, supporters could have also shared protest iconography in their responses. For example, as part of the Girls of Enghelab Street protests, an avatar emerged representing protestor Vida Movahed's waving a white veil as she stood on top of a telecommunications box on Enghelab Street (Revolution Street) in Tehran. As Gerbaudo (2015) notes: "the use of protest avatars testifies to the fact that protest movements in a digital era are still compelled by the need to construct a 'we' that people can adhere to" (926). Sharing this protest avatar iconography would represent a form of gestural solidarity based on the 'original' terms of the protest—Movahed's self-performance. In Tafokori's analysis, Movahed's original protest gesture offers what she argues to be the most promising form of authentication in its monumentalising form, that reaches most powerfully from the local to the national, but also to the international. Yet, this avatar was not widely used by MSF Global North respondents in the interactions observed. Further, while Tafokori locates some of the promise of authentication-building practices for transnational solidarities in the forms of protest like Movahed's, this would seem to place too much responsibility on the protester to 'perfect' the terms of the protest to bridge the authentication 'gap', rather than locating disconnection in the dispositions and behaviours of spectatorial publics.

Chouliaraki further notes that public action is "prototypically reflected in protest and donation practices" (225). For most of the life of the campaign, no obvious vehicle has been provided for supporters to connect their actions and resources directly to protesters. MSF only recently created a mechanism via its

Facebook and webpage for donation. Additionally, over the observation period within this research, there was little to no public posting by participants regarding their involvement in follow-up in-person protest gatherings, initiatives, fundraisers or other activities. This contrasts, for example, with later case studies such as @museummammy, in which followers frequently publically indicate they've contributed and crowdsourced funds are publically tallied. It is important to note the limitations of the scope and methodology of the present research to fully gauge how recent introduction of this donation vehicle and/or other behind-the-scenes activity may indicate varying and deeper levels of engagement by global supporters in this campaign. However, the public behaviours of spectatorial positionality analysed, at the very least, raise the significant potential of forms of White Global North feminist support in danger of becoming *in*activism with its considerable political potential and charge significantly neutralised. As Cooper notes in the prologue of Schuller (2021), referring to the political position of white feminism, "it's not that white women can't do good in the world or be useful allies in feminist world-making. The problem, rather, is white feminism and its gravely limited conception of how to address the injustices that all women face" (6). This is not to say that all engagement by white Global North feminists with MSF falls into the category of a "gravely limited conception," but rather that consistent patterns of engagement observed suggest a potential critical failure of imagination in how to more deeply engage within digitally mediated publics. Such issues are in need of much more in-depth attention beyond simple binaries of slacktivism/activism, which foreclose on the possibility of understanding various hyper fragmented discourses and micro-discourses of engagement.

5.6   CAMPAIGN FRAMING

MSF's curation by Alinejad as a "networked microcelebrity activist" further complicates the project of building transnational digitally mediated feminist solidarities around Iranian women's agentic protest

performances. Alinejad differs somewhat from the networked microcelebrity activists identified by Tufekci

(2013) in that she has spearheaded the campaign from outside of Iran, rather than emerging from grassroots on

the ground activism. She nonetheless conforms to many of the characteristics she identifies:

> *The political-activist networked microcelebrity shares certain practices with the nonactivist microcelebrity, which Marwick and Boyd (2011) conceptualise as a "mindset and set of practices in which audience is viewed as a fan base; popularity is maintained through ongoing fan management; and self-presentation is carefully constructed to be consumed by others" (p. 14); however, since the identity of the microcelebrity activist is constructed as activist first and foremost, the audience is seen not as fans but rather as political allies, supporters, political opponents, and mediators to broader publics such as journalists; and attention is treated, at least insofar as the issue is addressed explicitly, as an instrumental resource that is sought for the cause rather than solely for the sake of attention on the person.* (850)

Alinejad's own story of leaving Iran to find her freedom in the United States fits neatly and uncritically into the

type of emancipation narratives critiqued by Tafakori. Some have emphasised Alinejad's unequal position of

power, occupying a diasporic position while encouraging protest from a space safely out of reach of retribution

by the Iranian government. However, Alinejad shares that her family members living in Iran have faced

harassment, and the FBI has revealed multiple alleged plots to kill Alinejad on American soil, both of which

indicate she faces significant personal consequences for her activism. Further, her diasporic/exiled positionality

certainly doesn't exclude her from effectively speaking out against State oppression in her homeland. [16]

Much of the footage submitted to MSF begins with the personal address "Dear Masih" and/or speaks

directly to her. This format represents a mirrored exchange or form of solidarity between microcelebrity and

"fan" as in Tufekci's formulation (2013:850), in this case the "fan" being a protester, in addition to other

spectator "fans" of the movement, who are cultivated to drive support for the cause. This form becomes a

personal bridge by which protestors reach out to be heard on a global stage, while also being drawn upon

---

[16] Rafat Amirov, Polad Omarov and Khalid Mehdiyev were charged in January 2023 for multiple alleged plots to assassinate Alinejad in New York (Reuters, accessed online February 2023).

within protest actions themselves, for example, when a protester says to her harasser: "I am filming you, I will send this to Masih Alinejad." It also builds authenticity for Alinejad—a key source of capital for digitally mediated personas—which in turn grows her presence as a spokesperson for the cause and visibility within US media, an "instrumental resource" for the campaign (850).

Alinejad is careful to reiterate that the campaign is not against veiled women. For example, in several posts she speaks of her mother's wearing of hijab and publishes videos of veiled and unveiled women supporting one another. However, it's clear through her campaign framing that she associates unveiling with the host of freedoms articulated in the concept of (neoliberal) emancipation narratives (Tafakori 2021)—the (uncomplicated) shift to becoming liberated, modern, and empowered, with this focus obscuring other aspects and voices of the campaign. Tension emerges between Alinejad's specific anti-regime politics/her own self-performance and the more nuanced representations in campaign footage. Alinejad's focus is on her particular lived experiences of oppression and broad critique of the Iranian theocratic regime, including human rights violations. Hers is an explicit politics of secularisation which she advocates for within English-speaking media outlets and in human rights forums globally. In particular, Alinejad heavily criticises Western female politicians who wear hijab while in Iran, failing in her eyes to show adequate support for Iranian women protesting compulsory laws. Alinejad's personal views align to Western media frames, helping to increase her visibility and that of Iranian women's protests on a larger global stage. This is how the campaign "lays itself open to deauthentication" by departing from local Iranian grassroots efforts and identifications, aligning itself to simplistic (racialised) narratives of progress and failing to draw attention to the negative impacts of US sanctions on Iranians (Tafakori 2021:60).

Also problematic is Alinejad's de facto role in "curating trauma". In 2018, the #MeToo movement founder, Tarana Burke, started a subsequent sexual assault survivor's website focusing on stories of healing because as she said, "we don't believe in collecting stories of people's trauma because I don't think the trauma should be curated" (Burke, cited in Harris 2018, online). As a networked microcelebrity activist, Alinejad's broadcasting of various forms of protest, including traumatic events, places her in a position of effectively "curating" this trauma, reinforcing the unequal power relations of her position. Networked microcelebrity activists play an important role in raising the visibility of movements with outside publics. Tufekci (2013) notes that the Internet alters "barriers to and mechanisms of participation in the public sphere" and that the "media ecology" is shifted through to make "attention" a resource, though as she notes it is "necessary but not sufficient resource" to achieve "movement outcomes" (851). Further, she explains:

> The dilemmas these microcelebrity activists raise for repressive regimes should not be seen only through the framework of "save a life" or "save someone from torture" through attention. Repressive regimes retain a structural and deep capacity for violence; hence, whether they refrain from killing or torturing a single person because of international pressure is unlikely to be a key path to change. (868)

Alinejad addresses critiques of her approach head on. For example, in her #LetUsTalk campaign started in 2022, in which she shares footage of journalists accusing her of inciting Islamophobic sentiment and advocates for her and others' rights to express "rational fears" about a regime under which she has personally suffered. On the My Stealthy Freedom website, she also authors editorial pieces clarifying her political views, for example, stating:

> Outside of the United States, few peoples in the world are more impacted by the results of the U.S. presidential election than the citizens of Iran. President Donald Trump has subjected Iranians to the most punishing sanctions regime in the world, while also making clear his desire to make a deal that will make

Iran "very rich, very quickly." While Vice President Joe Biden has been critical of Trump's Iran strategy, his own strategy views Iran—and its 80 million inhabitants—primarily through the prism of another nuclear deal. Both miss the point. (Alinejad, My Stealthy Freedom website, accessed online)

Alinejad's positionality as networked microcelebrity activist ensures that her claims to personal experiences of oppression and critique of "censorship" e.g. in her frequent *Washington Post* op-ed pieces, become the face of the campaign with US media outlets and audiences, rather than protesters' self-performances. As discussed in Chapter Three, Papacharissi and Trevey (2018) note the significance of careful curation to the development of shared structures of feeling in mobilising political action. In MSF, the curation of powerful self-performances with campaign framing that espouses a Western narrative of emancipation, which together build attention capital on the foundation of the multiple types of publics/structuring described evidences a carefully curated *lack* of uniformly structured feeling that drives engagement of *all* the voices—from right-wing Islamophobic supporters to white neoliberal feminists. Case in point, two of MSF's "Top Fans"—signalled by a Top Fan Badge introduced by Facebook in December 2020 to help identify a community's "most engaged followers"—are a male supporter who is a broadly anti-Iranian regime activist and a female supporter who is a Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERF). Ultimately, this begs the question, what happens when social movement self-performances gain support in global circles on a proliferating foundation not only of affective circles of support, but also divided, ambiguous and spectatorial publics?

In the liminal spaces afforded between local and global contexts, MSF thus demonstrates tension between several defining coordinates. These are:

(1) Self-performances by Iranian protesters in published footage and the local/national Iranian solidarities they engender

(2) Alinejad's networked microcelebrity activist presence and framing for Western media

(3) Contentious reaction to this disposition by digitally-mediated Farsi-speaking Iranian publics viewing this diasporic protest as inauthentic spectacle (Tafakori 2021)

(4) Problematic engagement practices of spectatorship and hijacking in networked publics.

Two Facebook campaign examples illustrate the ways in which several of these dynamics come together within MSF. In one, Alinejad interviews two mothers of political prisoners who have been killed by State authorities. She states (to them) that this is the first time they have specifically protested against compulsory hijab as part of MSF. They nod in agreement and quickly remove their veils as though an afterthought, focusing their discussion on what has happened to their children and the government's focus on hijab policing as being merely a distraction from the real issues at hand. The exchange is as follows:

> Alinejad: *Dear [Participant 1] what about you? Tell us what you think? What would you say to people who tell me that I put mothers like you and women protesting against hijab in danger?*
>
> [Participant 1]: *I am [Participant 1]. My son was killed. No, I am not scared. Why should we be scared? No to the compulsory hijab! We wearing hijab or not is nobody's business. They have no right to impose hijab on us! No to the compulsory hijab! I don't believe in compulsory hijab! And I support political prisoners.*
>
> [Participant 2]: *Exactly! I also support my countrywomen whose crime is to protest against the compulsory hijab. But I also want to say that the compulsory hijab is only one of the problems of our country. It isn't the most important problem. But we should protest against all these problems. Compulsory hijab is also one of the problems and I am against it. Hijab isn't related to our constitution …*

Alinejad interjects with words in Persian (not translated) following which [Participant 2] removes her scarf.

[Participant 2]: *Here is my white hair! My hair has turned white in these 2 years by the government. [Participant 1]'s and all of my sisters' (who share the same pain as me) hair have turned white. And when the intelligence officers raided my home, they called me 'controversial old woman'. I told them, you turned my hair white, now you call me 'controversial old woman'? They have no shame!*

Alinejad: *Dear [Participant 2] and Dear [Participant 1], this is the first time that you participate in an interview hijabless and that you show your support for women who have protested against the compulsory hijab.*

[Participant 2]: *This is what the government is afraid of. I mean, is my hair being seen more important than the main issues of this country? Main issues such as the economy of the country, its culture, its history, the sale of Kish island and many other important issues. But this government has put all its effort and focus on (covering) my hair!*

Alinejad: *[Participant 1]'s mother, what about you? Because a woman had protested against hijab, she was sentenced to 24 years of prison. Have they found your son's murderer? Have they told you who your son's murderer is?*

[Participant 1]: *I know who my son's murderer is, I don't need them to tell me!*

[Participant 2]: *Dear Masih, this is very unfair that our children's murderers, people who had given order and executed these murders are free now and outside prison and people, who should take part in building and developing the country are in prison.*

Their striking comments and testimony are nuanced and informative and raise a different aspect of the debate—including what are described as more important political issues than that of hijab—yet Alinejad continually re-emphasises objection to hijab as the central theme. A 'forced' fit between these women's self-mediation of their traumatic experiences and the dominant campaign framing emerges.

The second example is a post of a video of an Afghani woman shown taking off her hijab in protest of new compulsory restrictions by the Taliban, while she speaks the following words:

I am a Muslim woman.

And I believe in hijab.

I don't have any problem with hijab.

I worship God.

Not those who order me around.

I don't have any problem with hijab.

But I don't want compulsory hijab.

I would not let politics define my formal identity.

Her theatricalised self-performance of unveiling is emotive in the stand she takes, while being unambiguous about her political standpoint, including personal commitment to hijab but not compulsory mandates, in a few short and powerful statements. The post, however, is introduced by MSF/Alinejad in more hyperbolic terms by including the following language:

I don't want to cover my face! / This woman who lives in Afghanistan bravely shared a video to say no to forced hijab.

Following the video a debate is sparked between several participants. A participant comments:

> *You say you don't have problem about Hijab. I do, it is a disgrace. No person should (be forced to) wear*
>
> *that!*

Despite the fact that the video offers the greatest 'truth claim' located and grounded by the protester voicing

her precise stance, and the greatest 'spectacular' claim to the viewers' attention as video footage of her protest

in action, this respondent's comment is a direct refusal of the protester's right to claim the stakes of her

position. This is not to say that all respondents react in the same way, for example, the next commenter replies:

> *Key words are "be forced to". How do you know every hijabi woman is forced to be one?*

While it is tempting to view anti-hijab responses to campaign posts as the direct result of MSF's/Alinejad's

topline issue framing, other responses - including those of affective circles of support - react directly to the

video rather than to campaign framing text and, at times, refute anti-hijab stances. Clearly, the liminal

operations of MSF publics represent much more complex manifestations of divided sentiment. Importantly

here, however, is the way in which transnational dialogue readily drifts away from the truth claim 'in front of

one's eyes' to a form of performative, 'self-authorising' banter among global spectators.

5.7   CONCLUSION

This case study has explored several key concepts in relation to the My Stealthy Freedom digitally mediated

campaign. As argued, the campaign brings together both agentic self-performances that demonstrate gestural

mirrored solidarities in the local/national Iranian context. Together, these form a vast compendium of

collective witnessing to a wide range of issues impacting Iranian women (and men). With regard to these

performances as transnational communication, their theatricality in the sense of staged unveilings and

recording of incidents produces a key component of what Chouliaraki (2013) espouses as an "agonistic" approach that incorporates "the performance of the vulnerable other as a sovereign actor" in which "the inclusion of the sufferer's voice is instrumental to the process of humanisation" (220). Agentic performances stage the agentic self as "sovereign actor" including the "dramatisation of suffering" (as trauma). Theatricalised accounts, by which I mean captured scenes of feminist political staging (through camera-witnessed encounters) rather than fictional staging, offer a myriad of prospective foundations for aspired to global solidarities by producing a diversity of affective positions and drawing attention to protesters' assertions of self, mediation of trauma, reversal of gaze and calling harassers to account. This includes various forms of footage demonstrating the nuance and complexity of women's protest and allyship with Iranian men, in counterposition to Global North "white saviour" tropes of white men and women rescuing "brown women from brown men" (Tafakori 2021). The mobilisation of multiple forms of affect are critical in producing the types of (particularly transnational) solidarities aspired to given that empathetic identification alone can veer too close to pity as "transnational politics of empathy needs to pay attention to empathy's uneven effects, to the particular social and geo-political distinctions and exclusions the generation of it can produce in a global frame" (Pedwell 2016:72).

In addition to elements of theatricalisation, the structure of the types of produced responses by protesters and participants reacting to these self-performances is significant. Stewart and Schultze (2019) distinguish types of solidarities built in MSF based on the emotion evoked and degree of anonymity of participation. They view the anonymous protest activity of the Facebook page as producing what they term "imagined solidarity", which exists largely as a conceptualised sense of collective belonging operating in the

virtual space alone. They contrast this with "situated solidarity" (2) which is generated by the greater depth of on-the-ground understanding, such as in a campaign like #WhiteWednesdays, that motivates solidarity through emotions of anger at the mistreatment of particular individuals. This research understands MSF protests as acts of embodied self(ie) performance—that exist across a range of acts—from stealthy unveiling to bicycling to camera-witnessed events and emotional engagements. Understanding these as digitally mediated self-performances, it locates a key anchor of solidarity formation in the ability to gesture reciprocally on some level, as was done by many participants throughout multiple iterations of the campaign as discussed. It argues that it is precisely the investment of the self in the act of protest that generates the range of affect discussed and produces in others the desire to mirror those protest actions—even anonymously coded protest actions.

While Stewart and Schultze's categorisations are valid and both appear in MSF, I would argue that all solidarities are to an extent *both* imagined and situated, given the necessity of an always imagined "collective we" and the multiply situated realities of all actors in processes of solidarity formation. The promise (and premise) of digitally mediated politics is the breaking down of physical, in-person borders to enable solidarities to be felt and performed in-between and across categories of the imagined and the situated. To understand how well digital mediation currently enables particular solidarities, therefore, I suggest that two adjacent (not opposing) categories may represent a more useful distinction: *gestural/reciprocal* and *ethical* solidarities. It is important to note that conceptualization of gestural/reciprocal solidarities does not require the 'copying' of protest. Gestural/reciprocal solidarities can be exercised on behalf of others through other forms of creative self-performance or protest and associated activities of donation, actions and volunteerism, etc. The term is used to distinguish, in part, an embedded communicative function central to forms of "selfie citizenship" and

embodied protest, and an agentic function in the sense of producing engaged response—both key in the structure of digitally *communicated* solidarities. The term ethical solidarities is, in turn, used to emphasise the component of solidarity building related to an ethics of affective publics. These categories are not intended to be all inclusive, but instructive in the process of assessing emergent relationships between digitally mediated self-performances and publics.

Ultimately, in MSF, the production of particular affective public formations re-renders some of the Iranian women's agentic performances of protest stealthy, this time within Global North publics, appearing as a near invisible trace with these audiences, in part foreclosed upon by the campaign's particular framing and the contentious and/or spectatorial nature of public responses. The theatricality and nuance of the protest footage bears all elements required in Chouliaraki's formulation of "agonistic" communication, conveying neither a call to pity, nor irony. As she puts it, agonism "differs from pity in that it refrains from regarding common humanity as the only source of empathetic emotion, and from irony, in that it does not give up the possibility of empathetic emotion altogether" (220). Yet, as demonstrated in this case study, several practices and dispositions of digitally mediated publics in MSF fail to produce this "agonist" conception of solidarity formation. Affective circles of support offer, at best, anaemic solidarities, and at worst, ritualistic reproductions of power imbalances and racialised (feminist) discourses. Spectatorship that fails to gesturally/reciprocally/reflexively respond to protest actions, accompanied by a simultaneous lack of political socialisation toward activating on affect (i.e. through direct donation or other support) contribute to neutralising the potential of these publics to support protesters. MSF publics frequently harbour key misrecognitions around protesters' self-performances. With regard specifically to transnational feminist solidarities, self-performances need to be met with 'ethical' affective publics. An ethical transnational feminist

public would arguably be built not on an agonistic engagement between protester self-performances and spectatorial public responses, but on aspects of what Lyshaug (2006) refers to as a feminist ethics of "enlarged sympathy". She notes:

> *Many feminist theorists have embraced coalition building as the central model for feminist political mobilisation. They have done so because they believe that coalitional solidarity resolves a long-standing impasse within feminism between the political claims of diversity among women and the political need for unity. In this essay, I argue that the turn to coalition politics within feminist theory is problematic: While coalitional solidarity honours the claims of diversity among women, it ignores the importance of acknowledging commonality. The tactical ties that it encompasses fail to enact the kind of mutual recognition on which feminism, as a movement for social justice, depends. I show that in order to address both the concern with diversity and the need for unity in a satisfying way, theorists of solidarity must supplement their appeal to coalition building with an account of the ethical and affective preconditions of inclusive political ties. Specifically, I argue that the cultivation of 'enlarged sympathy' among feminist political actors is crucial to the establishment of political bonds that accommodate and affirm important differences among women.* (77)

In its current iteration, MSF struggles in a number of cases to create the "ethical and affective preconditions" to produce the "inclusive political ties" required for "enlarged sympathy". This is partially connected to curation practices, but more broadly to the intertwined relationships between the spectator positionality of Global North feminist publics and the unrecognised division, ambiguity and de-recognitions across multiple liminal public formations.

CHAPTER SIX

PERFORMING THE SELF AT INSTITUTIONAL BORDERS IN BLACK CONTEMPORARY ART AND @MUSEUMMAMMY

To begin this case study, I will start with a short personal story. On Christmas Eve in 2019, I was lucky enough to be with a group of young BIPOC curators and social media professionals from the American contemporary arts world. Through professional and personal circumstances, we found ourselves within the liminal space of a new city away from family and friends brought together for the holiday. I spoke for a while with young social media and arts curators about the influence of social media at work and their personal lives. I was struck by two opposing ideas in what was said: unbridled enthusiasm for the potential of social media to bring people to art combined with a deeper exhaustion in having one's persona/self fundamentally formed through socially mediated interactions. These early discussions, and the many I would have over the next several years, informed a great deal of my thinking about digital mediation by BIPOC cultural creators as a deeply layered, ambivalent and even paradoxical experience. (Thesis Author's Personal Reflections, 2020)

6.1   INTRODUCTION

This case study explores intersecting practices regarding liminal thresholds and the formation of publics that arise between institutional and extra-institutional spaces. In particular, it engages with two modes of self-performance as visual counterpublic, both addressing cultural representation with regard to Black American and African diasporic art identity and experience. Centralising the work of two projects Black Contemporary Art and @museummammy, this case study benefits from the ability to explore this public work at the nexus of institutional and extra-institutional practices, in particular because of their founder's concurrent relationships with several formal institutions. Applying the framework of liminal publics, this work will be analysed for particular engagements between differing strategies of self-performance, the types of publics that assemble around each and key patterns of engagement. The chapter begins with a short overview of the practices under study to provide a sense of the context and frame of reference for each. This is followed by a brief history of issues of Black contemporary aesthetic production and an in-depth investigation of each practice.

In 2013, twenty-year old, queer, black female student in Art History at Smith College Kimberly Drew

launched the Black Contemporary Art blog. The blog was intended as a space where she and other

contributors could post images of artwork made by black artists not centrally held or easily locatable in other

networked spaces. Black Contemporary Art was created on Tumblr. Its emergence coincided within a cultural

heyday for the Tumblr platform, specifically one in which both Black feminist and queer cultures were

expressing their voices in these spaces. Tumblr's features emphasised content over user, making the images and

text posts key to the platform. As Steele (2021) describes, the platform culture of Tumblr enabled a positive

form of an echo chamber, through which post reblogging continuously amplified key content. Steele

comments on how this worked to create a "nestling" effect as original posts become further and further

encircled by additional commentary. She credits the space of Tumblr as a generative and dynamic one for the

cultivation of Black feminist thought in this period later taken to broader socially mediated publics. The BCA

blog ultimately became one of the largest digital collections of black contemporary art images. It garnered the

attention not only of artists, consumers, and viewers, but also of mainstream curators as well as educational

institutions. Drew, thus used digital communication to mediate viewership of Black art and build a platform

from which to amplify the work of artists and voices potentially marginalised in this space.

@museummammy is Drew's Instagram account, which she transformed from a personal account into a vehicle

for engaging with Black audiences and art professionals around both Black contemporary aesthetic production

and museum-going. Her aim in particular was to engage and connect with the Black Twitter community to

encourage black audiences to actively participate in museum spaces. in her book, *This is What I Know About*

Art (2020), Drew recalls the story of being inspired in particular by a trip to the museum with her mother,

where she became acutely aware of the fact that despite having had much exposure through her dad to the art

world, this visit was the first time that her mother had been in a museum for many years. Instagram became a space in which to produce a particular relationship to both black contemporary production and raced experiences of museum-going, as well the lack of representation of people of colour within mainstream art worlds. Drew launched @museummammy, growing her platform and presence as a "curator of black art and black experience" (Oswaks, 7 December 2018, accessed online). This space has built on a philosophy of combining both a living archive of Drew's experiences navigating the art world, critique of dominant museum-going practices, presentation of black contemporary aesthetic production, engagement with black popular culture, and, in later years, art activism and direct fundraising for marginalised communities.

Drew's online projects grew out of and alongside her educational experience studying Art History at Smith College, and professional interests as an intern with the Studio Museum in Harlem, work with Creative Time, and a three-year stint as the social media coordinator for the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met). Studio Museum is located in Harlem in New York and has a long history of cultivating engagement with black aesthetic production. Started by a group of artists, activists, and philanthropists, as its website profile notes, it focuses on being the "nexus for artists of African descent locally, nationally, and internationally and for work that has been inspired and influenced by Black culture [as a] site for the dynamic exchange of ideas about art and society" (Studio Harlem website, accessed online December 2020). Creative Time is a non-profit public arts organisation that was founded in 1974 to focus on site-based, socially engaged art. Finally, the Met is an iconic New York-based art institution that exhibits work across 5,000 years of art from around the world and was founded in 1870. According to its website profile, the Met "collects, studies, conserves, and presents significant works of art across time and cultures in order to connect all people to creativity, knowledge, ideas and one another" (The Met website, accessed online December 2020). Drew's intersections with these

institutions will form the third main pillar of this case study. Discussed will be the key tensions between

Drew's independent digital media practices and the institutional values and inclusions/exclusions they address.

In each of these projects, Drew produces different types of online self-performance in digitally mediated

extra-institutional spaces to shape emergent art discourses, logics and practices. Each activates the liminal

spaces of digital mediation to engage different types of publics. In order to assess these, it is first necessary to

provide a short history of Black art representation and viewership in the United States, followed by close

analysis of performative strategies and resulting dynamics of publics.

6.2   LIMINAL PUBLICS AND VISUAL COUNTERPUBLICS IN THE SPHERE OF

KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

It is important to emphasise, at the outset of this chapter, that Kimberly Drew has developed widely regarded

practices recognised by art and popular culture worlds, as will be discussed in depth in this case study. Yet, with

specific regard to art history scholarship, as Elena FitzPatrick Sifford and Ananda Cohen-Aponte (2019) draw

attention to regarding exclusionary citational practices, digital practices are under acknowledged and

underrepresented in important art historiographies. Sifford and Cohen-Aponte (2019) speak to exclusionary

practices regarding "interventions created from the margins" and specifically reference Drew's work:

> *One important intervention that we can make as art historians is to democratise our citational practices.*
> *Exclusionary and self-referential citational practices produce distorted historiographies of the field that*
> *erase or elide important interventions created from the margins. These citational exclusions also manifest*
> *in a failure to acknowledge popular and alternative forms of scholarship based in orality,*
> *intergenerational knowledge, and social networking/social media. As the realm of knowledge production*
> *becomes increasingly digital, decentered, and reclaimed by marginalised voices, scholars have a*
> *responsibility to cite and critically engage with important work being done outside the academy. Indeed,*
> *digital spaces such as Twitter and Instagram have become crucial places for art historical dialogue in the*
> *absence of infrastructure to advocate for those who write and create from the margins. Academics,*
> *creatives, and cultural workers alike have used these platforms to exchange articles and think pieces, to*

create communities, and to share resources ... Kimberly Rose Drew, a writer, curator, and former social media manager for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, has been critical in bringing visibility to contemporary black art to broad audiences through her 239,000-follower Instagram account and large Twitter following through the handle @museummammy. (2019:119)

As the following sections will describe, this push and pull of gaining recognition through popular knowledge formation while simultaneously ensuring these interventions are continually recognised across 'official' knowledge discourses is a persistent challenge. Sifford and Cohen-Aponte's call to action echoes the sentiments described at the outset of this thesis regarding the absolute necessity of engaging with digital practices producing knowledge from the margins in developing scholarly insight about larger fields.

6.2.1   Black Art and Artists in US Cultural Institutions

As scholars have noted, before 1967, there were fewer than 12 museum exhibitions focused on Black artists outside of Black colleges and universities making African Americans "virtually absent from this circuit as cultural producers and cultural consumers" (Cahan 2016:14). While exhibitions by Black artists began to flourish with the countercultural and Black rights movements, they were featured separately from the mainstay of large established institutional shows and displays at, among others, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art. With large spans of time between these one-off exhibitions, they failed to have the lasting effects that would accrue from "diversify[ing] permanent collections" (ibid.). As Wallace puts it: "Perhaps the dominant discourse is given to these lapses of amnesia because some ideas are so repugnant to Western culture that they are forced to emerge, again and again, as if new" (Wallace cited in Cahan 2016:16). The call for the expansion of contemporary Black art in mainstream institutions as a reaction to broader social movements has a history tracing back to the 1930s (Cahan 2016),

with major focal points around the 1940s, 1970s, the "multicultural moment of 1995", and in response to acts

of violence by the police against African American men in 2015 in the early years of the Black Lives Matter

movement (ibid.,16). As Cahan argues, typically there is a temporary increased visibility of black art and artists,

tied to prominent events in the broader American political sphere regarding race, instigating high-profile

exhibitions, frequently followed by a dwindling in interest and a long period of dormancy. As prominent

curator Thelma Golden has explained, interest in black shows comes in "waves". "Everybody puts their big

black shows on the books, they get their corporate funding, it goes all around the country, it's a big

extravaganza, and then it's over" (cited in Cahan 2016:16).

