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Virtually White: The Crisis of Whiteness, Racial Rule, and Affect in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is situated at the intersection of critical philosophy of race, affect theory, and new media studies. The dominant questions of my research consider what new problems and avenues of thought the digital age and social media open up for the study of race. This focus includes the ways the formation of race adapts to digital forms of sociality, as well as the new kinds of concerns or points of emphasis that may be raised if our analysis of race takes into account the non-local and often extra-national networks enabled by digital communication. In my dissertation, I conceptualize the constitutive factors of the crisis of white hegemony that has taken shape in the digital age. To account for the ways these shifts actually constitute crisis, my project constructs an alternate theoretical framework through which to think race, arguing for the virtuality of race and the affective modes of its proliferation. Using affect theory, my analysis details the ways race operates nonrepresentationally. My project then applies this reading of race to several viral events, memes, and digital performances, both staged and spontaneous to examine the virtual processes through which race is reproduced in the era of the internet. These performances and popular cultural materials that constitute my social media and internet archive not only demonstrate where whiteness is grappling with the terms of Western racial hegemony, but reveal the modes through which racial governance is adapting in the wake of social mediatization to maintain the coherence of its domination.

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It is impossible to disentangle or enumerate all the resonances, energies, and encounters that come together to make a thing possible. We are the sum total of an infinite number of reactions and innovations. This document is no different. While it is impossible to list all the generous and generative moments that brought me to this point, it is pleasing to attempt. So, I offer my gratitude for the people whose influence on this journey stands out in my memory—only some of whom I can name here—and for those unnamable instants, inklings, and forces, sensed but unknown.

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to Chelsea

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INTRODUCTION

“In states that are racially conceived, ordered, administered, and regulated, the racial state could be said to be everywhere. And simultaneously seen nowhere. It (invisibly) defines almost every relation, shapes all but every interaction, contours virtually all intercourse. It fashions not just the said and the sayable, the done and doable, possibilities and impermissibilities, but penetrates equally the scope and quality, content and character of social silences and presumptions. The state in its racial reach and expression is thus at once super-visible in form and force and thoroughly invisible in its osmotic infusion into the everyday, its penetration into common sense, its pervasion (not to mention perversion) of the warp and weave of the social fabric.”

— David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State*¹

“But though without dissent this point be fixed, how is mortal man to account for it? To analyse it, would seem impossible. Can we, then, by the citation of some of those instances wherein this thing of whiteness—though for the time either wholly or in great part stripped of all direct associations calculated to impart to it aught fearful, but nevertheless, is found to exert over us the same sorcery, however modified;—can we thus hope to light upon some chance clue to conduct us to the hidden cause we seek?”

— Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, Chapter XLII “The Whiteness of the Whale”

¹ Goldberg, *The Racial State*, 98.



But though without dissent this point be fixed,



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Can we, then, by the citation of some of those

— emoji translation of Melville in *Emoji Dick*²

The purpose of this dissertation is to analyze the crisis of whiteness as a digitally enabled conjuncture, a moment in the reorganization and negotiation of the terms through which race and whiteness operate.³ The crux of this crisis hinges on the increasingly fervent claim that whiteness

² Benenson, *Emoji Dick: Or The Whale*, 257. "Emoji Dick" is a translation of Herman Mellville's *Moby Dick*, into emoji, the pictographic unicode characters that are available for adding into text messages on smartphone keyboards. The project was initiated by Fred Benenson who employed Amazon's Mechanical Turk program to complete the translation. Through Amazon Mechanical Turk, people volunteered online to translate each sentence into a string of emoji characters, and could also vote up or down on the other participants' translations (they were paid five cents for every translated sentence and every vote). Benenson solicited three translations of every sentence in the novel, from which the anonymous Amazon Mechanical Turk workers chose the best translations. The resultant product was a crowd-sourced, crowd-funded translation of Melville's classic work into the internationally used, pictographic alphabet of the digital age that pushes the limits of comprehensibility without the written text. That is, the emojis do not illustrate the text or represent it directly. Rather they serve as evidence of the dynamic interplay of all the bodies that participated in rewriting the text, capacitated by burgeoning forms of digital sociality.

³ Hall addresses the relationship between crisis and conjuncture in his interview with Doreen Massey. Analyzing the relationship between conjuncture and crisis is only in part about periodization. It is also about tracking the way a turning point is reached in the conditions of power. "A conjuncture is a period during which the different social, political, economic and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come together to give it a specific and distinctive shape... As I see it, history moves from one conjuncture to another rather than being an evolutionary flow. And what drives it forward is usually a crisis, when the contradictions that are always at play in any historical moment are condensed, or, as Althusser said, 'fuse in a ruptural unity'. Crises are moments of potential change, but the nature of their resolution is not given." Hall and Massey, "Interpreting the Crisis," 57.

itself is under attack and that within a hierarchy of race, whiteness finds itself more and more often the victim of racial violence. This is indeed a challenging new position for whiteness to claim because, following the work of Barnor Hesse, whiteness is the force which produces and organizes racial hierarchy for the purpose of securing its own supremacy. The crisis posed by this claim, what I term a *discourse of decline*, concerns the very possibility of the future organization of modern life according to the principles of the modern—or, the organization of modern life under the formation of power I conceptualize as *colonial ontopower*. As I will elaborate further, the concept of ontopower was first articulated by Brian Massumi as a power of becoming, an ontogenetic force that establishes the conditions for its own future emergence, operationalizing the affective resonances to be generated by bodies to ensure those bodies affirmatively augment the structure of power itself.⁴ I articulate the concept of colonial ontopower to name the virtual forces of becoming that catalyze the emergence and reemergence of race in modern encounters between bodies. Without an account of race and whiteness that is built from an account of affect and the virtual, the crisis whiteness is undergoing and the processes by which it is inventing new strategies to sustain itself remain invisible to the analytic resources of critical race and whiteness studies. This dissertation takes race and whiteness to be priming relations, events that must be made to unfold in the effects bodies enact and have enacted upon them. They are priming in that each habituating event of race creates the conditions of possibility for the future extension or actualization of another event of racial relation. That is, race and whiteness work ontopowerfully, priming and potentializing their own future becoming. To reread a portion of David Theo Goldberg's conception of the racial state in my own terms, my dissertation invoked the term

⁴ Massumi, *Ontopower*.

colonial ontopower to describe the organization of forces that “fashions not just the said and the sayable, the done and doable, possibilities and impermissibilities, but penetrates equally the scope and quality, content and character of social silences and presumptions” to produce whiteness.⁵ The current crisis of whiteness is generated by an ambivalence expressed towards whiteness’s proscriptive power and therefore, the terms upon which it is capable of assuming its own future. Moreover, my research demonstrates that whiteness as priming, proscriptive, and preemptive finds a particularly compatible resource in the predictive but nonlocal affective swells of the internet. I argue that the current crisis of whiteness is intensified through the internet and digital media temporalities concatenating the asynchronous encounters through which the problematic claims of whiteness’s supposed decline can be alchemized into increased, and increasingly diffuse power.

In order to construct this analysis, my dissertation engages a triply interdisciplinary method between critical race and whiteness studies, affect theory, and new media studies. Although there has been work to put these subjects in conversation two at a time, I argue that it is only in their tripartite invocation that something like a crisis of whiteness in the digital age comes into focus. The crisis is articulated and felt in the digital sphere. Whether or not all of the effects associated with the crisis register in the individual experiences of internet users offline (in increased discrimination or negative bias), their intense circulation online make them available to be felt by any internet user participating in the spread and resonance of the discourse of decline. Digital technology decreases the friction between bodies, heightening the transfer of states of activation, and establishing resonance on a global scale that exceeds the individual body. My dissertation therefore uses the digital as the site within which to illuminate relations, activations, and moments

⁵ Goldberg, *The Racial State*, 98.

of participation in whiteness that form a corpus of non-representational activity. I explore several viral memes on social media platforms Twitter and 4chan, sites of aesthetic production on Tumblr, and digital performances hosted on independent websites that all gain critical momentum through the digital, occasionally erupting into the analog world, but which are characterized for the virtual relations they effect. I explore all of these events or moments of production through the analytic frame that reads the current crisis of whiteness to be an upheaval in the capacity of whiteness to assert itself into the future as a function of colonial ontopower, but a crisis that is nevertheless attempting resolution in expanding the affective horizon of whiteness to negotiate the discourse of decline. In what follows, I will review the conversations around race and affect and race and the digital into which my dissertation intervenes, and demonstrate how my research weaves together an interdisciplinary critique of whiteness in the digital age in order to stage my critical analysis.

RACE & AFFECT

In this dissertation, I reread the concept of race through affect to address a central unresolved problem in the definition of race that gets repeated and picked up in both affect studies and new media studies through their treatments of race. The conflict lay in the dominance of studies which figure race as an object as opposed to arguments that take race as a relation. The opposition between race as object and race as relation maps onto the opposition between theories of race as a social construction and critiques of the social constructionist point of view. The central problem is that social constructivist accounts of race assert its socially constructedness in order to reject any association of race with biology or science, and yet they rely heavily on biological markers to make sense of race. Barnor Hesse addresses this contradiction in his analysis of Omi and Winant's widely cited definition of race. He points out that the various strains of

race/modernity studies overwhelmingly “invoke some visual form of corporeality, while insisting on an analytical disassociation between the category race and the corporeal schema.”⁶ The biological basis of race has been rejected as false science in favor of a nominal insistence on a social constructivist argument, without a real excision of biological referents. Or as Walter Benn Michaels has observed, “treating race as a social fact amounts to nothing more than acknowledging that we were mistaken to think of it as a biological fact and then insisting that we ought to keep making the mistake.”⁷ In the social constructivist argument, race shouldn’t be biological, although it is.

Against this argument is the assertion that race is a relation of the modern organization of power. The event of race is characterized by its being a negotiation of relation. It is effectuated in the encounter between bodies. On this point Ann Stoler suggests that “if dominance and subalternity are ‘not inherent but relational characterizations,’ as Fernando Coronil helpfully argues, then historians of the colonial should not seek to describe a historical landscape of fixed identities, but one inhabited by a range of persons whose changing subjectivities respond to relations of power only partially of their making.”⁸ Stoler, Weheliye, Hesse, and many other theorists of race have insisted on the relational nature of race.⁹ However, I argue that the meaning of relation itself has been underdeveloped in critical race literature. As a foundational interdisciplinary reading, I draw from affect theory in order to articulate how relation works in the expression of modern colonial power that is race.

⁶ Hesse, “Racialized Modernity,” 645.

⁷ Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity*, 39.

⁸ Stoler, “Matters of Intimacy as Matters of State,” 895.

⁹ Coronil, “Listening to the Subaltern”; Hesse, “Symptomatically Black”; Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*; Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*; Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*.

First, affect is the capacity to affect and be affected by another body (not just another human body). And affect also references the resonances of an encounter when two bodies meet and act upon one another. Affect is fundamentally relational as Seigworth and Gregg note, “Affect arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon.”¹⁰ Affect marks a body’s belonging to the world. It might be something you feel, something that presses on you, but it is what hovers as the medium of a relation or the product of an interaction. Most pertinently to this study, affect has to do with what a body will do next, its increased or decreased ability to act in the future, having been influenced by other bodies. On a large scale, it had to do with how the collectivity of bodies that make up a field of co-producing potentialities could be directed to extend some of those possibilities, actualizing some intensities and not others. Affect captures the way we find ourselves in the world already in motion, embedded with a swirl of other bodies, all rotating on their axes while twirling in their orbits. In the reciprocal relationship affect invokes, it references a field of bodies coming to be in relation, coming in and out of alignment, like planets aligning and being aligned. Seigworth and Gregg offered:

Affect is an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation *as well as* the passage (and the duration of passage) of forces or intensities. That is, affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, *and* in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances

¹⁰ Gregg, *The Affect Theory Reader.*, 1.

themselves. Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces--visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion--that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability. Indeed, affect is persistent proof of a body's never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world's obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations."¹¹

The incorporation of affect theory into an account of race allows for a fundamental rereading of the implications of race understood as a relation. In dominant accounts, the idea of race as an object is evident in the conceptualization of race as identity, as something that belongs to us and inheres to our bodies corporeally. In my analysis, I offer that we think 'relation' as *relating*, in the gerund, to avoid the ossification that comes from thinking it in the noun form as 'relationship.' A relationship exists between two things. However, affect theory orients us to the notion that something emerges as and through the making-relate, the relate-tion or *relating*, of bodies that are actively being impacted by the relating they are doing.

In the absence of a robust account of relation, such as I argue is to be gleaned from affect theory, even those theories that otherwise describe the operation of race in highly affective terms may return to the former tropes that rely on the biological to define race. Take, for example, David

¹¹ Gregg, 1.

Theo Goldberg's deeply resonant description of the processual nature of racial rule, here invoked as 'racial order:'

Racial order imprisons modern subjects under the control of classifying schemas always delimiting of possibilities. It thus splits selves and subjects between the 'can' and 'ought,' between possibility and impossibility, requirement and liberty. But in this, the tension between racial naturalism and historicism perfectly represents the ambivalence of broader modern tensions, exacerbated by the order of race: between determinism and freedom structure and indeterminacy, form and formlessness, the before of history and its end. The ordering of the state accordingly by, in, and through race is at once representative of modernity more generally as race serves centrally to define and refine the modern condition.¹²

His description here evokes the emergence of intensities, or the open potential of affect, into habituated extensions that reproduce structure from indeterminacy. Race might be read here, as I propose it should be, to mean that limiting or modulating event that determines how a body should resonate with other bodies, conditionally and conditioned, deny all the other possibilities it may have to act and be acted within the field of bodies that comprise the encounter. And yet, shortly after this description, Goldberg suggests that race is "the social or cultural significance assigned

¹² Goldberg, *The Racial State*, 95–95.

to or assumed in physical or biological markers of human beings, including the presumed physical or physiognomic markers of cultural attributes, habits, or behavior.”¹³

On the other hand, without an analysis of relation, the question of race often returns to one of individualized subjectivity—the scale at which race is claimed to be mere epistemological fallacy or error, that causes individuals to act in a senseless, racist way. The respective categories of the European and non-European, or white and non-white are said to be made in opposition to one another. They are conceptualized, almost in a Schmidtian sense as enemies, opposites whose thingness comes into being against something else. But in this move, the processual nature of relation is lost. The fact of their opposition appears in the theory as a status, not an event. And once the categories become, they *are*, and then people *are*, as and according to the opposed categories. Within whiteness studies, the challenge brought to this point is often that which subjectivities belong to the category of white is has changed. Think of classic debates on the boundaries of whiteness, and the expansion of the category of whiteness to include the Irish. In Noel Ignatiev’s telling, their entry to the category of white came from the turn against the category of black as its enemy.¹⁴ What is assumed in this account is that whiteness is a state of being to which the Irish could ascend; not that whiteness was a way of relating to other bodies such that they emerged as black that the Irish iteratively and unevenly enacted in race events over a protracted period of time. To re-narrate this transformation in terms of my own analysis, as the Irish began shifting the horizon of the relations they were capable of—developing the capacity to resist, attach, and denigrate their formerly fellow colonized workers repositioning them as

¹³ Goldberg, 118.

¹⁴ Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*.

competition, and developing affinities to those elites and heads of state who directly benefitted from their exploitation under English Penal law and its global effects—they emerged as unthreatening and non-disruptive to the rule of whiteness. And that this was done with enough regularity that other than the signifying structure of state authority eventually expanded not to distinguish Irish from white, points to the development of a process of relation that continued to be enacted.¹⁵ The Irish did not merely become white—they were capacitated to becoming white and continue/d becoming as white in those relations that allowed for it. It was across the event of relating, properly effectuated, and only resonating at a certain frequency (ally with former enemies; enemy with former allies) that the Irish body emerged from each event relating as white.

Read through this lens, my project counters articulations of race which do not account for its relational and processual nature, rooted in affect, toward the determination of bodily capacity. I therefore offer a rearticulation of race *as the modulation or modulating of a body's affective horizon according to colonial taxonomy*. Or, race is the designation of relative potential, ascribed through the taxonomic determination of colonial administration. By “affective horizon” I refer to the limitations or proscriptions imposed on a body’s capacity to affect or be affected. Flatley and Anderson both develop the notion of affective atmosphere which indicates the priming situation in which encounters happen in the world—the conditions of an encounter which emerge from the realization of certain potentials rather than others. However, my notion of affective horizon points to the mechanism by which race attempts to curb or determine a body’s perception of the affective atmosphere itself. Horizon constructs something out of atmosphere; it invents a virtual division

¹⁵ Although the habituations that positioned the Irish as threatening or as productive of feelings of disgust continued to structure their emergence as not-capable-of-whiteness in certain instances, like job discrimination lasting into the 20th century.

which may never be grasped, but which instantiates itself as an object of orientation. I use horizon to denote its function as both a limit and a tool that attempts to impose order on feeling, relation, and bodily resonance. The horizon has long been the symbol of aspirations for control, as Hito Steyerl notes, contextualizing the notion of horizon in the West, “The use of the horizon to calculate position gave seafarers a sense of orientation, thus also enabling colonialism and the spread of a capitalist global market, but also became an important tool for the construction of the optical paradigms that came to define modernity, the most important paradigm being that of so-called linear perspective.”

ON NONREPRESENTATIONAL METHOD

Rethinking race through affect amounts to an intervention in the methodology of critiquing race, as it emphasizes the contingent, processual, and ad hoc operation of race as it emerges through the modern period. This analytic move also responds to a charge articulated by W.E.B. Du Bois, arguably the most influential thinker on race of the 20th century. In *Dusk of Dawn* published in 1940, Du Bois was reflecting back on his early work, noting that at the start of his career he and others had “spoken of ‘race’ and race problems quite as a matter of course without explanation or definition. That was our method in the nineteenth century.”¹⁶ By not fully interrogating the depth of the significance of relation, and therefore affect, virtuality, and nonrepresentational modes in our analysis of race, we leave the door open for race to be taken up, as it often is in dominant analyses as self-evident, visible, and “a matter of course.”

¹⁶ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn an Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, 100.

I employ affect and nonrepresentational theory to account what Arun Saldanha calls “race’s virtuality”¹⁷—its habituated but not contingent emergence in the manufacture of power. Race, to paraphrase David Theo Goldberg, is what ought to emerge in the interaction between two bodies within a frame of colonial power. Yet as Massumi notes, in every encounter, “it is clear that the identity of the event’s elements cannot predate their integration. What the object will definitely have been, and what precisely will have been role of the subjects, is clear only in retrospect after each integration.”¹⁸ Race is not guaranteed to be done because race itself is a relation, a mode of relating, that must be effectuated as the future outcome of a present interaction. Nonrepresentational theory offers an explanation of how the conditional, but as yet virtual, outcome of an encounter can be made to emerge, and through the iterative emergence, can be made to habituate structure. Thrift explains the way nonrepresentation theory accounts for the emergence of structure from virtuality that retains the fluidity of its virtual emergence as practice:

“Non-representational theory concentrates, therefore, on *practices*, understood as material bodies of work or styles that have gained enough stability over time, through, for example, the establishment of corporeal routines and specialized devices, to reproduce themselves. In particular, these bodies’ stability is a result of schooling in these practices, of each actor holding the others to them, and of the brute ‘natural’ fact that the default is to continue on in most situations. These material bodies are continually being

¹⁷ Saldanha, *Psychedelic White Goa Trance and the Viscosity of Race*, 199.