Lack of representation of Black cultural work and experience in such institutions is exacerbated by

multiple factors. Entrenched curatorial biases have led to a history of omissions and marginalisations of Black

art that continue to leave their mark on institutional collections. The impact of this over time is a form of what

Coleman and Yoachim describe as "symbolic annihilation"(2008). They note that Gerbner "first briefly

referenced the concept without elaboration: 'representation in the fictional world signifies social existence;

absence means symbolic annihilation'" (2008:44). Gerbner's concept has been significantly taken up in the

arenas of race and feminist scholarship to analyse omissions and negative depictions in fictional media. While

Gerbner's use of the term was designed primarily to address media representations in film and television, it has

merit with regard to curatorial practice. Curation is by definition a practice of conscious inclusion and

exclusion of art work that, in turn, creates a body of representation and particular 'narratives' that emerge

within a show, exhibition, collection and ultimately Canon. Curation impacts the production of knowledge

about particular social groups and if the experience of marginalised groups is omitted through curation from

the "official spaces of culture", a form of symbolic annihilation takes place. The white male cisheteronormative

Western art canon has long served as the overt (and/or invisible) guide rails of this practice producing several

forms of symbolic annihilation. As Cahan (2018) explains: "The institutions that make up the art

establishment determine what constitutes high art through a process of selective acquisition and display" (14).

Further, as Ang (2005) explains, the "non-negotiable reliance on a Western concept of 'art' is at the heart of the

predicament of diversity" (2). Within the context of curatorial practices impacting the presentation of Black

art, beyond the simple lack of inclusion, there are several types of "poor attention" at play important to

understanding the context of Drew's work. The long history of mainstream institutions featuring Euro-centric

art, in which Black experience becomes reduced to representation of Black bodies most frequently in poses of

subjugation, can be seen to produce a set of representations that excludes black experiences of heroism,

triumph, community, resilience, love and joy. As Black artist Deanna Lawson expresses in a museum talk on

the artist of Kerry James Marshall, she finds in his work the expression of "a space of bliss, which I think is very

rare to see in museums, particularly with Black bodies" (Lawson, YouTube video of artist talk, accessed

November 2021). Symbolic annihilation in this sense obliterates a vast realm of Black experience within official

spaces of culture. Additionally, it reinforces hegemonic narratives and constructions of White masculine

agency and heroism, by consistently representing African American experience as one of only oppression (Hall

1997). Against this backdrop of Canonical exclusions/symbolic annihilations of Black art and experience, the

opportunity to use digital mediation to experiment with new types of curatorial practices and viewerships

outside of traditional gatekeepers became a compelling prospect for the assertion of marginalised identities and

voices.

6.3   BLOG AS VISUAL COUNTERPUBLIC

Drew describes how she came to the project of Black Contemporary Art. She describes a scene in studying at

Smith College:

> *Then art history happened. The subjects emphasised in our courses were very white-Euro-centric. My*
> *sophomore year, I interned at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and that was when I was like, 'Oh shit'.*
> *There's all this art history that I missed, there's all this art history that has been erased, there's all this art*
> *history that has been inaccessible, and that complicated my relationship to art and really got me to ask the*
> *right questions of my peers. I started the blog as a means of educating myself and trying to keep a record of*
> *what I had learned from my time at the Studio Museum, and because I felt so strongly I needed to create*
> *a record in the call-and-response space Tumblr facilitates.*
> (*LennyLetter*, accessed online December 2017)

Drew's aim in starting BCA was to create a space where she and other contributors could post images of

artwork made by Black artists that could not easily be located elsewhere online. Her quote refers to the

"call-and-response space Tumblr facilitates." As will be discussed in further depth in later sections,

"call-and-response" is a communication pattern historically associated with African musical forms where a

musical phrase is initiated by a singer or musician and this is responded to in the next musical phrase by

another player or players. Drew emphasises this aspect of the platform (both in functionality and culture) as

enabling a shared relationship to the art presented. She explains: "in the same way that I had encountered that

image of Warhol and Basquiat, casually, I didn't want anyone to have to climb over mountains to learn about

Black artists" (cited by Billington, 31 January 2020 accessed online). Drew's desire to "casually" encounter

Black contemporary art images relates to several critiques of American art institutions' failure to adequately

address inclusion and circulation of black work and concerns. She notes:

> *I just wanted something like it to exist. I would search and find links to books or art criticism websites, but*
> *I didn't find anything that looked like a site for black artists...In the beginning, I would mill through*
> *museum websites and find black artists and search Tumblr to see if their names were there. And if their*
> *name wasn't there, I would write a post for them so that they were a part of a recorded history. Being a*

20-year-old at the time, I was like, 'If it's not on Tumblr, it doesn't matter yet'.
(Interview with *the Fader,* accessed February 2017)

Drew's comment about being a 20-year old for whom Tumblr was the benchmark of "what matters," while humorous and self-deprecating, raises an important aspect of what could be described as a "digital native" (Milkman 2017) perspective on virtual engagement with cultural and political spaces. As theorists such as Milkman argue, digital natives were born in the context of the continuous presence and use of the Internet and digital tools, and in the case of American millennials such as Drew, they share the characteristics of a) a generationally unprecedented 90% participation rate in social media use, b) a pervasive distrust of traditional institutions and parties, and c) considerable facility in marshalling digital media in the service of political action and engagement (Milkman 2017, Hsiao 2018). Thus, a particular generation of digital users has come to understand cultural, social, and political engagement from very early on as naturally virtual and networked. This aligns with discussions of social media consumption and importance had in the course of this research with young BIPOC social media managers and curators in the fine art space. Social media is fully imbricated everyday sociality for many millennial and younger generational users. Further, it has become a central part of commercialisation processes around art for independent artists, galleries, museums and professionals. Anecdotally, through informal discussions and observation, the embeddedness of social media practices across personal and professional spaces was seen to create a particularly pervasive "always on" (Nguyen 2021) culture for young art professionals.

6.3.1   Structure of BCA: Networked Call-and-Response Viewership

Drew began BCA knowing about 10 artist names, which she progressively built up to over 5,000 artists.

Pushing back somewhat on the term curator in this context, she instead emphasises the significance of her early

personal engagement as a Black woman within art spaces:

> *I would visit as many art spaces as I could, do my best to report back and try to show people literally different choreographies of how to engage with art. I'd try to make sure that people knew there were Black artists that were showing downtown ... and that you could look like me and be in a gallery.* (*DailyTrojan* website, accessed online February 2020)

Notably, she conceives of posts not as simply straightforward documentation/aggregation of artists' work, but

as a "choreography" of engagement—between her presence, the art, and the gallery space—one that

importantly serves as a model for others to mirror. The creation of BCA was from its origins deeply

collaborative by both design and necessity. As Drew notes:

> *A week or two into it I put out a call on Tumblr because it's one of those communities where you can be like, "I need help," and they'll be like, "I'm here for you!" I was just like, "Does anyone else want to edit this with me?" From the start there were other people who were working on it so it was a very collaborative process.* (Interview with *Vice Magazine*, accessed February 2020)

In terms of the structure of the blog, BCA features minimalist black typography on a white background with a

statement and set of navigation links. The links include first and foremost a link to BLACK LIVES

MATTER. Further links provide connections to a sample submission, art blogs and tumblrs, black art on

tumblr, Facebook/Twitter, press, events, submission and contact pages. The first and earliest post still archived

online in BCA was made on 2 March 2011 and received 46 notes. By 10 March 2011, a post of the painting

"Past and Present" by artist Leroy Campbell, a self-taught mixed media artist—whose work "celebrates the rich

visual culture of his Gullah Geechee heritage and exemplify the notion of *sankofa*, or harmony between past

and future"(*artsy* accessed online)—had already garnered 1,666 notes.

Some of Tumblr's "perceived benefits are the platform's long-form text posts, ability to track tags, and the multimodal nature of the platform" (Attu and Terras 2017 accessed online). What is unusual about how BCA works, however, is that image posts are, for the most part, presented on the blog one after the other, largely without curatorial comment. Rather than providing contextualisation or framing through long-form text posts with descriptors, as is standard practice in physical art spaces (and their digital extensions), each image simply appears as a new entry above the previous post, with older images moving to subsequent pages. Artwork is thus presented 'democratically' in the sense that it is displayed as a running set of images not grouped or ostensibly thematised in a particular way. One of the very few interjections the site's collaborators make in the entire blog, in fact, is to correct someone who assumes its creators are men and writes: "hey sir. great blog you have here, Its very educational"(sic), they respond with:

> LOL.
>
> Thank you but we're all lady bloggers over here!
>
> check your pronouns,
>
> black power,
>
> BCA
>
> 4:44 pm • 11 October 2013 • 74 notes

The blog features both known and up-and-coming contemporary Black artists to provide broad access to these representations and garner recognition for newly emerging talents. Through this 'broadcasting' format the archive is assembled. Drew notes:

I didn't really have a long-term plan, but I did it so consistently that people began to follow. Now, I've been able to inadvertently position myself as a friend to the artist. I like that I can have a different connection with an artist than someone like a critic or a traditional curator would. If a curator does a studio visit, there's always this immediate end goal that the artist might end up in a collection or an exhibition. With me, it's more casual. I can get to know artists as people, then get to know their artwork without an agenda. I always push back on the word "curator" because even though I make decisions about the things that I post on the blog and on social media, it's more of a broadcasting than a conventional curation process. (Interview with the *Fader,* accessed online December 2017)

6.3.2   Image Diversity and Themes Explored

Artwork presented spans a wide spectrum of genres, periods, and art forms, including painting, photography and (images of) sculpture. For example, there are works as recent as the photograph, *Black Lives Matter* (2017) by Sasha Huber and Petri Saarikko, which shows a white American police officer in an empty school classroom writing the words "Black Lives Matter" over and over on the chalkboard. Photographed 52 years earlier is the image of Black American artist and author James Baldwin by Steve Schapiro. The image shows Baldwin standing in front of a sign that reads: *Colored Entrance Only* from a shop front in Durham, North Carolina. Though these images are by no means presented as historical bookends in the series of posts, it is useful to review the seventeen images that come between Huber and Saarikko's photograph and Baldwin's portrait, to give a sense of the range of art and experience represented. The following is a set of 17 descriptions of works demonstrating the diversity of this imagery, which are listed one-by-one to impart the diversity of the work, but also to give a sense of the structure of how imagery is presented more as a list than as curated by theme:

IMAGE ONE: Just after the image of Baldwin is posted a short segment of black and white video footage of Hazel Scott, a prominent jazz musician of the 1930s–40s born in Trinidad appears. The

post is titled: "Hazel Scott playing two pianos at the same damn time with ease".

IMAGE TWO: Next is an emblem of the Black Panther movement that reads: "All Power to the People".

IMAGE THREE: Following this is a series of shots reposted from *Toan Magazine* taken by 30-year-old photographer Nadine Ijewere. Born in London and of Nigerian-Jamaican descent, Ijewere's is known in particular for her portraiture of diverse Black women, several of which appear in this sequence.

IMAGE FOUR: A series of images of young Black girls by collage artist Deborah Roberts. Titled "The Breakthrough Women", Roberts' collage figures construct images based on "ideals of race and beauty were shaped by and linked through Renaissance art and photographs in fashion magazines" (Larocca, 9 February 2018 accessed online), which incorporate images such as the eyes of Rihanna or the arms of Michelle Obama. The resulting assemblage she refers to as "breakthrough women", or those who have pushed through boundaries of race and gender, which she envisions as "the future of the girls she typically depicts" (ibid., accessed online).

IMAGE FIVE: Then appears the abstract painting by Ellen Gallagher titled *Oogaboogah* (1994), which addresses blackface through black pencil drawings on black lead squares.

IMAGE SIX: Deana Lawson's photograph, *Mama Goma, Gemena, Dr. Congo* (2014), depicts a young pregnant woman in a living room in Gemena, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Lawson's work "investigates Black aesthetics in the domestic environment" (Rhona Hoffman Gallery website accessed online), attentive to the details of the woman's belongings and dress.

IMAGE SEVEN: Following this is a 1977 painting by Guyanese abstract artist Aubrey Williams (1977) from the Tate Archives, called: *Painting of five men wearing Rastafarian hats.*

IMAGE EIGHT: Next is the work called *Graft and Ash for a Three-Monitor Workstation* (2016) by media artist Sondra Perry. This work features two images of Perry with different expressions of tiredness, in both cases with direct gaze back to the viewer. Her head appears as somewhat floating in space and the work addresses multiple issues of the politics of Black embodiment, along with "incisive commentary on the hidden labour Black bodies are constantly asked to perform" (Saint-Louis, 5 April 2018 accessed online).

IMAGE NINE: A Kandis Williams image appears showing a young Black woman in profile mirrored to the right hand side by a reverse profile of the same woman. The image on the right has the sketch of another figure overlaid and part of her neck is collaged with another woman's features, positioned as though the two are kissing. Williams' work is concerned with both intimacy and obsolescence, creating an eerie sense of pathos and multiplicity/quasi-disfigurement in the mirrored figure.

IMAGE TEN: Next is an abstract work by Guyana-born British artist Frank Bowling, from his later works in which restricted movement influenced his style of using dripped painting to build his abstract forms and subjects.

IMAGE ELEVEN: Well-known photograph by Hank Willis Thomas, *Scarred Chest* (2003), that depicts the naked torso of a Black male figure with scars across his chest in the shape of the Nike swoosh symbol.

IMAGE TWELVE: A series of three images curated by architect Sekou Cooke titled: *Close to the Edge: The Birth of Hip-Hop Architecture,* a project dedicated to exploring how "hip-hop's primary means of expression—deejaying, emceeing, b-boying, and graffiti—have become globally recognised creative practices in their own right, and each has significantly impacted the urban built environment" (Center for Architecture website accessed online November 2020).

IMAGE THIRTEEN: Sonya Clark's *Twenty-one* (1998) shows a lamp with a shade adorned by black thread stitched and woven like tightly braided hair resembling Bantu knots. The work "references the atmosphere of the Black beauty salon" by evoking the "harsh tugs of the comb, the smells of relaxers, the slickness of pomades on the scalp" (Cranbrook Art Museum website accessed online November 2020).

IMAGE FOURTEEN: A black and white photo still documenting a performance work *Me gritaron negra (They shouted black at me)* (1978) by Afro-Peruvian artist Victoria Santa Cruz. The still features Santa Cruz in the foreground looking off camera in a stance of defiance as she performs the poem as she is reinforced with a chorus of shouts from the figures around her, with the rhythm kept on a cajón.

IMAGE FIFTEEN: Haitian-born Manuel Matthieu's painting *Irma* (2017) which features an elaborate abstract female figure with obscured face. Such "ambiguous" and "anguished figures" are left open-ended, inviting the viewer to reflect on and/grow uneasy with the source of their pain.

IMAGE SIXTEEN: A segment of Florine Demosthene's multi-part work *The Capture* that focuses on the commodification and fetishisation of Black culture.

IMAGE SEVENTEEN: And, just before the Black Lives Matter photograph, there appears Thierry Tian Sio Po's *L'image de l'occidentale dans la peinture caribeenne* (2010), in which the Guianian artist using a baroque method to explore a "pictorial lesson in critical consciousness" (Ladouceur, Fondation Clement Habitation Clement website accessed online November 2020).

The patterns in this sequence are played out at large throughout the BCA collection. Artwork is international in scope, of diverse subject matter, and explores complex and multiplicitous facets of Black social, cultural and political experience, producing a collective witnessing to the scale of Black cultural production. Notable is the

considerable representation of Black women artists and subjects. In this sampling, for example, 11 of the 17

posts feature either women artists or subjects (or both), a consistent ratio throughout the blog.

6.3.3   Engaging with Black Female Identity

Much of the artwork featuring black female subjects specifically explores issues of identity. Roberts' work on

"breakthrough women" described above speaks to identity and role models for young black girls. Deanna

Lawson's work, including her painting *Mama Goma, Gemena, Dr Congo* (2014) noted above, explore identity

through "Black aesthetics in the domestic environment, and various settings of ritual or celebration" (Rhona

Hoffman Gallery website accessed online). Ellen Gallagher is a minimalist painter whose work has been

inspired by formal themes of artist Agnes Martin and repetitions of Gertrude Stein's work, including her

abstract painting called *Oogaboogah* (1994), which explores identity through featuring a central cluster of black

squares against a background of white squares. A painting by Jessica Spence called *Sore Arms* looks at Black

female identity through the lens of the work engaged in maintaining Black women's hair, by featuring the back

of a woman with her arms raised as she combs her hair into tightly braided buns. Often, artworks reference

direct activism, for example, the short film of Taja Lindley, "This Ain't a Eulogy: A Ritual for Re-Membering"

(2017), a work of socially-engaged art focusing on the deaths of Black victims at the hands of the police

Lindley's work is often "immersive, participatory, socially engaged, political and autobiographical" (Artist's

website, accessed online January 2022). Black female identity and empowerment are thus continuously

represented as integral to a living history of Black Contemporary Art.

6.3.4   BCA's Relational Domains

Many scholars have pointed to the unique relational qualities or "imagined commonality" that can be achieved through interaction via Tumblr. As Kanai (2019) notes: "in contrast to a platform such as Facebook which is predicated on maintaining existing networks of one's contacts, on Tumblr, blog posts are addressed to unknown groups defined by their imagined commonality with the individual blogger" (accessed online). Kanai's description points to what can be understood as a *productive* ambiguity that the specific space of Tumblr enables, by fostering communities in which a shared disposition to content by unknown groups is typical of its cultural practices. In a sense, publics that form through such practices are 'unified' through an unspoken sense of commonality with the blog. What makes BCA unusual is its function as both a space of engagement, but also functionally as a resource that effectively models an alternative set of relationships around art viewership. There are three key structures in BCA that enable this setup. First, is the ongoing updates of new works of art as described above. Second, is the series of links to Black art blogs and Black artists to follow on Tumblr. Third, is the extensive web of incorporations of BCA imagery into the blogs of viewers through the re-blogging. The posted artwork comes together as a coherent collection over time centring a space of Blackness through the aesthetic production. Through the links to outside artists' blogs BCA grows interlinkages to a wide intricate set of connections creating another layer of depth into further aesthetic experiences and critique from the perspective of Black artists. The third set of connections to outside viewers' blogs opens up the linkages to a much broader intersection of evoked experiences. Within this last category where artwork is incorporated within outside viewers' blogs, several domains of experience are evoked as demonstrated in the data set. These include:

1) blogs by contemporary artists or curators

2) blogs dedicated to imagery celebrating Black art, Black identity and culture

3) blogs focused on feminist imagery and posts

4) queer spaces.

Cultural expression within Tumblr creates the "nestled" effect of which Steele speaks. Bloggers incorporate a wide variety of structures in their blogs, including photography, poetry, personal statements, mantras and also importantly music samples. This creates a particular dimensionality within each blog that evokes a "room" in which the user crafts an identity space, however, one that is based on the relative anonymity of presentation within the Tumblr platform. As many scholars have pointed out, this anonymity created the feeling of a safe space, in particular for young queer communities able to explore self-performance in anonymous ways. At first glance it may seem a contradictory notion, i.e. of bolstering identity anonymously. However, this became a liberating use of digital space through exercise of identity understood as distributed assemblages and associations of experience. Identity is developed through individual bloggers reading themselves into a performance of interconnected ideas and associations, which are understood as an insider.

Incorporated to these various relational spaces of artists/art professionals, art viewers and Black, feminist and queer identity spaces, the collection achieves a call-and-response of viewership and collective representation. As Sale (1992) notes with regard to "call and response patterns":

> *Antiphony or call and response, function, improvisation, and audience performance can all be thought of as part of the group or communal nature of art. This theory of art is interactive, process-oriented, and concerned with innovation, rather than mimetic, product-oriented, or static. Call-and-response patterns provide a basic model that depends and thrives upon audience performance and improvisation, which work together to ensure that the art will be meaningful or functional to the community.* (41)

As Drew discussed with Doreen St. Felix in their joint *Lenny* interview:

In Haitian storytelling, our method of call-and-response is called krik krak, krik being the call, krak the response. That's the importance of public dialogue across the black diaspora. The Tumblr and your Instagram account function as real spaces for viewers to begin a conversation with contemporary art. (accessed online September 2018)

Each artwork is accompanied by the number of notes it has garnered, i.e. who has re-blogged or liked those artworks. The primary focus is on sharing and re-linking with other blogs and networks that focus on a diverse range of topics, including Black art, culture, fashion and politics. The set of links thus becomes a de facto digital infrastructure, creating what Drew refers to as new "virtual doors" to accessing this aesthetic production. As such, the conversation or call and response is a dialogue engendered through this structural logic of sharing and interconnectedness, mediated by digital networks rather than through institutional authority. For example, a post such as Sondra Perry's *Graft and Ash for a Three-Monitor Workstation* (2016) garnered 227 notes. . These notes indicate viewers who liked, posted it on their blogs and/or reblogged the image from BCA or other sources. BCA imagery is regularly recontextualised as part of the blogs of other contributors on their respective sites.

The "improvisation" within BCA takes the form of identity work across multiple relational domains. The 'dialogue' is formed through shared access, exposure, and viewership of Black contemporary art amongst a vast network that morphs with each new artwork posted based on configurations of shared resonances. The result is connections in and between thousands of artworks as a kind of living, breathing archive of artwork and viewers. As a use of the digital space of publics, BCA has resonances of what Florini describes when discussing different affordances of technological cultures by hegemonic and marginalised groups. She notes:

While digital cultures produced by hegemonic whiteness often deploy such practices in ways that reproduce networked individualism, connective logics, and a colorblind erasure of race, Black users in this network employ similar practices, but with different underlying logics of community, collectivity and colour-consciousness. (28)

Thumim (2010) describes, in a different context, various initiatives that mainstream art institutions are taking up to produce a more responsive, self-representational engagement with/viewership of their collections, but warns of the tendency of museum practices to "both confirm a community (of museum-goers as participants through the mediated self-expression of their ordinariness) and gloss over the power relations between participant and institution (through their hierarchy of 'systems of expression') (301). BCA produces a model outside of the traditional institution and gatekeepers of the museum or gallery that engages viewers as active agents of meaning-making. As Black (2012) notes:

> *The web also offers an alternative to the authority of museums. Its growth questions what expertise actually means in contemporary culture. With the web has come a new collaborative approach to knowledge generation and sharing, a recognition of multiple perspectives, and an expectation by users that they will be able to contribute and adapt/manipulate content to meet their own needs.*
> *In a broader context, the web is also gradually changing what people want from a cultural experience. Leadbeater (2009) suggests users at arts and cultural venues have always sought and overlapping 'mix of three different experiences', - Enjoy. Talk. Do.* (45)

Within the relational spaces of Tumblr, viewers "enjoy, talk and do" as a particular type of liminal public. This understanding of self and community around the reception of art and the "distillation" of spaces of Black, as well as other marginalised experiences, creates multiple forms of agency: a space of identity built in relationship to other Black and queer curators, artists, and enthusiasts; a model of interactive viewership; a living exhibition; and an archive built over many years that continues to function as a resource impacting the mainstream art world.

6.3.5   Visual Counterpublic as Alternative Knowledge

BCA has achieved considerable status in the art world, including recognition from mainstream curators and

professional aesthetic arbiters and journalist outlets, such as *Artnews,* as well as prominent commercial entities

such as *Artsy,* the New York City-based online brokerage. BCA's last recorded post was in 2019, with the

archive having grown continuously for 8 years, demonstrating a surprising degree of longevity for the

ephemeral virtual spaces of the Internet, and in particular of Tumblr (Sharp and Shannon 2020). As Drew

notes in a *New Yorker* interview:

> *I built the blog as a critique of the art world, and now it has a seat in that world...my mentor said: What*
> *you're doing is huge, you know that? People in New York talk about it and know about it. Curators look at*
> *it...the blog was being taught.* (Interview in *The New Yorker* accessed online December 2019)

In this sense, BCA has produced what Hartley refers to as "popular knowledge" formation. As he notes:

> *As the two kinds of knowledge clash and destabilise each other, it is important to acknowledge how much of*
> *productive, specialist knowledge is merely a certificated and branded version of the very same stories,*
> *prejudices and delusions that infect popular knowledge, and, conversely, how much connective, informal,*
> *popular knowledge strives to attain insight, certainty or explanatory power, albeit un-propped by*
> *disciplinary scaffold and institutional repute. Neither 'side' has a monopoly on truth-values or compelling*
> *stories, or even on reflexive, critical mechanisms for self-correction over time. What might each learn from*
> *the other? The question is rarely asked because the structure of their mutual relationship is adversarial*
> *(centrifugal, not centripetal).* (Hartley 2018:14)

BCA came to influence the "productive, specialist knowledge" of the New York gallery circuit, while retaining

its connective, informal, grassroots structure. This includes the embedded relationship between the collective

representation of Black art and experience in a single digital repository/archive, and the interweaving of that

experience through agentic viewership based on interconnected self-performance. Self-performance as visual

counterpublic in this example differs from the collective acts of protest and witnessing explored in the first case

study. In BCA, self-definition of marginalised identity takes place through both its direct representation across the aesthetic curation it features and through viewers' ability to incorporate interaction with this art into their own processes of self-definition and self-identification achieved through personal blogging. This can be understood, in Thumim's terms (2013), as producing a relationship between self-mediation of expression of crowdsourced voice that invokes "possible democratic outcomes"—in this case by modelling an extra-institutional practice circumventing not only traditional gatekeepers, but the collections logic and cultural imprint of a Western white male cis Canon. "Crowdsourced voice" transforms self-identification into a collective visual counterpublic response to a mainstream art Canon. To be clear, this does not imply that the Tumblr users engaging in self-representation in and through the collection represent an all-inclusive demographic drawn from all possible social categories. The subject matter involved in these knowledge formation processes is, to a degree, self-selecting. BCA viewer participants include art enthusiasts and practitioners and some aesthetic literacies are relied upon for 'full' participation. It retains the privilege of a 'high art' form, however, as digital artwork tagged into the multiple contexts of personal blogs, it merges public high art with personal popular cultural forms and expression. Its lack of hierarchical knowledge framing/positioning around the collection, and its incorporation in a wide array of blogged self-performances—of diasporic Blackness, of Black femininity, of queerness—circulate the work and its interpretations in more crowdsourced ways than its institutional counterparts. BCA thus functions as a visual counterpublic, enacting an alternative viewership model. This leverages the productive instabilities of the liminal spaces through this 'material' enactment. This format increases particular forms of accessibility. Black aesthetic production becomes more accessible through digital circulation. New viewers who have not experienced this artwork to anywhere near the extent (if at all) that they have experienced iconic works, such as

Van Gogh, Picasso, or Warhol that circulate in cycles of mass repetition can connect to a central repository of

this artwork. Further, built as a virtual collection, it extends other forms of accessibility, such as to visitors

unable to physically attend museums and galleries in person. In this example, the productive instability of

digital publics enables BCA to thrive as "an alternative to the authority of museums".

6.3.6   *Liminal Publics and Alternative Knowledge Formation*

The alternative logics of BCA's approach produce an arts space for and about Black aesthetic production that

increases the visibility of this art with many audiences. This, of course, raises questions of viewership of both

the artwork and of it through digital media, given entrenched histories of the "white gaze". There are inherent

tensions between a space for Black art and artists and the promotion of the blog as a resource that increases

circulation of Black aesthetic work to outside audiences. Viewers' reception of the art and authority to speak to

and interpret its themes becomes, for any viewer of historical privilege, critically tied to need for reflexive

engagement. Sions (2021) discusses this issue in relation to pedagogical approaches to teaching about art,

noting the importance that teachers:

> *Introduce artists who push back on norms of whiteness, Euro-centrism, heterocentrism, ableism, and other systems of oppression and to make the concepts of that work part of arts education as well as the inclusion of the artists themselves in the curriculum. Inclusion (alone) is a language of appeasement (Stewart 2017), not a practice of justice or equity.* (91)

Reflecting on Sions quote from the standpoint of a White Western researcher, I was struck by the idea of

"inclusion (alone)" as a "language of appeasement" and how my own "white gaze" may impact the selection

and reading of BCA imagery and its incorporation into personal blogs. One way I have worked to counter this

is through continual discussions with young female BIPOC curators throughout the research process to better

understand curatorial priorities from their perspective.

This section has explored the structure of Black Contemporary Art as a particular kind of visual counterpublic that creates a counter discourse of Black art history while engaging a larger viewership public through the space of Tumblr. Members of its viewership public are assembled through their engagement directly in *processes of viewing* and incorporation to their blog spaces. As the visual counterpublic circulates beyond its original core intended audience of Black artists and art viewers, the contingent and liminal nature of its circulation through larger digital publics becomes a greater potential factor. Its particular structure does not eliminate problems of ambiguity in reception of the art as it visually 'travels', particularly as an open art resource online that has been widely publicised. As a public virtual gallery, as with open access initiatives that make available artwork online, issues of control and honouring artists and also communities, make the publics that form within projects like BCA, liminal zones of engagement. However, operating in the semi-enclaved space of Tumblr and exchanged largely by a community of interest, there was little evidence in the data gathered for this research to suggest that significant forms of derecognition or appropriation emerged in reaction to BCA. Rather the opposite, BCA has exerted influence in the art world by becoming a resource and propelling Drew's advocacy of Black artists in mainstream institutions. I will now turn, however, to Drew's other main project, @museummammy and compare its logics of visual counterpublic formation and circulation within (comparatively more open) contemporary liminal publics.

6.4   CULTIVATING A SPACE OF QUEER, BLACK, FEMALE SELF-VALORISATION

I will now turn attention to another form of digitally mediated self-performance Drew invokes as part of her personal/professional practice, her Instagram persona @museummammy, discussing its structure and corresponding differences in digital public(s) formation. Thumim (2013) contrasts the "democratic" function of self-mediation/self-expression practices by "museum-goers as a participating, self-representing public" with

those that emphasise a "therapeutic function". For Thumim, the "valorisation of experience[s]" of the self is a

therapeutic function that can be seen to diminish the democratising power of such gestures. She notes:

> *Containing the valorisation of experience (a therapeutic function) and the invocation of possible*
> *democratic outcomes (a democratic function), the very idea of self-representation clearly encompasses an*
> *ultimate split of discourses. Of course these two discourses can be linked, but the analytical questions are:*
> *are they, when are they, and with what effect?"* (Thumim 2013:292)

As the following sections describe, the type of self-performance produced in @museummammy is one in

which Drew assembles an affective circle of support around the Black self-valorisation of her self-expression.

While valorisation of experience through digital mediation in this format does indeed represent a kind of

therapeutic function, that function is not wholly divorced from processes of democratisation. Therapeutic

spaces of collective self-valorisation for marginalised identities represent a counterpublic response to the

everyday mainstream devaluation (and threat to) those identities. This represents a collective relational

understanding that affirms important solidarities between marginalised identities, which is part of the process

of building support for and seeking forms of redress for marginalisation, including therapeutic self-valorising

processes. In the context of histories of Black art, in particular the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, the

relationship between the purpose and political function of art production and viewership is emphasised. As

Neal (1968) notes, "a main tenet of Black Power is the necessity for Black people to define the world in their

own terms. The Black artist has made the same point in the context of aesthetics" (1). The creation and

curation of Black aesthetics and Black histories as critical axes of self-determination and self-valorisation

become paramount. Says poet, Don L. Lee:

> *We must destroy Faulkner, dick, jane, and other perpetrators of evil. It's time for DuBois, Nat Turner,*
> *and Kwame Nkrumah. As Frantz Fanon points out: destroy the culture and you destroy the people. This*
> *must not happen. Black artists are culture stabilisers; bringing back old values, and introducing new ones.*

> *Black art will talk to the people and with the will of the people stop impending 'protective custody'.*
> (cited in Neal 1968:1-2)

As the next sections will demonstrate, the formation of publics around @museummammy effectively reinforce

the therapeutic (symbolic) function of self-valorisation, while not sharing the same structure, function, and

agency of publics as in BCA. Furthermore, key tensions in the nature of the publics produced in the space of

Instagram and as a microcelebrity form of publics emerge. This is in contrast to the type of relational spaces

produced through Tumblr. @museummammy publics are circumscribed by the particular liminal spaces of

Instagram. To begin discussion of @museummammy, I will first discuss the techniques of self-performance the

account engages to produce a self-valorising identity space.

6.4.1   @museummammy's Three Main Content Techniques: Life-Writing, Counterhistory and

Personal Activism

Drew launched @museummammy not long after starting BCA. She conceived of the project in terms of

sharing with audiences both artwork and her experience of moving through specific spaces of culture.

As she notes:

> *The more art I saw, the more I wanted to share it with others. My Instagram account ... became an opportunity to introduce my audience to everything that I was discovering. Back then, I remember thinking how implausible it was that I was working at Creative Time, and, more specifically, how inconceivable it was that a young Black person from New Jersey was being invited into such an exclusive world. I decided I could use my Instagram to illustrate my success, despite the odds. Maybe people would think, if they can do it, so can I.* (2020:35)

A foundational principle here is the idea that by demonstrating and celebrating Black success, this acts as an

invitation for others to envision themselves engaging in historically exclusionary domains. It is important to

note some of the tensions that exist around the technique of promoting "Black excellence". As a strategy, this

has been embraced by some Black creators, artists, and feminists to present aspects of Black American experience obscured by emphasis on negative images and portrayals. It is argued that while many such depictions are undeniably critical to expressing the histories of loss and trauma that are a part of Black American experience, such representations can nonetheless inflict their own kind of oppressive weight through a constant onslaught of negative imagery as well as the exclusion of other critical dimensions, such as joy and positivity. Some Black advocates, however, have critiqued the way in which discourses of Black excellence may become exclusionary. For example, as Peterson-Salahuddin's (2022) article on Black feminist counterpublics discusses, CaShawn Thompson raises concern about how the hashtag she created #BlackGirlsAreMagic, which was intended to inspire particularly working class Black women, later circulated in elite contexts of Black excellence. Thompson created the hashtag to "uplift and praise the accomplishments, beauty and other amazing qualities of Black women" (CaShawn Thompson personal website accessed online). Peterson-Salahuddin notes that Thompson said "the celebritization and commodification of the phrase by Black elites changed it from a message about everyday Black women's labour into an exclusionary celebration of 'Black women excellence'" (2022:10). Drew's practice refers to themes of Black excellence and followers sometimes react to images she presents affirming her "giving Black lux", which thus places her within a contested space and framing of Black excellence.

In order to understand more specifically how @museummammy participates in a particular form of world-building, I will begin with discussion of Drew's specific techniques. @museummammy has evolved over time to feature several components, including her engagement with and representation of artists and exhibitions, personal history, personal musings and reflections, pop culture references, presence in the fashion world, social activism and media coverage. Drew is also active on Twitter and in the reposting of TikTok videos

through her account, integrating a cohesive set of self-representations to convey her digital public persona. She describes her work as being akin to the practice/ethos of a DJ:

> *In art, it's been great to have been a person who's like a selector. I almost never feel like a curator ... I very much feel like a DJ almost ... which is why I love all my DJ friends ... I'm like you move the crowd, you keep the tempo going, you bring people into the party, you're managing so many ways of caring for people at once, and it is extremely more democratic than being a curator, because you have to interface one-on-one, and I think that is more apt for describing the work that I'm doing, because I have to be there with attention as well, because of social media.* (Apple podcast, *The Messy Truth* with Drew 2020)

@museummammy utilises three main content techniques that emphasise self-performance—life-writing, digital counterhistory and personal activism. These techniques dovetail neatly with the content requirements for cultivating status as a traditional Instagram influencer and microcelebrity by focusing on cultural tastemaking, 'authentic' self-documentation and personal experiences and aesthetic production, to generate and expand a digitally mediated viewership (Marwick 2007; Marwick 2013; Khamis, Ang & Welling 2017).

6.4.2   Life-Writing: I As We

Drew's particular strategies of self-performance consciously map the "I" of her @museummammy autobiographical mode to a collective "we". It does so by interweaving her presence with a collective history of Black cultural representation to encourage others to engage with this aesthetic production. Drew articulates that envisioning as specifically connected to modelling her presence in particular relationships to art as a path to give others a frame of reference for pursuing their own desires to work in, but also engage in viewership, within the art world. Drew's techniques in producing this 'I as We' space are connected to particular forms of "life-writing". This mode of self-performance emphasises self-broadcast as a hybrid/fused form incorporating life-documentation through selfies and captions. Self-performance can be described here as a form of digital

self/life-writing. "Life-writing" is identified by Foucault as a "technique of self", by which the subject can be "constituted as a subject of power" (1988). Building on Sauter's (2013) application of Foucault's life-writing within the arena of social media use, Petray (2013) identifies this as a means by which marginalised groups have worked to counter stereotyped images, for example, of indigeneity. Foucault makes the distinction between forms of life-writing, such as the "hupomnemata" (Kalmbach Phillips et al. 2009). As Swonger (2006) notes, "if the hupomnemata can be said to have an audience at all, it would be the writer himself … the reader of the hupomnemata is not passive, but continually engaged in the activity of incorporating the hupomnemata into daily life" (accessed online). Life-writing and 'self-vernacular' here are rooted in the telling of Drew's story personally and professionally and its tone frequently resonates with aspects of Black feminist autobiography. Scholars such as Butterfield, Smith, Yellin and Johnson discuss the "model of the self" that Black autobiographical writing works from. "In Black autobiography", Butterfield argues, "the unity of the personal and the mass voice remains a dominant tradition" (1974:3). Scholars Valerie Smith, Jean Fagan Yellin, and Yvonne Johnson assert that "the 'I' in Black women's autobiography stands for 'we'—meaning we, Black women and/or we, Black people, thus "craft[ing] Black female selfhood as collective," or a "selfhood-in-relation" (cited in Bosničová 2011:32). Selfhood construction begins for Drew with the Instagram handle @museummammy. According to Drew the origins of this name came, in part, from the inspiration of @museumnerd, self-described as "Bilingual based in beautiful Bogotá", who at the time live tweeted from galleries. Drew's aim is to rework traditional associations around this figure historically associated with deference and disempowerment. She also seeks to resituate notions of caretaking from a domestic realm to public spaces of culture and reframes the Museum through her eyes as a queer Black woman.

For me, I've always thought about the mammy figure as one of the superheroes within the canon of how we understand Black women. And I always see it with this, like, supreme respect. And so I chose that name because I always think of a mammy figure as a person of care, and a person of particular excellence, and a person who is, in many ways, within an institution and in some ways a leader of an institution. And so that's why I chose the name. (Interview on *npr radio* on 7 November 2018 accessed online)

Drew first chose the handle *@maudmammy,* based on the character of Maud Martha from Gwendolyn Brooks' book of the same name, a book that, as Drew points out, is rare in that it is "explicitly told through the point of view of a Black woman" (Interview with Phillips Gallery accessed online 8 February 2019). Drew describes the way Brooks writes her protagonist as 'like a subtweet'—Brooks says exactly what she thinks without actually saying it" (*Vogue* article website, accessed online September 2021). Ultimately, Drew settled on @museummammy, explaining:

I like the idea of deconstructing the ways in which we think about Black women's domesticity and Black women's labour, and I think that 'mammy' is a word that speaks to both of those axes of being. I like thinking about how powerful it can be to be considered a caregiver, without thinking about the way in which a mammy figure may be disempowered. (Phillips gallery website accessed online July 2021)

Drew also specifically references Black actress Hattie McDaniel's iconic Mammy from the film, *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Citing and drawing upon McDaniel's reputation as a Black female queer icon, she notes:

I feel "mammy" is a word that like "bitch" or like the N-word has been used in a violent way against us, and I really firmly believe in reclaiming those words. Because you think about the history of the mammy, I always think about Hattie McDaniel who was a queer icon who was the first Black woman to receive an Oscar. What does it mean if we reclaim that word, and that's what I've tried to do in my work. (*ZIWE* website, accessed online August 2020)

McDaniel in many ways reclaimed Mammy by shifting the way Black Americans were portrayed in cinema of the period, gaining recognition through receiving an Oscar, and living an offscreen life of (relative) sexual freedom, opulence, influence and charity, creating a powerful model and conduit of Black agency. Reversal of

the notions of mammy as a diminished or submissive figure frame her Instagram persona from the outset as a symbolically agentic self-performance.

One of the key aims of @museummammy throughout is to demystify the space of galleries for all museum-going identities through the modelling of her own self-performance. She posts selfies next to various works of Classical art, including Renaissance paintings and Greek and Roman sculpture. She produces a variety of self-poses that invariably foreground herself as the subject in a playful or critical interaction with these works, reinforcing her prominence in the space and ownership of the narrative/journey she is charting with the art on display. In one post she remarks:

> *Just a little reminder that there is no 'correct way' to view a work of art. There's no magic time limit. No secret code. No recipe. Your only challenge is finding the work that speaks to you. Angers or entices you. Calls you in or brings you out. Much love to folx as we all begin a new decade of romance in galleries near and far.* (Drew, @museummammy Instagram account)

As Gem Fletcher notes with reference to Drew, she is "using social media as a way to say, 'You could go there, and you could go there, and you could go there'" (Apple podcast, *The Messy Truth* with Drew 2020). Drew's aim is to create an entry point for marginalised identities to envision an active or agentic relationship to the Canon and the multiple forms of marginalisation and symbolic annihilation it represents. As she notes:

> *And so my Instagram looks a lot like this ... Taking in artwork that might be an old Renaissance painting and finding myself in it, with the hope that maybe people will start to see themselves in these spaces as well, to remix them, to take them, to reclaim them.* (Drew, American Alliance of Museums keynote, accessed online September 2020)

By creating virtual "doors" and leading a path into museum spaces through digital media, Drew builds a network of followers who, as she indicates, may never physically walk through the bricks and mortar spaces of

traditional museums or galleries. When posting work by Black artists she more typically chooses to let the art

speak for itself. She rarely takes selfies next to these images, preferring instead to provide the greatest possible

amplification of the subject of the work or the achievements of its creator, in keeping with an ethos of I as We.

The selfhood constructed in these spaces is not intended to simply assert Drew's individual presence in a

privileged position previously only afforded to a normative white cis male identity. In one post, Drew posts an

image of herself looks intently at the camera in front of a projected exhibition screen, with the accompanying

text:

> *Dear 'privileged' peoples: I want to make something clear - I do not desire or lust for what you have or what society has subscribed value to in your life. I do not want your proximity to constructions of "privilege," i do not want the comfort that comes with living in a hetero-patriarchal society, I especially do not want your handouts or pity. It may be controversial, but I am bored with the fight for 'equality' as I am bored with how the world's evils have set up our society. If not interrogated, the fight for 'equality' is just a race towards the privileges afforded by an unjust system.* (Drew, @museummammy Instagram account)

6.4.3   Digital Counterhistory

Across the body of life-writing in @museummammy, Drew digitally mediates past, present and future of

aesthetic and personal history in a collective narrative continuously in the (re-)making. The

selfhood-in-relation expressed through the vast representational scope of Black aesthetic production becomes a

form of collective representation of multi-layered, multi-generational Black aesthetic and personal histories. As

she notes:

> *Carter G. Woodson said: "If a race has no history, it has no worthwhile tradition, it becomes a negligible factor in the thought of the world, and it stands in danger of being exterminated.' When I discovered this quote, it became such a motivating force for me. I liked the drama of it; I love the idea of thinking about how to fight not just erasure, but extermination, really. What does it mean to be in service of Black art and Black culture with that level of danger potentially on the other side if that work isn't being done?"* (Drew, keynote address to American Alliance of Museums, accessed online September 2020)

@museummammy documents the present-day living history of Drew as a queer, Black, female curator. As she notes that "reporting on having been there, on *having been*, is a big part of the work" (quoted in Kim, 18 July 2016 accessed online). In this respect, @museummammy's self-performance frequently documents Black lived experience as a testament to unrelenting Black joy, power, positivity and affect. The concept of self-performance as a practice of counterhistory usefully points to a way to address *ongoing* loss/marginalisation of lived experience that contributes to symbolic annihilation. Within the context of the symbolic representation of the erasures of the past, Drew stages her own living history. Drew's practices articulate lost lineages of Blackness—represented by the *absences* within Canonical Art and official histories and embodied *presences* within Black contemporary art and life—written into the digital through her re-engagement with those losses. She represents day-to-day experience, both by documenting her own life, travel, engagement with art and fashion, self-care and family relationships. This includes posting images of herself spending time with her family or childhood photos taking part in quotidian activities, such as dinner out at a local *Red Lobster* restaurant. These images contrast visually and stylistically with the high-fashion selfies she incorporates. The purpose here seems to be multi-fold. As with all microcelebrity, values of "authenticity" are prized as a way to form meaningful engagement with followers and this imagery fulfils the kind of intimately shared 'backstage' of Drew's life. At the same time, the absence of imagery within the mainstream culture of diverse constructions of Blackness also politicises Drew's gestures, in particular through the diversity of associations mobilised. As Florini (2019) notes:

The performance of social identities and the "expression of one's cultural identity through idiom and style" can be an important mode of political engagement, regardless of whether there are direct and immediately discernible political consequences. (70)

She also presents images of herself in the context of her queer history, through photographs and commentary referencing her personal relationships. She combines these with selfies in her role as curator invoking exclusive cultural spaces such as the Venice Biennale or Prada Milan runway show, as well as photoshoots of herself in popular media coverage, for example, *Essence* magazine.

Interspersed with this type of imagery are exhibition photos referencing recovered Black histories, for example, the black and white images of Black female beach goers, with the caption, "Did you know Sag Harbor is a historically Black neighbourhood? #BlackHamptons". The staging of the self she performs is distinctly autobiographical in the sense of tracking her experiences, engagement and evolution over time as @museummammy as nurturing Black cultural imagination. Drew notes that as a Black woman in the arts, her ability to connect with Black figures in paintings such as the works of Italian Renaissance painter Titian or French modernist painter Manet is critical. Manet's seminal work *Olympia*, for example, features representation of a Black maidservant—posed for by a Black model named Laure who also featured in Manet's *Children in the Tuileries Garden* (1862)—offering flowers to *Olympia,* the white figure famously and provocatively visually-coded as a prostitute. Art scholars such as Denise Murrell have pointed to figures such as this as evidence of a lost centrality of Black women in the art of Modernity, with this focus evidence in the range of paintings of Black women by not only Manet, but also Gericault, Matisse, Delacroix, Gaugin, Picasso, Bonnard and Cezanne.

In another set of posts, Drew shares a sequence of paintings from the Musee d'Orsay exhibition, *Black Models.* She also shares the work of Nigerian-born artist Toyin Ojih Odutola, about whom Drew says: "ugh to

see @toyinojihodutola from the early tumblr days to the walls of the fucking @whitneymuseum—beside myself with joy for you toyin". In another, she posts a painted portrait of Otelia Cromwell, the first Black woman graduate of her alma mater, Smith College. She also includes many short sequences of images from various exhibitions, such as "Shattered Glass", which was held at the Jeffrey Deitch gallery in Los Angeles. As the exhibition preamble explains:

> *Several of the works gathered here explore questions of power, surveillance, and justice in the quotidian Black and Brown experience while speculating on radical futures. Going against the grain, where these bodies have been historically weaponized, they are now seen as divine: simultaneously destroying and reconstructing the self. Artist Kezia Harrell defines identity as the one true thing we have, and her phantasmagoric self-portraits lead us to an entirely new universe for Black identity that exists far from the heavy traumas of the past.* (Jeffrey Deith website, accessed online December 2020)

In the space of a few posts, Drew's contemporary lived experiences become dynamically and virtually interwoven and archived into a narrative with the lost histories of the Black models who posed for Modernist works and the "phantasmagorical" presence of Harrell's divinations of the future of Black female identity.

Drew's engagement with high art and culture in @museummammy extends beyond the art world directly. A significant part of her presence is also signalled through involvement with fashion. She makes explicit how she uses dress as a way to assert her presence and 'take up space': *"Being a Black woman in public … people don't think I belong or that I'm worthy of spaces. The garments that I wear are one of the key ways that I communicate my worthiness."* 💕 The post in which Drew explains this approach is titled: "Past Life" and contains the handwritten words across the side of the image: "A human no longer defined by size". Drew models body positive and inclusive fashion throughout her Instagram self-performance, documenting her inclusion in fashion events, runway walks and photo shoots. She presents Black cultural imagination and

queer, Black, 'body positive' beauty in the images she projects, as well as in concert with her assertions of Black presence and power in museum/gallery spaces. As Art Historian, Samantha Noel, notes:

> *The cultural archive really is, in many ways, an embodied experience that doesn't necessarily have to be a material object or thing, you know, written words, but is something that could be corporeally expressed, passed on with this tradition of oral history from generation to generation, but it's also survival, sustenance, perseverance...a counter discourse to the established order, when I think of cultural archive, I think of this alternative means of finding a form of self-validation.* (Panel presentation, States of Flux: Black Art as Cultural Archive panel discussion, Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit - MOCAD, accessed via YouTube, December 2021)

In terms of archiving, institutional gatekeeping can prevent inclusion of imagery sourced at the community level, thus excluding the experiences of particular community members and failing to convey self-definition and meaning-making in its 'everydayness'. Drew's work unites everydayness with elite cultural spaces in the digital counterhistory she performs.

6.4.4   @museummammy's Publics

As described in Chapter Four, within an Instagram account likes and views are the most common form of engagement thus making it difficult to definitively assess the 'sentiment space' of the broader public. However, A more specifically structured curation of affect, as described by Papacharissi and Trevey in their analysis of affective publics (2018), results in Drew's project in a more uniform set of affective responses among those who generate comments and affirmations in the space. This careful curation is built around a form of life-writing as collective digital history-building that unites key symbolic histories. The inner circle of commenting followers takes the form of ritualistic affective support exercised by displaying short, positive comments and emojis reinforcing and further valorizing the self-performative identity as a space of shared experience and connection. Such ritualistic affective circles have some spectatorial qualities in the sense that they offer support and

validation but somewhat limited capacity for what could be more meaningful reciprocal gestures. In this case, that lack of reciprocity is related more functionally to the practical technological limitations of Instagram. For example, participants cannot easily share their own reaction selfies to further engage with Drew's gestures. When Drew posts images of herself interacting and engaging within particular museum spaces and Canonical works, such greater 'democratisation' of self-expression featuring followers' own selfies would have the potential to create a powerful assemblage to speak to many of the ideas of symbolic absence/erasure that Drew raises. As a tastemaker/influencer space built on premises of increasing processes of following, however, @museummammy is much more akin to one-way broadcasting than two-way exchange. More active exchange takes place during live streaming events in which listeners post real-time questions and comments, but this still mimics broadcasting formats with the livestreamer selectively responding to particular questions. Typically, once a post is made, a content creator jumps in to engage in direct dialogue and counter dialogue with very specific statements, as a moderating/clarifying function. As a space of Black culture geared toward Black creators and curators, most of the engagement in comments is by followers with publicly-identifying profile information indicating they are also Black cultural practitioners. Comments most frequently reinforce statements Drew makes related to issues focused on art and activism, but in particular to issues impacting Black lives, including racial violence, Black trans community rights, histories around slavery and civil rights (e.g. through discussion of events such as Juneteenth, the US holiday that celebrates the emancipation of enslaved African Americans) Black feminism and queer experience more broadly. Also frequently posted are comments relating to the nature of artistic/institutional work environments and the expression of collective professional exhaustion with contemporary experiences of race in cultural workplaces and the time and labour demands of a neoliberal capitalist system.

Following is a discussion of more specific posts and exchanges that illustrate some of the dynamics of public

engagement around @museummammy. In one such post, Drew addresses a recent controversy around

filmmaker Jane Campion's remarks at an acceptance speech at the Critics' Choice Awards. Campion had

remarked to Serena and Venus Williams who were audience members that they were "marvels" but didn't have

to "play against the guys" as she did as a filmmaker. Campion's comments were met with a wave of intense

backlash. Drew posted on both Instagram and Twitter the comment: "We've all worked with or for a Jane

Campion". Followers of both Drew's accounts shared numerous comments expressing similar experiences of

dealing with white female colleagues and of how Campion's comments exemplify the problems of peak white

feminism. Drew's post was picked up by a number of media outlets discussing the backlash, for example, *Elle*

Magazine, in Nova Read wrote:

> *Drew touches on the universality of this sort of racism. Whether consciously done or not, it rears its head*
> *every day. So often, racism like this is subtle, or coded in a certain use of language, meaning you can't*
> *quite put your finger on it or articulate it, but you know how it makes you feel in your body. You know that*
> *it undermines your talent and your contribution, and that it plays into historical conversations around*
> *inherent value and worthiness.* (Read, 17 March 2022 accessed online)

There is no expectation that the worlds Drew builds should extend to a public outside its core address to a

Black audience. However, as produced within the forum of Instagram and celebrating Black cultural

production at large, Drew has a following far larger than the inner group of supporters who regularly

comment. With the structures of ambiguous engagement afforded through spaces like Instagram,

understanding this broader group as a public is challenging. Behind likes and views, it is often unknown

whether supporters choose not to engage in dialogue around these issues simply in order to learn from and

amplify the voices of those centred by the project, or participate from the sidelines for other reasons. In some

instances, white followers (most typically female-identifying through profile information provided) contribute

supportive statements. For example, one such follower thanks Drew for sharing aspects of history about which

she needed to further educate herself. Such comments demonstrate positive attempts to avoid centring the

commenter over the subject matter of the post. Comments such as these, however, appear very infrequently. In

contrast to the publics assembled around BCA—i.e. through intersecting relational

domains—@museummammy's publics include both active followers contributing based on shared experience,

i.e. ritualistic affective groups of commenting supporters, as well as a group of followers that are, to a large

extent, unknown. At times, white-identified (through profile information) participants make comments that

evidence significant types of derecognition. Two examples illustrate this point. In one, Drew writes: "A General

Note to White Artists That Follow Me, Stop Sending Me Messages Like This". The words overlay an image of

a painting of murder-victim George Floyd. The painting was created by a white artist who direct-messaged

Drew asking her to share this artwork with her platform community (that artist's name is obscured). The series

of interactions that follows demonstrates key aspects of derecognition and spectatorial engagement. In terms

of white artists reaching out to Drew in this way, a fundamental derecognition or refusal takes place in that the

space is clearly crafted and promoted as a space of Black art and culture—a much-needed corrective to

mainstream cultural exclusions and absences. Yet, followers promoting their own art read into this space an

opportunity for their own commercial gain. As a number of @museummammy followers discuss, the specific

artist Drew references is seeking to capitalise on the suffering of Black bodies in the figure of George Floyd.

This post generated numerous comments by Black followers incensed by the artist's attempt to do so and his or

her failure to instead elevate and promote Black artists' work. Participants also discuss their own experiences in

dealing with the tone deafness and decentring impacts of these frequently experienced interactions. Some

participants express their general disdain and fatigue with this genre of "white sympathy art". One follower recounts the story of discussing with a white gallery owner how her posts for Black Lives Matter failed to align with her lack of inclusion of Black art in her gallery. The follower recounts the gallery owner's response of saying that she "follows the @museummammy account", i.e. that simply by following the account gives her a form of engagement/credibility. These forms of spectatorial and opportunistic engagement are (silently) present in the liminal space of these publics until they dramatically puncture the space through a suddenly hypervisible comment or gesture. Within this same series of interactions, there are also several exchanges in which Black followers share information about histories of oppression to educate and inform different respondents about the nuance of these issues—in particular to commenters who move to a default mode of encouraging general appeasement for the sake of solidarity. Ultimately, such interactions importantly demonstrate the ongoing burden on Black participants to educate white participants about the histories of marginalisation and oppression. Such efforts become an attempt to remove the veil of "colour-blindness" under which not only these individuals, but also race as a construct, operate within a contemporary 'post-race' neoliberal American context (Florini 2019).

In discussing these interactions, it is important to return for a moment to varied approaches to engaging with broader publics discussed by different Black content creators. Steele cites Ibrahim (2014) when discussing some of these tensions, who notes:

> *I've never been explicitly concerned about how white people receive black content once it's been given the space for a large audience. While I understand other peoples' valid concerns, I don't think putting content out removes the social responsibility of white people to see their privilege and know when they are able to jump in and when they should just step back and listen.* (Ibrahim cited in Steele 2017:118)

The previous discussion of various types of interactions within the @musuemmammy space underscore failures by white audiences to "know when they are able to jump in". In addition to looking at specific misrecognitions that place, there is the broader unknowability of sentiment in the larger group responding to Black content. As discussed, those simply "liking" content may be "stepping back and listening", but within digitally mediated spaces this remains, in practical terms, unknowable. The purpose of drawing these aspects out is not simply to cast doubt and suspicion on particular publics, but rather to frame a critique into interrogating spectatorship at large as a function within digital mediation, as well as specific repertoires of derecognition.

Lastly, I'll discuss a brief exchange that took place around posting of an essay Drew wrote about a controversy specific to the art world regarding Dana Schutz's 2016 painting *Open Casket.* The painting which was shown in the 2017 Whitney Biennial was based on a photograph of Emmett Till, a young Black boy who was tortured and lynched in Mississippi in 1955. Till's mother insisted on an open casket funeral so that the public could see what had happened to her son. Photographs of the funeral circulated at the time in Black American publications including *The Chicago Defender* and *Jet Magazine.* Till's murder and the circulation of these photographs, within both Black and white media, were significant in catalysing the American civil rights movement. As D'Souza (2018) notes this circulation was "a crucial moment of consciousness-raising in the long struggle for desegregation and the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965" (blog post accessed online February 2020). The image was one of critical meaning making, "much more than an historical artefact to many people in this country" (D'Souza, blog post, accessed online February 2020). Schutz's painting abstractly depicts Emmett Till's face from the point of view of his mother looking down upon him at the funeral and is

based on the image from the original photograph. The painting was highly controversial eliciting protests by

some artists, while also defended by others on the grounds of artistic freedom. As D'Souza (2018) notes,

younger Black artists initiated much of the protest. She says: "the controversy did not play out as a starkly black

versus white issue; on the contrary, at times it seemed that the divide was more generational than racial" (blog

post, accessed online February 2020). Further, the controversy sparked deeper debate about the role of

institutions like the Whitney Museum in perpetuating "institutional anti-blackness". In her essay, Drew

approaches the controversy by centring questions of "the limits of empathy". She notes:

> *When Open Casket became the subject of protests and news coverage, Schutz explained the emotional impulse behind the painting. "The thought of anything happening to your child is beyond comprehension," she said. "Their pain is your pain. My engagement with this image was through empathy with his mother." I still think about her answer, and the many ways we have continued to experience the limits of empathy in the years since, through a cycle of violence, uproar, and the inevitable return to business as usual. Is empathy a retweet or a signal boost? A charitable donation? Exposure? A painting in a biennial? A black square? Who feels the weight of immeasurable loss, and who benefits?*
> *Who tells us what's real?* (Drew, 31 January 2022 accessed online).

Drew posted a link to her essay on @museummammy, which was met predominantly with comments of

support and desire to read the piece. One follower interjects to make a point about focusing on why Schutz

had not acknowledged and expanded on her own connection to the larger history of racism and Emmett Till's

story as a white woman, given that the brutal violence against Till was the result of his being accused of

"offending" a 21-year old white woman in her family's grocery store. Drew, however, disagrees with the point,

emphasising that the essay is by a Black woman, in a volume co-edited by two Black women and honouring a

young Black man that the focus of the article is on the "limits of empathy" in the current moment. This

exchange demonstrates two important intersections. The commenter who, despite emphasising that Dana

Schutz should acknowledge her connection to troubling white histories, still centres her discussion back on the white painter and not on the subject of the essay. Secondly, the concerns Drew raises at the end of her essay speak directly to the limits, from the point of view of allyship, of digital publics. As she questions, "*Is empathy a retweet or a signal boost? A charitable donation?*" Her comments resound with the predicament of how far such gestures can go to bridge the gap of empathy.