¹⁸ Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 31.

rewritten as unusual circumstances arise, and new bodies are continually making an entrance but, if we are looking for something that approximates to a stable feature of a world that is continually in meltdown, that is continually bringing forth new hybrids, then I take the practice to be it. Practices are productive concatenations that have been constructed out of all manner of resources and which provide the basic intelligibility of the world: they are not therefore the properties of actors but of the practices themselves. Actions presuppose practices and not vice versa.”¹⁹

In Thrift’s description we may clarify how the concept of race is nonrepresentational in nature, noting that the practice that is race—a particular way of modulating relations that determine bodily capacity (or reinforce habituations at random intervals)—functions virtually, preceding, alongside, and far exceeding whatever material properties we have come to associate with race (like skin color, physiognomy, culture, religion, etc). Whatever materiality race is attributed accretes in the patterns narrated into its repetition. However, this materiality misconstrues its regularity, or the regularizing effect race is meant to achieve. As Goldberg notes race emerges as a resolution of sorts to the indeterminacy of modern power, “Race appears in this scheme of things as a mode of crisis management and containment, as a mode mediating that tension, of managing manufactured threats, and of curtailing while alienating the challenge of the unknown.”²⁰ Another name for the

¹⁹ Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory*, 8.

²⁰ Goldberg, *The Racial State*, 40.

modulatory power that I am arguing forms the nonrepresentational scaffold for the doings of race is *colonial ontopower*.

WHITENESS AND COLONIAL ONTOPOWER

Ontopower is the concept, developed by Brian Massumi, that accounts for the structures of power built from and running on the modulation of affect. “Ontopower is not a negative power, a power-over. It is a power-to: a power to incite and orient emergence that insinuates itself into the powers of the world where life is just stirring, on the verge of being what it will become, as yet barely there.”²¹ Ontopower is fundamentally future oriented. Through its preemptive structure, ontopower is ontogenetic—it is productive of its own future conditions of becoming. Massumi develops the concept of ontopower to describe what he identifies as new recombinations of modern power asserted through innovative tactics of security and warfare. He identifies that instead of depending solely on force, the West invokes questions relating to preemption with increasing regularity. However, I think to mine the real significance of the concept of ontopower, the meaning of ‘modern’ necessarily goes much deeper than Massumi accounts for. In my analysis, I contend that modern should be read as the modern colonial, following from the way that Barnor Hesse elaborates modernity as being the constitutive period for the constitution of colonial power.²² Further, I read ontopower as the foundational strategy that gives rise to and sustains the West—the network of power that collectively benefits from European colonial exploitation, despite certain

²¹ Massumi, *Ontopower*, vii–viii.

²² Hesse, “Racialized Modernity.”

moments of competition for larger portions of that profit.²³ Thus, I conceptualize colonial ontopower as the engine of process that generates the West in all its forms, contending that the period of modernity has served as the lab, the test site for the experimentation and invention of new modes of interlocking social, political, and economic control established through the foundation obsession with a regimentation of sensation, feeling, and relations of bodily capacity.

Race has developed as one extremely effective practice in the elaboration of colonial ontopower. As part of the resignifying moves at this stage of colonial ontopower's development, race has been routinely narrated out of its colonial origins. This is why Barnor Hesse insists, reinvoking Oliver C. Cox's demand, on regrounding the concept of race in a colonial history as opposed to how other theorists think of race as a permanent and naturally occurring kind of human difference.²⁴ Otherwise, if not properly historicized, the idea of race as a neutral social difference theory has two mutually fortifying outcomes. The first is the increased difficulty of reading race as an event or function that comes out of a historically specific project—that of European colonialism. It functions to legitimize the narrative that race is natural and even if its naturalness cannot quite be proven, its objective reality, its thingness, the understanding of it as property and our investment in it is nevertheless secured. But perhaps more insidiously as I will argue is the way that the utter detail and robustness of the apparatus of race draws attention away from any broader critique to be made of colonial ontopower, the process or function race works in iterative but contingent service of. As Cox warned, “racial exploitation” is not the full extent of “racial

²³ This is the way Du Bois describes the cohesiveness of the colonial project and pursuit of European empire despite conflicts like World War I, pointing out that these fights were primarily about an intra-European competition for global resources. Du Bois, *Darkwater Voices from Within the Veil*, 26.

²⁴ Hesse, “Racism's Alterity.”

antagonism.”²⁵ My work illuminates this analytic blindspot offering a rethinking of the relationship between colonial ontopower and race, adding a third concept for rethinking to this trinity: whiteness.

Colonial ontopower rests on the capacity to maintain the distinction of the European and non-European—reflexively drawing authority from that distinguishing action. As that distinction then validates designation of bodies, it builds momentum towards governing. To draw on Hesse, in the proliferation of this power function I am calling colonial ontopower, the categories of European and non-European become transmuted as the non-local abstraction of white and non-white.²⁶ Where the European/non-European distinction carries with it a certain attachment to local origin, the white/non-white distinction reflects that the power source determining the existence and imposition of this power functions globally. The categories of white and non-white in their oppositional existence signify the distinguishing, designating action from which colonial authority is derived. White and non-white are necessarily both the products of and the components of a properly functioning colonial ontopower. One may think of this in the way that a battery only works with both positive and negative charges, localizing the charged resources that go in to electrification. Once these charged poles are located within the battery, it becomes portable, capable of powering anything (of the right size) by the presence and maintenance of its foundational polarity. The abstraction of the function of opposing European and non-European into white and non-white both indicates a major development in the structure, plasticity, and therefore strength of colonial ontopower—indicating a level of control in the abstract that it had not

²⁵ Cox, *Caste, Class, & Race; a Study in Social Dynamics*, 334.

²⁶ Hesse, “Racism’s Alterity.”

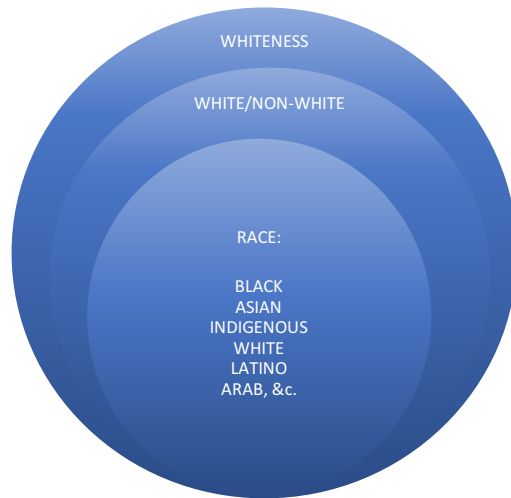
previously enjoyed—and provides another opportunity for the mystification of the signifying narrative.

Whiteness muddies the waters, so to speak. This is because, my analysis contends, whiteness operates with a level of seeming autonomy that contradicts the materiality and inertness ascribed to race in dominant accounts. It would seem that with whiteness being designated as a racial category, race might “comprise a designated ‘sphere of objects’,” when “it is rather a ‘public relationship between people’ capable of irrupting into the friend/enemy distinction, ‘from any sphere of human life.’”²⁷ Here, Hesse is speaking specifically about the concept of ‘the political,’ however, I would argue the ontopowerfully structuring force of whiteness is another interpretation of the political, “where the political is associated with the spatial embodiment of the regulatory state.”²⁸ However, as I read whiteness within the genealogy and development of colonial ontopower, whiteness names the capacious operations of modulating bodily capacity in order to properly produce the colonial distinction of white/non-white. Whiteness conceptually in-folds the goal of colonial ontopower—its perpetual capacitation—with its self-verifying product—the distinction of white/non-white. Whiteness is the *doing*, the agent of activity that retroactively affirms the operation of colonial ontopower. And in affirming the operation of ontopower whiteness also affirms its future capacity for emergence since ontopower describes power that is oriented towards establishing the future conditions of its possibility. Whiteness signals and names the stage of ontogenetic unity of colonial power that makes sense of all the actions taken thus far in its elaboration and all-but-assumes their future repeatable emergence through a forceful set of modes of attunement, habituation, attachment, activation, propulsion, momentum, and coercion.

²⁷ Hesse, “Symptomatically Black,” 11.

²⁸ Hesse, 11.

Thus, my analysis offers the intervention of rereading the relationship between the colonial, the racial, and whiteness. I contend that whiteness, as the doing of colonial ontopower, is not limited to the doing of race, and in fact, race is a particular strategy among others of *doing whiteness*, by which I mean animating the distinction between white/non-white, formerly European/non-European. Race in my analysis concerns those events of elaborating colonial ontopower in which the relation of the non-white may be specified through a colonial taxonomy—when the relation that emerges from the event can be said to be something more specific than white/non-white. Race happens when the product of the modulation of the capacity to affect and be affected by another body can also be discretely named, reproducing the designating-distinction between white and a particular non-white racial category, like, black, Asian, mestizo, multiracial, Hispanic, Latino, Arab, etc. Race has happened when the outcome of the modulation produces the performance of bodily capacity according to the signifying structures which have deemed certain capacities the properties of a specific racial category—these potentials are just as arbitrarily and contingently assigned as the categories of race themselves. As I will explore in the second chapter, race is the initial focus of Du Bois's critique, but across his career his critical attention expands to whiteness as a broader formation than race. I argue this can be traced in the development of his thinking from *Souls of Black Folk* culminating in his autobiographic treatment of the race concept in *Dusk of Dawn*.



What works to occlude the structure of colonial ontopower is the fact that whiteness, producing racial categories according to the needs of its ontopowerful production and future, establishes a racial category called “white.” In the same way that race functions to hide the naturalizing claims made by colonial ontopower that help it evade contestation, the racial category of white becomes imbued with the weighty materiality meant to be ascribed to racial categories that allows them to be taken up as identities. This recursive naming has been extremely effective at giving the impression that the locus of colonial ontopower sits within whichever people happen to become anointed with the designation of white. Indeed, where affect theory has been applied to the question of whiteness, the ground for such an analysis remains the empirical whiteness of the white people from whom certain behaviors or biases are drawn.²⁹ Race is tacitly reified as a biological concept that is verified by its physical appearance.

²⁹ Zembylas, “Rethinking Race and Racism as Technologies of Affect”; Tolia-Kelly et al., *Heritage, Affect and Emotion*; Andreassen and Vitus, *Affectivity and Race*; Hook, “‘Pre-discursive’ Racism.”

The conflation of whiteness with “white people” camouflages the autonomy that whiteness as a relation enjoys. That is, whiteness may be done by bodies that emerge as any race, or by bodies without a particular race. As Seigworth and Gregg describe, affect is “a palimpsest of force-encounters traversing the ebbs and swells of intensities that pass between ‘bodies’ (bodies defined not by an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect).”³⁰ This conflation of whiteness and white people hides the doubled nature of whiteness as a relation that both proliferates and structures future relations, or the possibilities for relations. Moreover, it misses the scale of colonial power which is not restricted to the scale of human life. It is not simply through the human body that relations of colonial ontopower or whiteness are realized. Rather I argue, the relations of whiteness comprise a constantly overlapping, co-forming, and entangled set of events which in their diffuse asynchronicity over-fill the present with a number of coterminous, if not competing, events of whiteness through which our bodies are constantly emerging. An over-full present primes for a determinable future, and although that future elaboration is not guaranteed, the ontopowerful spread of whiteness’s emergent events ensures, I contend, that by now most of us are doing whiteness most of the time. Whiteness conditions being in the modern world. Whiteness is oriented towards determining the conditions of being of the modern world. It seeks to secure the conditions of *becoming* for the continuation of modernity.

Whiteness gains its autonomy from the autonomy of affect—the undeterminable relation that will arise in an encounter.³¹ For those who write on the manipulation of affect as a strategy for

³⁰ Gregg, *The Affect Theory Reader*, 2.

³¹ Shouse, “Feeling, Emotion, Affect.”

establishing and maintaining power, like Massumi, Anderson, Protevi, the autonomy of affect is the site of political contestation.³² The autonomy of affect is the element power seeks to control and discipline. Their analyses have demonstrated that although an affective resonance cannot be absolutely determined before it unfolds, it can be primed. To the extent that affect is pre-social, meaning that it is not something society invents, but exists as the potential embedded in one moment to extend into another moment, the human body is very easily primed into and out of certain sensations.³³

³² Anderson, *Encountering Affect*; Massumi, “Perception Attack”; Massumi, “Fear (The Spectrum Said)”; Protevi, *Political Affect*. Protevi has a particularly compelling articulation of this in his term the “bodies politic” which is supposed to suggest a kind of interaction that goes even beyond subjectivity, and to me works well as a description of digital life, or being “plugged in.” Describing the aim of his work he writes, “In the most general terms, this book investigates the imbrication of the social and the somatic: how our bodies, minds, and social settings are intricately and intimately linked... I call this perspective ‘political physiology’ to indicate not only this mix of intellectual resources but also in order to indicate that subjectivity is sometimes bypassed in favor of a direct linkage of the social and the somatic.” (Protevi, xi)

³³ For example, it cannot be guaranteed that if given balloons, a child will be delighted by them. Balloons hold no inherent happiness-inducing charge. A child could just as easily feel disgust towards balloons, or fear. The affective event is the feeling or sensation produced in the encounter between the child and the balloons. The outcome of this event is fundamentally unknowable. One does not yet know what a body will do. However, should this encounter happen within a situation which primes an imperative that the child *should* feel happiness upon receiving balloons, if it is habituated that balloons themselves represent a previous happy event, and that the normative function of balloons is to heighten and validate the happiness of the event, a child may be primed to develop a certain attachment to balloons such that a sensation of happiness is generated in any kind of encounter with balloons—seeing them given to someone else, perhaps. Of course, a central part of this situation is the omission of others of the balloon’s conditions of emergence—like the exploitation of natural resources, the threat they pose to wildlife, or their potentially toxic composition, which would merit a feeling of suspicion in one’s encounter with them. The point of this thought experiment is not to debate the merits of balloon phobia or philia. Rather it is meant to illustrate that while affect is autonomous from the objects in relation to which it may be generated, which is to say, not predetermined, affective activation, sensation, feeling, or its potential may be primed, habituated, cultivated, or depressed under the right conditions.

Ontopower is the development of these conditions. Colonial ontopower names the relational mechanisms, priming forces, and future conditions of attunement which give rise to and secure a future as whiteness. If this feels at first like a tautology, it is important to note that ontopower is interested in augmenting power for itself. Ontopower describes the hegemonic production of power which is self-referential, recursively self-actualizing.³⁴ For clarity's sake, we may strategically invoke some of the other names colonial ontopower has developed in its self-naming agency, like "the West." However, it is important to keep in mind that these names are sometimes deceptive and occlusive. As Robert Gooding-Williams reminds us the "supranational regime of European global domination...has not been reducible to the sum of its state-sponsored colonialist and imperialist parts."³⁵ We may also note that this is what is meant by coloniality. Coloniality as a concept attempts to name the self-authorizing, self-actualizing continuity of power that generates its own conditions of power, as it also supplies the narratives by which it constructs a cohesive image and genealogy for itself, despite historically undergoing constant rupture, crisis, and resistance.³⁶ Although I use the term coloniality in my analysis, I develop the concept of colonial ontopower in order to not put too much attention on the narrative function of colonial governance. Narrative reconciles the past.³⁷ While this is a necessary function for creating a blueprint to inform how the future will or should happen, narrative in itself is not the enabling condition for the future. The colonial is oriented towards the future edge of emergence, but that

³⁴ Massumi, *Ontopower*, 215–16.

³⁵ Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois Afro-Modern Political Thought in America*, 3.

³⁶ Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/ Rationality."

³⁷ I mean reconcile here in the way it is used in financial accounting—to resolve discrepancies.

future will emerge from the more-than-narrated field of activity that is the present. Ontopower seeks to control what will emerge.

RETHINKING TRADITIONAL TERMS OF ANALYSIS

My dissertation, in constructing an account of colonial ontopower and tracing the crisis of whiteness rethinks several concepts that have been central to traditional analyses of race and whiteness. As I position the doing of race as just one codified mode of doing whiteness, I argue for an orientation towards more kinds of bodies to locate the doing of whiteness. This means in part reassessing non-human bodies as part of the affective analysis. Some examples of this can be found in the work in the field of geography and nonrepresentational theory.³⁸ More than this, my analysis calls for a reassessment of the durability of racial categories. I argue that attachment to a reproduction of relations that reify racial categories or insist on their material force is an example of doing whiteness. This means acting upon a preexisting determination of one's capacity to affect and be affected. Race is the outcome when the bodies in an encounter emerge according to the capacities ascribed to their colonial taxonomy—one's assumed Asian-ness or Blackness does not necessarily interfere with one's capacity to do whiteness.

Similarly to the idea Austin details of a happy performative, race is either done or not done.³⁹ From reading race through this lens, I argue that the analysis of whiteness has focused too narrowly on racism. In my theorization, the charge of racism must be reconceptualized as an event of race that produces negative feelings. The charge or identification of racism is an assessment of

³⁸ Saldanha, "Skin, Affect, Aggregation"; Nayak, "Race, Affect, and Emotion"; Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory*; Harrison and Anderson, *Taking-Place*.

³⁹ Austin and Urmson, *How to Do Things with Words*.

the qualitative properties or effects of an event of race. Detailing the emergence of racism as concept and objection, Hesse notes that “conventionally, ‘racism’ as a designation or an attribution refers to phenomena considered indictable in their invocation of race.”⁴⁰ Race is more than ideological and more than discursive—it is an event of colonial emergence. Thus, I want to amend Hesse’s phrasing of the ‘invocation of race’ for the *doing* of race. I argue racism describes an indictable or displeasing race-event. Rethinking race as an encounter between two bodies centers the element of practice in the analysis.

Dominant accounts of race and racism have been rooted in a discursive conceptualization. It is through a disavowal of practice in particular that Ruth Benedict was able to articulate a definition of racism that dismissed the severity of colonial violence and argued against the need to recognize colonialism as an indictable structuring force in European politics. As Hesse explains, “Whatever underlay the basis of the ‘white man’s superiority’ claims was not racism, but an ‘inevitable response to social conditions,’ it was ‘practical rather than intellectualized.’...Her critique of race relies upon the intellectualization of race as an ideology as it was first applied to Europeans, enabling her to dismiss the ‘practice’ of race as colonial violence imposed on colonially constituted ‘non-Europeans.’”⁴¹ At the level of description, Benedict’s Eurocentric disavowal is prophetic: as the pronouncement of racism has taken discursive center-stage—especially in its latest invocation as a problem for whiteness in the digital age—the nature of whiteness-as-ontogenetic-practice has remained completely obscured.

⁴⁰ Hesse, “Racism’s Alterity,” 144.

⁴¹ Hesse, 151–52.