6.4.5   Activism

Despite its limits, fundraising does seem to be one of the most direct ways that allies can materially impact issues of inequality through digital mediation. @museummammy does engage in direct fundraising for certain causes, which I'll now discuss. Financial donations are a response to equity and reparation challenges faced by marginalised communities. Several scholars (e.g. Bennett & Segerberg 2012; Giddens 1991), have identified how personal politics increasingly intertwine in the contemporary era with other aspects of life and lifestyle choices. Drew is identified as an activist alongside her roles as curator, through her outspoken support of connecting art with activism directly. In @museummammy, she regularly posts/reshares information on ways to support Black Lives Matter protests and reparations movements—including ways to donate money directly to Black audiences in need and hosts an Instagram #BlackPowerLunchHour, where she interviews artists and activists. Drew uses her platform to amplify trans causes, in particular, for example, working together with activists Chase Strangio, Camille G. Bacon and Phillip Picardi, Drew created a series called the Anti-Trans Bills Teach-In. Partnering with an organization called GLITS (Gays and Lesbians Living in a Transgender Society), Drew was a key promoter of a joint fundraiser that raised one million dollars in a week for the organisation. As its website notes, GLITS works to "create holistic solutions to the health and housing crises faced by TGBLQIA+ individuals experiencing systemic discrimination at intersecting oppressions impacted by racism

and criminalization" (GLITS website accessed online September 2021). GLITS "mobilised supporters in their social media networks, enlisting activists and allies with large followings and equipping them all with text and visual assets tailored to various platforms. With the coordinated campaign zipping across social media, the goal was smashed by the end of the first day. So Doroshow and the team aimed higher. What could they do with $1 million?" (*GQ,* accessed online September 2021). While GLITS itself has over sixty-three thousand Instagram followers, Drew was central to the fundraiser in hosting a live Instagram interview with GLITS' executive director, Ceyenne Doroshow, via a joint takeover of the Museum of Modern Art's (MOMA) PS1 Instagram account, thus broadcasting to its six hundred sixty-one thousand followers, while also promoting to @museummammy's three hundred thirty-six thousand followers. Though not the only key supporter, Drew's visibility in these spaces were important to the campaign's ability to "zip across social media", with numerous followers posting comments about their donations. This generates the attention required to activate cause visibilities across other networks, with material impacts for organisations such as GLITS.

6.4.6   *Black Self-Valorisation, Cultural Capital and Microcelebrity*

Drew's comments discussed earlier in this chapter about being undervalued as a Black woman in public, speak to the politically charged nature of 'being seen'. With over 100,000 followers, she is considered, through her @museummammy persona to be by common industry standards, a "macro-influencer", with Internet celebrity status (nano-influencers are one to five thousand, micro influencers are three to one hundred thousand, and mega-influencers like Kim Kardashian are over one million). As Banet-Weiser notes:

> *Rather than capturing the world's moments, Instagram is much more about carefully and strategically curating individual lives; along with YouTube, it has become the key place for "influencers" to launch their careers, as people who are 'paid to use their personal magnetism to promote specific agendas online'. Instagram influencers craft their self-brand around discourses of "authenticity," where they are more*

commercially successful the more relatable, intimate, and vulnerable their self-presentation. Yet at the same time, to be 'authentic' for influencers also means to strictly conform to dominant white, cis-gender norms. (2021:141)

Like many influencers, Drew participates in paid sponsorships having amassed a micro influencer level of fan following to garner opportunities with brands including Coach, Gap, Reebok and Ray-Ban. As sponsored content, Drew's participation raises important questions about the economic stakes at play. @museummammy fuses a space of self-performance at the crossroads of elite cultural representation, Black cultural production, political activism and commerce. Glatt and Banet-Weiser's use of "productive ambivalence" describes how feminist YouTube creators combine feminist positions—sometimes in simply "transactional" ways and at other times in "transformational ways"—with economic imperatives. @museummammy occupies what I would argue is a transformational form of this ambivalence. Unlike content creators who, as Glatt and Banet-Weiser point out, "slot easily into popular feminist 'brand-safe' discourses, namely white, heterosexual, cis-gendered and middle-class women" and therefore "face significantly less adversity in their plight to build sustainable careers as content creators" (2021:9). Drew's curated self-performance is unapologetically inconsistent with many aspects of these discourses, with the exception of possessing a 'brand-safe' identification as middle-class. Bringing every aspect of the persona she has crafted through self-performance into the arena of these brands creates associations with a celebratory Blackness and queerness. Drew is arguably granted greater freedom to do so, given the mainstream cultural capital she has acquired through her education and work with the Met and with high art, fashion and culture at large. In terms of her work with Prada, for example, she has engaged in a long-term relationship with the brand that began just following its public reckoning with backlash against racist practices. In 2018, both Prada and Gucci faced social media retribution

after releasing items drawing on racist iconography, demonstrating the deep-seated lack of diversity and racial

sensitivity in its staff and culture. Prada was specifically called out by Chinyere Ezie on Twitter for its NYC

Soho storefront display, who wrote:

> *Today after returning to NYC after a very emotional visit to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture including an exhibit on blackface, I walked past Prada's Soho storefront only to be confronted with the very same racist and denigrating #blackface imagery. History cannot continue to repeat itself. Black America deserves better. Thanks to #blackface @Prada, now you can take #sambo home with you for the holidays.* (cited in Jensen, 14 December 2018 accessed online)

The following year, Drew participated in a social media takeover of Prada's Instagram, where she crafted posts

of herself seated in the space of the True Value exhibition by artist Theaster Gates, built around the Johnson

publishing company's archive in Chicago, which houses more than four million photographic prints, slides,

and negatives across a space of two thousand five hundred feet dedicated to Black American publishing. The

space in which Drew sits is an installation of original furniture from the archive's offices in what is known as

the Ebony/Jet Building, production home to these prominent Black magazines since the 1940s

(fondazioneprada website accessed online October 2021). Gates' work began a still ongoing engagement with

Prada including the creation of the Dorchester Industries Experimental Design Lab, "an attempt to help

people refine their skills, create a couple of significant projects and then deliver those folks to a larger network

that creates more opportunities, leveraging myself and working with Prada to try and celebrate the amazing

talent that lives in Black and Brown communities but that is so often overlooked" (quoted in Zargani 1

September 2021 accessed online). Drew leverages the growth of her following through associations like those

with Prada in part to build visibility for causes, such as GLITS. These activities have only increased in the wake

of Drew's sponsorships, rather than her 'toning' down her persona or self-performance over time, as have some

feminist influencers when their work becomes further integrated/co-opted by mainstream cultures and

audiences. Clearly, brands seek to build their own equity with audiences increasingly sensitised to the political

issues Drew addresses, complicating the exchanges of capital, economic and cultural, that take place in the

work of such brand ambassadorship. Ultimately, I argue that Drew's work becomes a form of productive

ambivalence wherein she continues to assert her specific self-performance and self-definition to inform the

brands with which she is associated and also harnesses the growth of her audiences and public visibility to raise

awareness and funds for the causes and activism she supports.

6.5 INSTITUTIONAL AND EXTRA-INSTITUTIONAL TENSIONS

Throughout Drew's engagement with the independent projects described in this chapter, she has also held

roles in a number of formal art institutions. This section tracks the ways in which Drew has been able to

leverage the productive instabilities of digital mediation to challenge institutional authority in different ways.

Importantly, it will also draw attention to the particular politics at play, interrogating specific resources and

deep capacities that institutions possess to tacitly or overtly resist practices of equity and inclusion. At large this

section interrogates the interplay between digitally mediated public recognition in interplay with *institutional*

forms of derecognition.

As Drew outlines in her book, *This is What I Know About Art,* her critiques of various institutions has

been a recurring theme, and digital media has been a recourse to publically call out exclusion. She describes an

early encounter in her Art History program in which a discussion had become a "support circle for white

guilt" (2020:29). Drew's anger at what transpired led her to post on Facebook about the experience, for which

her professor criticised her actions. As she notes:

> *Just as I began to regret the post, he went on to explain that I had also made my classmates feel
> "uncomfortable" during the discussion. I retorted, explaining that I was upset the conversation had quickly*

turned into a support circle for white guilt. He looked at me and said, "If you wanted to be in a classroom with other students of colour then you should not have enrolled in art history classes. This professor was my art history adviser. (Drew in *This is What I Know About Art* (2020:29)

In an early fellowship, Drew became frustrated that though a number of people of colour had been hired at a particular institution, most were in temporary, unpaid or entry level positions, meaning people of colour on staff were the lowest paid within the organisation. The issue of pay parity and lack of long-term support within institutions would continue to be a focal point in later years with Drew's experience at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In this final section, I will discuss these issues in terms of Drew's employment experience as a "Black woman in museums" specifically at the Met. When Drew was hired to be the Associate Online Community Producer for the Met in July 2015, she had already been building BCA for four years. She worked at the Met until 2019, during which time she grew the institution's social media following significantly. By 2017, as she notes, the Met had reached "about 6 million people across platforms. On Facebook we have nearly 2 million likes, on Instagram, similarly, 2 million followers; Twitter 2 million; Pinterest 640,000 followers and on YouTube we have over 20 million views on our videos." (MuseumNext website, accessed online March 2018). As an institutional actor, Drew was in part tasked with helping to champion greater and more diverse interest in/access to the Met, for example, in initiatives such as developing live stream tours of work that may be more difficult to gain physical access to. Drew notes in one panel discussion, that from the point of view of enhancing engagement through social channels, she more or less had to work within the parameters of the collection and curated exhibitions. Occasionally, she would post images of particular works of art she felt had to be seen, but this was the exception rather than the rule.

Drew was hired at a time when digital access became a major priority for large art and historical institutions, which has only further intensified with the limitations on physical access created by the global COVID-19 pandemic. As Thumim (2013) notes, museums such as the Smithsonian have increasingly focused on digital imperatives and the need to serve participatory "digital native" audiences by "broadening access". As she explains, for example, the Smithsonian Institution's Strategic Plan (2010-2015) emphasises that:

> *New tools and technology will exponentially broaden our access worldwide. [...]We must also remain relevant to visitors who come from around the world. To accomplish this, we will use new media and social networking tools to deliver information in customised ways and bring our resources to those who cannot visit in person. Digitising objects and making them accessible online are major Institutional priorities as is exploring next-generation technologies that speak to 'digital natives' who expect to be reached online.*

Over the years Drew worked for the Met, it began to include its social media metrics in its annual report to stakeholders. In its 2015–2016 report, it referred to its digital presence as its "fourth space" which is "an integral part of our work" (Strategic Plan 2010-2015 accessed online). It also highlights some of its award-winning social programs, including its #MetKids launched in September 2016, created for 7–12 year olds to connect to the Museum's collection through multimedia content as well as the Met's online collection and *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* drawing the most hits. By 2017, it had begun its Open Access policy and the task of making thousands of digital images of its collection available for free and unrestricted use through partnership with the Wikimedia community. Though the shift to Open Access is still relatively new, some initial studies suggest that these initiatives show promise for bringing greater accessibility and democratisation to art consumption by lowering barriers to engagement. In a study on consumption of digitised objects from the Met, Navarrete and Villaespesa (2020) found that two-thirds of the imagery viewed via Wikipedia was in non-art contexts. As they note:

Wikipedia serves as a highly accessible source of easy-to-understand content, lowering the threshold of required ability to process information. Consumers are not required to formulate an 'art' query but can land on an article illustrated with art ... The article 'Pet', for example, has numerous images including one painting from The Met's collection 'Young Lady with parrot', by Édouard Manet [fig. 4]. Similarly, the articles 'Fair' and 'Horse trade' includes the artwork 'The Horse Fair' by Rosa Bonheuron.
(Navarrete and Villaespesa 2020:239)

However, as a digitisation of the Met's collection, open access is still subject to some of the constraints/logics of the Canon that 'follow' it into digital spaces. This includes the multi-layered legacies of symbolic annihilation outlined at the opening of this chapter. Museums such as the Met have long placed centrality on European Art, with the art of Brown and Black artists and subjects considered a subcategory, suffering from a lesser degree of representation.

As Walsh suggests: "a new museology must concern itself with involving the public, not just during the visit to the museum ... but also in the production of their own pasts" (Walsh 1992:161). A critical step in doing so rests on the hiring of more people of colour across art institutions to have greater impact at the collections level, which in turn impacts digital distribution. As Embrick, Weffler & Dominguez (2019) note, the problem of "white institutional space" or an "explication of how race privilege is produced and reproduced in organisations and institutions by illuminating the interrelated mechanisms of racialised structures and everyday practices and their connection to the ideologies and discourses that fuel the white spatial imaginary" (Moore 2008; Evans and Moore 2016). This relates to the physical placement of art, but also to the nature of how inequalities are reproduced in terms of hierarchies of employment (e.g. when Black employees work in positions of security, while white employees dominate positions of leadership).

Upon leaving her position at the Met, Drew shared publicly that her leaving salary did not match that of the white man who previously held her role—and she did so via her own independent social media

platforms. On 14 September 2018, she tweeted: "now is a good time to share that I'll be leaving the met soon. Much more to say, but working on this video (*Teen Vogue* video feature on women "SHATTERING the patriarchy in the art world") was one of my great joys during my tenure here". She followed this up by saying: "it's also a great time to share that my outgoing pay is still less than that of the white man who previously held my role. museums y'all got to do better". Despite the fact that Drew had exponentially increased the social media following and access by global virtual visitors to the Met, she was still fighting pay inequity within the Institution itself. She went on to tweet: "I left to take a break from working full-time (not because of the pay) … but now that I'm on my way out … I just have to say I loved working at the met, but honey … being a woman, a Black woman in museums is just as exhausting as it looks". This highlights Drew's complex relationship to the Museum and unique position at the intersection of institutional and counter-institutional forces. Though she has been able to digitally mediate extra-institutional representations of Black aesthetics and in-group publics in a new logic of viewership, from within it she continued to battle economic inequalities. Her high-profile presence as @museummammy (Instagram and Twitter) enabled her to enact a form of "name and shame" activism, in which she could call out the failures of the institution in a highly public and visible way, bearing witness to both pay parity injustices and the emotional labour demanded of a Black women in white institutional spaces. Black women's exhaustion is a theme that comes up repeatedly in contemporary Black feminist activist work, relating to both economic imperative but also the burden of educating others about race (Linder et al. 2019; Kelly et al. 2021). This sense of exhaustion also aligns with notions of the burden for the contemporary citizen, in particular the marginalised citizen, to apply exceptional "creative agility" placed as they are in a perpetual "economic turmoil as a default setting for which anything other than a 'can-do' attitude is futile" (Khamis, Ang & Welling 2017). Over the course of this research, in speaking with

young, female, BIPOC curators and social media managers currently working in American museums, Drew's

intervention on the issue of pay was frequently raised. Though Drew was careful to declare that the pay issue

was not the primary catalyst for her leaving the Met, her public call out for museums to "do better" resonated

profoundly with these industry professionals. Drew also these issues in the following post:

> *Spent a lot of the last week processing the ways that Black women creators are underpaid, underrecognized, or overworked. I talked to friends about times they have had to be therapists, assistants, and co-signers against their will. times when we've been berated for even the smallest misstep. Times when we had to work three and four times as hard as our peers with half of the resources. we really deserve better. The rhetoric of 2020 seemed to be 'thank Black women' but we need to bring it back and find some constructive ways not only to thank Black women, but to set up conditions and environments that help us feel safe and secure emotionally, monetarily and spiritually.* (Drew, Instagram)

The depth of capacity for an institution like the Met to weather public critiques, however, means that

ultimately, the material impact of her gesture may best be described as 'non-linear'. Following Drew's

announcement, Michelle Millar Fisher, an assistant curator in the European decorative arts and design

department of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, created and distributed a spreadsheet called Arts + All

Museums Salary Transparency 2019 making it openly accessible and anonymously sharing salaries,

institutional level/roles and some demographic data (e.g. race, gender). Fisher and her colleagues "had been

inspired to discuss their salaries after hearing Kimberly Drew describe how much she was paid when she held

positions at the Met, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and other institutions, and that their survey comes in

advance of a similar one to be conducted by POWarts" (Making a Mark blog, accessed online 10 March 2022).

Anecdotal comments on forums such as Reddit indicate some spreadsheet users have, in turn, used knowledge

gained from this crowdsourced tool to negotiate salary increases, again a diffuse digitally mediated politics of

change, rather than a direct one. As Drew notes:

I've gotten some criticism, but there is a woman named Michelle Fisher who's a curator. She started a spreadsheet where almost 800 people have posted their salaries. And it's so tight because there is no salary transparency in the arts, period. It's an industry where people say, 'Oh, you're going into the arts, you'll never make any money.' And so then you end up in these salary negotiations where you settle for less because you already know you're in an industry where you're not supposed to make money. But the fact of the matter is people are making good money. So I was just tired of having, like, these backdoor conversations with women, especially women of colour in my network, where I'm the only person they can come talk to about money stuff, and it shouldn't be that way. You don't have to be, like, on the Underground Railroad of getting equity. Like, come on now.
(Interview with Elle Clay, GOAT website accessed online March 2022)

The path of these interventions demonstrates the tensions between "doing culture work" and what

Papacharassi refers to as the *longue duree* of institutional change. Another case in point, the Black Lives Matter

movement has achieved unprecedented visibility over the past several years as a major social movement

addressing violence and discrimination against Black citizens. As a broad scale social movement Black Lives

Matter has had significant follow-on impacts in key cultural terrains, including the contemporary art world. In

2020, Black Lives Matter was listed in the number one spot in *ArtReview*'s influential Power 100 List, which:

"attempts to rank movers and shakers of the contemporary art world" (*The Guardian* accessed online March

2021). *ArtReview* noted BLM's ability to "accelerate change at every level in the art world whether by statue

toppling, raising the visibility of Black artists, appointments or the rush by galleries to diversify their rosters …

in museums rethinking who they represent and how they do it" (Brown, *The Guardian* accessed online March

2021). In the wake of this influence, a number of high profile appointments were made of BIPOC women

curators including Naomi Beckwith as deputy director of the Guggenheim, Maria Rosario Jackson at the

NEA, Vivian Crockett as curator at the New Museum and Eunice Bélidor as Montreal Museum of Fine Arts's

"first Black curator in the institution's 161 years" (*artnet news* 2022 accessed online). Yet, as Lise Ragbir reports

in March 2022, several high profile Black women appointees have abruptly quit their posts, frequently citing lack of institutional support. Ragbir notes that:

> The Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, the Hammond House Museum in Atlanta, and the MacLaren Art Center in Canada all placed Black women in leadership positions in the past year and a half. None of those women held their positions for longer than six months.
> (*artnet news* 17 March 2022 accessed online)

This illustrates further the sustained tension and complexity between publicly-mediated attempts to address exclusionary practices and limitations and real lived experience, even when buttressed by the political visibility and urgency generated by a high-profile, large-scale social movement like Black Lives Matter.

6.6   FEARS OF IMPERMANENCE, PROJECTS OF POSSIBILITY

In this concluding section, I will briefly discuss Drew's book, *Black Futures,* published in 2020 with co-author Jenna Wortham. Though many of the themes and strategies mirror those of BCA, it is important to acknowledge and discuss, as Drew does, he power and peril in utilising digital media to achieve these goals:

> We sought to make sense of our unique paradox: We have never been more empowered and yet, in many ways, are still so disenfranchised. Social media has granted Black folks a platform to tell our own stories, but it has also made us subject to a new brand of surveillance and unprecedented co-option. How can we find innovative ways to define ourselves, for ourselves, without fear of erasure or the deterioration of the Internet? (Drew and Wortham, *Black Futures* 2020:XIII)

The book is a compilation and 'portal' into digital Black and Black feminist art projects and the impetus for its creation reflects the emerging anxieties six years after the original BCA initiative, in the realm of hyper-contingent liminal digital mediation. *Black Futures* follows in the pre-digital footsteps of projects such as *Fire!! Magazine, The Black Book, The Black Woman: An Anthology, Conditions: Five: The Black Women's Issue, the work of Kathleen Collins,* and *9 More Weeks by Sinazo Chiya*. Drew's decision to utilise this format to take her network approach "offline" nonetheless replicates some of the key strategies of BCA. It compiles digital

and other artwork, essays, and interviews broadly under the headers: "Black Lives Matter", "Black Futures",

"Power", "Joy", "Justice", "Memory", "Ownership", "Memory", "Outlook", "Black Is (Still) Beautiful" and

"Legacy", but presents these works largely without framing commentary. The exception to this is the opening

letter from the Drew and Wortham in which they note:

> *Black Futures is not designed to be a comprehensive document. Blackness is infinite - a single book cannot attempt to contain the multitudes and multiverse. This is just one manifestation of a project that spans millennia. We are in a continuum of those who came before and those who will come after and make a dent in the archival project that is required of us as humans on this planet. We strove to nod to those we admire who are making history and those taking history and doing something anew with it. We aimed for a perspective that was global, atemporal, not dominated by America and the West, not constructed by binaries, and as dynamic as possible for a print book.* (*Black Futures* 2020:XIII)

The book effectively archives a living digital history of aesthetic production, reaching back into the past of

print technology to concretise many of the ethereal networks and engagements they are in the midst of

producing in dialogue with the digital. Though the entire volume speaks to the project of possibility that is

Black futurity, the section specifically titled: "Black Futures" points to a number of key ideas about history,

temporality and archive relevant to the broader discussion of Drew's work. One project, for example, titled

"There Are Black People in the Future" comprises a short essay by Alisha Wormsley on her project of the same

name. She says:

> *There Are Black People in the Future as a project has become an archive of information, histories, and myths that continue despite the apocalyptic narrative of Black American culture. I choose the term "apocalyptic" consciously, as it is informed by the reality that Black American neighbourhoods are struggling to survive.* (Wormsley, cited in *Black Futures* 2020:47)

Wormsley's short essay discusses her use of this phrase: "There Are Black People in the Future" as part of *The*

Last Billboard project, where it appeared in East Liberty, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in white lettering against a

black billboard, noting the sign was ultimately taken down by the landlord "over objections to the content" (47). The section also includes Rasheedah Phillips' project on Time & Memory which surveys Black participants on their experiences to understand "the ways in which Black people and people of colour and their communities create, reclaim and retain nonlinear temporalities" (59). And finally, Morgan Parker's poem, "Now More Than Ever", exploring white rhetorical demonstrations of racism in the phrase "Now More Than Ever", which articulates the way in which white liberal subjects using this phrase to show support for political action on behalf of marginalised people belies the "sinister" set of assumptions undergirding these words:

> *Subtexts, then underscoring this phrase are quite sinister in nature, varying from 'Your usefulness, Negro, is married to your misfortune," and "Time is linear," the implications of which are that 1) value is time sensitive, 2) conditions of despair are temporary, and 3) anything at all can be new, belonging to "now," and untethered to "ever" (i.e. past, future).* (Parker, cited in *Black Futures* 2020:41)

Black Futures is the bridge between the omnipresent digital focus of Drew's self-performance and past forms such as Toni Morrison's *The Black Book* (1974) which inspired the project. Morrison similarly compiled a series of images in a scrapbook-like format, for the most part without comment, to simply ensure visibility for a Black digital history in danger of, once again, being forgotten. The call to recommit digital history to print in a book like *Black Futures* responds to collective ongoing unease with the ephemerality, aspects of surveillance and commodified control inherent in the infrastructures and ownership of the tools of digital mediation.

As a cultural tastemaker, Drew combines modes of self-performance to drive alternate public formations - one engaged in the agency of reciprocal and expansive gestures of networked viewership of Black contemporary art, the other in uniting her visibility and space of self-valorisation with a chorus of in-group identity-building/support and diffuse political activation. Both offer a "relational understanding of self" (Brown and Phifer 2018) to the collective of Black experience, however, BCA seems to offer a greater model for

ways to envision Walsh's "new museology" that "involv[es] the public in the production of their own pasts", while @museummammy produces the publicity vehicle to reinforce cultural spaces of Blackness and materially impact marginalised communities. This chapter has emphasised two types of visual counterpublics that work in different ways based on leveraging the liminal spaces of digital media to perform the self and the collective. This case study demonstrated the productive and unproductive stabilities as they functioned at specific junctures between her role within formal institutions and outside of them.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BOTSWANA'S MAROK QUEENS

NOWHERE-SOMEWHERE: LIMINAL IDENTITY, PUBLICS AND COUNTERPUBLICS

The last case study in this research takes the issues of visual counterpublics to a *micro-publics* level. The purpose in doing so is to understand how negotiation and contestation of liminal space works within smaller environments, such as publics composed of family, friends and acquaintances. This is pursued to garner insight into whether the same dynamics play out, in the same way, in larger environments than the first two case studies. When referring to the "personal publics" of platforms such as Facebook, Bruns et al. (2016) notes: "a focus on these crucial if liminal spaces of communication and dissemination also substantially broadens the range of actors which are seen as contributing to public debate and deliberation, since personal publics in both offline and online forms present considerably lower barriers to entry for a larger number of participants"

(112-113). Further, as Silverstone states, "it is in the realm of the everyday and the ordinary that individuals enter into "conversations" with hegemonic power structures, engaging with them or opposing them, although not always consciously, through their own personal everyday practices—among them, nowadays, their social media use and self-representation practices" (1994a:996–998). As discussed in earlier chapters, counterpublic dynamics have largely been explored in terms of networked discourses directed within Twitter publics to carve out space for oppositional identity discourses. However, in literature covering the growth of counterpublic formations emerging from countries around the world, as some scholars have noted (e.g. Shklovski and Valtysson 2012), it is often within the "mundane publics" that form around everyday issues that citizens work to continually pressure and test the boundaries of the political and exercise personal agency. The present case study focuses on women who participate in the Marok heavy metal subculture from various cities in Botswana both offline and online. The women, referred to as "Queens" utilise Facebook to build community around their participation in this culture, developing a visual counterpublic asserting their identity online and a voice to advocate on behalf of one another across their (intersecting) personal publics. The chapter begins with historical contextualization of the Botswanan, its heavy metal scene, and of the considerable history many of the Marok women participants have with the subculture, prior to digitally mediated engagements.

7.1   CONTEMPORARY BOTSWANAN SOCIAL CONTEXT AND FEMINIST MOVEMENTS

Botswanan society and culture is characterised by deeply entrenched cultural norms reinforcing gender inequity. Social issues such as domestic violence are a major concern with "over 67% of women in Botswana having experienced abuse," which is "over double the global average" (Maswabi 2018: online). Further, attitudes continue to prevail concerning a man's "right" to physically assault a female partner if she "disobeys

him". As Paul Shiakallis, a South African photographer who has extensively documented the Marok scene, notes: "Religion is quite prominent in Botswana ... the patriarchal mindset runs fluidly through the household, culture and religious systems; and women in all scenarios are expected to be submissive" (quoted in Baritaux 2017, accessed online). It is common, for example, for religious doctrine/rhetoric to play a role in disciplining women's daily behaviour, e.g. through husbands quoting Biblical scripture to their wives to reinforce social expectations and behavioural limits. Feminist movements local to Botswana have sought to tackle these issues. The country experienced a peak in international aid flowing to women's non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the country between the 1970s and 1990s with a "period of heightened women's mobilisation" in the 1980s and 90s (Mosime and Mookodi 2020:77) . After 1992, however, Botswana was designated an upper-middle income country by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which resulted in "donor flight" (77) and what was perceived to be an inactive period for women's movements due to lack of resources and "gender fatigue" (Mosime and Mookodi 2020:79) As Mosime and Mookodi argue, however, a new wave of youth-oriented gender equality activism has emerged through the rise of popular feminisms aided by the Internet (2020). There is a significant digital divide in Botswana with Internet penetration at 61.0% as of January 2022 (Statista 2022 accessed online[17]). For those with Internet access, Facebook is the most popular social media platform at 60%, followed by Pinterest at 30%, while Twitter and YouTube were at about 5% (Statscounter 2019 accessed online).[18] Several high-profile campaigns have emerged including #Ishallnotforget focused on policy to protect women and children from sexual violence through increasing the age of consent to 18 and putting in place the Botswana 2009 Children Act, the Right To Wear What We Want Facebook

---

[17] Statista data aggregates and analyses information from multiple sources in combination with its own proprietary data and analysis. Sources aggregated for this statistic were DataReportal; Hootsuite; We Are Social; Kepios; and GSMA Intelligence.

[18] Statscounter aggregates data "collected by Statscounter on a sample exceeding 5 billion pageviews per month collected from across the Statscounter network of more than 1.5 million websites."

campaign and marches in 2017 addressing women's right to dress as they wish without fear of rape or sexual

harassment. In addition to these movements, as Mosime and Mookodi explain, a number of initiatives, such as

high teas focused on entrepreneurial empowerment with featured guests from activist, influencer, and social

entrepreneur backgrounds, Pentecostal Church-led programs aimed at young women's empowerment, and

efforts to centre "girl-child empowerment" have emerged. Mosime and Mookodi's study demonstrates the

increasing, but under recognised, diversity throughout the 2010s of local feminist negotiations and approaches

to social issues that embrace multi-faceted positionalities with regard to the types of empowerment espoused

and promulgated. They emphasise, for example, the resonance found within younger women of many

discourses of empowerment that share similarities with *Lean In* style popular feminism imbued with the

neoliberal discourse of women's power achieved through capitalist success, i.e. becoming the "self-made"

woman. Feminist critiques of this style of popular feminism (McRobbie 2004, Banet-Weiser 2021) raise

important issues about the ways in which popular feminism(s) may deflect attention from more systemic

gender inequality issues by focusing on the individual achieving her own liberation and empowerment.

Mosime and Mookodi's analyses, however, fall into the category earlier described in which feminist

positionalities are increasingly identified in their hybrid, contested, and ambivalent forms, as new generations

redefine the parameters of a personalised politics and heterogeneous forms of agency. Mosime and Mookodi

sketch the contours of a landscape in transition, one that is characterised by new political opportunities

outside of traditional institutional/NGO dynamics in a post-(peak) international aid era, with continued focus

on women's personal (financial) empowerment and countering a culture of sexual violence, abuse and

harassment against women and girls. This context is one increasingly characterised by digital efforts and

movements as the country works to further bridge the country's digital divide. While the Marok Queens'

subcultural participation and use of digital mediation is not explicitly a feminist movement or project, it

should nonetheless be understood in the context of circulation of these local (at times digitally mediated)

feminist movements throughout the 2010s.