CONCEPTUALIZING RACE IN THE DIGITAL

Finally, when whiteness appears online, the preemptive meets the predictive. My dissertation thus begins to account for the vast relations we have not yet explored as doing race, especially in the spread of social media and digital technology. I ground my intervention in the analysis of a set of digital performances in which normative markers of identity or frames of representation are not as tangibly guaranteed. This puts my dissertation slightly outside of the conversation of many of the main bodies of work considering the digital and race, oriented around representation in particular.⁴² Although the work of a foundational scholar of digital race studies like Lisa Nakamura has certainly paved the way for thinking race and the digital together, her method is grounded in an empirical notion of race that takes race as a given, excising it from the relational and processual terms of becoming in which I would like to embed it. Moreover, this school of digital race studies is explicitly interested in visual and phenotypic schematics that rely on the visual to determine race. Thus, the major concerns are about the unequal access to technology—the question framed as the digital divide—or unfair and caricatured representations of non-white people online and the fight for more accurate or nuanced representation. In these studies, the internet is figured as a place or resource that should be interrogated for how it structures access, not for how it demonstrates a non-representational mode of understanding race across its digital contours.

⁴² Nakamura, *Cybertypes*; Nakamura and Chow-White, *Race after the Internet*; Nakamura, *Digitizing Race*; Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman, *Race in Cyberspace*; Gajjala, “Digital Media, Race, Gender, Affect, and Labor Introduction to Special Section”; Steinfeldt et al., “Racism in the Electronic Age.”

I embed my analysis in the digital because the motivating thrust of this project is to move towards thinking race non-representationally; but my work also diverges from the dominant conversations around seemingly more non-representational elements of digital life like the question of data and the algorithm. This is because much of the work on algorithms and big data that also addresses race, tends to re-invoke the biological ground in which race is dominantly defined.⁴³ I want to think race in a way that we cannot make recourse to some sort of a priori ground that props identity or self-identification up as a check and therefore assert that someone is ever *misidentified*. This is the argument made by scholars of the algorithm who assert that the overwhelming processing of data and the taxonomic function it employs *mislabels* people based on their actions and their perceived future purchasing potential. Rather, I hope through my research that we might redefine race itself as that iterative and conscriptive event whereby bodies emerge in colonial relation, resonating through colonial taxonomy, the execution of which I term colonial ontopower. The simple way of saying this would be that no one person has race or has a race—two bodies have to make race in and as their encounter. The fact that for most people, the race that comes out of that encounter is often the same every time (whereas the processing of the algorithm places them many different positions with each action) should signal the power of habituation in making race events emerge and our tendency to establish the same virtual relation over and over again despite conflicting clues as to how our bodies may relate. This is not to say that algorithms have it right—that they are somehow properly categorizing us in a way that we miss because they are able to work on a kind of scale and temporality that exceeds the capacities of the human body.

⁴³ Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*; Cheney-Lippold, *We Are Data*; O’Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction*.

But algorithms point to the contingent, temporary, iterative structure of race and modern coloniality more broadly. The algorithm is interested in placing you somewhere along the colonial taxonomic spectrum with which it has been programmed, but it is not invested in the same way as humans are in where you might land. What we may learn from comparing human behavior to algorithmic processing is that we are willing to overlook a whole wealth of data that might otherwise prevent us from arriving at the same colonial relations in every encounter. Or perhaps we have been programmed out of thinking about much of our encounters as really significant enough to make us rethink the habituation of colonial categorization. But what we might learn from thinking about the algorithm in a less comparative lens is that the algorithm also always finds a place for you. To us, it might seem contradictory that the algorithm could place you differently from day to day, click to click. But what is really significant here is that the algorithm always finds a way to compute you along the spectrum of colonial being. This should herald to us the way that the colonial becomes visible in a new way digitally as a kind of processing machine which seeks to reduce bodies to a certain kind of transparency (à la Glissant) from which they may not abstain.⁴⁴

Finally, I stage my analysis in the digital in order to take advantage of the compatibility between the digital and the virtual as both non-materialized sites of relation. I work through examples of digital performance in order to reveal the ways that the virtual modulation of power is amplified and normalized in digitized social space. Whiteness's ability to negotiate new strategies of power is greatly increased by the web. Further, my research conceptualizes the digital itself as a site for the negotiation of emergence and becoming precisely because of the virtual formations that gain forceful significance in it, but are never grounded in material conditions. A

⁴⁴ Glissant, *Le discours antillais*.

prime example of this, which I will explore in my first chapter, is the rise of a pan-white nationalism hosted on the internet. This pan-white alliance may be interested in the future demographics of particular countries, and may worry about the strength of the white majorities there. But the network of affinity is digitally hosted across social media platforms, reanimated in viral memes, etc. The pan-white, ethno-nationalist alliance most overtly devoted to securing whiteness's future, provides itself with its own virtual terrain in the digital. In my analysis, it is virtual relations which form the foundation of whiteness.⁴⁵ The material signifiers—like skin color, phenotype, hair texture, etc—that are used to ascribe causality or given as origin points for the doing of race reflects the advanced level at which colonial ontopower operates. However, I want to displace those materialities as much as possible to focus on the virtual relations between bodies, with as much attention as possible directed to the virtual rather than the bodies themselves. In order to emphasize the virtual, I make use of the digital. This is not to say that whiteness's virtual operation only takes shape with the advent of digital technology. Rather, digital space enables a certain level of focus to be applied to the virtual in a way that is more concentrated than in analog space.

Secondly, however, I argue that part of whiteness's virtual ontopowerful function is demonstrated in the turn whiteness makes to using the digital to test and proliferate new strategies for its future elaboration or to secure its power. The digital provides a new landscape upon which to virtually negotiate recent challenges to the organization of colonial ontopower. The first demand

⁴⁵ The white nationalist obsession with its own future is consecrated in the popular white nationalist slogan called the "14 Words" sometimes colloquially invoked just through reference to the number fourteen: "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children." "14 Words."

is to determine the affective limits needed to maintain the distinguishing distinction of white/non-white in the absence of the legal potentializing structures of racial segregation and outright colonial government. My research shows how, in the adjustment to these post-Civil Rights, post-multiculturalism, post-Obama demands, whiteness has made use of the digital as a site to invent new bodies and relations that will continue to produce colonial ontopower. Whiteness's development of new strategies of power has not been a linear endeavor, and as I work through in my chapters, some of the most recent experimentation engaged in part via digital networks, has provoked crises in the potential for colonial ontopower to guarantee its future. This makes the digital a unique place from which to analyze whiteness for its ontopowerful operation, both for the ways it enables greater scrutiny to be applied to affective modulation and virtual modes of attunement and habituation, but also because it is an active site for the negotiation of the strategies of whiteness designed to prime whiteness's own future.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

My dissertation opens with an exploration of the major conjunctural shift of my research, "The Crisis of Whiteness as a Problem of Intelligibility and Hegemony." My analysis articulates the deepening of a paradox within the system of colonial ontopower in which whiteness figures itself as a racial victim in order to reaffirm white supremacy during the transitional period of the end of the Obama administration and the rise of Trump. Illustrating the fever pitch of this crisis, I look at the trending hashtag and performance #TakeUsDown. #TakeUsDown was a counter-protest developed on the internet to lament the removal of the Confederate flag from the South Carolina State Building after the mass shooting perpetrated by Dylann Roof in 2015. I build from Stuart Hall's articulation of crisis of hegemony that is both a moment of rupture in which power

has to reconstitute itself, and a period in which the operation of power is revealed, to show that whiteness is negotiating the self-imposed threat of what Jonathan Lear calls a crisis of intelligibility. Whereas a crisis of hegemony is a moment of rupture in and reconstitution of power, a crisis of intelligibility threatens an ontopowerful limit in which new conditions no longer support the intelligibility or practicability of former modes of being. I read the current moment, in which #TakeUsDown takes part, as a dual crisis of hegemony and intelligibility for whiteness—as an upheaval in the mechanism of racial life driven by the attempt by whiteness to claim it is the target of racial discrimination in order to justify a recommitment to the stability of white society and a rejection of diversity and multiculturalist politics. In other words, if whiteness has come into being as a formation of power that establishes its authority through the exploitation and domination of the non-white other, this new strategy is tantamount to claiming whiteness is positioned as a new racialized Other and that whiteness itself does not secure any guaranteed power within Western society. It is a move that is functionally unintelligible to the traditional logics of white supremacy, but nonetheless enjoys a viral resonance in social media.

My second chapter lays out the theoretical intervention that grounds my analysis. If one of the conceptual problems revealed in the unfolding crisis of whiteness is the negotiation of the very limits and capacities of whiteness, I argue that affect theory and accounts of power emerging from affect theory are particularly adaptable to analyzing the constitution of race and whiteness. In this effort, chapter two, "From Du Bois to Massumi: Towards a Theory of Colonial Ontopower," works through the ways W.E.B. Du Bois consistently organized his critiques of race and western power around questions of feeling, virtuality, and bodily capacity, or topics that have been elaborated in contemporary scholarship as affect. Even the oft-cited question "How does it *feel* to be a problem?" is actually the unspoken resonance that emerges from Du Bois's encounters with society as it

continually enforces its whiteness in positioning him as a non-white racial problem.⁴⁶ The question emerges at the interface where Du Bois meets the world, but it is never directly posed and never directly answered. Building from these and other instances of race conceptualized through the regime of feeling and regimentation of sensation in Du Bois, I offer an articulation of the concept of race that foregrounds its constitution through affect. I argue that race is the modulation of a body's affective horizon—its capacity to affect and be affected by other bodies—according to a colonial taxonomy. Race is the enactment of this iterative modulation emerging in the relation between human and non-human bodies, or to borrow from Brian Massumi, race operates to reify the force of colonial becoming, as an ontopower. To ground the analysis, I compare two moments of Du Bois's theorization concerning the construction of the racial subject as it is made to emerge at the interface of the Western nation-state. The first is the affectively charged trip Du Bois takes to the Grand Canyon, recounted in *Darkwater*, (1920), in which he attempts to demonstrate the depth of his capacity for nationalist feeling in his encounter with the newly claimed national monument. In his later works, particularly *Dusk of Dawn: an Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, (1940) as Du Bois's race concept becomes articulated more explicitly through the language of affect and appears as a force of virtuality that organizes the possibilities of political action, he rejects his celebration of American nationalism as an attachment to imperial whiteness. As I work from Du Bois to Massumi and back, this chapter illustrates what is embedded, but rather under emphasized in Du Bois's later thinking: that race's fundamental orientation concerns the priming of the conditions of bodily possibility such that the extension of the virtual into the actual will reproduce what Barnor Hesse calls the "onto-colonial."

⁴⁶ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk Essays and Sketches*.

My third chapter, “Beyond the Pale Blog: Aesthetics of White Anxiety,” is devoted to illustrating the role tumblr is playing in widening the affective horizon of whiteness to accommodate its new orientation toward racial victimization. The first part of this paper offers a genealogy of pale blog’s aesthetic and affective character in order to demonstrate that the source of this aesthetic form emerges from colonial desires for frontier and reacts directly to the crisis around the future possibility of satisfying that desire. That is pale blogs try to adapt the claim of weakness without jeopardizing the future of colonial ontopower. My interest in affect theory is rooted in its conceptualization of the habituated intensities of bodily relation in which sensation emerges and informs future events. In digital sociality, I argue that the sites and temporalities across which participation takes shape, and periods of affective activation are augmented by the technologies of the platform. Thus, I read social media as a site in which the regulatory force of whiteness accretes. Or, as danah boyd offers, social media’s primary impact is in contouring the parameters of “social grooming and maintaining peripheral social awareness.”⁴⁷ This chapter explores how the phenomenon of “pale blogs” on tumblr regulates the performances of white-decline-as-dominance and normalizes this new set of relations for bodies properly performing as white. In particular, the very strict, self-policed pale blog aesthetic forms a complex reanimation of colonial desire in the presentation of place. Pale blogs frequently circulate images of empty, foggy landscapes that function to rewrite notions of frontier according to the logic of digital space where potential is figured through the assumed infinite horizon of the internet. The pale blog aesthetic has spread offline in the craze for the color Tumblr Pink—a range of pinkish pastels that unite many Spring 2017 fashion lines, the marketing colors of brands like Thinx Underwear and

⁴⁷ boyd, “Danah Boyd | Apophenia » Twitter.”

Glossier, and Pantone's 2016 color of the year, Rose Quartz. In their pervasive popularity, I analyze the ways pale blogs cultivate neoliberal modes of consumption that appropriate racial victimhood as the new cool.

The fourth chapter, "Virtually White," provocatively argues that when we think of race as a colonial ontopower, and the doing of whiteness as a virtual performance of regulating the potentials of bodies-in-relation to reproduce colonial ontopower, whiteness then becomes available for any body to instantiate or inhabit. This chapter depends on an articulation of the concept of coloniality, the extant modes through which the distinction between the European and Non-European or white and non-white continue to be elaborated. As the illustrative example of the chapter, I read Wafaa Bilal's performance piece "Domestic Tension," alternately titled "Shoot an Iraqi," where anonymous users signed in to a live feed of Bilal's month-long performance and could direct the paintball gun positioned at the opening of his living space to shoot at him. I argue that the zealous performance of digitized Western imperial aggression is an example of doing whiteness virtually, or being 'virtually white.' Here, I mean to draw attention to both the digital form of the shooters' participation, their telepresence, as well as the nonrepresentational relations of whiteness catalyzed between the bodies of the users and Bilal. The anonymous shooters that made up Bilal's audience hailed from all around the globe often overwhelming the system trying to all shoot at once. As each event of firing the gun unfolded, users inhabited the relation as white, actualizing, in part, an investment in the military might of the West, with Bilal's body emerging as an object of radical annihilation, figured as the terrorist for whom the domestic is the target of military power and neocolonial intervention. In this chapter, I argue that this type of digital performance illustrates a new metric for determining how whiteness is done—that is this example helps us to think race as a virtual event.

My conclusion quickly reviews how the status and sites of the crisis of whiteness have expanded over the course of the research I have conducted. The election of Donald Trump has shifted the terms upon which I originally began this study. At the start, the crisis of whiteness registered digitally, but was not expressed through dominant figureheads of the state. However, in Trump's twitter activity and his open interaction with the memetic production of the Alt-Right, the crisis of whiteness has reached a feeling of present tangibility it did not previously have. In this last chapter, I quickly review what is commonly known as 'meme magic'—a term that mixes the ludic and the pernicious as it describes the IRL ("in real life") effect of a meme, the tactility it accumulates, or the force it gathers as it spreads beyond its creators to influence the formal realm of politics. The conclusion suggests that memetic practices have been instrumental in revitalizing white nationalism for the 21st century as both a political project and as a digital site of play and imagination. Most pertinently, through memetic play, the crisis of whiteness may finally be reaching a stage of synthesis in which discourses of white decline circulate playfully, but consistently through memes and social media circuits, from anonymous message boards like 4chan, up into the highest levels of government.

Chapter 1

THE CRISIS OF WHITENESS AS A PROBLEM OF INTELLIGIBILITY AND HEGEMONY

WHITENESS IN CRISIS

On June 15th, 2015, twenty-two-year-old Dylann Roof shot and killed nine people in a Bible study session at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Roof, a white supremacist, kept a blog called The Last Rhodesian (thelastrhodesian.com) where he posted a manifesto detailing his thoughts on race along with photos of himself with the Rhodesian and confederate flags.⁴⁸ In the aftermath of the shooting, the internet reacted to the presence of the Confederate flag in his photos and it became a point of critique and activism. There was a national outcry that coalesced in the hashtag #TakeItDown and a fervent demand the South Carolina state capitol building remove the Confederate flag from its flagpole.⁴⁹ Before the state legislature finally voted to take down the flag, North Carolina native Bree Newsome traveled to South Carolina, scaled the pole and removed it.⁵⁰ But the rhetoric around taking down the Confederate flag as well as Newsome's independent action sparked its own viral backlash hashtag and performance: #TakeUsDown.

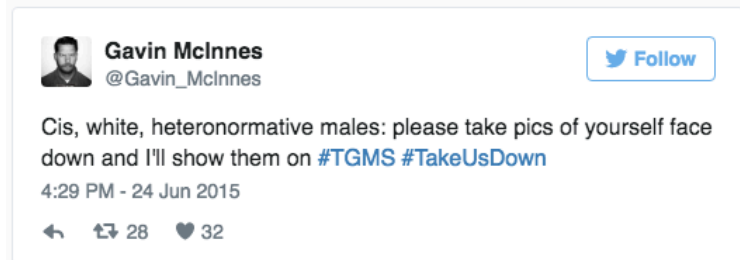
⁴⁸ The website along with much of the content was taken down immediately following the shooting. Collections of some of the photos on the site are available through certain news articles reporting on Roof, but all whole versions of the site seem to have been removed from the web and are even unavailable on The Internet Archive (archive.org).

⁴⁹ Yuhas et al., "South Carolina Takes down Confederate Flag – as It Happened."

⁵⁰ Holley and Brown, "Woman Takes down Confederate Flag in Front of South Carolina Statehouse."

#TakeUsDown was started by radio personality and co-founder of Vice Magazine Gavin McInnes. He tweeted “White people are a symbol of oppression and hatred. We need to take ourselves down by lying on the ground and crying.” McInnes urged “cis, white, heteronormative” men to take photos of themselves laying down flat on whatever surface was available to them and post the photos with the hashtag. #TakeUsDown restaged taking down the Confederate flag, using the individual body to symbolize the flag and reimagining the act on the localized scale of camera phone screens, circulated through personal social media accounts. Most of the images appeared to be of men at home or at work, the *mise en scène* usually reflective of the ordinary everyday. When posting their images with commentary, the majority of the people using the hashtag expressed regret or guilt about their whiteness, and apologized for white privilege.

Despite invoking the US’s history of racial oppression and the violence of racial inequality, the gesture was meant to be one of sarcastic self-loathing that mocked the outcry against the confederate flag. That is, McInnes and his followers actually used the terms cis-gender, microaggressions, privilege, colonialism, slavery, Jim Crow, and sexism, but they did so to try to prove that arguments about white privilege are tedious, self-important, whiny, and outdated. The main point of the performance was to insist on the idea that white privilege itself doesn’t exist, that white privilege is not something that actually benefits or applies to the experience of white people, and that those who constantly harp on the idea of white privilege are unfairly picking on whites. Through disingenuous suggestions that self-immolation and suicide were the only truly responsible political gestures left for whites, the argument that emerged from #TakeUsDown was that behind so-called anti-racist rhetoric there is a real anti-white sentiment brewing and the desire for the destruction of whites is on the rise.



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What is confusing to navigate about #TakeUsDown is the double-edged assertion it makes with the language it coopts. On the one hand, it attempts to discredit anti-racist arguments and in

⁵¹ Screenshots of the original tweets sent out by Gavin McInnes promoting the performance of #TakeUsDown.

⁵² In this photo, the user poses with a copy of "White Like Me" by Tim Wise, making direct reference to scholarship on whiteness and anti-racist rhetoric.

so doing, minimize those perspectives and political claims that run counter to the traditional interests of white supremacy. But on the other, it holds up the power of anti-racist leftist rhetoric to claim that whites are new victims of racial aggression. Movements like #TakeItDown are framed as part of a larger attack on whites that is not only unjustified, it should be acknowledged as racism against white people. Among the hashtags circulated alongside #TakeUsDown are #WhiteGenocide, #WarOnWhites, and #BlackPrivilege. Together, they form a discourse that insists on a growing bias against whites. The argument is based upon the notion that whites are the undeserving, if not innocent, victims of an all-out racial war against them—the erasure of their cultural symbols from social space, i.e. the Confederate flag, being the latest example. Taking to its extreme the notion that racism is a zero-sum game that disadvantages whites,⁵³ the #TakeUsDown argument is a double-sided strategy that exerts white power through insisting on white victimization. This is a new kind of tactic that indicates a deeply problematic shift in the state of whiteness today.

In its contradictory invocation, the claim of white victimization threatens a larger crisis of intelligibility for conventional modes of understanding race and racial violence. Most theories of racism tend to position whiteness as the instigator of racist performances.⁵⁴ Indeed, whiteness studies most routinely conceptualizes racism as the defining property of whiteness and its main strategy of power and dominance.⁵⁵ I draw my definition of whiteness from the work of Barnor

⁵³ Norton and Sommers, “Whites See Racism as a Zero-Sum Game That They Are Now Losing.”

⁵⁴ For example, see Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*; Doane and Bonilla-Silva, *White Out*; Jordan, *The White Man’s Burden; Historical Origins of Racism in the United States*.

⁵⁵ Hartigan, “Establishing the Fact of Whiteness”; Hughey and Byrd, “The Souls of White Folk beyond Formation and Structure”; Kincheloe et al., *White Reign*; Leonardo, “The Souls of White Folk”; Martinot, *The Machinery of Whiteness*; Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*; Yancy, *Look, A White!*

Hesse. As Hesse points out, following the development of the categories of European and non-European to white and non-white as they emerge from the modern project of Western colonialism, whiteness can be seen as both a category of race as well as the organizer of racial categories.⁵⁶ Races are consolidated and organized through the colonial project in opposition to whiteness which, through its instituting authority, is necessarily dominant. The racial categories of non-whiteness are elaborated to establish hierarchy and maintain the racial hegemony of whiteness. The idea then that whiteness be a victim of its own ultimate privilege suggests that a major destabilizing shift has occurred. Here, Jonathan Lear's notion of a crisis of intelligibility provides a useful analytic. A crisis of intelligibility is sparked when not only the significance of a concept has shifted but also that some form of life which it used to designate verges on becoming impossible under the new organization of meaning.⁵⁷ In this instance, whiteness simultaneously competes with itself as both victim and organizer of racial order, whereas it was previously only possible to think whiteness as a kind of aggressor. For whiteness to mark and reposition itself as a target of racial violence suggests that whiteness is embroiled not only in a crisis of intelligibility, but a crisis of hegemony as elaborated by Stuart Hall, an epochal transition, in which strategies of white power are in a moment of critical reconstitution.⁵⁸ A crisis of hegemony is provoked when the relations of force that establish social authority and consent are challenged and exposed, resulting in a "profound rupture in the political and economic life of a society, an accumulation of contradictions."⁵⁹ This phase is necessarily exceptional but the peculiar element to the crisis

⁵⁶ Hesse, "Escaping Liberty."

⁵⁷ Lear, "What Is a Crisis of Intelligibility?," 147.

⁵⁸ Hall, *Stuart Hall*.

⁵⁹ Hall, *Policing the Crisis*; Hall and Massey, "Interpreting the Crisis."

whiteness is undergoing is that the catalyst seems to originate among those who make up the racial ruling class.

A combined crisis of intelligibility and of hegemony is a dangerous place for whiteness to find itself. For if the new strategy of marking white victimization too thoroughly shifts the meaning of racial victimhood to include whiteness, and as a strategy of power the claim to victimhood too successfully repositions whiteness in the field of racial dominance as *not* dominant, the newly developed strategies of whiteness may be its almost auto-immune undoing. I refer broadly to the anxieties generated by these shifts as well as the machinations of these transitions as the *crisis of whiteness*. And in the remainder of this paper I will attempt to outline the specific conjuncture or ‘epoch’ of this transition, as well as the relationship between the crisis of intelligibility and hegemony, opening a discussion of the crisis by working through the following questions: What are the practical features of a crisis of whiteness and what does it look like in action? What are the theoretical elements at stake in this formulation? That is, what notions do we need to define in order to formulate a notion of a crisis of whiteness and properly recognize it? What are other examples we have of whiteness claiming to be in crisis? How do those differ from the current one? What is relevant about the current context that helps us to understand this crisis as distinct? And finally, what is the significance of the shift into the digital age in determining the location and medium of the crisis?

#TAKEUSDOWN: THE CIRCULATION OF THE MEME & THE DISCOURSE OF WHITE DECLINE

#TakeUsDown refers to many things. At its most basic, it is the hashtag and the call to action it represents. That action is to mimetically invoke the removal of the Confederate Flag from

the South Carolina capitol building, in protest of the supposedly overblown reaction to its public presence in the first place. But to talk about #TakeUsDown is also to invoke the various trajectories and forms of participation that constitute its sphere of circulation. These necessarily include choreography of lying down, the photography, the caption writing, the encouraging responses to the concept, the commentary, and the sharing and tagging of the content to create a cohesive, viral moment. Or meme, rather. An internet meme is the propagation of digital content, shared from one user to another.⁶⁰ It references the content that is shared (messages, jokes, words, photos, videos, gifs, dance, gestures, etc.), and the action of it being shared across one or more digital platforms, as well as the process of participation in the meme, and its development of it as it congeals into an identifiable and more or less codified referent. It can be more than strictly discursive as it usually involves some visual material; and it often establishes an in-group although not all interaction with the meme is direct participation in it. Mark Andrejevic makes a useful distinction between interaction and participation when it comes to what makes a meme or viral internet content.⁶¹ The difference is in the nature of the relationship the user has to the meme. For #TakeUsDown, we may recognize those who laid themselves down and circulated those photos as participating in #TakeUsDown; this is opposed to those who retweeted #TakeUsDown to comment on its confusing message who may be designated as only interacting. Despite the intentions of the twitter users sharing the hashtag, both kinds of engagement drove the spread and consolidation of the meme.

⁶⁰ Shifman, "Memes in a Digital World"; Shifman, "Memeology Festival 05. Memes as Ritual, Virals as Transmission?"

⁶¹ Andrejevic, "The Pacification of Interactivity," 189.

Once #TakeUsDown began to go viral, its purpose and effectiveness were widely questioned. Of course, there were those who critiqued it as racist and inappropriate.⁶² But for most of the commentators who weren't in on the joke, #TakeUsDown was described as a confusing strategy. The #TakeUsDown discourse is a confusing satirical response that claims parody of liberal and antiracist ideals by using liberal and antiracist rhetoric quite plainly, not coopting it (like discourses of safe space are sometimes coopted)⁶³ but invoking it to be ironic and sarcastic, in addition to falsely encouraging “revolutionary” performances of self-sacrifice, like self-immolation, and other manners of suicide. Perhaps just the fact that McInnes or his followers were able to invoke the language of anti-racism is not so surprising. The effectiveness with which conservative arguments reframe and redefine liberal political jargon and the tenor of political conversation has been well documented.⁶⁴ But this example poses a problem of coherence first because of the way sarcasm works on the internet, and second because of the contradictory position it carves out for white supremacy.

⁶² Both Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown were parodied in the course of the meme's viral spread. One user shared an image of himself “taken down” wearing a hoodie and laying next to a packet of skittles and canned beverage. Another shared an image from the Chicago exhibition of artist Ti-Rock Moore, “Confronting Truths: Wake Up!” that displayed a life-sized effigy of the dead body of Michael Brown laying between police cones and tape. The user shared the image of this effigy to critique the artist for being duped into feeling white guilt and privilege, and posted the question, “How long before whites are just outright hunted?”

⁶³ In my personal experience teaching, I have witnessed a shift in students' willingness to build classroom ground rules around the idea of establishing a “safe space.” Rather than enabling critical discussion of painful, even violent, topics, they see the invocation of term “safe space” as a policing tactic. One group of students related to me that the term was being invoked to silence and dismiss the anger students of color felt about racialized aggression that was directed towards them. White students would claim that they felt “unsafe” in these kinds of discussions, and effectively censored their classmates by coopting the discourse of “safe space.”

⁶⁴ See for example, Nunberg, *Talking Right*; Lakoff, *Moral Politics*.

Generally, it is difficult to identify sarcasm on the internet. Work in computational linguistics demonstrates that advanced models of sentiment analysis do not reliably identify sarcasm or irony in tweets, and for that matter, neither do humans.⁶⁵ Often, without the explicit tags #sarcasm or #irony, commentary on the internet is not readily identifiable as ironic or sarcastic and can be easily taken literally.⁶⁶ Instead, to even hope to be able to accurately interpret most tweets, they have to be read with a rather extensive understanding of the context from which they emerge.⁶⁷ It may be an obvious point to emphasize the link between content and meaning, but it is to say that for the spread of a hashtag like #TakeUsDown, a mainstream audience may not have the extensive understanding of the context from which it emerges required to understand what they were seeing or interacting with. For those who are not familiar with Gavin McInness's character or political views, the rhetoric alone is not always reliable as a coherent sarcastic message. The average internet user doesn't understand the notion of the cloaked site or anticipate disingenuous rhetoric.⁶⁸ Finally, the product of this performance was in fact a mass affirmation of white victimization. This new virally popular take on whiteness contrasts with previous iterations of the structure of white power to the point of posing problems of intelligibility.

Ultimately, the net effect of all the activation and reaction around #TakeUsDown was to make a coherent set of performances that resonated with, and so further popularized, a larger discourse on white decline. This discourse has various points of emergence that I will detail below,

⁶⁵ Agrawal and An, "Kea: Sentiment Analysis of Phrases Within Short Texts"; González-Ibáñez, Muresan, and Wacholder, "Identifying Sarcasm in Twitter."

⁶⁶ Liebrecht, Kunneman, and Bosch, "The Perfect Solution for Detecting Sarcasm in Tweets #not"; Back, "Aryans Reading Adorno." In "Aryans Reading Adorno" Back points out how Adorno's work is mind bogglingly used on white supremacist websites to support overtly anti-semitic rhetoric.

⁶⁷ Bamman and Smith, "Contextualized Sarcasm Detection on Twitter."

⁶⁸ Daniels, *Cyber Racism*; Daniels, "Cloaked Websites."

but it is the general obsession with the idea that whiteness is in a state of peril in the present moment, faces a set of random or sometimes coordinated threats, and broadly has lost the political and social standing it once enjoyed—the removal of the Confederate flag being an almost overfull representative example that implicates the individual, the state, the symbols of the nation’s mythologized past, and its imagined future.

The digital is a space that is conducive to the development of new tools of white supremacy, especially considering the speed and facility of disseminating Western and Anglophone cultural trends, political values and events, and social mores. However, the viral spread of information may also amplify white anxieties—creating an alternate layer of potential activation to the fear and threat of white extinction, disturbance, upheaval, unsettlement, that goes beyond and challenges the dominance of ‘the actual.’ To fully grasp the crisis of whiteness and the way it manifests a discourse of white decline necessitates an account of the digital.

The discourse of white decline and idea that whiteness is under threat is validated most poignantly from the way children were figured in #TakeUsDown. As symbols of the future of whiteness, they seem to prove the looming threat posed to white supremacy by implying that children are the target of anti-white ire. Where children appeared in the meme, they were used to emphasize the absurdity of the idea that white privilege materially benefits white people and gives them a competitive edge. This line of tweets took one dominant form—generally they were images of babies or young children sleeping, narrated as if, in their short lives, they were already overcome by the burden of the white guilt from their immense racial privilege and had joined the #TakeUsDown movement, surrendering to self-loathing and whatever other forms of destruction would be necessary to put an end to their exercise of white privilege. Children as surrogates for the adult participants in #TakeUsDown are represented as having the same investment in the meme

and message. But they also convey the idea that the targets of anti-racist rhetoric are wholly undeserving of criticism.

One user tweeted “For our transgressions in the next 30 years,” along with an image of two young boys, presumably his sons, lying face down on a tile floor. This particular tweet conveys the notion that without even having reached adulthood, the boys will inherit a bias against them for their whiteness that they could neither chose nor change. It suggests the baseless nature of rhetoric around white privilege—that it is part of an anti-white attitude that is irrational and has nothing to do with the actual lives of white people. No matter what the boys do in the next 30 years, the rising tide of anti-white hate will ensure they face criticism and racist attacks.

The obvious irony in this strain of the argument motivating #TakeUsDown is how closely it mirrors the anti-racist rhetoric that it attempts to make fun of and dismiss. One of the most popularly articulated indictments of the system of race in the United States is precisely that racial discrimination does not take into account the content of one’s character, so to speak.⁶⁹ However, the racial critique #TakeUsDown is making doesn’t really insist on the idea that whites are *good people* and deserving of equal treatment socially and before the law. #TakeUsDown and in particular, the posts about children, insist on the idea that the children are *individual people*. In the logic of #TakeUsDown, if white privilege is something that applies to all whites and that all whites enjoy, it suggests that they are all the same in that they all have the same effect on the world, and that the way white life takes shape in the world is not a question of individual will, choice, and control. In this light, what is at stake is more than just an unfair bias—#TakeUsDown rejects the charge of white privilege and white guilt because it violates the right to individuality guaranteed

⁶⁹ One wonders what Martin Luther King Jr. would make of the #TakeUsDown meme.

by whiteness. DiAngelo details the importance of individuality to whiteness by highlighting the ways that a discourse of individuality functions to delegitimize claims of racial violence, to dissociate events of racial harm from institutional structures, and confer upon whiteness a general status of racial innocence.⁷⁰ According to its own rules, whiteness produces, as a basic function, individuals. It is a central function. And the recourse to individuality is also recourse to innocence. Individuality protects against group guilt precisely because it insists on the differentiability of each person's intentions, actions, and will. Moreover, as a rhetorical strategy, insisting on the individual white body casts any such generalizable indictment of whiteness as disproportionate and unfounded. It does this by invoking larger discourses about national identity, the meritocratic foundations of the United States, and the goodness of the American people. In American meritocracy, social life is taken to be "the sum total of conscious and deliberate individual actions."⁷¹ Thus, if judgments of racial wrongdoing must be made based on what one deserves, the emphasis on children in #TakeUsDown facilitates the slippage between individuality and innocence by demonstrating just what extreme condemnations are made against such blatantly undeserving victims.⁷²

⁷⁰ DiAngelo, "Why Can't We All Just Be Individuals?"

⁷¹ Pierce, *Racing for Innocence*, 82.

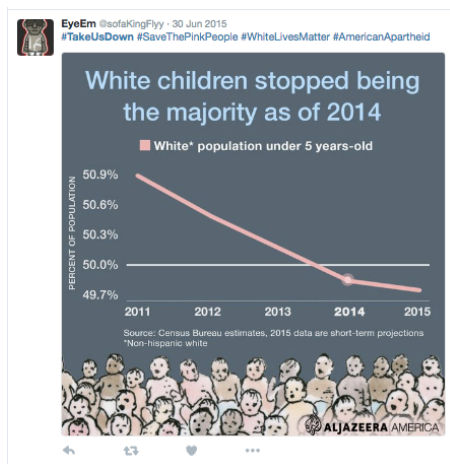
⁷² Ruth Frankenberg's work demonstrates how the turn to children and the innocence of white childhood is a strategy to reinforce the impunity of whiteness. The actions and attitudes of childhood are presented as the basic moral building blocks of the adult and as the adult's true core. Therefore, the adult can be presumed innocent of any racial wrongdoing, or can at least be dismissed of any intentional wrongdoing by being pure of heart. Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters*, 146–49.



Even though the message children are used to convey in #TakeUsDown aligns with the notion that racism is an effacing foe, it is not in a kind of racial solidarity that the complaint is articulated but rather in a defense of the right of white individualism against the alleged rising tide of anti-white sentiment. So while children figure productively in the meme to make the point that whites are being unduly attacked, they are also an effective vehicle for the other side of the argument: whiteness in general is in a state of peril. Here, #TakeUsDown links up to a broader

trend that I am calling a discourse of white decline. Discourse should be taken in the widest sense of the term because how and where white decline is argued includes a number of different discursive strategies, performances, performatives, aesthetic practices, viral activations, memes, and digital resonances. The arguments and breadth of this discourse are what I will begin to demonstrate in the following section.

WHITE DECLINE, DEMOGRAPHICALLY & OTHERWISE



#TakeUsDown intimates that whiteness is losing its grip on its basic rights, the right to individuality being just one. Hinging this argument on the figure of the white child, #TakeUsDown orients the point toward the future, suggesting that the present assaults it endures are just the beginning of a war on whiteness. The targets of this war include the universality of whiteness—both the unmarkedness of white history, as well as its majority population that contributes to the status of whiteness as the norm. This is aptly illustrated in one meme a user tweeted that reads “ALL races practiced slavery, ALL races engaged in conquest, ONLY white kids are told they must be eternally punished.” Paired with an image of a child walking with a backpack, the implication

is that the multicultural curriculum now in schools primarily teaches white children to be ashamed of the history of European colonialism and racial domination and that their history cannot be taken as a source of pride. However, the meme also positions whiteness in a strange relationship to other histories. Primarily, white history is placed *alongside other histories*. The larger aim of this move is to normalize the history of European slavery and conquest such that it is undeserving of special rebuke. But this is a strange transformation of Western exceptionalism to assert the special thing about white history is that it is the only one among “all races” for which its descendants are being punished. This is a far cry from the idea, reflected in the canon of white literature, philosophy, and history, that Western civilization was the only one in possession of a history.⁷³ It is also a stance that seems to have given up on the notion of a benign colonialism, to which the US and Europe have been wedded for so long.⁷⁴ Instead, there is the concession that slavery and conquest may not have been benevolent but it is offset with the qualification that since they were no worse than what other civilizations practiced, the children—or by extension, the descendants—of these projects of the West do not deserve to be punished for benefitting from them.

This assault on white history, white individualism and innocence, and thus the neutrality of white identity is a cause for outrage and concern according to #TakeUsDown because while white children are actively taught to feel shame about their racial identity, they are also becoming a minority and therefore face increased discrimination. Here the argument has fully entered the terrain of white decline where the broad assault on whiteness—which is figured at times as a history, a political force, or the privileges of neutrality, universalism, or individualism—is

⁷³ Wolf and Eriksen, *Europe and the People Without History*; Klein, “In Search of Narrative Mastery”; Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.

⁷⁴ Ypi, “What’s Wrong with Colonialism”; Salman, “In Our Orientalist Imagination.”

compounded by an assault aimed at the white individual. One of the most pressing problems facing the white individual is the notion that they might soon be outnumbered by non-whites. The latest waves of demographic calculation and conjecture following recent US census data tends to fixate on the year 2042: the year whites are projected to fall below fifty percent of the population.

The threat of 2042 and the possibility of the United States becoming a “majority-minority” country has become a point of popular obsession and is signaled in the range of media outlets that report on it. In August 2008, the New York Times, The Guardian, and Fox News all ran stories on the coming demographic shift within a day of each other.⁷⁵ They all noted how previous Census Bureau projections from only 2004 had forecast 2050 as the year of the minority-majority shift, but that updated information revealed the estimates to be off by at least 8 years. While the New York Times emphasized the growing minority population, the headlines of the Guardian and Fox News articles framed the shift as kind of white decline: “US set for dramatic change as white America becomes minority by 2042” and “Whites in the Minority by 2042, U.S. Census Predicts.”