7.2   'BRUTAL' STYLE, RENEGADE LOVE: MAROK MUSIC, FANS, FASHION AND PHILOSOPHY

The heavy metal music scene of Botswana was born out of engagement with Western cultural rock forms of

the 1970s. Botswana's first and most well-known rock band, Nosey Road, was formed by Ivo and Renato

Sbrana, the sons of an Italian doctor who settled in the country in 1969. Botswana's first heavy metal band,

Metal Orizon, emerged in the 1990s and the scene began to grow steadily, becoming "one of the most vibrant"

in southern Africa achieving a small, but strong and active core group of fans centralised in the cities of

Gaborone and Maun. This includes one of today's most well-known acts, *Skinflint*, featuring Giuseppe

Sbrana and Alessandra Sbrana. Botswanan heavy metal brings together a diverse range of styles and innovation

incorporating facets of African, British and American music. "Musically speaking, the metal scene in Botswana

is neither heavy nor metal" Madondo (2017), "it's a combination that sounds impossible when articulated: a

mix of African hard riddims, mid-70s Manchester punk, cacophonous dub, psychedelic swamp music,

free-wheelin' progjazz and some sped-up Ohio funk thrown in for good measure" (accessed online). As one of

the leading band members of the scene explains:

> *We are not even talking about the American South's blues connection. We are talking about something deeper: the original healing pilgrims in the Kongo squares; the pounding drums, accoutrements, scarification, dances, poetry and screams issuing out of communal séances deep in BaKongo land. We are talking about the Khoi and San people's compositional genius. We are talking about Zulu musical expressions.* (Giuseppe Sbrana from *Skinflint* quoted in Madondo 2017: online)

Marok style is immediately recognizable, including its 'brutal' dress style—leather biker wear, cowboy hats, heavy metal t-shirts, and various adornments such as cowbells, leather belts, chains, studs, skulls and animal bones. To be identified as Marok means to wear these items and listen/'headbang' to various forms of loud, pulsating, hard rock, metal music, thus creating a highly identifiable set of visual and aural signifiers that immediately distinguish members from Botswana's cultural mainstream. Although subcultural participation on the basis of music is frequently associated with youthful processes of identity formation (e.g. teenage goths), "it is a quirk of the Botswanan metal scene that it is made up not of disgruntled teenagers, but 30-somethings with families and jobs" (*The New European*, accessed online November 2021). As Shiakallis notes: "You will notice that the Marok is not a youth subculture; this is because the Tswana are heavily family-oriented and are only really afforded free thought once they are able to leave home and fend for themselves" (quoted in Baritaux 2017, accessed online). Thus, Marok-ers are in their 20s, 30s, 40s and beyond. In addition, they are predominantly (though not exclusively) from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

However, beyond these commonalities is a more heterogeneous and loosely defined and and/or integrated set of characteristics. Marok fans include farmers, cowboys, security officers, law enforcement officials, soldiers, welders, self-employed craftspeople, secretaries, government workers, graphic designers, mothers, the unemployed, and priests, among others. As one media outlet reported: "the movement isn't just made up of bands, though. Bikers, cowboys and motley crews of female punks—not to mention every other weirdo or outcast driven underground by the "benign dictatorship" of President Khama—has found some kind of home in the scene" (*huck,* accessed online November 2021). Marok music creators and band members convey a wide variety of sentiments and commitments regarding the subculture's philosophical mindset. Some relate to the death-focused imagery of heavy metal music as interpreted through the local context in which "the

dark themes and brutal sounds of death metal strike a particular chord" (*The New European*, accessed

November 2021) or as one Marok fan explained, "Quite frankly, in Bots, we have a lot of death" (*March of The*

Gods: Botswana Metalheads, 2013). For a number of others, the Marok mentality relates much more strongly

to themes of self-affirmation, reinvention and love:

> *What we know for sure is that the founding root, the essence, the magic and ritual that lies at the centre of rock's performative culture—its quest for freedom and destruction as a means of healing and rebuilding—is African. No doubt.* (Giuseppe Sbrana from Skinflint quoted in *huck*, accessed online November 2021)

> *There was this message going around that rockers are the devil, but actually we spread the message of humanity and love.* (Martin Beats, Musician, quoted in *huck*, accessed online November 2021)

> *We see ourselves as warriors and poets. This is a calling. We use metal to speak to our social conditions as Africans: the struggles, the climate we operate in ... It might be cheesy to you but, to us, metal is just another way of speaking about romance. To us, love is hardcore, yo!*
> (Dumisani Matiha, lead singer and rhythm guitarist for Metal Orizon, quoted in *huck*, accessed online November 2021)

Bands connect this ethos to larger social concerns, in particular through significant charity work. For example,

a band called the Humanitarians "sings and posts online about human rights issues such as homelessness and

albinism" (Harrisberg, 29 December 2021, accessed online) while very well-known band, Overthrust, organises

a charity festival every winter in Ghanzi. As one music journalist put it: "The Hellbangers, those "Enfants

Terribles" of a sleepy, diamonds rich country, see themselves as representative of social justice" (Roig, blog

accessed online November 2019).

> *While the renegades incorporate that aggressive side of metal into their look, "there's a strong sense of camaraderie amongst them," says Marshall, "They've got a very strong bond and friendship with each other." Seen as role models in society and often followed by a trail of young children in awe, they're seen as protectors of the community with a strong awareness of social responsibility.*
> (*Sangbleu*, accessed online November 2019)

As some rockers point out, the rock n'roll lifestyle in Botwana is really different to the U.S. in the sense that it is embraced holistically as a way of life rather than as a pastime or hobby that "doesn't go to the hearts of those who live it" (*March of The Gods: Botswana Metalheads,* 2013). As one fan said: "We try to be exemples.[19] Rock is a wild thing, but also something for the heart" (Gunsmoke, Heavy Metal Band quoted in Bonet, accessed online).

Marok has developed as a distinct subcultural scene, incorporating a broad set of philosophies related to freedom of expression and this renegade ethos. The subculture evinces a certain fluidity or more porous and open-ended incorporation of diverse entry points, unified by universal deviation from the mainstream—in particular, through competitively 'brutal' sartorial style, rebellious gestures, and embodied movement/engagement and driving intensity of metal music. Nilsson describes this as an "open-ended range of experiences" (cited in Heesch and Scott 2016:264) and this certainly applies to fans, who discuss their engagement with Marok as a way to work through a large range of personal problems and broader social issues. As Kahn-Harris (2007) discusses, participation in heavy metal subcultures creates a sense of communality—being part of a scene "bound together by the 'magic' of metal"—that also instils a sense of belonging, pride and empowerment" (122). He also identifies "subcultural capital"—or "knowledge of the scene, possession of relevant physical objects, appearance through style, and perceived commitment or longevity of identification with the scene (Thornton 1995; Force, 2009) that accrues through involvement in metal culture" (121). Kahn-Harris says "subcultural capital is accrued in the extreme metal scene by constructing and performing various forms of discourse and identity. Subcultural capital is both endowed by other scene members in the form of prestige and power and claimed by scene members for themselves in the

---

[19] All quotes from rockers include original spelling/grammar.

ways they perform their identities" (2007:121). Thus, the Marok identity interweaves a wide variety of associations related to personal and social empowerment and subcultural capital-building, underpinned by deep experiences of community engagement.

This scene has gained global media attention over the last decade, frequently 'exoticised' in popular Western youth digital media (e.g. *Refinery29, Vice*) as a novelty understood solely against a white masculine Euro-centric model of metal culture. Nilsson has addressed the issue of exoticisation, writing about his "sense of bewilderment" at attending a local Botswanan heavy metal show while working in the country on exchange at the "mismatch" between his preconceptions about heavy metal norms and local scene (cited in Heesch and Scott 2016:259). As he notes, this was the product of "an ethnocentric approach that made me focus on differences rather than similarities and interpret these differences as deviances from a European/North American norm" (cited in Heesch and Scott 2016:261). Nilsson goes on to critique this ethnocentricity and describe aspects of the scene he observed regarding race and gender. In particular, he emphasises that the Botswanan scene doesn't respond to a monolithic or central set of social issues. As he notes: "the relationship between heavy metal and specific social conditions, positions, and groups needs to be understood as being much weaker or more arbitrary than is usually the case within the literature on metal. The production of an empowering feeling of communality within metal scenes should, for example, not be seen as a response to any particular social condition, but rather as something that can be used by scene members to deal with a potentially open-ended range of experiences" (cited in Heesch and Scott 2016:264).

Upon analysing the Botswanan scene further, Nilsson assesses it to be as he puts it "indeed masculinist," in keeping with predominant views from the literature on European/North American heavy metal music as masculinist/hyper-masculinist by nature (cited in Heesch and Scott 2016:268). He goes on to

say that at the festival he attended, there was "almost no interaction between the male metal heads and the few women who had shown up. While the men bonded with each other—by way of loud greetings, hugs, drinking and dancing—the women kept a very low profile in the back of the venue" and he describes the "enacting of masculinity" here as marginalising female members through creation of "fantastic worlds without women supported by male bonding" (cited in Hill 2016:268). Nilsson leaves open the question of whether the scene is masculinist solely because of local patriarchal conditions or other factors including gendered "symbolic economies" that he sees as operating within both Botswanan and Euro-centric heavy metal subcultures (cited in Heesch and Scott 2016:269). Nilsson does suggest that such economies are not immutable, however, his analysis falls short of developing any deeper engagement with women's participation in such subcultures. His analysis is hampered by several issues relevant to this case study. Nilsson gathered his observations in 2007 based on attendance at a single festival. In the intervening years, however, there has been growth in participation by both men and women in Marok. Increased global visibility of the subculture through digital media and international films such as *March of The Gods: Botswana Metalheads* (2013) and *Queens of Botswana* (2019) - have documented a broader set of experiences than those observed by Nilsson. Though Nilsson's assessments of the Botswanan scene as being male-dominated certainly hold true, more problematic is his assessment of women's subcultural engagement as 1) bordering on non-existent based on 2) its (il)legibility only with regard to interactions observed between women and men, rather than those that may be taking place between women, and/or other uses and identifications taking place outside of public concert/festival spaces. Rosemary Lucy Hill (2016), a feminist heavy metal scholar, raises issues of the tendency to marginalise women's experiences within heavy metal cultures—particularly in dominant media—by not paying attention to their differentiated practices of participation. In *Gender, Metal and the Media:Women*

Fans and the Gendered Experience of Music (2016), she discusses the multiple, intertwining ways in which women's experiences of male-dominated heavy metal are ignored or misrepresented, calling for more nuanced analyses of the experiences and pleasures of women fans, even within sexist environments. Though her analysis is focused on Western heavy metal cultures, this raises an important issue with regard to previously overlooked aspects of Marok women's experiences. As Paul Shiakallis, a South African photographer who extensively documented the Marok scene throughout the 2010s, notes in this regard: "there had been a few news agencies that had covered the Marok scene before me, but their narratives were about the scene in general. In all the coverage they had, the men, as expected, were at the forefront. They were the face and the voice of the Marok. My plan from the start was to tell the women's stories" (quoted in Baritaux 8 February 2017, accessed online). To understand women's experiences in and through Marok, it is critical to identify multiple operations in play. Whilst the subculture continues to be male-dominated and behaviour is subject to the country's pervasive patriarchal norms, as this case study will argue, subcultural participation and its digital mediation offers these women significant spaces of agentic identity formation and contestation of gender limitations/norms.

7.3   BECOMING A QUEEN

One of the key elements of the Queens' participation in this subculture and its digital mediation is the deep and long-term connection many participants have with Marok, as the biographies of three interviewees make clear. Again, as an observer and researcher from outside the cultural frame of reference of my interviewees, it was important to develop an "accountable positioning" (Haraway 1988, cited in Rodriguez 2023:1274) through which "researchers recognize and address how they embody and enact symbolic and material power over the research process" (Rodriguez 2023:1274) , in particular the privilege of educational and material

support to spend the time to perform this research. The following sections will begin by describing each of the

three fans interviewed giving a brief background and history of their involvement. When I interviewed Gloria

through both Facebook messaging and email, she shared that she has been deeply involved with Marok culture

for many years and is also very involved in organising and facilitating many of the charitable activities in which

the larger Marok fan group (men and women) participate. She notes:

> *I have been involved with Maun Rockers i think around 1998 when i was 21 because in my culture you can't be associated with drinking alcohol and night life when you are still a teenager. When i started going out to rock festivals and bar, i remember we will meet every Saturday at a local bar called Mummies and we will listen to a program from a local radio station and all rockers and cowboys will be there to enjoy. I attend rock shows and sometimes jazz festivals because i love live music.*
> (Interview with Gloria William for this research, 9 May 2018)

My second interviewee was Ludo Morima, a younger member of the group who first became involved in

Marok through family:

> *I have been exposed to rock music since around the age of 5, that's how far i remember but it was probably earlier than that because i grew up staying with my father and this is the music he listened to, but i met and mixed with the other rockers early 2009 after i completed my schooling. It was then that I started attending shows, get-togethers and gearing up. My father preferred classic and hard rock, we would listen to this music at home, while travelling, watch the video live performances together with my siblings and i fell in love with it. It made an impact on almost everyone who came to live with us including my brother, my uncles and my cousin. These are people who still listen to rock music.*
> (Interview for this research, 8 June 2018)

Gloria and Ludo's long-standing relationships to the music culture are an important factor in the role it plays

in their lives. However, their use of social media represents a different phase in that relationship, one which will

be discussed further into this chapter. The Marok Queens negotiate different concerns and identities in

relation to the broader heavy metal subculture. Scene documentarian Paul Shiakallis notes: "it is much harder

to become a rocker as a woman than it is as a man. Men, as heads of the household, can do what they please;

women, on the other hand, have to ask permission" (quoted in Baritaux 8 February 2017, accessed online).

Thus, being a Queen is a (continually) negotiated/contested positionality, and for some, more of a 'coming out' process than for others. For example, Shiakallis shares the story of photographing one of the Queens noting: "On one occasion, we were shooting at one Queen's home; her father, who is a pastor, unexpectedly arrived, and he was not impressed. We offered to stop the shoot, but the Queen was adamant she could convince her father to accept it" (ibid.).

A significant aspect of women's participation is their use of the dress code and community participation to stake temporary liminal claims to their own power. In Shiakallis' view, "for a woman to dress up in full black-leather regalia, give herself a vulgar nickname, drink heavily in public and scream and perform to heavy metal music is outright defiance against her man and what society expects from her" (quoted in Baritaux 8 February 2017, accessed online). Weinstein raises the notion of metal's masculinity as "a floating signifier available to female as well as to male fans" (2009:18–19). By this Weinstein suggests that the production of masculinity within metal music might be considered a semiotically produced positionality where stereotypical traits, such as leather clothing and studs and hard rock rhythms, connote 'masculine' strength/power. The masculine/feminine binary has been increasingly problematised in some cultures as not only a false/normative socialisation of male and female bodies, but as unproductively essentializing of these characteristics even as free-floating signifiers—for example, the problematic nature of conceiving of femininity (and its symbolic representations) as inherently associated with passivity. Further, it would be oversimplifying to describe the Marok's engagement with 'masculine' signifiers as making them somehow 'more male' or conferring equivalent social power.

Following the "interpretative subjective model" advanced by Rogers and Deflem (2021), emphasis is

placed on "accurately and usefully describing and portraying what members of the metal community themselves think and feel in their own terms...[and] an interpretive model of various aspects of (subjective) identity of self and (intersubjective) understanding of others in the heavy metal community" (1), the following sections discuss how women of the Marok scene view their own participation. The words the Marok women use to describe their feelings associated with "putting on their rocker identities" provide insight into the type of liminal positionalities they engage through the process. Throughout interviews with myself, the press, and through Sarah Vianney's documentary, *Queens of Botswana* (2019), Queens Gloria William, Ludo Morima, Florah Mangwa, Phoenix Tonahs Slaughter, Siera Madrid and others express sentiments of being "intimidating" or "empowered", "standing out" and "standing up", and having an "edge" and a "voice", and also being respected as a "Queen". In their words, they note:

> *It changes how you feel. You have this edge to you when you listen to the music.*
> Ludo Morima (Interview for this research, 8 June 2018)

> *I stand up as a woman, no man can try me. We are called Queens and we are treated as such.*
> Siera Madrid, former law enforcement official (quoted in Baritaux 8 February 2017, accessed online).

> *I believe girl rockers have a strong voice over a normal society 'cause to be one you got to be outspoken and strong as we are always criticised. Only girls who believe in themselves and are not afraid to express themselves can be rockers.*
> Phoenix Tonahs Slaughter (quoted in Baritaux 8 February 2017, accessed online).

Each woman's experience of taking on the Marok identity differs along a spectrum between those who are "full rockers" and those whose identifications are more dynamic/continuously contested. Florah's story exemplifies the threshold nature of these identifications. As presented in Vianney's film, Florah who is from the town of Oodi began as one of the youngest Marok Queens in her teens. At the age of 19, she gave up "wearing her leathers" at the insistence of her religious boyfriend—Prophet Samuel. He wants her to focus on Christianity and their relationship. In an interview with the two, she sits silently frowning as he speaks about the Marok-ers, how they dominate space when they come together and parade in a line, and the connection their engagement with heavy metal has to Satanic "spirits in the music" (*Queens of Botswana,* 2019). In his view, like Florah, they must be redeemed through adherence to Christianity. Florah later remarks on her own "I believe what I believe, so I don't let that get into my head what he says. No, that's my lifestyle. I will just be a Queen and a Christian" (*Queens of Botswana,* 2019). The film follows the story of Florah returning to her Marok persona to attend a show. Showcased is a scene in which Florah leads a band of Marok in public procession. A number of key issues emerge from this scene with regard to Florah's personal identifications and more broadly the Marok's negotiation of public identity. First, Florah's story crystallises the conflict between highly delineated domestic demands—as mother and carer to several children in her family, including her own—and strong religious influences and a powerful desire to inhabit what she describes as the "energy of the Kings". Unlike most of the Marok women, Florah identifies with the Kings rather than the Queens, saying: "When I am with Kings I feel crazy. I like the performance of the Kings, rather than Queens, because when I perform with Kings I get crazy. I love the motivation of Kings" (*Queens of Botswana,* 2019). Florah and Ludo not only parade with the Kings but engage in the customary "rough greetings" of handshakes and other gestures the Marok use to signal peaceful intent, developed as a response to early incidents of violence. Their wholehearted

participation in this scene differs dramatically from Nilsson's 2007 observations of only men engaging in these performative heavy metal rituals. As Ludo comments: "Within the parade like this, we are the Queens and they are the Kings, but we can do the same things." Florah notes: "I'm so proud of being with them." Though this scene takes place as part of documentary filming i.e. it is being performed for the filmmakers, it also unfolds in front of Queens' family members who show varying degrees of support or dismay. For male Marok members its "crazy energy" elevates life from the mundane/everyday as rebellion against personal and social conditions. But for the women of the scene, this energy brokers a temporary symbolic levelling of a deeply unequal gender field.

Thus, the Marok identity for these women represents a liminal space, one in which the "rocker" persona may be inhabited as a threshold to performatively transgress/abandon the societal constraints dictating these women's public behaviour. The relationship between men and women conveyed reveals a sense of camaraderie reaching beyond the bounds of familial, domestic and romantic obligation. As the following sections will explore, digital mediation offers a parallel liminal space of identity production and collective participation that not only replicates some of the structure offered by the Marok identity performance itself (i.e. a performative space that crosses over the boundary between traditional and countercultural norms), but offers new forms of self-performance.

7.4   THE ROLE OF DIGITAL MEDIATION

As Robins (1995) notes: "cyberspace is projected as [a] kind of nowhere-somewhere" somewhat akin to a utopia set apart from existing social reality (135). However, as some studies have demonstrated, multiple forms of misogyny, racism, and classism can be identified in online practices, in some cases building on historical

marginalizations, while in others, exacerbating them. At the same time, these spaces have been noted for the productive/potential power they offer to marginalised voices. Virtual spaces can thus be understood as exponentially proliferating zones of liminal (opportunity-based) identity production and contestation between multiple norms and practices. Thresholds between or blurring of on and offline and/or public and private don't, as Miller & Slater note (2000) inherently create a separate "nowhere-somewhere" but rather, if virtual space is used to assert a space apart from everyday life, this constitutes a specific type of practice:

> *We need to treat Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces, that they happen within mundane social structures and relations that they may transform but they cannot escape into a self-enclosed cyberian apartness. Indeed, to the extent that some people may actually treat various Internet relations as "a world apart" from the rest of their lives, this is something that needs to be socially explained as a practical accomplishment…How, why and when do they set "cyberspace" apart? Where and when do they not [italics in original] do this? In what ways do they make use of "virtuality" as a feature of new media? What do they…regard as real or virtual or consequential?*
> (Miller & Slater 2000:4).

The Marok Queens use social media partially as a form of 'alter-ego-ing'. Alter-ego-ing represents a continual process of re-working identity through particular uses of digital mediation. Unlike the kind of anonymity frequently utilised in Tumblr, as described in earlier chapters, this does not rely on being anonymous. Rather it is a process by which digital space affords a conceptual separation of identity into a second/hybrid identity. This relies on the expectation of the ability to separate and deploy online identities with the belief that online worlds can form a gateway space of acceptance for new identity formations. In Miller and Slater's terms, this "setting 'cyberspace' apart" is a conscious and purposeful strategy. As one of the Marok women expressed: "I believe facebook allows u to be who u are" (quoted in Dunne, 18 December 2015 accessed online). As the following sections will discuss, Marok Queens use social media as both an imagined/produced

"nowhere-somewhere" for agentic self-performance as identity formation *as well as* a located practice of collectively engaging with other Marok women and advocating for social causes.

7.4.1   *Perceived Virtual "Nowhere-Somewheres" and Self-Performance*

The Marok Queens' use of social media differs somewhat based on age, personal preferences, and degree of identification with the subculture. For some, social media represents a true "nowhere-somewhere" or in other words, an identity space that can only be occupied in a digitally mediated reality, with its virtuality key to a "world apart" from offline life. As *Vice* reports, "for some of the women, home is the only place they can dress like this, sharing photos of themselves and their garb on Facebook" (Baritaux, 8 February 2017, accessed online). In this sense, identity projection is produced as a direct circuit from within the private sphere of the Marok woman's home to the public space of the Internet, blurring gendered boundaries between private (feminine) and public (masculine) spheres. For others, "nowhere-somewhere" threshold enables a zone capable of supporting multiple potential postures, for example, multiple/split identities. As Shiakallis notes: "Some Marok live strictly dual lives—one Facebook profile with their real name and another profile with their self-confessed nickname" (ibid.). A number of Marok women alternately leverage that threshold as "nowhere-somewhere" extension and expansion of their day to day realities, wherein the two identities become entwined through a selective, incremental, "coming out" process. Says Shiakallis:

> *[Social media] is very important...It's not easy for women to just outright tell people they are a Marok. This craving to "come out" is evident on their Facebook profiles...They will have pictures of family and kids, birthday messages and inspirational quotes, teddy bears and flowers, and then the next post will be of a skeleton up in flames biting the head off a baby. Then the next post is of them in church clothes, and then, in full leather regalia pulling zaps [giving the middle finger] at the camera.*
> (ibid.)

Through this process, they share multiple aspects of their personalities. For the Queens I interviewed for this research, each introduced aspects of their rocker persona in posts regularly interspersed with others that connected to non-Marok aspects. For example, Gloria's posts show scenes of her in both rockwear and 'normal' attire attending shows but also weddings and other events. As she notes: "I post almost every gathering or rock shows i have attended, i post advice to other rockers advising them, especially to new queens coming up, and [I post] when i am out with my friends or family enjoying ourselves" (Interview with Gloria William for this research, 9 May 2018). Meanwhile, Ludo's posts interpolate between deeply private experiences, Marok life experiences and her business interests as a solo entrepreneur. She describes her posting in the following words:

> *There are posts when i had lost a fiance in a car accident, and i had to express my sorrows.*
>
> *There are posts where i express my love for my daughter.*
>
> *Also where i share my previous show pictures.*
>
> *Where i share pictures of me before church.*
>
> *Just to mention a few.*

Ludo explains: "social media plays a huge role in our lives as Marok, this is how we communicate. We get to share our photos and our stories here. Social media is used to get our names out there to be better understood by the public" (Interview for this research, 8 June 2018). Ludo, for example, has shared through Facebook a feature article on her from *Vulture Thrust Metal Magazine.* She appears in both her profile picture and in this feature post in her Marok gear of Black studded leather jacket, cowboy boots and a defiant stance as she gazes at the camera. Accompanying this imagery is a post of her quote from the article saying:

"Am metalhead, I love metal music, my father and my uncle "Mika Gunsmoke Morima were metalheads and that's where I got my inspiration from, at a very young age of 4 years. My sister has no problem with it at all, my mother and daughter give me mixed reactions and my grandmother doesn't like it. The only challenge I have is people confusing my heavy metal attire for a religion, or making assumptions about my personality (that I might be a bad person)...Now my advice to a girl child would be to never let anyone bully them into thinking less of themselves. As a girl child, I would say listen to advices from elders, know your worth, respect yourself and others" (September 2020).

Digitally mediated space for them is imagined and experienced as generative space to expand their Marok identification in a more continuous way than only within the context of rock concerts. Online they gain different types of visibility than available in the day to day—with virtual space becoming a threshold between social life, working life and their 'true' Marok selves. Much of the existing literature on social media interactions has highlighted the negative aspects of "context collapse", in virtual spaces, i.e. "the flattening out of multiple distinct audiences in one's social network, such that people from different contexts become part of a singular group of message recipients" (Vitak 2012:541). Context collapse has been seen as to impinge on privacy resulting in the need to develop counterstrategies, such as only posting content suitable for every audience or shifting particular conversations into the private spaces of chat groups to reestablish context. The Marok women interviewed, however, have actively sought heightened visibility within these "collapsed" spaces to assert and defend the identifications of Marok culture and integrate these into complex, multidimensional online personas. As Nahon (2015) notes:

Central to both platforms [Twitter and Facebook] are the profiles of individual users, of course, around which Schmidt's (2014) 'personal publics' emerge; these self-selecting (and in the case of Facebook, reciprocal) networks of 'friends' or 'followers' serve in the first place as an audience for the account around which they have formed, and the account owner is likely to be at least vaguely aware of the makeup and interests of that audience (2015:64-65).

Within an individual's Facebook profile, that person 'produces' their identity as though the centre—the "star" even—of a broad and interlinked social circle. Gloria and Ludo's socially mediated Facebook identities enable them to each centre their subcultural participation and experiences as part of larger self-narratives.

7.5   THE "VIRTUAL CLUBHOUSE" AND SUBCULTURAL CAPITAL

As part of Marok identity production, digital mediation also offers the Queens an alternative virtual infrastructure—a "virtual clubhouse" (Baritaux, 8 February 2017, accessed online) in which to connect and engage with other Marok women. There are long distances between the Botswanan towns in which these women live and they utilise social media as a space across geographical limits to cultivate friendship and exchange of subcultural knowledge and Marok clothing and accessories. Marok Queens also frequently post links to videos or images of particular bands and tracks, which they discuss together through the comments linking particular songs back to experiences together, for example, sharing song titles of favourite bands with images of themselves. In one entry, a Queen posts an image in her Marok gear with the names of artists like Daemonarch: Corpus Hermeticum, Mgla: Exercises in Futility ❤ and Rammstein: Mother, Sun, Without You, Sailor! referencing songs by the Portuguese, Polish and German heavy metal bands. Fan engagement takes place by Marok through official fan sites such as the Maun Rockers Association page and *Vulture Thrust Magazine*. However, this engagement is largely through posts on upcoming events, music clips (frequently by male heavy metal bands), merch and community news. One example is a post of a notice by the prominent band, *Overthrust*, upon receiving a certificate of appreciation from the Letlhakane Police Station for their commitment to anti-gender-based violence campaigns. By contrast, the Queens establish circuits of community exchange/fandom/across the 'public' space of their personal networks. Visual fandom and

counterpublic discourse live within the direct flows of publics—unlike in the past spaces of underground clubs, closed door consciousness-raising groups, or semi-enclaved Tumblr spaces. The Queens' articulation of oppositional consciousness is through enactment, visual presence and exchange and personal connections with other fans that literally 'cuts across' the space of Facebook publics. The centralisation/virtualisation of this exchange through social media has only grown and intensified in the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic which inhibited in-person gatherings. As Ludo said: "over the years, i have realised we meet less in person" (Interview for this research, 8 June 2018).

Many of the Marok women, including Gloria and Ludo, are single mothers. Access to online communities is one of few social outlets available to them. Marok women (and men) are frequently able to meet other fans online before they meet face-to-face. Additionally, as some of the Queens note, younger Marok women are increasingly more comfortable expressing themselves through social media. One of the key forms of their expression is to share their experience of the scene. As Shiakallis notes: "From the start i was liaising with [the Queens] on Facebook and WhatsApp … The Marok like to compete with their outfits, they say they want to show how 'brutal' they can look" (Interview for this research 10 May 2018). As Marok women increasingly circulate both their knowledge of the scene, advice for other women, trade and sell rocker gear, and display their 'brutal' looks, they demonstrate forms of "subcultural capital". The concept of subcultural capital was developed by Thornton (1995) building on Bourdieu's (1984) work on "cultural capital" to describe the "artefacts and knowledge which, within a specific subculture, are recognised as tasteful, 'hip' and sophisticated. It works in much the same distinctive way as cultural capital, allowing the holder to see him or herself as distinguished, and to be seen to be so by relevant subcultural others" (Jensen 2006:263). Subcultural capital is conditioned by both active participation within the subculture as well as the social status the individual brings

to/within the subculture (Nilsson 2007). Marok Queens are able to build subcultural capital through participation online. As Ludo notes:

> *I will post via Facebook. Other women post our events or rock shows and they post our clothes or businesses that they do. As Maroko/Rockqueens we like to be seen and be heard in Botswana since its always been our kings leading us in bands and wearing nice leather pants, but now we are buying our own clothes and we have others who [have] already joined the bands and started performing.*
> (Interview for this research 8 June 2018)

Though Marok men and women hold very different positions of power within the society at large, within the circulation of this subcultural capital, they are able to participate and gain recognition within a similar 'brutal' visual economy and embrace of Marok philosophies. Marok Queens, meanwhile, find more outlets to "be seen and heard" through virtual spaces. Ludo, for example, was featured in a Botswana-based magazine, *Vulture Thrust Metal Magazine* (with a Facebook following of approximately 20,000), highlighting stories of Marok, which she then incorporated into her own timeline. She gained a great deal of support and accolades from her networks, including from both male and female Marok, as part of the large group of 3,300 friends she's cultivated online. While Nilsson's 2007 analysis of the Botwanan scene seems to gloss any forms of "subcultural capital" that may circulate between women as part of their experience of the culture, as Ludo's earlier comments indicate, that scene is changing, and digital mediation is a significant part of its expanded sphere of Marok sociality and economies of subcultural visibility.