Still other outlets presented the coming white minority as though it had already arrived or may as well have.⁷⁶ Online journal Think Progress published “When Will Your State Become Majority-Minority?” in 2012, noting that several states, like California and Texas, were at the time already majority-minority. California and Texas may have been ahead of the curve, but the article insisted they presage what the rest of the country will look like come 2050. Going by age group rather than

⁷⁵ Roberts, “Minorities in U.S. Set to Become Majority by 2042”; Pilkington, “US Set for Dramatic Change as White America Becomes Minority by 2042”; “Whites In The Minority By 2042, U.s. Census Predicts.”

⁷⁶ Mic, “The Year White People Will Become a Minority in America Has Been Declared”; “Whites Projected to Become a US Minority | Al Jazeera America”; Office, “Most Children Younger Than Age 1 Are Minorities, Census Bureau Reports - Population - Newsroom - U.S. Census Bureau.”

state population again accelerated the shift. In 2011, it was reported that whites were already a minority in the section of the population under 2 years old.⁷⁷ A #TakeUsDown tweet shared an infographic claiming that white children stopped being the majority in 2014. And in a recent NPR interview, heavily quoted demographer William Frey said that based on the increasing birth rates of minorities, “we may, by 2020, have a majority minority child population in the United States” and that whites would fall to a minority “well before 2040.”⁷⁸

As the tipping point of 2050, 2042, 2040, 2020, or 2011 is projected to be so nigh as to have already happened, the question seldom posed is the exact meaning and significance of this date. Whites are projected to become a “minority” in the Census Bureau report when whites comprise less than 50% of the population. The term is applied to the ratio of whites to the whole, not in relation to other racial groups. It means “‘minorities’ will be in the majority.”⁷⁹ The transition is framed as one in which whites are losing ground against a bloc of “minorities” growing through natural increase and immigration. Whether the projections for population growth actually occur, the reaction to them rehearses traditional, racially violent strategies of whiteness that efface and fail to differentiate the specificities of non-whites.

But the idea of losing demographic ground against rising minority populations is only one strain in a larger discourse of white decline. Not only are birth rates of whites dropping, but the Baby Boomer population skews the average age of the white population much older than other racial groups, and to top it all off, death rates among middle aged whites seem to be climbing

⁷⁷ “Census.”; Passel, Jeffrey, Gretchen Livingston, and D. Cohn. “Explaining why minority births now outnumber white births.” *Pew Research Center. Retreat from: <http://pewsocialtrends.org/2012/05/17/explaining-why-minority-births-now-outnumber-white-births>*(2012).

⁷⁸ Frey, US Will Have Minority Whites Sooner, Says Demographer.

⁷⁹ Maharidge, *The Coming White Minority*, 1999, 3.

inexplicably.⁸⁰ Despite an overall decline in mortality rates in the US, whites or white non-Hispanics, are experiencing rising mortality rates. Case and Deaton, the authors of the heavily quoted study on the white mortality rate, suggest that increased drug use, alcoholism, chronic pain, mental health issues, and financial stress have contributed to increased midlife morbidity. Reporting on the study, the Atlantic suggests “Middle-Aged White Americans Are Dying of Despair.”⁸¹

Perhaps one of the most public affirmations of the threat of white decline was the discussion between Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, and Gwen Ifill during the 2016 Democratic debate in Milwaukee on the concerns specific to the white working class. Ifill posed a question to the prospective candidates that not only validated the murky mid-century demographic tipping point, but suggested “If working- class, white Americans are about to be outnumbered, are already underemployed in many cases, and one study found they are dying sooner, don't they have a reason to be resentful?”⁸² While Sanders seemed shocked at the suggestion, Clinton responded affirmatively validating the sense of discontentment, threat, and impending deprivation that fuels the discourse of white decline.

⁸⁰ Case and Deaton, “Rising Morbidity and Mortality in Midlife among White Non-Hispanic Americans in the 21st Century.”

⁸¹ Olga Khazan, “Middle-Aged White Americans Are Dying of Despair,” The Atlantic, November 4, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/11/boomers-deaths-pnas/413971/>; Similar articles published in The Atlantic and The Washington Post include “Why Are So Many Middle-Aged White Americans Dying - The Atlantic,” accessed May 30, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/01/middle-aged-white-americans-left-behind-and-dying-early/433863/>; “A Group of Middle-Aged Whites in the U.S. Is Dying at a Startling Rate - The Washington Post,” accessed August 23, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/a-group-of-middle-aged-american-whites-is-dying-at-a-startling-rate/2015/11/02/47a63098-8172-11e5-8ba6-ccc48b74b2a7_story.html.

⁸² “Transcript”; “Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders Discuss White People Problems at Democratic Debate.”

This entitled resentment reaches a fever pitch in memes like #TakeUsDown and undergirds its conflicted strategy. Perhaps the spread of this sentiment is to be expected. As Craig and Richeson point out, exposure to the idea that whites will become a minority is perceived as a threat to their social and political status and results in increased conservatism.⁸³ The sheer ubiquity of this projection in mainstream media outlets could perhaps account for the indignant rejection of feelings of guilt or shame and the dismissal of charges of racial bias that run through #TakeUsDown.⁸⁴ At the same time, Maharidge and Hill have detailed how the prospect of a white minority has fueled a sense of paranoia that whiteness is under attack.⁸⁵

PRACTICAL VS THEORETICAL REASON: DEBATES AROUND INTELLIGIBILITY

I argue that the crisis of whiteness is best understood as a combined crisis of intelligibility and crisis of hegemony. That is, the new strategies being developed to reassert white supremacy at many different levels are functionally unintelligible to the principles of supremacy. I draw the notion of a crisis of intelligibility from the work of Jonathan Lear. According to Lear, a crisis of intelligibility is meant to mark a particular kind of impossibility, “a peculiar kind of ontological issue: the possibility that the intelligibility of concepts with which one has lived, understood oneself, others, and one’s world might cease to be viable.” In order to illustrate this, Lear uses the example of the Crow, a nomadic Native American tribe from what is now the northwest United

⁸³ Craig and Richeson, “On the Precipice of a ‘Majority-Minority’ America Perceived Status Threat From the Racial Demographic Shift Affects White Americans’ Political Ideology.”

⁸⁴ On Being Post-Fact: The question of white decline is one which circulates as popular discourse. The major news sources cited above may present the conversation a journalistic way, but there is no shortage of popular commentary in the articles’ comments sections or on independent websites, public discussion forums, and private newsfeeds in terms much more explicit about the dire state of whiteness.

⁸⁵ Maharidge, “The Coming White Minority,” 1996; Hill, *After Whiteness*.

States. With the spread of US colonialism, the removal of the Crow from their lands to reservations, and the newer extinction of the buffalo, their traditional way of life ceased to make sense. As Plenty Coups, the last Crow chief described, “When the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened.”⁸⁶

Lear explains that for the Crow, it is not that “nothing happened” because they stopped living, but because all of the practical elements, performances, notions of culture, concepts, and modes of meaning had been wiped out with their traditional way of life. Importantly, this is not a failure of comprehension. Rather, “the possibility that we are investigating – namely that the entire range of possibilities ceases to make sense as ways to live – was not itself within that range. The Crow had a vivid idea of what it would be to be defeated in battle, decimated, destroyed, taken into slavery, and so on, but they had no idea what it would be for their way of life to cease making sense.”⁸⁷ The claim made by the larger discourse of white decline, in which #TakeUsDown takes part, is that with the shift in demographics and the removal of markers of Western history, the American way of life will cease to make sense because the originators of American life—European descendants—will not only become a minority but will face active discrimination and social degradation, and have their traditions and institutions perverted and eliminated. However, the threat to the understanding of white supremacy this actually poses is to make the notion of supremacy itself stop making functional sense. In order for whites to be the victims of racial power, whiteness must not occupy the dominant position in the taxonomic hierarchy of race. But to return to the point made by Hesse, whiteness emerges through the European colonial project as an

⁸⁶ Lear, “What Is a Crisis of Intelligibility?,” 142.

⁸⁷ Lear, 151–52.

organizing force whose power is derived from the authority to organize racial life.⁸⁸ Importantly, this is an articulation of whiteness as a formation of power, not as a set of phenotypic traits or even strict genealogies. It positions whiteness as a modern invention whose central function is to fortify the colonial project and secure its economic profitability. Whiteness has an almost utilitarian relationship to power—as Theodore Allen illustrates in *The Invention of the White Race*, whiteness is a rather flexible concept that may be conferred or rescinded and applied strategically for different political moments and climes. This flexibility is also what makes it productive; of different non-white racial categories in different colonial territories, of social habituations, of totalizing epistemologies and cosmologies like globalization or Manifest Destiny. Therefore, for whiteness to claim a position of victimhood within the structure it institutes would be to relinquish its instituting authority and signal the end of its own formation and the rise of a different, antagonistic hegemony.

Importantly, a crisis of intelligibility is not a psychological problem. Lear makes a comparison to the institution of marriage, but we may apply this more broadly to political institutions of the West. Psychological problems of intelligibility cover the possibility that one may wake up one day to realize he no longer loves his wife and has no idea why he is married to her; or he may wake up one day with a different set of ideas about the reasons to get married in the first place such that he no longer understands why people have chosen to do so. However, as a practical problem, Lear specifies that a crisis of intelligibility around the institution of marriage would be to wake up one day and find that marriages no longer exist, they are banned from being performed, one is no longer recognized in any way either by the state or by those around you as being married

⁸⁸ Hesse, “Escaping Liberty.”

or for having been married. In this instance, “because of a breakdown in the form of life, the concepts that had been embedded in that form of life – and which depended on the viability of the form of life for their own intelligibility – can no longer be used to make her own life intelligible.”⁸⁹ Similarly, to think this through whiteness, a psychological crisis would be akin to suddenly not understanding what whiteness means in Western society, or what a racial structure is and where one fits into it. This is a theoretical problem that may be solved semantically in the way “the West” as a term was arrived at to solve the problems of the meaning of white supremacy in the late 19th century. But a true crisis of intelligibility suggests that at a certain point, whiteness would carry none of the force through which it instituted itself, it would buttress none of the institutions that reinforce it, and functionally, “Western” society would cease to be dictated through racial hierarchies in the way it has been constantly organized since its inception because it would be impossible to make recourse to the notion of racial superiority tied to whiteness. This is a practical problem that the current spread of a discourse of decline threatens to manifest by claiming a position of racial victimhood so ardently.

To elaborate the difference between what is exactly meant by a theoretical problem as opposed to what constitutes a practical problem, it is worth quoting Lear at length:

The point about unintelligibility as a practical concern is not that I can make no sense of my past, or my people’s past, of my culture’s past theoretically understood; it is that I can make no sense of my past, or my people’s past, or my culture’s past practically understood: that is, as a way of going forward in my deliberations, choices, actions, aspirations, and

⁸⁹ Lear, “What Is a Crisis of Intelligibility?,” 144.

identifications. If we are thinking of unintelligibility as a phenomenon of practical reason, the past need not be incomprehensible to me as a theoretical matter. My past may be intelligible to me theoretically speaking – I can make sense of what we were all up to – but what has become unintelligible is how to live that past into this future.⁹⁰

Lear makes a helpful distinction to clarify the problem of intelligibility—that is the difference between practical and theoretical reason. He asserts that too often questions of practical reason are assumed to be, at their core, theoretical problems such that semantic changes or shifts could cover the distance between previous practical contexts and preserve intelligibility. In terms of theoretical reason, a crisis of intelligibility suggests that one is no longer able to remember and make sense of the past. This makes it quite difficult to identify anything as a crisis of intelligibility because it would be nearly impossible to rationalize past events or action even if they were impossible to repeat.⁹¹ However, as a problem of practical reason, what becomes impossible is the ability to render oneself intelligible in terms of one’s past *into the future*. “This form of unintelligibility does not imply that the past is incomprehensible to me as a matter of contemplation: it means that the concepts with which one had hitherto rendered oneself and others intelligible are no longer available to do that work.”⁹² He notes this is not a question of semantic meaning, but rather a

⁹⁰ Lear, 147.

⁹¹ Indeed critics of Lear’s notion argue this very point, see Jonathan Lear, “Response to Hubert Dreyfus and Nancy Sherman,” *Philosophical Studies* 144, no. 1 (March 31, 2009): 81–93, doi:10.1007/s11098-009-9369-7.

⁹² Lear, “What Is a Crisis of Intelligibility?,” 147.

problem of grounding future performances in the conceptual landscape which make them meaningful. Indeed, Lear notes that this is what separates performance from “dramatic mimesis.”⁹³

This distinction is central to analyzing the larger question of whiteness making use of strategies of power which also seem to threaten its power. In the first place, approaching this crisis as a problem of theoretical reason allows for many significant shifts to be written off as failures of comprehension or consciousness. Indeed, traditional notions in whiteness studies are unable to keep whiteness fully visible in its moment of reconstitution for this reason. Analyzing #TakeUsDown using the theory of George Yancy’s, the meme would only make the case for the insidiousness of whiteness. In his book, *Look, A White!: Philosophical Essays on Whiteness*, Yancy dedicates a chapter to reading whiteness as a kind of ambush that takes over even the most conscious allies if the circumstances are difficult enough.⁹⁴ By this logic, the participants of #TakeUsDown are “ambushed” by their own whiteness. For Yancy, the white mind is so overrun with racist vitriol that reason ultimately fails. The deep attachment to notions of white victimization and the disingenuous deployment of anti-racist discourse can be dismissed as evidence that white anger is powerful enough to incite erratic and illogical behavior that the white person himself, in this case, may not even be able to explain. It may be tempting to use #TakeUsDown to validate the thesis that whites will express their whiteness through racially violent means at one point or another, or that the white mind dispenses with logic and reason willingly when faced with a racially charged situation. However, all these interpretations assume a traditionally understood relationship between whiteness, race, and racism in which race is a

⁹³ Lear, 145.

⁹⁴ Yancy, *Look, A White!*, 183–85.

guaranteed and naturalized object, and racism is a kind of ideology, or sometimes performance, which inheres in white identity.⁹⁵

Reading this for the distinction between practical and theoretical reason, a central problem of whiteness studies emerges—that is, its insistence on reading race, and therefore racism, as a problem of theoretical reason. In “Nature Culture and Race,” Robert Bernasconi outlines the history of anti-racism discourses tracing the various justifications and explanations for the concept of race. A huge shift in this discourse came when scientific methods proved there was no biological ground for race, and race was not an inheritable trait. In his sketch of this turning point, Bernasconi astutely points out the general blind spot: “with biology removed from definition of race, the idea is that it has no scientific basis; racism seen as epistemological error: it cannot be legitimate to discriminate against someone on the basis of what does not exist.”⁹⁶ In terms of theoretical reason, once the theories which gave meaning to the events of the past are debunked, the past should no longer intelligible—things may have happened, but the reasons for which they happened existed only as error and now have no explanation. The adherence to theoretical reason within whiteness studies reveals its incapability to not only fully explain future developments of race and racial violence, but suggests that much of the work of whiteness studies actively obscures our ability to understand how whiteness operates.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ This is perhaps even more problematic for whiteness and critical race studies than it is for mainstream media, as it purports to have an account of whiteness and race which rejects biological, ideological, and representational models, and yet relies directly upon them like Lipsitz, Omi and Winant, Fields, Yancy, Roediger, and Gilroy.

⁹⁶ Bernasconi, “Nature, Culture, and Race,” 12.

⁹⁷ The notion of practical reason, however, highlights the workings of whiteness to the extent that it is possible to read Dreyfus’s critique of Lear (and Lear’s own analysis, for that matter) for its lack of attention to whiteness. They fail to explicitly account for the role of whiteness in either instance—even as the Crow example is about the effects of western colonialism. Lear formulates the phenomenon of unintelligibility as if it could be totally generalizable to describe not only the

The problem with traditional theories in whiteness studies is the way these supposedly dismissible actions accumulate as a rather large remainder in the functioning of whiteness. That is not to say that they are not accorded a place in whiteness studies. They are perhaps too easily accounted for in that they are deemed irrational. It is in the quick designation of irrational behavior, of the eruption of passion, of the accidental arrival that they can be explained as unproblematic in the schema of white power. If they are irrational, then the ways they conflict with traditional notions of white power are not interesting or material to the functioning of white dominance. This is the crossroads of practical and theoretical reason. The irrational is a question of theoretical reason. It is a conflict of meaning, a contradiction in a semantic system. The idea that whiteness as a system of power has been afforded a certain amount of irrational leeway demonstrates the extent to which whiteness studies in general has been oriented towards an analysis of theoretical reason. If part of the way whiteness works is to be irrational, then as an operative power strategy from the colonial era through the present the most one can insist is that it has at least maintained some sense of cohesiveness with a certain remainder of inconsequential action. However, approached from the perspective of practical reason, those irrational and ugly and surprising and eruptive moments of white violence are part of a larger logic that tends toward the continued execution of a system of white power.

practices of extinction faced by the Crow, but in Dreyfus's application the "collapse of western culture," and that there would not exist radical differences in both the development and later effects of unintelligibility for these two instances. In the quick comparison, questions of power are easily dismissed and the language of "the collapse of a civilization" is easily couched in terms of the natural life and death of civilizations generally, not in terms of western expansion, the enforcement and development of extinction and the question of the blanching, bleaching effect of whiteness as theorized by David Batchelor's *Chromophobia* (p. 10). Whiteness is therefore central to the notion of and the possibilities for interpreting these modern crises of intelligibility, their conditions of possibility, and their attending upheavals of power.

CRISIS OF HEGEMONY

Hegemony and crisis of hegemony are concepts Stuart Hall develops from the work of Antonio Gramsci. Hegemony describes a kind of power exerted by the state as a “process of the coordination of the interests of a dominant group with the general interests of other groups and the life of the state as a whole.”⁹⁸ Within a hegemonic order, a ruling group is established, called a historical bloc, that manufactures the consent of the rest of the society’s subordinated classes. In the manufacture of consent, the historical bloc need not overtly impose their interests over society through force or coercion. Instead, social discipline is articulated as an element of self-control, and the mechanisms of control of a hegemonic society become increasingly self-regulating.

A crisis of hegemony signals a kind of irregularity in the system of consent and a fracturing of hegemonic administration’s self-governing automaticity. Hall identifies this breaking point, describing:

If in moments of 'hegemony' everything works spontaneously so as to sustain and enforce a particular form of class domination while rendering the basis of that social authority invisible through the mechanisms of the production of consent, then moments when the equilibrium of consent is disturbed, or where the contending class forces are so nearly balanced that neither can achieve that sway from which a resolution to the crisis can be promulgated, are moments *when the whole basis of political leadership and cultural authority becomes exposed and contested.*⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Hall, *Policing the Crisis*, 217.

⁹⁹ Hall, 217.

Hall's articulation of a "crisis of hegemony" deals directly in terms of practical reason—the central question is how the state is able to continue functioning in light of the masses who have "put forward demands which, taken together, albeit not organically formulated, add up to a revolution."¹⁰⁰ I argue that the way racial victimization is mobilized is in fact revolutionary for white racial hegemony. Indeed, as #TakeUsDown protests the state's capitulation to those who wanted the Confederate flag removed, it demonstrates that at the center of the current crisis is a "problem of authority" which "directs us to a different level of analysis, a different terrain of social organisation: as Gramsci put it: "A 'crisis of authority' is spoken of: this is precisely the crisis of hegemony, or general crisis of the State."¹⁰¹ So the first step in reading a crisis of intelligibility together with a crisis of hegemony is to see their mutual orientation towards process, towards practical management and administration, towards the future possibility to organize and elaborate social life in a moment of political rupture. A crisis of hegemony erupts in the face of the question of how power will be performed and carried out in institutions into the future.

However, the question here of political rupture is complicated. Despite the claims made on the surface of the discourse of white decline, the dominance of whiteness is not being threatened merely by the increase of a non-white population. The very modes of white violence that are emerging in this discourse that emphasize white victimization are contributing to the *revelatory* aspects of the crisis of hegemony. This results from the complexity of the strategy—it acknowledges that in the post-Civil Rights, post-colonial era, complaints of racial victimization are taken seriously, legislatable even, and so tries to co-opt the ability to claim victimization of this kind. However, as this strategy hinges on increasing the attention paid to the victim, it also

¹⁰⁰ Hall, *Stuart Hall*, 215.

¹⁰¹ Hall, *Policing the Crisis*, 177.

makes whiteness and the guiding principles of racial hegemony direct objects of scrutiny. This fuels the crisis as Hall notes, “such moments are also marked by a process of 'unmasking'. The masks of liberal consent and popular consensus slip to reveal the reserves of coercion and force on which the cohesion of the state and its legal authority finally depends; but there is also a stripping away of the masks of neutrality and independence which normally are suspended over the various branches and apparatuses of the State.”¹⁰² Whiteness depends directly on its association with neutrality, unmarkedness, and independence for its authority. The crisis for whiteness is not just about the potential upheaval in white power; here whiteness is forced to contend with a level of visibility inimical to its very nature as an agent of social control.¹⁰³

Yet, the current crisis also signals a new stage of development in the strategies of white hegemony, which is that crisis itself may indeed be the latest tool to maintain white supremacy. As Hall notes, “There is nothing more crucial, in this respect, than Gramsci's recognition that every crisis is also a moment of reconstruction; that there is no destruction which is not, also, reconstruction; that, historically nothing is dismantled without also attempting to put something new in its place; that every form of power not only excludes but produces something. That is an entirely new conception of crisis and of power.” As whiteness struggles with the conflict between the attention that results from the discourse of white decline or other performances of racial victimization and the unmarked universalism through which it retains power, the question to which we must remain oriented is: What is it that whiteness seeks to establish from this precarious

¹⁰² Hall, 217.

¹⁰³ For an articulation of whiteness's universality authorized through invisibility, universality, and unmarkedness, see especially Dyer, *White*; Joseph Pugliese, *Biometrics: Bodies, Technologies, Biopolitics* (Routledge, 2010); Kincheloe et al., *White Reign*; Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (WW Norton & Company, 2010).

strategy? In the complex tension between consent and coercion that undergird crises of hegemony John Clarke asserts, “the state in the United States and the United Kingdom has extended its power by laying claim to the threats of an almost permanent social crisis: the anxiety inducing cocktail of crime, terrorism, dislocation, disorder, incivility, and people out of place (the homeless, the undocumented, racially marked migrants in general). This looks like the *normalization* of the ‘exceptional state’ or the Law and Order state.”¹⁰⁴ The interesting turn in this crisis of hegemony is that the upheaval is driven in general by the racial ruling class, albeit its populist contingent. But in the way the discourse of white decline circulates through the now mundane channels of social media, there is a critique made by the Twitter users of #TakeUsDown that the state is not sufficiently managing the modern threats it increasingly identifies. Ultimately, in the profound alignment of consent in the project of identifying social or political threats and claiming a growing plight, the popular expression of consent drives the crisis.

CRISIS OF WHITENESS: A GENEALOGY OF THE DISCOURSE

This most recent bout of crisis is not the only time a rhetoric of a ‘crisis of whiteness’ has emerged in Western discourse. Alistair Bonnett writing extensively on discourses of a crisis of whiteness locates the earliest mass crises to the late 19th century. It begins at the supposed height of white supremacist sentiment when just as it is suspected that the “‘culmination of white ascendancy’” will have to be followed by decline, Ethiopia defeats Italian forces in Adowa in 1896. This was followed by several other military defeats and reorganizations of alliance, including Russia’s defeat by Japan in 1905 that later prompted a formal alliance between Britain and

¹⁰⁴ Clarke, “Of Crises and Conjunctures,” 348.

Japan.¹⁰⁵ According to Basil Matthews, a missionary publicist, “the legend of white invisibility was shattered.”¹⁰⁶ With the outbreak of WWI, European nations were riddled with anxiety over how the great “white civil war” looked to the colonies. In response to these shifts, the discourse of white crisis was quickly counterbalanced with a literature of white supremacy. It was out of this literature, Bonnett argues, bound up with anxieties around the future of colonial power, health, education and politics at home, and the tension between the desire for racial solidarity among European nations and the race for control of resources, that a conception of the West began to be articulated in the place of whiteness and white supremacy, as the marker of social solidarity.¹⁰⁷ From the domestic point of view, the problems to overcome were many: generalized feelings of anxiety, declining health and birth rates, a growing white poor and underclass who are not only undereducated and malnourished but unfit for the privileges of whiteness and incapable of carrying forward the mantle of white supremacy. They were not sufficiently superior specimens. Thus, they were a poor synecdoche for the white race, lacking in sufficient race allegiance, prone to miscegenation or desire for the racial other, feminists, or communists lacking in the “racial instinct.”¹⁰⁸ But as a guiding concept, the notion of the West could efficiently include poor whites in a system of privilege and belonging, history and political values. “The West is defined as a form of spirit, or consciousness, that is intellectually far-seeing and militarily enforced.”¹⁰⁹

The notion of the West subsumed many of the anxieties of white decline that, although it still tends toward crisis, broadened the possible investment in the supremacy of Europe through the

¹⁰⁵ Bonnett, “Whiteness and the West,” 18–19.

¹⁰⁶ Bonnett, “Whiteness in Crisis,” 39.

¹⁰⁷ Bonnett, “Whiteness and the West,” 21.

¹⁰⁸ Bonnett, “Whiteness in Crisis,” 40.

¹⁰⁹ Bonnett, “Whiteness and the West,” 24.

figure of the Westerner who “can and does sometimes operate as a substitute term for ‘white,’ [but] also operates within new landscapes of power and discrimination that have new and often fragile relationships with the increasingly widely repudiated language of race.”¹¹⁰ Under the mantle of the West, the conflict about who would control colonial land and who would control which resources could be safely resolved. However, this was not a fight to maintain colonialism as a system or maintain the idea of empire itself. So we may see how this first crisis of whiteness was argued and resolved at the level of theoretical reason. A new term was created—the West—which enriched the semantic field and therefore resolved the problem of the *who* in the colonial system of power, both in terms of who was the appropriate target of colonial aggression and who were the controlling classes entitled to enjoy colonial power. But it was not a problem that went so far as to question *whether* the colonial as the organizing matrix of power and modern life would be the mode through which society was constructed.

Since the period of the West began, there have been backlashes against increased rights for colonial and non-white populations, but those backlashes have intensified building to this latest one. Indeed, the present moment is marked by the increase in sentiment that whites suffer worsening racial discrimination¹¹¹ and precipitates what Roger Hewitt calls “white backlash”¹¹²—a phenomenon of which #TakeUsDown is one of the latest developments. White backlash denotes both the increased sense that whites are experiencing racial victimization as well as the kinds of

¹¹⁰ Bonnett, 18.

¹¹¹ Norton and Sommers, “Whites See Racism as a Zero-Sum Game That They Are Now Losing,” 215.

¹¹² Hewitt, *White Backlash and the Politics of Multiculturalism*.

violent outbursts in reaction to this fear, ranging from increased physical violence against non-whites and cries of “whiteness-under-assault.”¹¹³

Building on Hewitt, Matthew Hughey outlines three waves of white backlash from the 1960’s to the present. They are explicit attempts to restore or reify white privilege and power in the US as part of whiteness’s hegemonic drive. These periods of white backlash make recourse to what Stuart Hall identifies as traditional “repertoires of domination.”¹¹⁴ These include an increase in state and state-sanctioned violence in the defense of traditional values and ways of life. Thus, white backlash often encompasses rather blatant forms of violence, whether outmoded or not. That is, in attempting to regain its full authority, forces of whiteness demonstrate and reassert themselves through increased aggression against non-whites.

The first wave was a direct response to the struggle over segregation and access to Civil Rights. Spanning the 1960’s and 70’s, these concerns manifested in response to hiring practices during a period of de-industrialization, increased immigration, and “equal opportunity” programs which were interpreted as “unfair handouts to a dark and dangerous underclass that possessed neither the moral compass nor the resources to use them correctly.”¹¹⁵ The second wave of white backlash developed across the 1980’s and 90’s during which discourses of racial inclusion, multiculturalism, diversity, and identity politics challenged the cohesiveness of white masculinity and threatened the loss of white male privilege.

The third built off the anxious momentum of the second and coalesced around the election of Barack Obama in 2008. Backlash in this third wave manifested in the founding or revival of

¹¹³ Hughey, “White Backlash in the ‘Post-Racial’ United States,” 726.

¹¹⁴ Hall, *Stuart Hall*, 217.

¹¹⁵ Hughey, “White Backlash in the ‘Post-Racial’ United States,” 722.

ultra-right wing, nativist groups (Tea Party, the Birthers, and various KKK branches) and in the uptake of their discourses in popular media. This current wave of white backlash has refined the more diffuse anxieties of the first and second. As Hughey notes, “The repeated mainstream questioning of the legitimacy of Obama’s citizenship reflect – and even produce – a sense of political legitimacy and quasi-religious calling endemic to the questioning of how someone deemed ‘alien’, ‘un-American’ or simply ‘black’ could subvert the implicit white supremacist social contract to become president.”¹¹⁶

The second and third waves of white backlash mark the beginnings of what I am conceptualizing as the current crisis of whiteness. They are distinguishable from the first wave in that they are accompanied by discourses of whiteness-under-assault that spark the “ascendency of a new and powerful figure in US culture: the white male as victim.”¹¹⁷ This is evident in the increasing invocation of “white oppression,” and the “End of White America” in which whites are helpless to adequately address or make others recognize the racism they face for fear of being labeled racist themselves, nor are they capable of engaging in the “same kinds” of community building strategies and identity politics available to communities of color.

However, the scene that comes into view, then, is one in which cries of white oppression run alongside the increasing visibility of pervasive and extreme white violence against non-white bodies. Indeed, the conflict between the #blacklivesmatter movement and the immediate #alllivesmatter response captures the tension of the strategies of white backlash in the present moment. The #alllivesmatter response tries to equate the response of protest in the face of lethal

¹¹⁶ Hughey, 723.

¹¹⁷ Savran, *Taking It like a Man*, 4; Hughey, “White Backlash in the ‘Post-Racial’ United States,” 723.

force with the feeling of being deprioritized discursively. Even if the BLM movement were making the claim that *only* black lives mattered, the offense of this claim does not compare to the routinized violence and often life-threatening conditions produced by police. In this way, the current crisis of whiteness in the United States echoes and updates that of the late 19th century in its insistence on the semantic. The difference is that this latest crisis also performs a conflicting racial position as it explicitly marks itself as a victim of racial violence.¹¹⁸ There are anxieties around the white working class, rising suicide rates, shortened life span among middle aged white men or what have been labeled “despair deaths;” but there are also gripes over questions of political and social order in education opportunities and the allocation of Affirmative Action funds, and, most directly, the popular discourse of a “War on Whites,” alternatively referred to as “Obama’s War on Whites.”¹¹⁹ #TakeUsDown participates in the third wave of white backlash directly, with its explicit focus on

¹¹⁸ Instances of police violence and the arguments responsible for the acquittal of white police officers form a large body of such examples. These include episodes ranging from the Rodney King beating to the recent verdict in Cleveland, Ohio in which an officer was acquitted of manslaughter. The actions in question were described in the New York Times in the following way: “Officer Brelo, 31, was one of 13 officers who fired 137 rounds at Timothy Russell and his passenger, Malissa Williams, who were killed after a chase through the area on Nov. 29, 2012. Officer Brelo fired his Glock 17 pistol 49 times, including at least 15 shots after he reloaded and climbed onto the hood of Mr. Russell’s 1979 Chevrolet Malibu and the other officers had stopped firing.” Evident of the range of ways the current crisis of whiteness manifests is his lawyer’s response to the verdict: “Patrick A. D’Angelo, one of Officer Brelo’s lawyers, said his team was “elated” with the verdict, and he blamed an “oppressive government” for bringing the charges. “We stood tall; we stood firm,” Mr. D’Angelo said, “because we didn’t do anything illegal. We didn’t do anything wrong.”” (NYT — http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/24/us/michael-brelo-cleveland-police-officer-acquitted-of-manslaughter-in-2012-deaths.html?smid=nytnow-share&smprod=nytnow&_r=1)

¹¹⁹ Case and Deaton, “Rising Morbidity and Mortality in Midlife among White Non-Hispanic Americans in the 21st Century.” See Deaton and Case, 2015 or Squires and Blumenthal 2016 in the Commonwealth Fund, as well as the reporting of the findings of these cases in the New York Times and the Atlantic. For Affirmative Action scandals, see viral stories like the Abigail Fisher case in 2008. For “War on Whites” rhetoric, Alabama congressman Mo Brooks’s comments were circulated in a viral meme in 2014.

white men, but heightens the peril of the victim. Users claim to be resisting an ongoing “#WhiteGenocide.” This new strategy of power poses a problem for whiteness as co-opting the charge of racism simultaneously makes whiteness vulnerable to visibility. As established in the foundational work in whiteness studies, whiteness draws its power from its ability to define itself along the lines of invisibility and neutrality,¹²⁰ even going so far as to symbolize itself through death, the ultimate unknowable entity in the Western imaginary.¹²¹ This suggests that for whiteness there is an inverse relationship between intelligibility and visibility—the less visible whiteness is, the more cohesively it operates, and the more firmly it maintains its power. But whiteness’s insistence that it is the victim of a racist, genocidal attack requires making whiteness and its operation available to a level of scrutiny and visibility that is inimical to its operation. It is as though by pushing the central concept of supremacy towards a limit of practical unintelligibility, this strategy initiates the stage of revealing the mechanism of power that Hall notes is central to a crisis of hegemony. It is around the challenge that visibility or revelation poses, motivated by this new strategy of power of claiming victimization, that conventional definitions of whiteness, race, and racism are thrown into crisis.

FROM ROOF TO McINNES AND BEYOND

The crisis of whiteness, which is a twin crisis of intelligibility and hegemony, is also one that plays out across a digital divide in the mechanisms or strategies of asserting whiteness. By this I mean that instead of being a smooth transition, reconfiguring the parameters of white power

¹²⁰ McIntosh, “White Privilege”; Frankenberg, *Displacing Whiteness*; Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters*; Rasmussen et al., *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*; DiAngelo, “White Fragility.”

¹²¹ Dyer, *White*.

to account for the digital age has produced contradictory courses of action. The norms of social media allow for vast and/or anonymous participation, which do not give rise to a straightforward reproduction of power or social relations as the competing orientations towards the digital between Dylann Roof and Gavin McInnes serve to exemplify.

Dylann Roof, whose actions sparked the chain of events that lead to the viral hashtag of #TakeUsDown had a website called lastrhodesian.com where he posted photos of himself with white supremacist paraphernalia and published his views on race. Roof detailed that he came to believe in white supremacy through the information he found online—through various white supremacist websites, like that of the Council of Conservative Citizens that reported on the perils facing the West, the different strains of white nationalism, and the countless achievements of white civilization that were no longer acknowledged in schools.¹²² He was motivated to seek out that information during the Trayvon Martin case when his curiosity about who Martin was lead him to google and eventually to search “black on White crime.”¹²³ These results reportedly changed Roof permanently and made him an active adherent to the cause of white nationalism.

As Jesse Daniels details in her work on cyber-racism, many white supremacists were “early adopters” to the internet and viewed it as a useful tool to disseminate white nationalist and white supremacist ideas.¹²⁴ They therefore have a robust digital archive of content that displays varying degrees of extremism. One shocking strategy Daniels focuses on in her work are what she calls “cloaked websites”—sites that present conservative retellings of history or current events. Cloaked websites are meant to influence a reader to look for more content provided by similar sources, and

¹²² “Conservative Headlines,” <http://conservative-headlines.com/>.

¹²³ Roof, “Lastrhodesian-Manifesto.Pdf.”

¹²⁴ Daniels, *Cyber Racism*; Daniels, “Cloaked Websites”; Daniels, “Race and Racism in Internet Studies.”

essentially function as a gateway to get unsuspecting readers on the internet convinced of the virtue of a white supremacist agenda. Roof is an example of how white nationalist websites can be used to radicalize readers who may not have any real-world ties to white supremacist organizations.

However, Roof quickly became frustrated with the amount of time and attention white supremacists were expending on the internet. In the manifesto he wrote just before the Charleston shootings he lamented, “We have no skinheads, no real KKK, no one doing anything but talking on the internet. Well someone has to have the bravery to take it to the real world, and I guess that has to be me.”¹²⁵ The real-world presence of white supremacist action, Roof felt, was hindered by the move toward a space of cyber racism.

Rather than value the power of social media, cloaked websites, and conservative online news outlets to create converts in the same way Roof himself was radicalized, he saw the internet as a distraction that made online interaction seem as valuable to engage in as the violent defense or re-occupation of the white nation. Worse than that, Roof suggested, the prevalence of online activity weakened the courage of white supremacists to take any real action, making them prefer to just vent to each other digitally. It is then a significant tension in the development of strategies of white power that ultimately, the most widespread reaction Roof’s shooting spurred was the spread of a viral meme.

Despite the fact that Roof is a millennial, his style of white supremacist action is rather old guard and inflexible to the technological present. The popularity of McInnes’s backlash-meme suggests that not only is the digital a more plastic space in which to engage white supremacist activity, it offers more attractive sites of participation than the militant actions Roof hoped to

¹²⁵ Roof, “Lastrhodesian-Manifesto.Pdf.”

inspire. The key here is plasticity. Users circulated the meme #TakeUsDown with hashtags that profess all sorts of different allegiances. The implications of #TakeUsDown modified by #WhiteGenocide or #WarOnWhites, reads differently from #TakeUsDown tagged with #MensRights or no other hashtag at all. #TakeUsDown can be cast as a fight to retain history and restore pride in traditional kinds of masculine ventures that have been worn down by the laziness of contemporary consumer culture—#MensRights or #WGTOW (Whites Going Their Own Way) are indicative of this desire to return to classic masculinities. Modified by #WarOnWhites, #AmericanApartheid, or #WhiteGenocide, #TakeUsDown becomes one battle in the longer struggle to establish a white ethnostate from the multiculturally ravaged US and Europe. The distinction drawn here is not to argue whether these are drastically different positions, but rather to demonstrate the flexibility of participation afforded anyone sharing #TakeUsDown. Perhaps the user believes deeply in one or both of these positions; perhaps he thinks the meme is just funny or is titillated by contravening the norms of what he sees as “PC culture.” It’s hard to tell which, and it is almost impossible to prove either. The internet provides a point of low resistance to participation precisely because one’s participation need not be explained nor one’s intentions truly plumbed and revealed. The user is free to play the white nationalist, to get riled up about SJWs (Social Justice Warriors), to vent and complain and say “bad” things. It is a play with violent implications but low or no real accountability. Consider even during the rally in Charlottesville, “Unite the Right,” a young, alt-right protester who took off his shirt and hat and tried to hide any outward signs of being with the rally when he was physically confronted. Instead of welcoming violence, he complained that the rally to him was just about having fun, that being offensive was

fun for him, that he was “barely” a white supremacist.¹²⁶ He was not prepared to face any consequences for the practices of white supremacy and white nationalism having had free reign in the digital world.