7.6   PERSONAL PUBLIC AS VISUAL COUNTERPUBLIC

Marok women's use of Facebook as a platform not only provides a space to post an alternate identity, it also becomes a space to collectively advocate for that identity. Returning to discussions in earlier chapters, it was noted that all public formations exist within a liminal networked sphere that contains such diversity and

diffusion of different flows of information and affect that a counterpublic isn't understood in the traditional

sense that Fraser, Travers or Squires describe. Florini's concept, building on Squires, of the idea of an

oscillating networked public that moves between the "safer space" of an enclave and more public engagements

with mainstream discourses resonates more closely. However, what makes the practice of visual counterpublics

within these spaces distinct is the way in which they are performed within the larger public. As visual

performances they demonstrate a public voice through the image that asserts self-definition. Images are

selectively shared with the platform and Marok Queens then jointly defend against negative comments.

Self-definition is tied to collective action.

There are three intersecting dynamics at play in these identity spaces. As in all the case studies, there are

far more likes than comments for every post made. Within comments, several groups become visible, other

Marok Queen followers, other Marok followers in general, and other participants of family, friends, and

acquaintances. Other Marok Queens provide support through affirming a Queen's post and frequently

referring to shared experiences, for example, of attending shows. Frequently, pictures are shown of groups of

Marok women at concerts and referencing these experiences. Through this, the women establish visually and

carve space for a shared performance of comradery. Men of Marok frequently comment as well with language

reflecting ideas of "respecting Queens". Occasionally, there are also comments directed more specifically at

Queens' physically attractive appearance in their Marok style, which reflect an objectifying gaze. Frequently,

however, Marok Queens push back on these comments, redirecting attention back to their own position of

strength/self-definition. Within this closer group of family and friends, the most salient point of contention

regarding Marok and their reception is the idea that the subculture embraces Satanism, an interpretation based

upon the visual symbolism and sonic aggressiveness of the music and dress. For the women involved, the

notion of a subculture that is Satanic elicits a two-fold (interrelated) response, (1) that it is antithetical to Christianity and (2) a further gendered dimension, based on the expectations specifically of a woman in relationship to both Church and Family. As Ludo puts it: "a woman in Botswana should be an example. An example towards kids on how to carry yourself. A woman should be that glue that keeps the family together" (*Queens of Botswana*, 2019). For Gloria, it is well understood that her Marok identity will be received in both positive and negative ways by the multiple audiences viewing her Facebook account. She notes: "people like my posts and some don't like, especially when I have posted myself wearing rock clothes because here they think being a rocker you are a Satanist" (Interview with Gloria William for this research, 9 May 2018). Another Marok Queen, Mille Hans notes that "Like anywhere in the world, here in Botswana people think I am a Satanist because of the black clothes. Satanism is usually associated with darkness ... They think I belong to the dark side and I usually try to explain that I pray to God and I am a Christian. Not all of us are Satanists" (Interview with *The Guardian*, accessed online January 2022). As Mutua-Mambo notes, "moral panic over women's sartorial choices or agentic performativity is not new on the African continent" (2020:125). Nyanzi explains that this emerges from "reified African culture, conservative religious interpretations, heteronormative moralities, and pro-natalists assumptions" (2013:956). However, digitally mediated space becomes fertile ground for the Marok women to contest these interpretations of their Marok identities, empowered by the ability to comment back and/or block those who won't accept them. Ludo notes:

> *I have very supportive online friends, they respond positively to my posts. I've never had any haters so far, but I do have those who misunderstand our lifestyle by believing that we are satanists. So, i never mind explaining to them where we stand.* (Interview for this research 8 June 2018)

Ludo is quick to address particular comments. For example, in one exchange a male participant from her Facebook network responds to a photo by saying: "wow can I b a member", to which Ludo replies: "its not abt being a member, its a musical choice" to correct any implication that the Marok subculture has structure that may be attributed to a cult. In another exchange, a male participant responds to a photo of Ludo with "My beautiful wife" to which she responds: "Darling I am loved by me thank you".

As discussed in earlier case studies, all three women are flanked by what this thesis terms *affective circles*, or an inner circle of networked friends, fans and supporters who regularly/ritualistically engage with their posts with compliments and emojis of hearts and fire, and posts with sentiments such as: "Flaming flames flames!!!!! Wow you are my role model" or "superbrutal queen" and "queens with more respect". Some Marok Queens' affective circles extend transnationally to other female African metal enthusiasts, for example, in exchanges such as:

> *You are everything I am inspired to be. And your visibility as Black women marockers just shows the world more African metal is here!*
>
> To which Queen Ludo responds: *We are honoured to be an inspiration Queen Nicole, u are an inspiration too! African metal, definitely here!*
> (Exchange from Ludo's Facebook account, accessed online)

Such affective circles form an important part of the way in which social mediation comes to reinforce and support these identifications. Marok women mirror their solidarity through becoming role models for one another. Both Marok women and men provide affective solidarity through their encouragement and shared experiences. And, within these circles of support, detractors are intermittent, emerging primarily from non-Marok family members. Marok Queens respond to these detractors by defending themselves against claims of Satanic associations or "unwomanliness". The strength of these responses contrasts with the "quiet

deference" of their day-to-day public interactions, again reinforcing the notion of online spaces as productive public "nowhere-somewheres", that share with the subculture itself, a liminal zone of agentic self-performance and expression. In these personal publics, or tighter, closed circuits of family, friends, and other Marok, Queens perform "visible solidarities" to produce a shared space of Marok identity. The strength of their affiliations and identifications with the subculture prior to coming into online space produces a more powerful and productive form of community-based negotiation. Performed as affective circles of support cultivated both off and online, they become a visual/discursive community reinforcing each Queen's identity by dynamically responding to trolling or dismissive comments to publicly demonstrate solidarities.

7.7   LIMINAL PUBLICS

Throughout this thesis, it has been argued that we need to "stay with the trouble of liminality". One of the primary tenets of the arguments in this research is that in looking into the in-between spaces - within digital publics and 'outside' of them, we gain, not *the* answer, but *answers* about how these spaces are specifically used to create connection, build community and pressure dominant structures, even if only within particular tactical moments. We also gain answers to some of the ways in which the less 'knowable' publics intersect with these functions. Because of the ambiguous structures of engagement through likes, once again a large part of the public is still unknowable in terms of *specific* sentiment or disposition to the identity being presented. In this sense the liminal space of networked publics is one in which *experiences of publics* (plural) also takes place—the audience that is imagined and to some degree 'verified' through the comments of support and shared advocacy, and the 'unimagined' audience that assumes a range of unknown spectatorial roles. The following section will discuss some of the ways in which unimagined and unknown audiences play a role in the

circulation of the Marok Queens' images within liminal publics. Most of the Queens interviewed have public Facebook accounts, which further opens up the space of potential 'unimagined' publics. Further, as several Queens have been featured in the short documentary film as well as in photo shoots, images of them circulate outside the context of the inner circles of their personal publics. The following sections will discuss examples of the ways in which these latter images circulate online.

First, some images appear within public Tumblr accounts. Some of the Marok Queen photographs by Paul Shiakallis have achieved thousands of notes (e.g. in one case 35,000) linking to other blogs. Unlike the example of the BCA blog, such circulation takes place according to far more free-floating associations. Incorporation of ideas of and visual connotations with the Queens' personae appear across a vast disparate, ambiguous terrain of unrelated topics and contexts—from micro-local political discourses to expressions of feminist mysticism to topics as far-reaching as discussions of sea turtles. Within a significant number of blogs, the Marok Queen images circulate as queer iconography consistent with visual and other discursive representations characteric of feminist and queer blogging cultures of Tumblr. It became clear, however, through the variety of uses that potential recontextualisation of this imagery was infinite. This is particularly true given the way that much of this material exists in a liminal state as the ephemera of a bygone Tumblr heyday, sitting in the in-between digital space of bloggers' past imaginaries and a plethora of possible, future unknown uses.

Second, in another digital arena, a short clip has been made to advertise Vianney's documentary about the Marok Queens and posted on Facebook. The viewership profile within the Facebook page for this post indicated about 100,000 views, 900 likes and around 60 comments. While there were some 'cheering fans' there were also a few comments seeking out deeper engagement with the Queens. The majority of comments,

however, related to one phrase that was used to frame the post before the video trailer, which was: "Who said heavy metal was just for white men?" Numerous commenters took offence at this comment, calling it race-baiting. The exchange was valuable as it related to issues of race, the form of heavy metal music and the intentions of the poster, who acknowledged the validity of these comments. However, this didn't generate much in the way of discussion *with* these particular women or about their aims—i.e. a highly diffuse set of interactions and representations.

Third, a few TikTok videos appear that draw on Marok Queen imagery to celebrate their fashion sense or present Marok in general to represent alternative world music scenes. In one video, a young woman describes the fashion of the leathers worn by the Queens and then presents a short history of the Botswanan scene, explaining she is pursuing African studies and "trying to" put her degree to use. Of all the described digital interactions, commenting patterns around the TikTok videos most enthusiastically engage with the culture itself, likely reinforced by the TikTok-er positioning herself as a credible educator on African metal culture. She might best be described as a micro-gatekeeper influencing the path and creation of new publics for this imagery.

Lastly, I want to briefly touch upon the circulation of the photographic images of the Queens in Western publications. Photographer Paul Shiakallis and documentarian Sarah Vianney engaged with Ludo and Gloria (two of the Queens I interviewed) as well as other participants to present their stories of being in Marok. I was also able to interview Shiakallis. Throughout the interviews, both the Queens and the views reflected by the 'outsider' perspective through the documentarian's gaze conveyed similar conceptions of the nature of the subculture in terms of its aesthetics, forms of subcultural capital, discussions of music, descriptions of the feelings of strength/empowerment through participation and desire to further increase women's involvement

in the Marok community, particularly in bands. However, in conversation with the Queens, they more strongly emphasised the significance of social media supporting community participation and forging connections with other Marok women, than did Shiakallis' or Vianney's work. The images that Shiakallis has created circulate most predominantly through Western pop cultural and fine art spaces online. Sometimes they are used by the Queens as part of their self-presentation within their personal micro-publics, but sometimes they are not. Many choose to present their own selfies or group images reflecting the collective comradery and identity space of the group, over presenting the view through Shiakallis' lens. The Queens' curation of self is layered and, to use Florini's words, an "oscillating" performance. At a micro-scale, these performances mimic the complex exercise represented by the strategic visibilities of moving between a visual counterpublic that openly contests traditional identity expectations, and purposeful retreat to other identity positions, when deemed strategic. It is useful to be reminded of Florini's assertion that:

> *For marginalised groups, seemingly mundane activities often come to take on political importance. The performance of social identities and the 'expression of one's cultural identity through idiom and style' can be an important mode of political engagement, regardless of whether there are direct and immediately discernible political consequences.*
> (2019:79)

7.8   ON AND OFFLINE WORLDS

> *Through the development of new technologies, we are, indeed, more and more open to experiences of de-realisation and de-localisation. But we continue to have physical and localised existences. We must consider our state of suspension between these conditions.* (Robins 1996:16, 26)

The "state of suspension" is part of the liminal capacity that digital mediation can afford. As seen with the Marok women's uses of digital interaction, they are able to move between on and offline worlds in their Marok identity, using each arena for complementary purposes, and increasingly (due to the COVID-19 global

pandemic and other travel and time constraints) centring their engagement with one another in the "de-localised" and somewhat "de-realised" spaces (i.e. spaces conceived of as outside of day-to-day reality) of digital media.

Ludo combines her online Marok persona with business interests in a manner that resonates with the discourses and projects of self-empowerment referenced in earlier discussions of Botswanan feminist movements. In Vianney's film, Ludo is interviewed discussing her work building cribs and shelves saying that "doing this kind of work makes me feel powerful". The film's voiceover notes, "Ludo credits her being a Queen for her daring to transverse gender stereotypes. And she's very motivated. She does everything for her daughter" (*Queens of Botswana*, 2019). She speaks of wanting to build an amusement park in her local area and leave her crib-building business to her workers. Ludo notes:

> *The women here seem to be dependent on men for the hard jobs. And also core parenting, usually when the baby is around you cannot do things on your own. I am able to be an example to others to keep on going, with or without a man in your life.* (*Queens of Botswana*, 2019)

Ludo has gained recognition and subcultural capital with local mainstream heavy metal audiences, featured in the publication *Vulture Thrust*. She shares the coverage and a quote from the story in a Facebook post, which says:

> *The only challenge I have is people confusing my heavy metal attire for a religion, or making assumptions about my personality (that I might be a bad person). Other than that the majority of people don't judge me and there love my style. Now my advice to a girl child would be to never let anyone bully them into thinking less of themselves. As a girl child I would say listen to advices from elders, know your worth, respect yourself and others, be a go getter and never give up. Try again!*
> (Ludo quoted in *Vulture Thrust* 7 September 2020)

Gloria has had a long-time involvement with the Maun Rockers Association, where she takes a lot of

responsibility for the scene. She advocated to start the association, which spearheads initiatives for bands, for

example to play at weddings and interconnect with charities such as those addressing HIV. As Gloria notes:

> *We want to teach other rockers and the community that is not all about alcohol and drugs in rock music, we also can give back to the community, we have an association that we work with the government by picking up litter on the streets and donating to the orphanage and we are planning even to be chasing animals off the road to avoid road accidents. We surprise people a lot because they thought being a rocker its only for men and drinking alcohol, sex and loud music.*
> (Interview for this research, 9 May 2018)

Other Marok Queens are involved in causes connected to women's rights. Bonolo, for example, works for a

woman's rights organisation full-time, and as Shiakallis notes:

> *It's not just the women but the Marok in general. I know one of the Marok men who hosts the local woodstock festival holds a 'March Against Woman and Child Abuse' walk. The Marok gather at a tavern or park with their placards and march to the music venue.*
> (Interview for this research 10 May 2018)

In Feb 2022, the Maun Rockers Association hosted the Maroko March Against Gender Based Violence with

bands Overthrust, Wrust, Skinflint, Humanitarian, and others. Says Ludo, "we have a lot of rock shows/

festivals annually in Botswana that I attend, these could be shows for fun, charity shows, celebrations,

promotions, dedications and road shows that educate the public about certain issues that affect us as the

community" (Interview for this research, 8 June 2018). As one media outlet reported, a Marok member

described the Charity Festival:

> *About 500 people attend our fest, the Overthrust Winter Metal Mania Charity Festival, every year. It's been going on for 14 years. People pay a fee to get in and part of those proceeds go to charity. We try to identify beneficiaries who are disadvantaged. That includes orphans, people or children with a disability or who are affected by HIV/AIDS. And then some of the proceeds of the festival are given to those people for their needs — basic things like food baskets, clothing or funds for education or to start a small business. In*

2021, for example, we donated $400 to a maternity ward in central Botswana.
(Gharib, *npr*, 7 August 2022 accessed online)

The overall Marok scene continues to have more men than women, with women only now beginning to participate as musicians. As the show posters for charity performances as well as the Maun Rocker's Facebook page and *Vulture Thrust Magazine* pages reveal, much of the imagery still heavily features images of male rockers, as most of the bands continue to be started by men. More recently, there has been a slight uptick in images of women, in particular featuring figures like Ludo as part of the *Vulture Thrust* webpage and magazine. One of the ways the magazine engages its fans is to post images of Marok Queens and Kings on their birthdays and send greetings. Queens will react to the message in the page, interacting with maybe 50 or 60 other fans. In this exchange a sense of broader comradery is expressed in which Queens, like Ludo give shoutouts to her Marok "fam". However, in the sense of how the culture comes to 'officially' represent itself, more images of male rockers and performers dominate the page.

7.9   CONCLUSION

The Queens' digitally mediated subcultural participation is not a 'women's movement'. It exists in the context of a male-dominated cultural affiliation, one which, however, produces in-between identity spaces for the women of the scene. The Marok Queens' use of digital mediation is both possible and effective because of an existing offline subcultural affiliations through which to negotiate identity formation. Fifteen years after Nilsson's assessments, new configurations of subcultural capital around Marok culture continue to be brokered between women, in particular aided by digital mediated communication and exchange between the Queens online. Queens negotiate acceptance for their Marok identities with family and friends online. Further, by leveraging the nowhere-somewhere liminal spaces of digital media, the Queens build on, expand and gain

community support for a kind of alterego that quietly seeps into everyday life. This includes individual projects of "empowerment" from integrating personal entrepreneurial businesses and community projects with rocker identity. As Mosime and Mookodi (2021) note with regard to emergent (online) popular feminist projects in Botswana, emergent popular efforts tend to be hybrid and self-determined. They note:

> *By presenting several kinds of popular feminisms that have emerged in Botswana under the rubric of 'empowerment', the position taken in this paper is that, adherents of these kinds of popular feminisms are not necessarily 'lacking critical awareness and hence in need of emancipatory projects' (Glapka 2018). They themselves, provide emancipatory projects among their own, on their own terms, within their own discursive practices.* (Mosime and Mookodi 2021:81)

Marok identity—or the outward visual markers of such—do not become a way to acquire all aspects of power conferred on men in the culture, nor do Marok women feel the power of their identity as becoming 'masculine' in any sense. Rather this liminal zone of empowerment enables a bridge between the performance of identity and building forms of subcultural capital, as well as an increased sense of individual agency then tied to the collective agency of the group. This is asserted as a (micro-form) visual counterpublic within Queens' Facebook publics. These connections are furthered through action directed to social causes. Increased engagement between Marok and the community at large appears to connect, in part, to women's increasing participation. As reported at allafrica.com:

> *While rumours were once rife that the metal fans were vampires or criminals, they say such negative stereotypes are slowly dissolving as more women join their ranks and their charity work becomes better known.* (Harrisberg 29 Dec 2021, accessed online)

The organising capacity driven by women like Gloria and the integration of charity work, in this sense, serves to 'feminise' the subculture in ways that shift/soften public perceptions. At the time of this thesis writing,

women's involvement in the genre and its official cultural spaces was on the rise. The age-old question arises as to whether, as a culture 'feminises', it is seen to lose prestige, however, in the current moment these shifts have created new ways to reimagine the culture.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

Some scholars (Szetela 2019; Smith 2021) have called for the abandonment of identity politics in favour of non-identity based coalition-building. To do so, however, ignores some of the fundamental realities of the contemporary political sphere. Further, as Smucker (2012) notes, "social change groups require a strong internal identity in order to foster the level of commitment needed for protracted struggle" (1). As the case studies in this thesis demonstrate, affective support built around marginalised identities is an important source of validation and affirmation among participants contributing to long-term engagement, replication, and commitment. Beyond the strength of 'inner' circles of support, however, broader public formations produced a more complex picture. The following sections will recap the key conclusions from each of the case studies followed by discussion of future directions for research.

8.1   CASE STUDY COMPARISONS

8.1.1   *My Stealthy Freedom*

Tracing the liminal engagements of My Stealthy Freedom reveals its tactical and personal contributions to processes of popular feminist uprising in Iran. Protestors reaching out to the campaign to broadcast demands was, for many protestors, the expression of desire for global visibility, including mothers of political protesters

whose children had been killed by the State. Such protests represent a threat to the Iranian government evidenced in its local crackdowns, as well as a recent plot to kidnap Alinejad from her home in the US. In this sense, the campaign demonstrated tactical and collective representational force that built visual counterpublics through self-performance to elevate these concerns to and within larger publics and potentially influence future local movements. At the same time, campaign framing by its founder implicitly reinforces an anti-hijab, rather than an anti-bodily-policing, stance. This creates a disconnect between the broad campaign framing and the aims and terms of protest evident in the video footage of self-performances. Campaign curation at times drew in Islamophobic sentiment. Significant contention around aspects of the campaign among Farsi-speaking participants remains, for all practical purposes, 'invisible' to Global North audiences given the language and translation barriers within Instagram, as well as, as Tafokori notes, the lack of reporting on this aspect of the campaign within Western media. Unseen, or more pointedly, unacknowledged, contention is buried within the various digital platform publics of Facebook and Instagram. This unseen disagreement/difference (ironically) is flagged and instrumentalised by social media as attention capital. This capital consequently bolsters Alinejad's authority as expert to speak on behalf of the campaign growing its prominence and visibility in Western media, which then reinforces a particular (Western) view of emancipation. Global North participants who expressed affective support, frequently did so in ways that reinforced their position as spectators of the protesters' bravery, rather than as allies engaged in reciprocal forms of protest or (publicly shown) material support. This demonstrates how at odds digitally mediated cultures and the values of the attention economy can be with the aspiration to build ethical solidarities across borders. The role of Global North allies proved lacking in ways that go beyond the benign passivity of slacktivism, pointing to a potentially broader ritualised symbolic

reproduction of power imbalance. These supporters were moved by the bravery of marginalised others, but largely unmoved to act beyond the position of spectators.

Just weeks before the completion of this thesis, Iran erupted in the largest civil unrest since the 2009 presidential election protests. The spark for this protest was the death of Mahsa Amini, who was arrested for 'bad hijab' like so many of the protesters in Iran including the many who have posted on My Stealthy Freedom. Amini's death has set off a wave of global reaction, including coverage by major Western news outlets and outpouring of sympathy protests by Iranian diasporic communities around the world. It is worth noting some of the chain of events through both social media networks, diasporic global reaction, and news coverage as this event has unfolded in real-time as they reflect many of the issues identified in this thesis. I first became aware of Amini's death through two simultaneous posts, one in the My Stealthy Freedom account and one as a shared post that travelled from American actress Leah Remini's account (Remini is famous for appearing in the American TV show *The King of Queens* and for her public battles with the Church of Scientology) to another American feminist Instagrammer called @agirlhasnopresident. The hashtag #mahsaamini began circulating with calls for social media users to Be the Voice of Iran, as the Iranian government violently clamped down on protesters killing and wounding many. The government shut down the Internet for an entire week simply to stop the flow of information out of Iran (Burgess, 23 September 2022, accessed online). As the crisis has escalated within the country, protests have circulated around the world, including large-scale demonstrations by Iranian diasporic groups at Western Iranian embassies in LA (attended by Alinejad), Melbourne, London, and others (Hui, 12 October 2022, accessed online). Global celebrities from Kim Kardashian to Justin Bieber to Bono circulated the story to millions of followers on their social accounts (Khalifeh, 9 October 2022, accessed online). Well-known BBC and CNN journalist, Christiane Amanpour, refused to wear a headscarf in

a New-York based interview scheduled to take place with Iranian President Raisi, who thus declined the interview (*The Guardian*, 23 September 2022, accessed online). Iranian human rights lawyer Shirin Ebadi described the protests as being "a lot more widespread than before. Even schoolgirls, pupils (sic) have come to the streets—and grandchildren are protesting alongside their grandparents" (quoted on Amanpour's Twitter account, 7 October 2022). Many Iranian protesters have cut their hair and burned hijabs. Some Western female politicians in parliamentary settings reciprocated the gesture by also cutting their hair. International hacktivist collective *Anonymous* launched Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks taking down Iranian government websites, releasing information about government officials and intercepting an Iranian news broadcast. Through the course of these events, My Stealthy Freedom continues to offer one of the most steady streams of footage from within Iran of protest on the ground. Though Western media outlets such as the *New York Times* have posted stories with videos on protest, commenters have critiqued the outlet for using older footage and not engaging with activity on the ground in real-time, while also referencing TikTok videos circulating directly from protestors (Instagram Personal Feed, commentary on *NYT* post, 20 September 2022). In some of the smaller grassroots digital corners of social media, real-time local events are relayed with nuance and micro-discourses circulate that spell out intersectional feminist concerns clarifying the need for *choice,* not banning of hijab.

Within Iran, young female students chant "get lost" to President Raisi as he visits their campuses, even while aware of the recent deaths of young people (some as young as 16) at the hands of the State (*Reuters*, 9 October 2022, accessed online). It is difficult not to reflect on the spectatorial dissonance carried in global protest gestures, in which Global North audiences post black squares on their profile pages with the writing: "I Stand with the Women of Iran", and these travel virally/diffusely throughout global publics (observed in Instagram Personal Feed, September 2022). Who is the "I" and where do they stand? As of this writing, there is

tremendous hope among many around the world that the current protests, led in many ways by women and young girls, will enact the kind of wholesale regime revolution that many Iranians wish to see. It is the build up over time of protest throughout Iran, including through MSF, and the tactical use of social media by Iranian citizens to expand the terms of protest and civil disobedience that digital mediation empowers. At the same time, the ritualisation of social media in producing potential global allies as cheering fans (and even as earnest amplifiers) without material recourse produces, I argue, one of the fundamental liminal instabilities of contemporary use of digital networks.

8.1.2   *Black Contemporary Art and @museummammy*

The second case study shifts gears to institutional interventions in BCA and @museummammy. Drew was able to influence curatorial agendas and awareness of Black contemporary aesthetic production to challenge the dominant exclusions of large-scale institutions. BCA in particular produced a vital digital collection and demonstrated a path of sustained engagement with this artwork through a networked Tumblr community. @museummammy enabled Drew to build a space in which to actively negotiate aspects of the Black cultural experience in particular through her engagements with queer and transgender community issues. In the case of Drew's projects, inner affective circles played a role in producing networked viewership and creating in-group momentum for the identity space she articulates. At the day to day level of follower engagement, however, in-platform dialogue was rarely sparked among out-group followers regarding the issues raised around Black aesthetic production. Further, Drew's own professional trajectory showed the ways in which institutions often fail to adequately support Black women's cultural and curatorial work in more substantive ways. Despite a large push to hire from marginalised groups over the past few years since the peak of the Black Lives Matter movement, stories like Drew's continually emerge from arts and other institutions reflecting the paradoxical

relationships of digitally mediated capabilities. On the one hand, Drew was able to produce alternate cultural

logics and call out the injustices of pay parity gaps. At the same time the Met was able to benefit from Drew's

work focusing on diversity and accessibility initiatives, while absorbing the temporary 'shocks' of Drew's

public critiques.

8.1.3   Marok Queens

Finally, in the Marok Queens case, incremental gains arose through the ability to build community and

exchange subcultural capital around non-traditional identities. The Queens expressed a deep sense of

empowerment through living an "alternate" Marok identity and the importance in the use of digital media to

facilitate that experience and connection and comradery with other Marok Queens from across the country.

Ritualistic affective circles of support emerged, serving the function of building in-group solidarities.

Marginalised identity performance and valorization, however, depended strongly on the relationship between

online and offline worlds. Digital mediation was a powerful tool in the context of identities formed offline over

long periods of time. The publics forming around these identities divided between Marok and non-Marok, and

while men in the subculture expressed affective support, it was other Queens who advocated on behalf of one

another to shift perceptions in non-Marok participants. There was some evidence to suggest that the Queens'

increasing participation and visibility in the scene is enhancing mainstream social perceptions of the Marok

identity at large. Marok as a movement is closely tied to charity efforts in the country, in particular a

commitment to campaigns against gendered violence. The growth in the presence of women of the scene

developed in particular, in the period just before the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the Marok community

posts express feelings of stress and sadness at not being able to attend live concerts throughout the COVID-19

period, however, Queens have continued to circulate images of themselves at past concerts and share

experiences maintaining a relational public presence through digital spaces. Within this case study is demonstrated both the visual counterpublic established within the intersections of their Facebook communities and the unimagined publics that emerge as images of the Marok Queens become free-floating visual identities in larger digital publics, particularly, for example, as increasingly 'un-anchored' digital objects in other platform spaces. In the latter, decontextualisation seems to work against spaces of identity recognition.

8.1.4   Case Study Comparative Summary

Key Differences

By analysing the role of self-performance across multiple contexts and platforms this thesis has identified a portfolio of techniques of the self used to assert collective spaces of identity/visual counterpublics. Each of the three case study projects approached self-representation in differing ways to produce a visual counterpublic response to hegemonic civic, cultural and social values. In My Stealthy Freedom, the dominant techniques were the visual creation of acts of rebellion and civil disobedience through self-unveiling, turning the camera gaze back on citizens trying to police the unveiled, and the (re-)mediation of trauma by sharing visceral imagery of the traumatised body (in acid attacks and mothers' trauma at the persecution of their children). While many of these techniques, in particular camera-witnessing, have been used before in various protest movements, My Stealthy Freedom differs in its efforts to continuously build a space of counterpublic voice through multiple techniques of self-documentation and witnessing over time. In contrast to My Stealthy Freedom, BCA produces a visual counterpublic response through processes of curation built around art that fundamentally explores marginalised identity itself and facilitates viewers' ability to incorporate interaction with this art into their own self-performances/self-definition through personal blogging. @museummammy's self-performance meanwhile is focused on microcelebrity techniques of building fan following around the performance of

identity to build influence and activism not only personally and professionally, but as a form of identity-based advocacy. Finally, the Marok Queens' visual performances demonstrate a collective voice through a shared subcultural identity by asserting self-definition against dominant cultural norms via self-fashioning in Marok attire and persona.

*Key Similariti*es

Despite the very different contexts, platforms and purposes from which these three case studies emerged all worked to produce visual counterpublics and demonstrated key dynamics of liminal publics. Aspects of Derecognition, Unknowability, Ambiguity and Spectatorship were all at play in the digitally-mediated publics that aggregated around self-definition for marginalised identities through visual counterpublics in operation. Importantly, however, these took place in very different degrees based on aspects of both curation of "shared feeling" and most importantly in terms of the size and scale of the publics observed, i.e. the wider the scale and scope of digital publics as in My Stealthy Freedom and @museummammy, the greater the degree of derecognition and disconnection evidenced in the exchanges and response via commentary. The following table highlights the key findings across all three case studies:

CASE STUDIES Emerged from different settings	VISUAL COUNTERPUBLICS Assembled through multiple, diverse, repertoires of the self	PLATFORM OBSERVATIONS	LIMINAL PUBLICS Share several key patterns
My Stealthy Freedom (Civic)	- Self unveiling - Reversing the gaze through camera witnessing - Re-mediation of trauma through representing traumatised bodies.	Disconnect in cross-cultural dialogue between global-oriented Facebook discourses and local (Iranian)-oriented Instagram discourse.	Patterns of: - Derecognition - Unknowability - Ambiguity - Spectatorship
Black	Curated artwork exploring	Early Tumblr blog culture	

Contemporary Art + **@museummammy** (Cultural)	• marginalised identity itself • Microcelebrity techniques of the self • Viewership and interaction with art incorporated into self-identity	enabled a semi-enclaved space and creation of a repository that is still a valuable resource today. Instagram account lent itself to a fan-building model and short-term, single-sided discourse, but also strong, direct visibility to amplify fundraising.	identified in all case studies, however each to varying degrees. The greater the size and scale of the digital public, the greater the de-recognition and ambiguity observed.
Marok Queens (Personal)	• Self-defining images	Facebook enabled a subcultural social community within family and friends networks. In this 'semi-closed' space, participants were able to negotiate and defend identity expression on behalf of one another. This relied on subcultural community links and open debate for members to self-define against the status quo.	