The ultimate question is not just whether or not the digital is the new dominant site for the negotiation of whiteness in the 21st century. The question really is what characteristics the digital and norms of digital sociality lend that are new tools, more plastic frameworks with which to work out contradictory or paradoxical formations not easily carried out in real space. The opposition that arises in the approach by Dylann Roof and Gavin McInnes ultimately rests on the question of how whiteness’s relationship to power will be elaborated in the 21st century. If whiteness has, as they claim, fallen from a position of dominance, the courses of action they offer are different responses to that problem. Roof’s reaction is armed struggle that attempts to resolve the threat of decline through violent domination. McInnes’s tack recuperates decline, satirizes it, and returns the conversation to the digital realm where it may simultaneously gain new adherents and be passed off as a tasteless joke. The ambiguity is productive to reconcile the crisis of what racial hegemony might mean when the ruling racial class both denies its power and longs to assert it. What the digital provides is the space to inhabit both these positions simultaneously and, perhaps, as the rise of Donald Trump—often referred to as the Victim in Chief¹²⁷—evidences, make them feel less paradoxical.

¹²⁶ Hunt, “A Charlottesville White Supremacist Stripped Down to Escape Protesters and We Got It on Video.”

¹²⁷ Jones, “Donald Trump”; Diamond and Diaz, “Trump on Sex Assault Allegations.”

Chapter 2

FROM DU BOIS TO MASSUMI: TOWARDS A THEORY OF COLONIAL ONTOPOWER

THE MATTERS OF RACE

The conceptual genealogy that links William Edward Burghardt Du Bois to Brian Massumi is surprisingly direct. It isn't obvious from the disciplinary boundaries drawn around them in how their work has been taken up, however this, I would argue, is a consequence of broader assumptions about how differently situated knowledge is thought to be able to relate. But in this story, it doesn't even take all six degrees to get to the proverbial Kevin Bacon. Brian Massumi reads back through Deleuze and draws on Alfred North Whitehead to consider the relationship between the virtual and the actual, the perceptual and the potential.¹²⁸ Whitehead relied on William James's notions of radical empiricism and theorizations of relation in order to build his accounts of experience and sensation.¹²⁹ This lineage—James to Whitehead to Deleuze to Massumi (with perhaps the addition of Spinoza as the fountainhead for his propulsory question around what a body can do)—appears to be a rather complete foundation for what has taken shape as affect studies today. But William James was also one of W.E.B. Du Bois's most influential teachers and over time a close personal friend. The context in which Du Bois explicitly rooted his thinking is what differs him from the other names in this list. But considering Massumi's interest in using theories of affect to explain modern problems of power and the political valences of a body's

¹²⁸ Deleuze, *Spinoza, Practical Philosophy*; Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*; Whitehead, *Process and Reality*.

¹²⁹ James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*.

sensoria vis-a-vis the State,¹³⁰ I argue that Du Bois's and Massumi's projects are much more compatible than they seem at first glance. The thrust of this chapter, then, is to read Du Bois forward for what his critiques of colonialism and theorizations of the white world contribute to both affect theory and contemporary conceptualizations of race by pulling the contributions of Massumi back through an intellectual predecessor whose conditions for thought remain, in dominant areas of philosophy, mostly disavowed. I do this by reconsidering race as ontopower, repurposing Massumi's concept to argue that race is the modulation of a body's affective horizon according to the operative logic of the colonial.

For the remainder of this chapter then, I will explore the connection between these two lines of thought—race theory and affect theory—both as they are in the current literature and as I propose we read them together. As much as this is a critique of the marginalization of the role of affect in critical theories on race, it is also a critique of affect theory's superficial attention to race. In my contention that neither side has afforded the other enough rigorous, sustained attention, I will conclude by reading Du Bois's analysis for its striking reliance on questions of affect in both the approach to the concept and his suggestions for resistance. In this last endeavor, I hope to gesture towards a syncretic mode of analysis that takes race and affect as necessarily linked.

FEELING THROUGH DU BOIS

Scholars of race have traditionally approached W.E.B. Du Bois's iconic question, "How does it feel to be a problem?" as if its primary charge were to counter representations of the Negro

¹³⁰ Massumi, *Ontopower*; Massumi, *Semblance and Event*; Massumi, "Fear (The Spectrum Said)"; Massumi, "To Kill Is Not Enough."

that depict it as a problem.¹³¹ Indeed, Du Bois's own works like *The Study of Negro Problems* (2000) and *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) would suggest that the "problem" is the most important piece of the question. His sociological studies attempted to exonerate the Negro from the charge of "problem" by demonstrating that social and economic inequality stemmed from larger social prejudices rather than an inherent deficiency. This rhetoric should be recognizable as a very early strain of social constructivist theories. However, I read Du Bois's question for its suggestive emphasis on the role of feeling in the construction of problemness as one aspect of modern coloniality.

My guiding heuristic, "How does it feel to be a problem?" first appears in Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903. It is important to remember that his question appears at a critical moment in his intellectual career. Du Bois has lost faith in the ability of objective truth and empiricism to change popular opinion. Rather, he is beginning to be swayed by the power of propaganda and the idea that in order to change racial prejudice, one must be attendant to and manipulate the tendencies of a readership. Thus, his autobiographies¹³² do not function to reveal the minutia of his daily life or even provide his account of his life's most popular controversies. Rather, the point is to draw theory deep into the realm of feeling in order to slowly affect how his readers act by changing what they define as the limits of their actions or ability to act.

I draw my first example from *Darkwater*, published in 1920, where Du Bois describes his experience of visiting the Grand Canyon for the first time. At first, the canyon appears as a hole in the body of the earth, "a sudden void in the bosom of the earth, down into its entrails" (Du Bois 1920, 139). More than a hole, it is a lesion. Du Bois describes it as "a wound where the dull titanic

¹³¹ Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois Afro-Modern Political Thought in America*. most of his works have an autobiographical element, even *Dark Princess*¹³²

knife has turned and twisted in the hole, leaving its edges livid, scarred, jagged, and pulsing over the white, and red, and purple of its mighty flesh” (1920, 139). As he continues his description, the body he describes becomes unstable. No longer is it the earth that is the wounded body, but the canyon itself becomes the body. It speaks, it mocks; he asserts, “It is human” (1920, 139). The human-canyon-body gives an impression far beyond just *feeling alive*, by which I mean seeming alive. Rather, it exists, it exists in an impossible state of madness and dismemberment, altering and overtaking the reality of those who look at it. First, Du Bois describes that, “The mountains up-twirled, disbodied and inverted, stand on their peaks and throw their bowels to the sky” (1920, 139). Then he claims, “Ever the gorge lies motionless, unmoved, until I fear. It is a grim thing, unholy, terrible!” (1920, 139) The canyon is at once a living, moving body at the same time as it has always existed inanimately; it performs wonderous feats of violence that, instead of horrifying the viewer, entice him with the possibility of becoming one, as Du Bois finally draws the reader into the canyon with him insisting, “*You* stand upon their roots and fall into their pinnacles, a mighty mile” (1920, 139, emphasis added).

In the years between the canyon’s almost accidental “discovery” in 1869 and Du Bois’s account published in 1920, the canyon’s symbolic meanings shifted dramatically. Before 1869, maps of the United States were mostly empty where Arizona is now represented (Neumann 1999, 5). It was discovered by Major John Wesley Powell in an expedition that was shrouded in mystery. In July of 1869, newspapers covering Powell’s expedition reported that the whole party of explorers had died in the middle of the trip (Neumann 1999, 68). Although this proved to be false, the canyon’s ability to enchant certainly threatened to make this a reality for later explorers. Explorers and entrepreneurs quickly capitalized on the mystery and beauty of the canyon, setting up hotels and promoting tourism. As the canyon’s popularity expanded, it attracted the attention

of the US government who saw the potential to transform the canyon from a site of the Great Unknown into an iconic American symbol. By 1908, the Grand Canyon was a National Landmark, the power of its image quickly coming to represent an “indigenous monument of American culture”—note that this is a *white* indigeneity (Neumann 1999, 84). Claiming the Grand Canyon as uniquely American soothed pervading white anxieties around American cultural deficiency, bolstering nationalism and a sense of American unity (Neumann 1999, 97–98).

In this light, Du Bois’s thickly affective experience at the Grand Canyon opens the possibility for certain political advancements. The scene is not merely one of deep patriotic emotion. Du Bois’s experience demonstrates his *capacity* to participate in this political and cultural project of being an American, and it stands as a testament of his right to full social inclusion and enfranchisement. The canyon was a natural mystery seemingly as old as time itself; but it also provided a site where the physical matter of one’s body could find a material legacy, and through a profound eco-emotional bond, one could return to the beginning of time. If the Grand Canyon was a site of the eternal, its incorporation into the national imaginary as a monument extended US cosmology much farther than its historical beginnings. As much as the canyon represented the unknown, it was also a site of the frontier dream—importantly, at a time when the US frontier was rapidly vanishing. As an unknown which could be conquered and facilitate American expansion, the Grand Canyon physicalized an American ideal. In visiting this national monument and being so moved by it, Du Bois not only participates in American mythmaking, his vertiginous description demonstrates the *capacity* of his body to relate to the canyon, to be in total communion with it, totally American, a relation which withstands and willingly submits to the kinds of destruction the canyon threatens.

The chapter in which this account appears, “On Beauty and Death,” opens with a long meditation on the effects of segregation and racial discrimination, pointing out that these systems are man-made, not natural. Moving to his visit to the canyon, the passage is meant to demonstrate that his racial designation doesn’t hinder his ability to viscerally experience the Americanness reserved for the white subject; he is making the case for inclusion, although his case relies on first accepting the naturalization of the link between land and nation. While Du Bois may be critiquing the exclusion of blacks from the social and political fabric of the white American mainstream, in this moment he is not so much critiquing race itself, as much as he is trying to prove the constructedness of it. Reflecting back on this period in *Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois notes that for so long, his concern was “democracy and democratic development and upon the problem of the admission of my people into the freedom of democracy” (28 *Dusk*). What is so interesting about this passage then, is that in the anecdote, even without taking on race directly as his argument is fundamentally integrationist here, he is thinking about whiteness, and the encounter with the canyon that symptomizes the way race governs to inhibit and determine the affective possibilities of blackness, through a matrix of capacities and relation.

QUESTIONS OF AFFECT THEORY

Affect theorists have generally taken the approach of most western academia and treated race as an optional category of analysis in their accounts of modernity. Clare Hemmings (2006) suggests that the too eager adoption of affect as the new grounding of experience has allowed some affect theorists to uncritically dismiss the problems of racialized power.¹³³ Where race has not been

¹³³ Hemmings, “Invoking Affect.”

ignored, affect theory has treated race as a kind of body or object that generates intense feeling when we come in contact with it. In these kinds of studies, race necessarily appears as a self-evident object that in itself requires no extra attention. The worthwhile intent of this analytic move is to validate the idea that racialized encounters are highly charged and to draw legitimated attention to feeling in the system of racialization. But beyond an insistence on feeling, this move actually obscures the fact that race itself gains no specificity as a concept. And ultimately, beyond proving that the raced body feels, affect theories that deal with race tend to set up a kind of epiphenomenal relationship between race and affect. The conclusion is, they both happen and often together. Never has race been analyzed as an ontology of the modern world that is at once a kind of affective force and a structuring of affective attachment.

This is evident in the few scholars who deal explicitly with race and affect together, and in their methods function ultimately to maintain a gulf between the two concepts that prevents a radical rethinking of race. One such example is Ana Ramos-Zayas's work on the ways African American and Latino communities in Newark, NJ occupy the spaces of the city, vying for control over limited resources and navigating the affective landscapes produced by neoliberal economies.¹³⁴ In keeping with her ethnographic methodology, the affect and affective experiences in the work result from the race/classed identities her interlocutors claim and occupy. But this means that race is necessarily framed as a given thing for her interlocutors, and the affects they experience (anger, aggression, etc) emerge as they come into contact or competition with other, predefined groups. Most problematically, these predefined racial groups are neatly categorized along certain emotional states, such that, for example, anger and resentment are identifiable as

¹³⁴ Ramos-Zayas, *Street Therapists*; Ramos-Zayas, "Learning Affect, Embodying Race."

distinctly African American. Ultimately, while the kinds of affects her interlocutors experience may be influenced by the larger neoliberal economy, the question of race is localized to the pre-existing identity of the individual body. And most problematically for the level of scrutiny I am trying to apply to the concept of race, the categories which emerge in the analysis reinforce the vague understanding of race as something both biologically and socially based.

Sara Ahmed's phenomenological elaboration of 'orientation' in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) provides a more robust tool for thinking about the composition of social realities through the relations a body has to other bodies, human or non human. This is helpful to apply in theorizing race as something non-biological, but as constituted in the kinds of turns bodies make. However, her own account of race is rather detached from the question of power and racial rule. That is, the question of the turn itself is disassociated with questions of force. When Ahmed asserts that social differences can be defined as effects of how bodies inhabit space the idea of orientation appears as a phenomenon separate from the social difference it may or may not map onto.¹³⁵ In other words, it is as if orientation emerges from bodies themselves free of any coercive force; they are not oriented as a process of establishing and maintaining social difference.

Even more rare is affect theory writing that deals directly with whiteness. Ahmed again provides one of these rare examples with her article "The Phenomenology of Whiteness."¹³⁶ She very convincingly draws out the ways in which the bodies of whiteness include non-human bodies, namely, buildings and their particular arrangements of space. Quite productively her argument illustrates the ways in which the relationality of whiteness are constantly being performed and constantly orienting the body towards whiteness. However, whiteness ultimately finds its ground

¹³⁵ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 5.

¹³⁶ Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness."

in a biological definition of race, so that no matter how diffuse the phenomenological experience, it builds from the actions and governing modes of bodies that *look* white or are genealogically defined as European. This denies a certain complexity to the concepts of whiteness and race. Not only does it recenter the human body as the foundation for understanding race, it eliminates the possibility of bodies that don't look white to be complicit with a system of whiteness. Moreover, it obscures that complicity may be the very process by which bodies are constituted as white.

Generally, affect theorists assert that affect is prepersonal (Shouse) and unformed, unstructured potentials (Massumi). However, the tendency of many affect theorists is to then construct an account of affect that is divorced from questions of politics and power. This is often done fairly unevenly, and there are certain theorists who acknowledge its relevance to both politics and power. Some studies, like those on fear and threat, that theorize the circulation of affect in political situations or events, do explicitly embed affect in a broader reading of power (Massumi, Bertelstein and Murphy). These theorists argue that while affect may exist beyond the limits of discourse, the flows and activations of affect are politically important as they influence the types of political assemblages possible for a particular group or for a moment to realize (Flatley, Thrift, Cadman, Protevi). These thinkers of nonrepresentational theory and affect are committed to locating affect in the social and political realms, zooming between levels of the individual body (human or non-human) and the constellations of bodies or larger political assemblages which emerge at a macro-scale. And although they have no account of race itself, they can be read as articulating the workings of the Western political and the terrain (or nonrepresentational geography) of whiteness. My reading of affect theory then, looks at the field of affect theory to highlight the ways unmarked writing reveals something about the role of affect in white western

modernity, reading race, governance, and power into theories where they may be disavowed or absent.

For theorists like Ahmed, Masumi, or Bertelstein, affect itself is a tool to be harnessed and deployed—not only is it a technology of maintaining power, power is wielded on the terrain of affect. This strand of affect theory is useful to think through a set of forces or relations and orientations as the source for political and social phenomena. However it evades thinking about race directly and has treated race as an optional object for understanding the machinations of modern power (Massumi, Flatley, Bertelstein). For example, writing on the use of fear and threat as political tactics of conservative American politicians immediately following 9/11, Massumi makes no mention of the way threat becomes a central element in constructing Arabness as a set of bodies over which to re-exert white dominance. I would argue that threat, and the relational nature of a body's capacity to incite fear in bodies which must also perceive that fear, is constitutive of the designation of both Arab and white post-9/11; but it is in the potential to harm, the future capacity of action and impingement on the body, alongside the simultaneous vulnerability to particular kinds of white surveillance, detention, and violence that determines which bodies are Arab and which are not. It is to this affective horizon that extended objects become identified alongside the body and physical features, and are added as indexes of the relation between Arab and white, forming a kind of extended assemblage which is later taken as the source and explanation for racial profiling and other conventionally recognized doings of race (Puar, 2007).¹³⁷ My project combines the two approaches of affect theory and nonrepresentational theory in order to think about race as the modulation of capacities according to a colonial legacy which then

¹³⁷ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.

manifests in different kinds of assemblages, and opens the potential for new modes of relation. This focus highlights the relationship between whiteness and race itself. Rather than reading whiteness as the dominant race in whiteness studies, my project considers the conceptual rearrangement of understanding race to be a function of whiteness.

QUESTIONS OF WHITENESS STUDIES

As one of its primary concerns, this dissertation responds to the general undertheorization of whiteness. Whiteness studies generally accounts for the machinations of whiteness through its effects—that is through concepts of white privilege, white racism, ideologies of white supremacy, and representations of whiteness in white visual culture. Even where accounts conflate whiteness with the effect they interrogate, it is clear that whiteness itself looms outside these accounts, only obliquely defined. Lipsitz's (2006) or Harris's (1993) accounts suggest that whiteness *is* a kind of [white] privilege. Dyer's study of visual culture suggests that whiteness is somewhere in the [white] visual lexicon or emergent from the [white] gaze (Dyer 1997). Yancy's exploration locates whiteness in the racist behaviors and ideologies of [white] people (Yancy 2005, Yancy 2012). To repurpose the construction of Stuart Hall's compelling question: What is the *white* in white anything?¹³⁸ Whiteness studies tends to identify whiteness by the privilege, aesthetics, or racism of people who are *phenotypically* white. And as each of these accounts vehemently deny the scientific and biological validity of race, the mode of defining whiteness is subordinated within their arguments, ultimately leaving whiteness unmarked and unaddressed.

¹³⁸ My question parrots the question of Stuart Hall's 1993 piece, "What is this black in black popular culture?"