Figure 8.1   Case Study Comparison

8.1.5   Contributions

The primary contributions of the empirical work of these case studies is the development of broader

frameworks for understanding several phenomena, including visual counterpublics and their use of

self-performance, the dynamics of liminal publics specific to marginalised voices and uncovering forms of

spectatorship and derecognition that hinder processes of digital allyship. In all three case studies, visual

counterpublics were assembled through practices of self-performance. Self-definition for in-groups provided

relational identity formation by uniting the self to the collective in novel ways.

In the first case study, this took place through mirroring and modelling of protest, in the second through spaces of Black and queer valorisation, and in the third through subcultural participation. Much stronger cohesion was demonstrated between in-group (members who shared the experiences of marginalisation) than out-group (allies).

The visual counterpublics documented in this research demonstrate the push and pull between the validating/empowering forces of collective and reciprocal engagements around identity, and the disconnects of shallow structures of engagement/unknowability, practices of cheering fans and (platform-)specific forms of derecognition. Further, identity production has largely moved away from spaces like Tumblr where, as scholars have suggested, such production was produced and fostered in semi-enclaved or safe spaces for the development of politics, aesthetics and community. Digital publics increasingly demonstrate the paradoxical pull of enmeshed public contestation.[20] The results in these case studies thus demonstrate the complexity that arises as online identity projects work to drive both broader and deeper structural change. The double-edged sword that marginalised identities face in desires for/danger of visibility online, is complicated by a further double bind. The same mechanisms/affordances by which digital mediation empowers in-group identities in social movements can (stealthily) power, amplify and reward counterproductive dynamics of publics, under an ostensible banner of social and political solidarity. While it is true that the action of liking amplifies content and therefore raises the visibility of an image and identity, questions of deeper engagement arise, particularly when it comes to supporting marginalised groups, voices and identities. The ambiguity of likes and emojis demonstrate that a marginalised identity is affirmed, but the basis for the affirmation is unknown. Why is a

---

[20] The shift toward specifically closed publics, for example, in encrypted private chat rooms (Abidin 2021) is another form of divided and/or enclaved publics, however, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss this in detail.

post liked? By whom, and for what reasons? Derecognition is also enacted through overt hijacking, which refers in this case to public discourses that purposely change the intent of marginalised identity performance, for example, by hijacking the subject of posts to drive forward other political agendas and/or refuse to engage on the terms invoked by the identity performance. This represents a different phenomenon than that of echo chambers. In echo chambers, digital media processes and functions produce different ideological factions in support of and against marginalised identities eg. through amplification of hate speech and misinformation. This also differs somewhat from what is referred to as "performative" or "optical allyship", in which supporters participate in forms of "virtue signalling" by posting the symbols of a movement to draw attention to one's own virtue (Kalina 2020; Wellman 2022). Instead, this refers in a much larger sense to the unstable structures of digitally mediated public formations at large, identified in looking at the microcosms within these small, discrete projects and the qualities of *spectatorship* and *derecognition* demonstrated within engagement practices around identity. As opposed to "moral spectatorship" in digital media, these processes only reinforce the notion of spectators *ritualistically* reproducing the privilege of dispensing likes and "Bravos", failing to fundamentally deconstruct that privilege in more meaningful ways.

Social projects and movements do not necessarily have incentive to deeply interrogate the structures of allyship underpinning their support. Likes and shares build metrics, metrics build visibility, and both can lead to commercial/donation support if activated toward those ends. However, in pausing to reflect on underlying dynamics of publics in terms of ritualistic patterns of engagement, and the unknowability and potential weaponisation of digital publics, this sheds light on the challenges ahead for future movements. Put simply, while digital mediation can provide connective weak tie solidarities, without deeper structures of allyship, in particular around the availability of platformed communicative practices that more deeply deconstruct

privilege, what does the future of digital empowerment and engagement look like? To Papacharassi's notion of affective publics offering windows of opportunity for empowerment that may or may not effect change in institutions, I offer the idea that social mediated exchange, at least that of particular platforms has become institutionalised by particular ritualistic patterns of engagement and ready-made counterdiscourses for every practice of counterpublic discourse. The following table contextualises the concept of liminal publics of this thesis within the conceptual continuum that has emerged to describe key features and evolution of digitally-mediated publics over the past decade and a half.

Networked publics (boyd 2010)	**Affective and Intimate publics (Papacharissi 2015)**	**Competing publics and counterpublics (Holm, 2019)**	**Liminal publics**
Publics as structured through technical affordances	Publics as affective flows (sharing structures of feeling)	Publics as fragmented and competing between internally 'unifed' counterpublics	Hyper-fragmentation, hyper-speed in micro experiences of publics and hyper-instability Publics as ambiguous and unknowable Productive and unproductive instabilities Multiple types of counterpublics, including *visual counterpublics* Results in fracturing and in-group coding of public discourse, e.g. Abidin's refractive publics (2021)

Figure 8.2   Digital Publics Continuum

8.2   FUTURE DIRECTIONS

There are a number of potential paths that would offer fruitful future directions for this research to develop. I will discuss these in terms of the following topics: visual counterpublics, liminal publics, and

spectatorship/derecognition, and the limits of digital allyship. With regard to visual counterpublics, it would

be useful to map out this concept as it applies to other highly visually-oriented platforms, in particular TikTok.

TikTok videos are rich spaces for exploring visual modes of assembling and disassembling publics at

hyperspeed. It would be productive to understand how/if visual assemblages work around identity in TikTok

publics, as well as processes of recognition and derecognition specific to this platform. The types of

derecognition that take place in the projects of this research are operationalised differently than, for example,

the erasures that take place within the flows of Twitter publics. TikTok content is, in effect, centred around

visual self-performance and self-documentation in a more deeply constitutive way. This is particularly so, given

the way short videos combine self-performance as short broadcast, with discourse and counter discourse

stitched into the frame, to create further multi-layered forms of discourse. Future directions could work to

understand the possibilities for "collectiveness" in publics that have what Zulli and Zulli (2020) describe as the

"imitative" logics of this platform. These capabilities would seem to intensify the discursive intertwining of

discourse (literally stitching comments and videos together) while simultaneously placing this expression in the

flows of contesting publics and away from original contexts. Further attention to how these processes impact

production and circulation of identity would be a fruitful avenue of inquiry as new types of interaction craft

not only different ways of "doing identity" but also of "doing publics".

With regard to the concept of liminal publics, the primary purpose of this framework has been to focus

attention on in-between spaces—first, in the interactions between actors in publics and second, in terms of

how such interactions impact the spaces of institutions as well as work across global and online/offline borders.

A future direction in this regard would be to continue processes of mapping interactions within publics to

better understand the full spectrum of behaviours of recognition and derecognition and how they are shaped

by specific platforms as they evolve. The contextual nature of how affordances such as liking or commenting or, for example, practices such as stitching on a platform like TikTok, combine with political ideology, is necessary in order to move out of binary distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' and into explications of what social media "does" around processes of identity.

A second future direction is to look at the under-examined tensions between *digital re-imagining* and the *material re-making* of institutions. This thesis has tracked some of the tensions between digital projects aimed at social change and the strategies and tactics by which governments and institutions have been able to resist that change. As scholars such as Zarkov and Davis (2018) have raised, in a movement like #MeToo much of the resulting legal activity and material consequences emerging from this digital campaign have been directed at high-profile actors and celebrities. Less is known about more extensive impacts for other victims and voices following this movement. Tracking these developments and relationships between broadscale activity online and localised impacts should be a significant focus moving forward, including better understanding of how institutions push back on/absorb the gains of awareness raised through digital publics.

Following from this, the notion of *experiences of publics* points to the need to think of networked publics in a different frame. Traditional concepts of 'publicness' and the public sphere fall short in explanatory power with regard to some of the weaponised instabilities of global networked public mediation. For example, in May 2022, the Iranian government (suspectedly) coordinated a cyber-attack inundating feminist accounts with a mass influx of fake followers through bots and trolls. By negatively amplifying the publics of these accounts with an onslaught of fake participants, at a rate impossible to counter in real time, the government was able to destabilise engagement with the movement. This underscores how fake publics can be mobilised against marginalised voices and, in particular, the deep capacities of institutions to absorb the impacts of

digitally mediated resistance. In response, ARTICLE19, Access Now, and the Center for Human Rights in Iran have issued a statement demanding that Meta, owner of Instagram, "better understand the complexities of Persian-language content" and amend their moderation practices to support freedom of expression and protest (*accessnow.org*, accessed online September 2022).

Lastly, the questions raised about ethical digital allyship are fundamental ones. It is clear that social media enables visibility of discourses of inequality through a connective model of political engagement. Through this thesis it was also demonstrated that strategies of self-performance and the creation of visual counterpublics created novel ways to build community and gain visibility and collective representation for oppositional identity discourses and projects. What is less clear, however, is how the day-to-day practices of using digital media support deeper engagement by allies. This problem is twofold in its relationship both to active harassment and hijacking of the cause of marginalised groups and peoples and also the inability to engage more deeply in dialogue across differences within current, dominant platform cultures. One critical direction forward is further study into what types of further regulation and governance will be suitable and feasible for digitally-mediated platforms. The issue of governance with regard to younger digital users, for example, has started to build momentum in mainstream public discourses in news media as of the completion of this thesis. However, much more work needs to be done to determine how to effectively monitor and regulate platform behaviour in ways that support marginalised people and groups. For example, such work would include investigation of extending parameters and legal frameworks for more effective criminalisation of online hate speech based on gender, race, and/or sexual identification, and making platform providers more accountable for this within virtual domains.

Returning to Kimberly Drew's words about the "limits of empathy", her expression conveys multiple

meanings, including the limits of how empathy may be understood in the interaction between allies and

marginalised groups, and the limits of empathy as can be expressed in the liminal, diffuse spaces of digitally

mediated interaction. The findings of this research regarding those limits point to the much 'quieter' (but

perhaps more pervasive) problems with the structures of social media (ironically for a medium so associated

with creating noise). That is, in the ritualistic everyday practices of liking content day in and day out, shallow

structures of engagement mirror (at the very least become a metaphor for) larger mainstream institutional

silences and intransigence. With regard to deeper engagements and forms of allyship, a great deal of further

study needs to be done to begin to identify which platform dynamics (if any) are currently promoting positive,

more deeply engaged forms of allyship and what initiatives will encourage new platform cultures in those that

are not. It will, in my opinion, take dramatic broader cultural shifts, including in some cases, concerted efforts

to move away from particular platform cultures altogether to counter the types of patterns and behaviours

observed in the present study.

In the course of the American Civil Rights movement, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote: *"Shallow*

understanding from people of goodwill is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.

Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection" (Letter from Birmingham Jail, 16 April

1963, accessed online). The danger is that shallowness gives way to a particular contemporary form of

"hollowness". As author Yaa Gyasi expresses:

> *To see white people holding up Black Lives Matter signs as we marched through a gentrified Brooklyn. To*
> *see white parents hoisting children up on their shoulders, chanting Black Lives Matter, when I suspect*
> *they've done as much as possible to ensure those same children never have to go to school with more than a*
> *tasteful smattering of Black children. All of it brings up the dissonance again. The revulsion that makes*
> *clear the hollowness of the reverence. Black Lives Matter – a reverent, simple, true phrase – can only be*
> *hollow in the mouths of those who cannot stomach Black life, real life, when they see it at a school, at the*

doctor's office, on the side of the road. Still, I marched. A few months later, I went back on tour for my second novel, knowing what I have always known. The world can change and stay exactly the same.
(*The Guardian* 20 March 2021, accessed online)

The difficulty in producing meaningful communicative and empathetic reciprocity of engagement between allies and marginalised voices through a global digitally mediated political and visual economy, is by no means a simple one. The recent tragedy of Mahsa Amini's death and the circulation of protest gestures and iconography demonstrate their generative capacities as visibility-raising counterpublic discourses. Yet, a call to action by Alinejad herself highlights the complexity of this as a question of ethical transnational feminist allyship. At the end of an op-ed piece she has written for the *Washington Post*, Alinejad says:

> *I am asking all Western feminists to speak up. Join us. Make a video. Cut your hair. Burn a headscarf. Share it on social media and boost Iranian voices. Use your freedom to say her name. Her name was Mahsa Amini.* (Alinejad, 27 September 2022)

My immediate reaction to Alinejad's call to action was to envision how the circulation of (hundreds? thousands?) of videos of Western feminists burning hijabs would register as the limits of empathy to the millions of hijabi women around the world?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abidin, Crystal. "From 'networked publics' to 'refracted publics': A companion framework for researching 'below the radar' studies." *Social Media+ Society* 7.1 (2021): 2056305120984458.

Abu-Lughod, Lila. "The cross-publics of ethnography: The case of "the Muslimwoman"." *American Ethnologist* 43.4 (2016): 595-608.

Agrawal, N. 'Curator Kimberly Drew on Black Art, Social Media, and Taking Selfies in Museums' *Vice*, 26 November 2016, accessed January 2018.

Ahmed-Ghosh, Huma. "Dilemmas of Islamic and secular feminists and feminisms." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 9.3 (2008): 99-116

Alimardani, M. (2018) "The 'Girls of Revolution Street' Protest Iran's Compulsory Hijab Laws"

Alinejad, Masih. "Opinion.Women are leading a revolution in Iran. When will Western feminists help?" *The Washington Post,* 27 Sept. 2022.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/09/27/masih-alinejad-west-feminists-support-iranian-women/

Altheide, David L., and Christopher J. Schneider. *Qualitative media analysis*. Vol. 38. Sage, 2013.

Alvizo, Xochitl. "Being Undone by the Other: Feminisms, Blogs, and Critique." *Feminism and Religion in the 21st Century*. Routledge, 2014. 47-56.

American Alliance of Museums. '#AAM2019 Keynote: Kippen de Alba Chu and Kimberly Drew,' 28 May 2019, accessed June 2019.

Andén-Papadopoulos, Kari. "Citizen camera-witnessing: Embodied political dissent in the age of 'mediated mass self-communication'." *New Media & Society* 16.5 (2014): 753-769.

Anderson, Jon W. "Rethinking New Media in the Public Sphere: Beyond the Freedom Paradox." *Knowledge, Authority and Change in Islamic Societies*. Brill, 2021. 101-124.

Ang, Ien. "The predicament of diversity: Multiculturalism in practice at the art museum." *Ethnicities* 5.3 (2005): 305-320.

Asadi Zeidabadi, Pardis. "Political identity: feminists and feminism in Iran." *Gender, Place & Culture* (2022): 1-21.

Asen, Robert. "Seeking the "counter" in counterpublics." *Communication theory* 10.4 (2000): 424-446.

Attu, Rose, and Melissa Terras. "What people study when they study Tumblr: Classifying Tumblr-related academic research." *Journal of Documentation* (2017).

Baer, Hester. "Redoing feminism: Digital activism, body politics, and neoliberalism." *Feminist media studies* 16.1 (2016): 17-34.

Banet-Weiser, Sarah. "Gender, social media, and the labor of authenticity." *American Quarterly* 73.1 (2021): 141-144.

Banet-Weiser, Sarah, Rosalind Gill, and Catherine Rottenberg. "Postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in conversation." *Feminist theory* 21.1 (2020): 3-24.

Baritaux, Zio. "Meet the gender-defying women of botswana's heavy metal scene," *id Magazine*, 8 February 2017, https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/evx48m/meet-the-gender-defying-women-of-botswanas-heavy-metal-scene. Accessed 11 May 2017.

Barnes, Renee. *Uncovering online commenting culture: Trolls, fanboys and lurkers*. Springer, 2018.

Barthes, Roland. *Elements of semiology*. Macmillan, 1977.

Bauer, Gretchen. "Update on the women's movement in Botswana: have women stopped talking?." *African Studies Review* 54.2 (2011): 23-46.

Bauman, Zygmunt, and David Lyon. *Liquid surveillance: A conversation*. John Wiley & Sons, 2013.

Baym, Nancy K., and Danah Boyd. "Socially mediated publicness: An introduction." *Journal of broadcasting & electronic media* 56.3 (2012): 320-329.

Benhabib, Seyla. *Situating the self: Gender, community, and postmodernism in contemporary ethics*. Psychology Press, 1992.

Bennett, W. Lance, and Alexandra Segerberg. "The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics." *Handbook of digital politics*. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2015. 169-198.

Bevan, Alex. "How to make victory rolls: gender, memory, and the counterarchive in YouTube pinup hair tutorials." *Feminist Media Studies* 17.5 (2017): 755-773.

Berridge, Susan, and Laura Portwood-Stacer. "Introduction: Feminism, hashtags and violence against women and girls." (2015): 341-341.

Billington, Rachel. "Visions and Voices shines a light on representation in art," *Daily Trojan*, 31 January 2020, https://dailytrojan.com/2020/01/31/visions-and-voices-shines-a-light-on-representation-in-art/. Accessed 1 February 2020.

Black, Graham. *Transforming museums in the twenty-first century*. Routledge, 2012.

Bone, Martyn. *Where the New World Is: Literature about the US South at Global Scales*. University of Georgia Press, 2017.

Bosničová, Nina. "Transgressive black female selfhood." (2011): 31-40.

Bouvier, Gwen. "From 'echo chambers' to 'chaos chambers': Discursive coherence and contradiction in the# MeToo Twitter feed." *Critical Discourse Studies* 19.2 (2022): 179-195.

Boyd, Alicia, and Bree McEwan. "Viral paradox: The intersection of "me too" and# MeToo." *New Media & Society* (2022): 14614448221099187.

Boyd, Danah. "Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics, and implications." *A networked self*. Routledge, 2010. 47-66.

Boyd, Danah Michele. *Taken out of context: American teen sociality in networked publics*. University of California, Berkeley, 2008.

Boyd, Danah M., and Nicole B. Ellison. "Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship." *Journal of computer-mediated Communication* 13.1 (2007): 210-230.

Brennan, Ross. "Teaching marketing at university level: A review of recent research." (2012).

Brown, Megan Lindsay, and Hanna Phifer. "The Rise of Belle from Tumblr." *Microcelebrity Around the Globe*. Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018.

Bruns, A. (2009). "From Reader to Writer: Citizen Journalism as News Produsage." In: Hunsinger, J., Klastrup, L., Allen, M. (eds) International Handbook of Internet Research. Springer, Dordrecht.

Bruns, Axel, et al., eds. *The Routledge companion to social media and politics*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

Bruns, Axel & Highfield, Tim (2016) "Is Habermas on Twitter? Social media and the public sphere." In Enli, G, Bruns, A, Larsson, A O, Skogerbo, E, & Christensen, C (Eds.) *The Routledge companion to social media and politics.* Routledge, United States of America, pp. 56-73.

Burbules, Nicholas, and Suzanne Rice. "Dialogue across differences: Continuing the conversation." *Harvard Educational Review* 61.4 (1991): 393-417.

Burgess, Matt. "Iran's Internet Shutdown Hides a Deadly Crackdown." Wired, 23 September 2022, https://www.wired.co.uk/article/iran-protests-2022-internet-shutdown-whatsapp. Accessed 24 September 2022.

Burns, Stuart. "Crafting research from the liminal space." *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 9.3 (2012): 259-273.

Butler, Judith. *Undoing gender*. Routledge, 2004.

Cahan, Susan E. *Mounting frustration: The art museum in the age of black power*. Duke University Press, 2016.

Campbell, Mary Schmidt. "African American art in a post-Black era." *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 17.3 (2007): 317-330.

Carter Olson, Candi. "#BringBackOurGirls: digital communities supporting real-world change and influencing mainstream media agendas." *Feminist Media Studies* 16.5 (2016): 772-787.

Cartwright, Lisa. "Moral spectatorship." *Moral Spectatorship*. Duke University Press, 2008.

Cassidy, Elija. *Gay men, identity and social media: A culture of participatory reluctance*. Routledge, 2018.

Castells, Manuel. *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the Internet age*. John Wiley & Sons, 2015.

Chan, Michael. "Networked counterpublics and discursive contestation in the agonistic public sphere: political jamming a police force Facebook Page." *Asian Journal of Communication* 28.6 (2018): 561-578.

Chouliaraki, Lilie. *The ironic spectator: Solidarity in the age of post-humanitarianism*. John Wiley & Sons, 2013.

Clark, Rosemary. ""Hope in a hashtag": the discursive activism of# WhyIStayed." *Feminist Media Studies* 16.5 (2016): 788-804.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. routledge, 2002.

Collins, Patricia Hill. "No guarantees: Symposium on Black feminist thought." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38.13 (2015): 2349-2354.

Combahee River Collective. 1979. "The Combahee River Collective: A Black Feminist Statement" (1977). In *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, edited by Zillah Eisenstein, 362–372. New York: Monthly Press Review.

Coulson, Jonthon. *The strength of weak ties in online social networks*. University of Missouri-Columbia, 2009.

Coretti, Lorenzo, and Daniele Pica. "The rise and fall of collective identity in networked movements: communication protocols, Facebook, and the anti-Berlusconi protest." *Information, Communication & Society* 18.8 (2015): 951-967.

Crane, Susan. "The Performance of Self." *The Performance of Self*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.

Crenshaw, Kimberley. "Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. The University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989 (1), 139-167." *Chicago, IL* (1989).

Crossley, Alison Dahl. "Facebook feminism: Social media, blogs, and new technologies of contemporary US feminism." *Mobilisation: An International Quarterly* 20.2 (2015): 253-268.

Dahlgren, Peter. "The Internet, public spheres, and political communication: Dispersion and deliberation." *Political communication* 22.2 (2005): 147-162.

Daniels, Jessie. "The trouble with white feminism: Whiteness, digital feminism and the intersectional internet." *Digital Feminism and the Intersectional Internet (February 16, 2015)* (2015).

Das, Veena. "Trauma and testimony: Implications for political community." *Anthropological theory* 3.3 (2003): 293-307.

Davidson, Maria. *Black women, agency, and the new black feminism*. Routledge, 2017.

Davis, Angela Y. *Freedom is a constant struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the foundations of a movement*. Haymarket Books, 2016.

Dawson, Paul. "Hashtag narrative: Emergent storytelling and affective publics in the digital age." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 23.6 (2020): 968-983.

de la Piedra, Benji. "Mounting Frustration: Art Museums in the Age of Black Power. By Susan E. Cahan." (2019).

Deboick, S 2019 "The tunes of Gaborone ... the unlikely heavy metal hub in Botswana," *The New European*, 13 November 2019, accessed online December 2019.

Debre, I. and Akram, F. "Facebook's language gaps weaken screening of hate, terrorism," *Associated Press*,

https://apnews.com/article/the-facebook-papers-language-moderation-problems-392cb2d065f81980713f373
84d07e61f. Accessed 27 October 2021.

Dehghan, S. (2018) "Video of Iran 'morality police' wrestling with woman sparks outrage"

Dejmanee, Tisha, et al. "# MeToo;# HimToo: Popular feminism and hashtag activism in the Kavanaugh hearings." *International Journal of Communication* (2020).

Dernikos, Bessie P. ""Queering"# BlackLivesMatter: Unpredictable intimacies and political affects." *SQS–Suomen Queer-tutkimuksen Seuran lehti* 10.1–2 (2016): 46-56.

Drew, Kimberly. *This is What I Know about Art.* Penguin, 2020.

Drew, Kimberly, and Jenna Wortham. *Black futures.* One World, 2021.

Dubrofsky, Rachel E., and Megan M. Wood. "Posting racism and sexism: Authenticity, agency and self-reflexivity in social media." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 11.3 (2014): 282-287.

Duguay, Stefanie. "Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer visibility through selfies: Comparing platform mediators across Ruby Rose's Instagram and Vine presence." *Social Media+ Society* 2.2 (2016): 2056305116641975.

Duranti, Andrea. "The Green Screen: Neda and the Lost Voices." *International Journal of Communication (19328036)* 7 (2013).

Earl, Jennifer, and Katrina Kimport. *Digitally enabled social change: Activism in the internet age.* Mit Press, 2011.

Eckardt, S. "Meet the Queens of Botswana's Metal Scene," *The Cut*, 15 November 2015, accessed March 2019.

Edelmann, Noella. "Lurking in online participation and e-participation." *2017 Fourth International Conference on eDemocracy & eGovernment (ICEDEG).* IEEE, 2017.

Eickelman, Dale F., and Armando Salvatore. "The public sphere and Muslim identities." *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 43.1 (2002): 92-115.

Eklund, Lina, et al. "Beyond a dichotomous understanding of online anonymity: bridging the macro and micro level." *Sociological research online* 27.2 (2022): 486-503.

El Guindi, Fadwa. "Gendered resistance, feminist veiling, Islamic feminism." *The Ahfad Journal* 22.1 (2005): 53-78.

Ellison, Nicole, and Danah M. Boyd. "Sociality through social network sites." (2013).

Elsheikh, Dalia, and Darren G. Lilleker. "Egypt's feminist counterpublic: The re-invigoration of the post-revolution public sphere." *New Media & Society* 23.1 (2021): 22-38.

Embrick, David G., Simón Weffer, and Silvia Dómínguez. "White sanctuaries: Race and place in art museums." *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* (2019).

Evans, Elizabeth, and Prudence Bussey-Chamberlain. "The problems with feminist nostalgia: Intersectionality and white popular feminism." *European Journal of Women's Studies* 28.3 (2021): 353-368.

Fairclough, Norman. *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. Psychology Press, 2003.

Felski, Rita. *Beyond feminist aesthetics: Feminist literature and social change*. Harvard University Press, 1989.

Fiig, Christina. "A powerful, opinion-forming public? Rethinking the Habermasian public sphere in a perspective of feminist theory and citizenship." *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 12.3 (2011): 291-308.

'Film: Kimberly Drew on becoming an advocate for artists of colour' at MuseumNext, 31 May 2017, accessed online March 2018.

Flew, Terry. "Digital communication, the crisis of trust, and the post-global." *Communication Research and Practice* 5.1 (2019): 4-22.

Florini, Sarah. *Beyond hashtags: Racial politics and black digital networks*. Vol. 19. NYU Press, 2019.

Florini, Sarah. "Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin' Communication and Cultural Performance on "Black Twitter"." *Television & New Media* 15.3 (2014): 223.

Foellmer, Susanne, Margreth Lünenborg, and Christoph Raetzsch, eds. *Media practices, social movements, and performativity: transdisciplinary approaches*. Routledge, 2017.

Foley, Barbara. *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in US Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941*. Duke University Press, 1993.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Vintage, 1977.

Foust, Christina R., Amy Pason, and Kate Zittlow Rogness, eds. *What democracy looks like: The rhetoric of social movements and counterpublics*. University of Alabama Press, 2017.

Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy." *Social text* 25/26 (1990): 56-80.

Friedland, Lewis A., Thomas Hove, and Hernando Rojas. "The networked public sphere." *Javnost-the public* 13.4 (2006): 5-26.

Gallagher, Ryan J., et al. "Reclaiming stigmatised narratives: The networked disclosure landscape of# MeToo." *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 3.CSCW (2019): 1-30.

Gamson, Joshua. "Must identity movements self-destruct? A queer dilemma." *Social problems* 42.3 (1995): 390-407.

Georgy, Michael. "Women students tell Iran's president to 'get lost' as unrest rages," Reuters, 9 October 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iranians-keep-up-heat-leaders-with-protests-strikes-2022-10-08/. Accessed 9 October 2022.

Gerbaudo, Paolo. "Protest avatars as memetic signifiers: political profile pictures and the construction of collective identity on social media in the 2011 protest wave." *Information, Communication & Society* 18.8 (2015): 916-929.

Ghobadi, Parham. "Instagram moderators say Iran offered them bribes to remove accounts," BBC News, 27 May 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-61516126. Accessed 1 June 2022.

Gibbs, Martin, et al. "#Funeral and Instagram: Death, social media, and platform vernacular." *Information, communication & society* 18.3 (2015): 255-268.

Giddens, Anthony. "The emergence of life politics." *Contemporary sociological thought: Themes and perspectives* (2005): 347-356.

Gillespie, Tarleton. "#trendingistrending: When algorithms become culture." *Algorithmic cultures*. Routledge, 2016. 64-87.

Glas, Saskia, and Amy Alexander. "Explaining support for muslim feminism in the Arab Middle East and North Africa." *Gender & Society* 34.3 (2020): 437-466.

Glatt, Zoë, and Sarah Banet-Weiser. "Productive ambivalence, economies of visibility and the political potential of feminist YouTubers." *Creator culture: An introduction to global social media entertainment* (2021): 39-56.

Goffman, Erving. *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Anchor, 2021.

Goredema, Ruvimbo. "African feminism: the African woman's struggle for identity." *African Yearbook of Rhetoric* 1.1 (2010): 33-41.

Grbich, Carol. *New approaches in social research*. Sage, 2004.

große Deters, Fenne, Matthias R. Mehl, and Michael Eid. "Narcissistic power poster? On the relationship between narcissism and status updating activity on Facebook." *Journal of Research in Personality* 53 (2014): 165-174

Gyasi, Yaa. "White people, black authors are not your medicine," *The Guardian*, 20 Mar. 2021.

Habermas, Jurgen. *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. MIT press, 1991.

Hall, Stuart. "The spectacle of the other." *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices* 7 (1997).

Hall, Stuart. "TV as a Medium and its Relation to Culture." (1975).

Haraway, Donna."Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp 149-181.

Harrisberg, Kim. "In Botswana, heavy metal bands' fame and fortune grow online in pandemic," 29 December 2021, Thomson Reuters Foundation, https://news.trust.org/item/20211229015803-lacax/. Accessd online 10 January 2022.

Hartley, John. "What Hope for Open Knowledge? Productive (Armed). Connective (Tribal) Knowledge and Staged Conflict." *Cultural Science Journal* 10.1 (2018): 27-41.

Hauser, Gerard A. *Vernacular voices: The rhetoric of publics and public spheres*. Univ of South Carolina Press, 2022.

Heath, Jennifer, ed. *The veil: Women writers on its history, lore, and politics*. Univ of California Press, 2008.

Heesch, Florian, and Niall Scott, eds. *Heavy Metal, Gender and Sexuality*. Ashgate, 2016.

Hill, Rosemary Lucy. *Gender, metal and the media: Women fans and the gendered experience of music*. Springer, 2016.

Hilsen, Anne Inga, and Tove Helvik. "The construction of self in social medias, such as Facebook." *AI & society* 29.1 (2014): 3-10.

Hochschild, A. R. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983.

Holm, Malin. *The rise of online counterpublics?: the limits of inclusion in a digital age.* Diss. Department of Government, 2019.

Huang, Shuzhen, and Jiyeon Kang. "Counterpublics beyond Western imaginaries." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 108.2 (2022): 221-226.

Huckin, Thomas. "On textual silences, large and small." *Traditions of writing research*. Routledge, 2009. 431-443.

Hui, Sylvia. "Protests and marches worldwide bring together Iranians living abroad," *PBS.org*, 12 October 2022,
https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/protests-and-marches-worldwide-bring-together-iranians-living-abroad Accessed 12 October 2022.

Hurley, Zoe. "#reimagining Arab Women's Social Media Empowerment and the Postdigital Condition." *Social Media+ Society* 7.2 (2021): 20563051211010169.

Hurley, Zoe. "Imagined affordances of Instagram and the fantastical authenticity of female Gulf-Arab social media influencers." *Social Media+ Society* 5.1 (2019): 2056305118819241.

Ikegami, Eiko. "A sociological theory of publics: identity and culture as emergent properties in networks." *Social Research* (2000): 989-1029.

Iyer, Neema. "Alternate realities, alternate internets: African feminist research for a feminist internet." *The Palgrave Handbook of Gendered Violence and Technology*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2021. 93-113.

Jackson, Sarah J. "(Re) imagining intersectional democracy from Black feminism to hashtag activism." *Women's Studies in Communication* 39.4 (2016): 375-379.

Jackson, Sarah J., and Brooke Foucault Welles. "Hijacking# myNYPD: Social media dissent and networked counterpublics." *Journal of communication* 65.6 (2015): 932-952.

Jarmakani, Amira. *Imagining Arab womanhood: the cultural mythology of veils, harems, and belly dancers in the US*. Springer, 2008.

Jenkins, Henry. *Fans, bloggers, and gamers: Exploring participatory culture*. NYU Press, 2006.

Jensen, Sune Qvotrup. "Rethinking subcultural capital." *Young* 14.3 (2006): 257-276.

Jolly, Margaretta. "Introduction: Life writing as intimate publics." *Biography* (2011): v-xi.

Jones, Andrew. "From neoreactionary theory to the alt-right." *Critical Theory and the Humanities in the Age of the Alt-Right*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019. 101-120.

Jungselius, Beata. ""She liked the picture so i think she liked it". Unpacking the social practice of liking." *Netcom. Réseaux, communication et territoires* 33-1/2 (2019): 23-38.

Kahn-Harris, Keith. *Extreme metal: Music and culture on the edge*. Berg, 2006.

Kaiser, Jonas, and Adrian Rauchfleisch. "Integrating concepts of counterpublics into generalised public sphere frameworks: Contemporary transformations in radical forms." *Javnost-The Public* 26.3 (2019): 241-257.

Kalina, Peter. "Performative allyship." *Technium Soc. Sci. J.* 11 (2020): 478.

Kalmbach Phillips, Donna, et al. "Trying on—being in—becoming: Four women's journey (s) in feminist poststructural theory." *Qualitative Inquiry* 15.9 (2009): 1455-1479.

Kanai, Akane, and Caitlin McGrane. "Feminist filter bubbles: ambivalence, vigilance and labour." *Information, Communication & Society* 24.15 (2021): 2307-2322.

Karimi, Sedigheh. "Iranian women's identity and cyberspace: Case study of stealthy freedom." *Journal of Social Science Studies* 2.1 (2015): 221-233.

Kavada, Anastasia, and Thomas Poell. "From counterpublics to contentious publicness: Tracing the temporal, spatial, and material articulations of popular protest through social media." *Communication Theory* 31.2 (2021): 190-208.

Kelly, Bridget Turner, et al. "Hidden in plain sight: Uncovering the emotional labour of Black women students at historically White colleges and universities." *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 14.2 (2021): 203.

Kelty, Christopher. "Geeks, social imaginaries, and recursive publics." *Cultural Anthropology* 20.2 (2005): 185-214.

Kenyon, P. "In Iran Protests, Women Stand Up, Lift Their Hijab, For Their Rights," *NPR,* 3 August 2018, accessed January 2019.

Khalifeh, Mona. "Kim Kardashian, Justin Bieber and More Celebs Speak Out About the Ongoing Protests in Iran," ET Online, 9 October 2022, https://www.etonline.com/kim-kardashian-justin-bieber-and-more-celebs-speak-out-about-the-ongoing-protests-in-iran-191585. Accessed 9 October 2022.

Khamis, Sahar, and Vit Sisler. "The new Arab cyberscape redefining boundaries and reconstructing public spheres." *Annals of the International Communication Association* 34.1 (2010): 277-315.

Khamis, Susie, Lawrence Ang, and Raymond Welling. "Self-branding,'micro-celebrity and the rise of social media influencers." *Celebrity studies* 8.2 (2017): 191-208.

Khazraee, Emad, and Alison N. Novak. "Digitally mediated protest: Social media affordances for collective identity construction." *Social Media+ Society* 4.1 (2018): 2056305118765740.

Khiabany, Gholam, and Milly Williamson. "Veiled bodies—Naked racism: Culture, politics and race in the Sun." *Race & class* 50.2 (2008): 69-88.

Khoja-Moolji, Shenila. "Becoming an "intimate publics": Exploring the affective intensities of hashtag feminism." *Feminist media studies* 15.2 (2015): 347-350.

King, Jr., Martin Luther. "Letter From the Birmingham Jail," 16 April 1963.

http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/060.html

Kingston Mann, Larisa. "What can feminism learn from new media?" *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 11.3 (2014): 293-297.

Knight Steele, Catherine. "When the Black lives that matter are not our own: digital Black feminism and a dialectic of self and community." *Feminist Media Studies* 21.5 (2021): 860-863.

Koo, Gi Yeon. "To be myself and have my stealthy freedom: The Iranian Women's Engagement with social media." *Revista de Estudios Internacionales Mediterráneos* (2016).

Kuo, Rachel. "Racial justice activist hashtags: Counterpublics and discourse circulation." *New Media & Society* 20.2 (2018): 495-514.

Lakkimsetti, Chaitanya, and Vanita Reddy. "#MeToo and Transnational Gender Justice: An Introduction." *Feminist Formations* 33.3 (2021): 224-238.

Larocca, Amy. "The Breakthrough Women of Artist Deborah Roberts," *The Cut*, 9 February 2018, https://www.thecut.com/2018/02/fashion-portfolio-deborah-roberts.html. Accessed March 2019.

Latzko-Toth, Guillaume, Claudine Bonneau, and Melanie Millette. "Small data, thick data: Thickening strategies for trace-based social media research." *The SAGE handbook of social media research methods* (2017): 199-214.

Leadbeater, Charles. "The art of with." *An original essay for Cornerhouse, Manchester http://www. charlesleadbeater. net/cms/xstandard/The% 20Art% 20of% 20With% 20PDF. pdf* (2009).

Lee, Myunghee, and Amanda Murdie. "The Global Diffusion of the# MeToo Movement." *Politics & Gender* 17.4 (2021): 827-855.

Lewis, Desiree. "African feminisms." *Agenda* 16.50 (2001): 4-10.

Lewis, Desiree. "Discursive challenges for African feminisms." *African feminist politics of knowledge: Tensions, challenges, possibilities* (2010): 205-21.

Lewis, Tania, Annette Markham, and Indigo Holcombe-James. "Embracing Liminality and "Staying with the Trouble" on (and off) Screen." *M/C Journal* 24.3 (2021).

Linder, Chris, et al. "A Student Should Have the Privilege of Just Being a Student": Student Activism as Labor." *The Review of Higher Education* 42.5 (2019): 37-62.

Litvin, Boris. ""This Hearing Should Be Flipped": Democratic Spectatorship, Social Media, and the Problem of Demagogic Candour." *American Political Science Review* (2022): 1-15.

Lowenstein-Barkai, Hila. ""Write it down! I am an Arab": The role of reader comments in the formation of networked counterpublics." *New Media & Society* (2022): 14614448221101163.

Loza, Susana. "Hashtag feminism,# SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, and the other# FemFuture." (2014).

Lünenborg, Margreth. "Affective publics." *Affective societies*. Routledge, 2019. 319-329.

Lünenborg, Margreth, and Christoph Raetzsch. "From public sphere to performative publics: Developing media practice as an analytic model." *Media Practices, Social Movements, and Performativity* (2017): 11-35.

Lyshaug, Brenda. "Solidarity without "sisterhood"? Feminism and the ethics of coalition building." *Politics & Gender* 2.1 (2006): 77-100.

Macdonald, Myra. "Muslim women and the veil: Problems of image and voice in media representations." *Feminist Media Studies* 6.1 (2006): 7-23.

Madondo, B. "The hell bangers of Botswana's underground metal scene," *huck*, 9 August 2017, accessed online March 2018.

Mahdi, Ali Akbar. "The Iranian women's movement: A century long struggle." *The Muslim World* 94.4 (2004): 427-448.

Malone, S. and Katz, E. "Iran and the headscarf protests," *Brookings*, 24 January 2019, accessed May 2019.

Marwick, Alice E. "None of this is new (media): Feminisms in the social media age." *The Routledge handbook of contemporary feminism*. Routledge, 2019. 309-332.

Marwick, Alice E. *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age*. Yale University Press, 2013.

Maswabi, Oitshupile Khumo. "Risk Analysis and Countermeasures of Gender-Based Violence in Botswana." *International Journal of Innovation and Economic Development* 4.3 (2018): 60-64.

Matich, Margaret, Rachel Ashman, and Elizabeth Parsons. "Seeking safety and solidarity through self-documentation: Debating the power of the self (ie) in contemporary feminist culture." *The Routledge Companion to Marketing and Feminism*. Routledge, 2022. 388-400.

Matthews, Kristin L. "Woke and reading: Social media, reception, and contemporary Black Feminism." *Participations* 16.1 (2019): 390-411.

McKee, Alan. "Textual analysis." *Media and Communications in Australia*. Allen & Unwin, 2001. 62-71.

McRobbie, Angela. "Post-feminism and popular culture." *Feminist media studies* 4.3 (2004): 255-264.

Megarry, Jessica. *The Limitations of Social Media Feminism: No Space of Our Own*. Springer Nature, 2020.

Mendes, Kaitlynn. *Feminism, Activism and Media*. Leicester: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.Nash, Jennifer C. *Black feminism reimagined: After intersectionality*. Duke University Press, 2018.

Milkman, Ruth. "A new political generation: Millennials and the post-2008 wave of protest." *American Sociological Review* 82.1 (2017): 1-31.

Millen, David R. "Audience maps: Visualising listeners (lurkers) in a shared conversation space." *33rd Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, Maui, Hawaii*. 2000.

Miller, Daniel, and Slater, D. *The Internet: an ethnographic approach*. Routledge, 2020.

Miller, Heather, and Gupta, G. *The Internet*. Harcourt, Incorporated, 2001.

Miller, Niya Pickett, and Gheni N. Platenburg. *Lizzo's black, female, and fat resistance*. Springer Nature, 2021.

Miller, Vincent. "Phatic culture and the status quo: Reconsidering the purpose of social media activism." *Convergence* 23.3 (2017): 251-269.

Moghadam, Valentine M. "Islamic feminism and its discontents: Toward a resolution of the debate." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27.4 (2002): 1135-1171.

Mojab, Shahrzad. "Theorizing the politics of 'Islamic feminism'." *Feminist review* 69.1 (2001): 124-146.

Mortensen, Mette, and Hans-Jörg Trenz. "Media morality and visual icons in the age of social media: Alan Kurdi and the emergence of an impromptu public of moral spectatorship." *Javnost-The Public* 23.4 (2016): 343-362.

Mosime, Sethunya, and Godisang Mookodi. "Women Rights Activists Never Stopped Talking: From Formal Women's Movements to Informal and Fluid Networks Through the Empowerment Discourse in Post-Donor Aid Botswana." *Botswana Notes and Records* 52 (2020).

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema." *Visual and other pleasures*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1989. 14-26.

Munar, Ana Maria. "Digital exhibitionism: The age of exposure." *Culture Unbound* 2.3 (2010): 401-422.

Mundt, Marcia, Karen Ross, and Charla M. Burnett. "Scaling social movements through social media: The case of Black Lives Matter." *Social Media+ Society* 4.4 (2018): 2056305118807911.

Mutua-Mambo, C. Nthemba. "Living in a liminal space: Feminist and LGBT alliances in Kenya." *Women's Studies in Communication* 43.2 (2020): 125-130.

Nakahara, Junki, and Saif Shahin. "All the President's media: how news coverage of sanctions props up the power elite and legitimises US hegemony." *Sanctions as War*. Brill, 2021. 77-90.

Nakamura, Lisa. *Digitising race: Visual cultures of the Internet*. Vol. 23. U of Minnesota Press, 2007.

Nagy, Peter, and Gina Neff. "Imagined affordance: Reconstructing a keyword for communication theory." *Social Media+ Society* 1.2 (2015): 2056305115603385.

Nahon, Karine. "Where there is social media there is politics." *The Routledge companion to social media and politics*. Routledge, 2015. 39-55.

Navarrete, Trilce, and Elena Villaespesa. "Digital Heritage Consumption: The Case of the Metropolitan Museum of Art." magazén 1.2 (2020): 223-248.

Neal, Larry. *The Black arts movement*. New York University. School of the Arts, 1968.

Newsom, Victoria A., and Lara Lengel. "Arab Women, Social Media, and the Arab Spring: Applying the framework of digital reflexivity to analyse gender and online activism." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 13.5 (2012): 31-45.

Nguyen, Minh Hao. "Managing social media use in an "always-on" society: Exploring digital wellbeing strategies that people Use to disconnect." *Mass Communication and Society* 24.6 (2021): 795-817.

Nkomozana, Fidelis. "The experiences of women within Tswana cultural history and its implications for the history of the church in Botswana." (2008).

Nyanzi, Stella. "Dismantling reified African culture through localised homosexualities in Uganda." *Culture, health & sexuality* 15.8 (2013): 952-967.

Olukotun, Oluwatoyin, et al. "An Analysis of Reflections on Researcher Positionality." *Qualitative Report* 26.5 (2021).

O'Riordan, Dr Kate, and David J. Phillips. *Queer online: Media technology and sexuality*. Peter Lang, 2007.

Ott, Kate. "Social media and feminist values: aligned or maligned?" *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 39.1 (2018): 93-111.

Oswaks, Molly. "Kimberly Drew Is a Curator of Black Art and Experiences," *New York Times*, 7 December 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/07/style/kimberly-drew-black-contemporary-art.html. Accessed 20 January 2019.

Papacharissi, Zizi, ed. *A networked self: Identity, community, and culture on social network sites*. Routledge, 2010.

Papacharissi, Zizi. *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

Papacharissi, Zizi. "Democracy online: Civility, politeness, and the democratic potential of online political discussion groups." *New media & society* 6.2 (2004): 259-283.

Papacharissi, Zizi. "The presentation of self in virtual life: Characteristics of personal home pages." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 79.3 (2002): 643-660.

Papacharissi, Zizi. "The virtual sphere: The internet as a public sphere." *New media & society* 4.1 (2002): 9-27.

Papacharissi, Zizi. "Without you, I'm nothing: Performances of the self on Twitter." *International journal of communication* 6 (2012): 18.

Papacharissi, Zizi, and Meggan Taylor Trevey. "Affective publics and windows of opportunity: Social media and the potential for social change." *The Routledge companion to media and activism*. Routledge, 2018. 87-96.

Parsons, Neil. "Unravelling history and cultural heritage in Botswana." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 32.4 (2006): 667-682.

Patton, Michael Quinn. "Two decades of developments in qualitative inquiry: A personal, experiential perspective." *Qualitative social work* 1.3 (2002): 261-283.

Pearson, Roberta. "Fandom in the digital era." *Popular Communication* 8.1 (2010): 84-95.

Peterson-Salahuddin, Chelsea. "Posting Back: Exploring Platformed Black Feminist Communities on Twitter and Instagram." *Social Media+ Society* 8.1 (2022): 20563051211069051.

Petray, Theresa Lynn. "Self-writing a movement and contesting indigeneity: being an aboriginal activist on social media." *Global Media Journal: Australian Edition* 7 (2013): 1-20.

Phillips, Whitney, and Ryan M. Milner. *The ambivalent internet: Mischief, oddity, and antagonism online*. John Wiley & Sons, 2018.

Phipps, Alison. "Me, not you: The trouble with mainstream feminism." *Me, not you*. Manchester University Press, 2020.

Pitcan, Mikaela, Alice E. Marwick, and Danah Boyd. "Performing a vanilla self: Respectability politics, social class, and the digital world." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 23.3 (2018): 163-179.

Poster, Mark. *What's the Matter with the Internet?*. Vol. 3. U of Minnesota Press, 2001.

Quan-Haase, Anabel, et al. "Mapping# MeToo: A synthesis review of digital feminist research across social media platforms." *New Media & Society* 23.6 (2021): 1700-1720.

Radsch, Courtney C., and Sahar Khamis. "In their own voice: Technologically mediated empowerment and transformation among young Arab women." *Feminist media studies* 13.5 (2013): 881-890.

Rahbari, Ladan, et al. "Transnational solidarity with which Muslim women? The case of the my stealthy freedom and World Hijab Day campaigns." *Politics & Gender* 17.1 (2021): 112-135.

Rajabi, Samira. "Living Contingent Lives Online: How Mediations of Trauma Foster Meaning-Making and Articulations of Voice in Digital Spaces." (2017).

Reid, Nova. "Jane Campion's Williams Sisters Dig Could Be A Teachable Moment, Beyond Her Apology," Elle Magazine, 17 March 2022, Https://Www.Elle.Com/Uk/Life-And-Culture/A39452346/Jane-Campion-Williams-Sisters-Comment-Teachable-Moment-Beyond-Apology/. Accessed 18 March 2022.

Reading, Anna. "Mobile witnessing: Ethics and the camera phone in the 'war on terror'." *Globalizations* 6.1 (2009): 15.2 (2015): 341-344.

Renninger, Bryce J. ""Where I can be myself... where I can speak my mind": Networked counterpublics in a polymedia environment." *New media & society* 17.9 (2015): 1513-1529.

Ringrose, Jessica, and Kaitlyn Regehr. "Feminist counterpublics and public feminisms: Advancing a critique of racialised sexualisation in London's public advertising." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 46.1

(2020): 229-257.

Robins, Kevin. "Cyberspace and the world we live in." *Body & Society* 1.3-4 (1995): 135-155.

Rogers, Anna S., and Mathieu Deflem. *Doing Gender in Heavy Metal*. Anthem Press, 2021.

Rodriguez, Jenny K., and Maranda Ridgway. "Intersectional reflexivity: Fieldwork experiences of ethnic minority women researchers." *Gender, Work & Organization* (2023).

Saint-Louis, Elodie A., "Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation," The Harvard Crimson 5 April 2018, https://www.thecrimson.com/column/in-total-darkness/article/2018/4/5/intotaldarkness-graftandash/. Accessed 5 June 2018.

Sale, Maggie. "Call and response as critical method: African-American oral traditions and Beloved." *African American Review* 26.1 (1992): 41-50.

Sarkar, Mahua. "Why Does the West Need to Save Muslim Women?." *Cultural Critique* 95 (2017): 244-262.

Scott, Joan Wallach. "The politics of the veil." *The Politics of the Veil*. Princeton University Press, 2009.

Senft, Theresa M. *Camgirls: Celebrity and community in the age of social networks*. Vol. 4. Peter Lang, 2008.

Senft, Theresa M., and Nancy K. Baym. "What does the selfie say? Investigating a global phenomenon." *International journal of communication* 9.Feature (2015): 1588-1606.

Schuller, Kyla. *The trouble with white women: A counterhistory of feminism*. Bold Type Books, 2021.

Schulte, Stephanie Ricker. "Surfing feminism's online wave: The Internet and the future of feminism." *Feminist Studies* 37.3 (2011): 727-744.

Shirazi, Faegheh. "The Veiling Issue in 20th Century Iran in Fashion and Society, Religion, and Government." *Religions* 10.8 (2019): 461.

Shklovski, Irina, and Bjarki Valtysson. "Secretly political: Civic engagement in online publics in Kazakhstan." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56.3 (2012): 417-433.

Shorey, Samantha. "Fragmentary girls: Selective expression on the Tumblr platform." (2015).

Silverstone, Roger. *Television and everyday life*. Routledge, 2003.

Slaby, Jan, and Christian von Scheve. "Introduction: Affective societies–key concepts." *Affective Societies*. Routledge, 2019. 1-24.

Smucker, Jonathan M. "Political identity paradox." *Beautiful trouble: A toolbox for revolution* (2012): 254-255.

Snelson, Chareen L. "Qualitative and mixed methods social media research: A review of the literature." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 15.1 (2016): 1609406915624574.

Somolu, Oreoluwa. "'Telling our own stories': African women blogging for social change." *Gender & Development* 15.3 (2007): 477-489.

Squires, Catherine R. "Rethinking the black public sphere: An alternative vocabulary for multiple public spheres." *Communication theory* 12.4 (2002): 446-468.

Srnicek, Nick. *Platform capitalism*. John Wiley & Sons, 2017.

Steele, Catherine Knight. "Black Bloggers and Their Varied Publics: The Everyday Politics of Black Discourse Online." *Television & New Media*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2018, pp. 112–27, https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476417709535.

Steele, Catherine Knight. "Digital black feminism." *Digital Black Feminism*. New York University Press, 2021.

Steele, Catherine Knight. "When the Black lives that matter are not our own: digital Black feminism and a dialectic of self and community." *Feminist Media Studies* 21.5 (2021): 860-863.

Stewart, Maya, and Ulrike Schultze. "Producing solidarity in social media activism: The case of My Stealthy Freedom." *Information and organisation* 29.3 (2019): 100251.

Talebian, Hamed, and Sara Talebian. "Women and activism in social media (Case study:"Stealthy Freedom of Women" page in the Facebook)." *Women in Development & Politics* 15.2 (2017): 205-222.

Tafakori, Sara. "Digital feminism beyond nativism and empire: affective territories of recognition and competing claims to suffering in Iranian women's campaigns." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 47.1 (2021): 47-80.

Thomas, K. Bailey. "Intersectionality and epistemic erasure: a caution to decolonial feminism." *Hypatia* 35.3 (2020): 509-523.

Thrift, Samantha C. "# YesAllWomen as feminist meme event." *Feminist media studies* 14.6 (2014): 1090-1092.

Thumim, Nancy. "Self-representation in museums: therapy or democracy?" *Self-Mediation*. Routledge, 2013. 107-120.

Toepfl, Florian, and Eunike Piwoni. "Targeting dominant publics: How counterpublic commenters align their efforts with mainstream news." *New Media & Society* 20.5 (2018): 2011-2027.

Travers, Ann. "Parallel subaltern feminist counterpublics in cyberspace." *Sociological perspectives* 46.2 (2003): 223-237.

Trott, Verity. "Networked feminism: Counterpublics and the intersectional issues of# MeToo." *Feminist Media Studies* 21.7 (2021): 1125-1142.

Tufekci, Zeynep. ""Not this one" social movements, the attention economy, and microcelebrity networked activism." *American behavioural scientist* 57.7 (2013): 848-870.

Turley, Emma, and Jenny Fisher. "Tweeting back while shouting back: Social media and feminist activism." *Feminism & psychology* 28.1 (2018): 128-132.

Vitak, Jessica. "The impact of context collapse and privacy on social network site disclosures." *Journal of broadcasting & electronic media* 56.4 (2012): 451-470.

Walsh, Kevin. *The representation of the past: museums and heritage in the post-modern world*. Routledge, 2002.

Wesch, Michael. "YouTube and you: Experiences of self-awareness in the context collapse of the recording webcam." *Explorations in media ecology* 8.2 (2009): 19-34.

Wichmand, Mette, and Sisse Siggard Jensen. "Small is beautiful-lurkers engaging through micro-contributions." *4th European communication conference*. 2012.

Winkel, Eric A. "Remembering Islam: a critique of Habermas and Foucault." *American Journal of Islam and Society* 6.1 (1989): 13-35.

Zahedi, Ashraf. "Contested meaning of the veil and political ideologies of Iranian regimes." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 3.3 (2007): 75-98.

Zargani, Luisa. "Prada, Theaster Gates Launch Experimental Design Lab," 1 September 2021, https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/prada-theaster-gates-launch-experimental-120014480.html. Accessed 10 October 2021.

Zarkov, Dubravka, and Kathy Davis. "Ambiguities and dilemmas around# Metoo:# forhow long and# whereto?." *European Journal of Women's Studies* 25.1 (2018): 3-9.

Zulli, Diana, and David James Zulli. "Extending the Internet meme: Conceptualising technological mimesis and imitation publics on the TikTok platform." *New Media & Society* 24.8 (2022): 1872-1890.

Filmography

Queens of Botswana. Directed by Sarah Vianney, 2019.

March of the Gods: Botswana Metalheads. Directed by Raffaele Mosca.

Online Sites

Association of Internet Researchers
https://aoir.org/ethics/

Black Contemporary Art
https://blackcontemporaryart.tumblr.com/. Accessed August 2018.

Creative Time
https://creativetime.org/. Accessed September 2019.

The Studio Museum Harlem
https://studiomuseum.org/. Accessed September 2019.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art. 'Welcome to the Met' https://www.metmuseum.org/.
Accessed September 2019.

My Stealthy Freedom.
https://www.mystealthyfreedom.org/.
Accessed November 2018, September 2019, October 2019, January 2022.

Taja Lindley Artist's Website
https://www.tajalindley.com/. Accessed January 2022.

"Iran: Meta must overhaul Persian-language content moderation on Instagram," *accessnow.org*, 9 June 2022.

https://www.artsy.net/artwork/leroy-campbell-clear-path

https://datareportal.com/social-media-users

https://globalvoices.org/2018/01/30/the-girls-of-enghelab-street-protest-irans-compulsory-hijab-laws/ -

accessed online 10 December 2018.

https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/02/18/experts-say-the-new-normal-in-2025-will-be-far-more-tech-driven-presenting-more-big-challenges/

https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/

APPENDIX A: LIST OF FIGURES

APPENDIX B: ETHICS FORM PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Gender Equality 2.0: Understanding the Role of Emerging Online Communications Practices for Women

HREC Approval #ETH17-1769

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

My name is Clarice M. Butkus and I am a student at UTS. My supervisor is Professor Mark Evans, Head of Communications in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is to find out about Gender Equality 2.0: Understanding the Role of Emerging Online Communications Practices for Women

There are new communication practices emerging through web 2.0 technologies that are introducing novel ways for women to tackle issues of gender equality. The emergence of these new communication practices necessitates new models for understanding how these communications address gender equality issues and impact institutional power. By exploring case study examples, broader conclusions can be reached about the nature of tensions between new media and old institutions and how women can best leverage 2.0 toward creating a more equal gender playing field.

Research Questions

1) How have web 2.0 technologies enabled women to create novel communication practices addressed to gender equality?

2) What does this mean for gender equality in 2.0 spaces and institutional power?

WHY HAVE I BEEN ASKED?

You have been invited to participate in this study because of your role in creating a novel communications practice through your social media project that addresses aspects of gender equality. Your contact information was obtained from the contact details you published on the Internet.

IF I SAY YES, WHAT WILL IT INVOLVE?

If you decide to participate, I will invite you to participate in an email dialogue comprised of me sending you questions to respond to, as well as a 1-2 hour semi-structured interview in person that will be audio recorded and transcribed. Your responses will be used and identified with you in the published research.

DO I HAVE TO SAY YES?

Participation in this study is voluntary. It is completely up to you whether or not you decide to take part.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I SAY NO?

If you decide not to participate, it will not affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Technology Sydney. If you wish to withdraw from the study once it has started, you can do so at any time without having to give a reason, by contacting Clarice M. Butkus.

If you decide to leave the research project, we will not collect additional personal information from you, although personal information already collected will be retained to ensure that the results of the research project can be measured properly and to comply with law. You should be aware that data collected up to the time you withdraw will form part of the research project results.

CONFIDENTIALITY

By signing the consent form you consent to the research team collecting and using information about your project for the research. This information will only be used for the purposes of this research project and it will only be disclosed with your permission, except as required by law. We plan to discuss/publish the results across various academic contexts including conferences, journals, online forums and/or books.

WHAT IF I HAVE CONCERNS OR A COMPLAINT?

If you have concerns about the research that you think I or my supervisor can help you with, please feel free to contact me at Clarice.M.Butkus@student.uts.edu.au. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

NOTE:

This study has been approved by the University of Technology Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee [UTS HREC]. If you have any concerns or complaints about any aspect of the conduct of this research, please contact the Ethics Secretariat on ph.: +61 2 9514 2478 or email: Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au], and quote the UTS HREC reference number. Any matter raised will be treated confidentially, investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.

APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM

Gender Equality 2.0: Understanding the Role of Emerging Online Communications Practices for Women

HREC Approval #ETH17-1769

I _____ agree to participate in the research project Gender Equality 2.0: Understanding the Role of Emerging Online Communications Practices for Women HREC Approval #ETH17-1769 being conducted by Clarice M. Butkus.

I have read the Participant Information Sheet or someone has read it to me in a language that I understand.

I understand the purposes, procedures and risks of the research as described in the Participant Information Sheet.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and I am satisfied with the answers I have received.

I freely agree to participate in this research project as described and understand that I am free to withdraw at any time without affecting my relationship with the researchers or the University of Technology Sydney.

I understand that I will be given a signed copy of this document to keep.

I agree to be:

X   Audio recorded

 I agree that the research data gathered from this project may be published in a form that:

X   Identifies me

X   May be used for future research purposes

I am aware that I can contact Clarice M. Butkus if I have any concerns about the research.

_____Name and Signature [participant]

Date

Clarice M. Butkus_____

Name and Signature [researcher or delegate]

Date