The role of phenotype or biology as the basis for understanding or identifying whiteness severely restricts the critical apparatus for understanding it. This is evident in the kinds of empiricist bias of each of the dominant effects of whiteness mentioned earlier: privilege, racism, and aesthetics. Privilege is quantified in legal, institutional, and economic advantages as a kind of property (Harris 1993). Where motivation becomes a necessary element of the arguments around whiteness, both in the desire to retain privilege at the expense of non-whites and in the more overtly violent actions that comprise racism, the evidence is ideological and discursive. That is, coherent if subconscious ideologies of supremacy are revealed or articulated in discursive displays—racial epithets and hate speech. The power of the discursive to determine the presence or absence of racism should not be underestimated. Indeed, Kimberle Crenshaw notes that “identifying the operation of racial power within discursive traditions that had been widely accepted as neutral and apolitical” was one of the first central aims of Critical Race Theory as an intellectual endeavor precisely because of the pervasive denial of the operation of race (Crenshaw 1995). Consider the shift in argument and evidence in the Zimmerman case at the assertion that race was not an issue or a factor in the shooting of Trayvon Martin. While "profiling" was permissible as a term, "racial profiling" was not, foreclosing the option of examining what exactly about Trayvon Martin was being profiled and how that motivated Zimmerman's actions. (Bloom 2013) The denial of racist beliefs or the dismissal of the relevance of race is powerful enough to reclassify racial bias as coincidence or circumstantial evidence, eviscerating its ability to reliably index racist ideology. This means that performances are only truly considered to be racism once they are discursively identified and validated. In the current modes of its theorization, racism not only becomes visible through the terrain of the discursive, from which an analogous ideology may be articulated, but it could be argued, it requires this terrain for its very being. Finally, the aesthetic power of whiteness

is maintained through modes of representation. At its most radical, this position would argue that the white gaze and visual lexicon determines not only representations of whiteness, but representations of the non-white as well. But ultimately, the aesthetic is supplementary to the previous two versions of whiteness—privilege and racism (Dyer 1997, Batchelor 2000).

The empiricist lens of whiteness studies, and in a large part critical race theory, does a lot to reveal structural inequality at the same time that it promotes a kind of “conditioned deafness” to alternate conceptions of race (Conquergood, 2002). On the dangers of texto- and scripto-centrism that characterizes the Western academy, Conquergood argues “What gets squeezed out by this epistemic violence is the whole realm of complex, finely nuanced meaning that is embodied, tacit, intoned, gestured, improvised, coexperienced, covert—and all the more deeply meaningful because of its refusal to be spelled out” (Conquergood 2002). It is this with this charge in mind that I attempt to weave together affect and critical race theory in order to develop a new language for theorizing whiteness.

My research draws from the conceptualizations of race and whiteness in the work of Barnor Hesse, which situates them within modern coloniality (2007, 2011, 2014), and affect theory in order to further interrogate the performance of race and whiteness's relationship to it. As Hesse notes, within the modern system of colonial race governance, whiteness is both a racial category and the organizer of racial categories (2007). As opposed to getting trapped in a tenuous chain of equivalencies in traditional models which elaborate race-whiteness-racism, thinking race through the system of the colonial and the mechanism of affect reveals the possibility of theorizing whiteness's relationship to itself in the dual position it occupies within its own power. Indeed, affect is most useful for its ability to theorize embodied relation in a sustained way. Fundamentally relational, affect "marks a body's belonging to a world of encounters" (Seigworth and Gregg, 2).

My dissertation draws from affect theory to account for the conditions and relations of the colonial "world of encounters" of race. I argue that race is *the modulation of a body's affective horizon, its capacity to affect and be affected by other bodies, according to its prescribed colonial legacy*. Here the horizon indicates a limit or the bounds of one's capacity to affect and be affected (Gadamer 2004). That is, the affective horizon of race is already partially determined by whiteness, including whiteness's own affective limits. The manipulation of affect elaborates Saldanha's formulation of the "virtuality of race." As he describes it, the notion of the "virtuality of race" attempts to account for the control of whiteness and race across seemingly impossible changes in context, time period, legal standing, and social organization (Saldanha 2006). I read Saldanha's formulation of the virtuality of race as the element that sustains racial rule as theorized by Goldberg. For Goldberg, racial rule locates race within the organization of the state and the foundation of Western modernity, arguing that the elaboration of the state will reinforce white dominance as a constitutive logic.

Linking the question of virtuality with Goldberg's theory which embeds the colonial and the question of white rule at the heart of Western sociality, my definition of race is guided by the work of Denise Ferreira da Silva who describes the relationship that undergirds the colonial division between European and non-European as *the affecting white* versus *the affectable other* (2007). Therefore, I theorize how on the one hand, the doing of race constitutes bodies as white, or constitutes bodies as properly functioning within a system of race governance regardless of phenotype or ideology; while on the other, whiteness creates for itself an affective horizon predicated on a one sided non-relation to other bodies, the denial of relation, facilitated by characterizations of whiteness as deathliness, ethereality, transparency, and immateriality. It is through this paradoxical non-relation that the system of white sociality obscures itself and the ways

that bodies traditionally not thought of as white, or not biologically identified as white, act in its interests by doing race.

In this affective formulation, race appears as an inherently performative, iterative process in which the boundaries of one's affective potentials must be constantly redrawn and negotiated. In short, an affective reading of race shifts it from being a socially constructed representational phenomenon to being a participatory, performative function that requires constant elaboration in relation to other bodies. Race is an affective event.

TOWARDS A THEORY OF COLONIAL ONTOPOWER

By the time he publishes *Dusk of Dawn*, he is fully invested in a critique and elaboration of the concept of race itself—the full title is *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward An Autobiography of A Race Concept*. Importantly, in the 20 years between *Darkwater* and *Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois's faith in propaganda deepens, and centrally informs his thinking. So I begin by addressing the question: what is propaganda meant to do? For Du Bois, it is supposed to shift something, to manipulate the ground of orientation and make possible or facilitate a realignment of the body of the viewer and the body of the object. This is the space of the deep relationality of affect.

In *Dusk of Dawn*, not only does Du Bois situate whiteness and the “white world” in a more consistently global context with an eye toward colonialism, the concept of race he outlines appears to be more amenable to the question of affect and relation than ever before. At the end of the chapter on “The Concept of Race,” Du Bois asserts, “Perhaps it is wrong to speak of it at all as ‘a concept’ rather than *as a group of contradictory forces, facts and tendencies*.” (133, emphasis mine) This is an intentional delineation of vocabulary. Forces. Tendencies. Here, Du Bois is pulling race out of the sphere of discourse, logic, and rational representation that we may associate with

the articulation of race *as a concept*, even as he is more concerned with the appearance of this concept globally as a defining fact of modernity. Instead, he is grounding race in a set of tensions, locating it in and across the resonating viscera between bodies that are bound up in a and in deed constitutive of a colonial system.

And returning to the body, we can also trace how in *Dusk of Dawn* the body appears more attuned than it did at the edge of the canyon to its [own modulation and] its own capacities in an enduring colonial formation. Du Bois is constantly revising the visual matrix with which he illustrates his work, so *Dusk of Dawn* presents an example quite different than the one in *Darkwater*. Instead of a canyon, a symbol of profound openness and depth both in time and space, Du Bois takes us into a cave. And at the mouth of this cave is a glass wall. If a canyon can be said to have an opposite, perhaps this wall is it; the only infinite properties of the wall are its height and length. It is almost a plane. There is no getting around it.

Revising all of the illustrative metaphors Du Bois has used to elucidate his theories of race, from the color line, to the veil, to the caul, this is now how he describes the “meaning of caste segregation”:

It is as though one, looking out from a dark cave in a side of an impending mountain, sees the world passing and speaks to it; speaks courteously and persuasively, showing them how these entombed souls are hindered in their natural movement, expression and development; how their loosening from prison would be a matter not simply of courtesy, sympathy, and help to them, but aid to all the world. One talks on evenly and logically in this way, but notices that the passing throng does not even turn its head, or if it does, glances curiously and walks on. It gradually penetrates the minds of the

prisoners that the people passing do not hear; that some thick sheet of invisible but horribly tangible plate glass is between them and the world. They get excited; they talk louder; they gesticulate. Some of the passing world stop in curiosity; these gesticulations seem so pointless; they laugh and pass on. They still either do not hear at all, or hear but dimly, and even what they hear, they do not understand. Then the people within may become hysterical. They may scream and burl themselves against the barriers, hardly realizing in their bewilderment that they are screaming in a vacuum unheard and that their antics may actually seem funny to those outside looking in. They may even, here and there, break through in blood and disfigurement, and find themselves faced by a horrified, implacable, and quite overwhelming mob of people frightened for their own very existence.

(Du Bois, 130-131)

Here the capacity to affect and be affected by other bodies is completely determined by the governance of race or the administering of caste segregation. The metaphorical physical barrier not only restricts these bodies in space, it means they are only heard in particular kinds of ways (if they are able to be heard at all); they are only seen in certain ways, have a very particular kind of access to the efficacy of representation—their affective horizon in their relation to the white world is fundamentally restricted. The horizon, far from being a symbol of expanse like the endlessness of the Grand Canyon in both time and space, is physicalized in this example, demonstrating that a horizon may also be, or perhaps is necessarily, a limit.

On the other side of the wall, the capacity for the white world to be affected by the black world is limited only to amusement or horror, should one succeed in breaking through the glass wall. For the white world, the wall sustains the illusion of a kind of distance between the bodies and suggests that perhaps the white world understands the non-white world as existing in a kind of non-relation to them. They are so permanently and forcefully removed, the relation between non-white and white need not be consistently felt.

It may seem counterintuitive to go back so far in order to rethink race or attempt to build an alternate account of it. But what I suggest is that taking Du Bois on his own terms actually reveals an alternate starting point already primed for us that we have generally overlooked. In *Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois describes what is an almost Spinozist concern that occupied him and his friends from youth; escaping the violent and unfair strictures of racial prejudice “became the vision of a glorious crusade where I and my fellows were to match our mettle against white folk and show them what black folk could do” (Dusk, 130). Instead of being a simple question of disproving a fallacy or false belief, and changing the hearts and minds of those around him, Du Bois continues, “my ‘way was cloudy’ and the approach to its high goals by no means straight and clear. I saw the race problem was not as I conceived, a matter of clear, fair competition, for which I was ready and eager. It was rather a matter of segregation, *of hindrance and inhibitions*, and my struggles against this and resentment at it began to have serious repercussions upon my inner life.” (130, *Dusk of Dawn*, all italics mine)

The problem of race produces different material conditions in the world, but at its base, it appears over and over to hinge on the struggle to break free from a force which delimits one’s capacity. If we are to read Du Bois for how affect modifies the question of race as we are traditionally used to reading it, then proving the realities and real capabilities of the raced body

misses the mark because the question of race has never hinged on its truthfulness. As a virtual function that then extends into the actual in divergent ways, race has never drawn its power or been restricted in its effect on bodies because of its objective realness or the truth and accuracy of the justifications that explain its use by the state.

To go deeper into this argument it might be interesting to think through Du Bois's own conversation about the shifting justifications for race and how when one justification was refuted another one was produced. This is often used as evidence to establish as fact that race is socially constructed. However, what is the significance of such shifting explanations? That is, how can the replacement of justifications not work to discount the validity of race but on the contrary to reify its power? For example, if the original "justification" of race is established through biblical text and is then displaced as a legitimate source of explanation, it is not race itself which is displaced, but the former inaccuracy of its explanation. With each new explanation then, the evidence of race's source becomes more and more refined, more "accurate," more concrete while at the same time it deflects critical attention away from questions that may ask how close or far the stuff of race is from its source or explanation; or perhaps even more directly, what does it take to delegitimize race itself and not only its explanation? That is to say, one has to imagine that over the years of developing new explanations of race and grounding it in different epistemological or ontological contexts, the conversation went something like this: "upon recognizing that truth is to be found in the objective rigor of modern science and not based in theological claims that are tantamount to ideological manipulation, we now assert that the idea that race was created by God as the curse of Ham in punishment for ... is invalid and not a legitimate explanation for the presence of races in the world. And although we were wrong about the explanation before, thanks to the strength of modern science, we can now say that race can be explained by permanent biological

differences which inhere in the body and are passed down generation to generation, preserving and marking the different races in categories of biological inferiority and superiority.”¹³⁹ What is not wrong is race itself. Race is real and still needs to be explained. And in the way that natural phenomena were originally explained by myth and then later explained by science, race as a concept has retained its facticity through to its most modern conceptions.

Attention to the virtual is useful to me then, because it seems to suggest a kind of resolution for the ontological and assumed epistemological incoherence of race. To review and return to da Silva, globality is a kind of symptomatic state of the latest phase of race’s productive force, that derives from the initial colonial-modern project, then perhaps the coherence of race across its existence is its ontogenetic capacity. That is, race establishes the “onto-colonial” which “describes the modernity of social realities historically brought into racialized being by colonial regimes of demarcations, designations and deployments, that is to say as the effects of onto-colonial taxonomies.”¹⁴⁰ As a condition of modernity, thinking through the present moment as a kind of onto colonial condition, suggests that race is a particular kind of productive force and I contend that if we are to attune race’s virtuality then rather than a social construction or biological fallacy, we might actually want to see race operating as an ontopower.¹⁴¹ An ontopower operationalizes future perception, governs immanence through affective attunement, and suffuses the event with its own logic such that its unfolding prompts the continued iteration of the apparatus of power itself. “An ontopower is a name for a power of becoming whose force is maximally abstract: whose

¹³⁹ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn an Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*.

¹⁴⁰ Hesse, “Racialized Modernity,” 658–59.

¹⁴¹ Massumi, *Ontopower*.

power resides in a ‘conceptual persuasion’... An ontopower is a power of emergence: a power for the serial production of variations belonging to the same power curve, or tendency.”¹⁴²

In Massumi’s conception, ontopower is a newly consolidated mode of power emerging from the need of the United States to not only justify the wars in the Middle East post-9/11 but the need to create a logic that will rationalize new extremes in the application of Western dominance in the face of so many failed military campaigns. I read race as an ontopower that is consolidated across centuries of Western aggression and domination.

Ontopower is maximally self-organizing. Ontopower is ontogenetic, meaning it is productive of its own future conditions of becoming. That which is ontogenetic is ontologically productive. As my reading argues, to think race as an ontopowerful function emerging from the colonial means to locate race as situated as an organizing force of an affective field, and as productive of that very field which it constitutes. Then to fully understand its ontogenetic qualities means the race first works from the virtual and then moves to the actual. The virtual starting point of race as it elaborates itself as a modern strategy of power cannot be found by first looking to the physical plane in order to find the elements which will reveal or demonstrate the workings and definition of race to us. Second, this entails a kind of exclusivity that is not immediately apparent. I’m not saying that race is something like identity and that identity is something about which we feel very intense affects or emotions. That is taking race as an object. Indeed, from the philosophical lineage of If anything, drawing from non-representational theories through which I am trying to construct a new way of thinking race, race must appear as something more of an event.

¹⁴² Massumi, 221.

I'm saying that the basic terrain of race, the matter which makes it up is fundamentally affective, that is, fundamentally concerned with capacities, potentials, with the ways bodies come into contact and are not only attuned to certain activations but ontogenetically prime for future activations, future beings-colonial, which will not only lend the current event of race legibility, but will allow for the abstraction of that event into the objects of identity, subjecthood, and other grounds. From this view, all the other things we variously and either conveniently or contradictorily use to identify what we think of as the basic building blocks of race like skin color, culture, language, nationality, etc, are only indices or abstractions of the primary, affective terrain I'm trying to conceptualize. The name for the affective terrain which gives the virtuality of race its unity is what I term colonial ontopower.

I use the term colonial ontopower to counter the fact that as part of the resignifying moves at this stage of it's development, race has been effectively narrated out of its colonial origins. This is why Barnor Hesse insists, reinvoking Oliver C. Cox's demand, on regrounding the concept of race in a colonial history as opposed to other theorists think of race as just one kind of social difference among many.¹⁴³ Otherwise, if not properly historicized, the idea of race as a neutral social difference theory has two mutually fortifying outcomes. The first is the increased difficulty of reading race as an event or function that comes out of a historically specific project—that of European colonialism. It functions to legitimize the narrative that race is natural and even if its naturalness cannot quite be proven, its objective reality, its thingness, the understanding of it as property and our investment in it is nevertheless secured. But perhaps more insidiously as I will argue is the way that the utter detail and robustness of the apparatus of race draws attention away

¹⁴³ Hesse, "Racism's Alterity."

from any broader critique of colonial ontopower, the process or function race works in iterative but contingent service of. As Cox warned, but perhaps went unheeded, race, or “racial exploitation,” is not the full extent of “racial antagonism.”¹⁴⁴ My work illuminates this analytic blindspot offering a rethinking of the relationship between colonial ontopower and race, adding a third concept for rethinking to this trinity: whiteness.

Colonial ontopower rests on the capacity to maintain the distinction of the European and non-European—reflexively drawing authority from that distinguishing action. As that distinction then validates designation of bodies, it builds momentum towards governing. As Hesse notes, in the proliferation of this power function I am calling colonial ontopower, the categories of European and non-European become transmuted as the non-local abstraction of white and non-white.¹⁴⁵ Where the European/non-European distinction carries with it a certain attachment to local origin, the white/non-white distinction reflects that the power source determining the existence and imposition of this power functions globally. The categories of white and non-white in their oppositional existence signify the distinguishing, designating action from which colonial authority is derived. The abstraction of the function of opposing European and non-European into white and non-white both indicates a major development in the structure, plasticity, and therefore strength of colonial ontopower—indicating a level of control in the abstract that it had not previously enjoyed—and provides another opportunity for the mystification of the signifying narrative. Whiteness muddies the waters, so to speak. This is because, my analysis contends, whiteness operates with a level of seeming autonomy that contradicts the materiality and inertness ascribed to race. It would seem that with whiteness being designated as a category it might “comprise a

¹⁴⁴ Cox, *Caste, Class, & Race; a Study in Social Dynamics*, 334.

¹⁴⁵ Hesse, “Racism’s Alterity.”

designated ‘sphere of objects’,” when “it is rather a ‘public relationship between people’ capable of irrupting into the friend/enemy distinction, ‘from any sphere of human life.’”¹⁴⁶ However, as I read whiteness within the genealogy and development of colonial ontopower, whiteness names the capacious operations of modulating bodily capacity to properly produce the colonial distinction of white/non-white. Whiteness conceptually infolds the goal of colonial ontopower—its perpetual capacitation—with its self-verifying product—the distinction of white/non-white. Whiteness is the *doing*, the agent of activity that retroactively affirms the operation of colonial ontopower. And in affirming the operation of ontopower whiteness also affirms its future capacity for emergence since ontopower describes power that is oriented towards establishing the future conditions of its possibility. Whiteness signals and names the stage of ontogenetic unity of colonial power that makes sense of all the actions taken thus far in its elaboration and all-but-assumes their future repeatable emergence through a forceful set of modes of attunement, habituation, attachment, activation, propulsion, momentum, and coercion.

In a return to examining whiteness then, the next chapter will explore the ways in which whiteness is attempting to expand the capacities through which it governs, specifically attending to the question of racial victimization that is fueling the current crisis of whiteness, or the crisis of colonial ontopower. The internet is a space of resonant encounter. Although it has an infrastructure, and although it must be accessed through several material layers of devices and electrical charges, expert code and a certain amount of often informal but nevertheless necessary mastery on the part of the user, all these vary degrees of material engagement combine to produce a virtual experience.

¹⁴⁶ Here, Hesse is speaking specifically about the concept of ‘the political,’ however, I would argue the ontopowerfully structuring force of whiteness is another interpretation of the political, “where the political is associated with the spatial embodiment of the regulatory state.” Hesse, “Symptomatically Black,” 11.

Thus, the following chapter will explore how the aesthetic practices online embedded in a virtual world of virtual encounters that in their force produce the distinct understanding of having been somewhere, but in their ultimate materiality amount to a series of activations and resonant encounters that do not map on to the physical encounters of the body, but fortify whiteness nonetheless.

Chapter 3

BEYOND THE PALE BLOG: TUMBLR PINK AND THE AESTHETICS OF WHITE ANXIETY

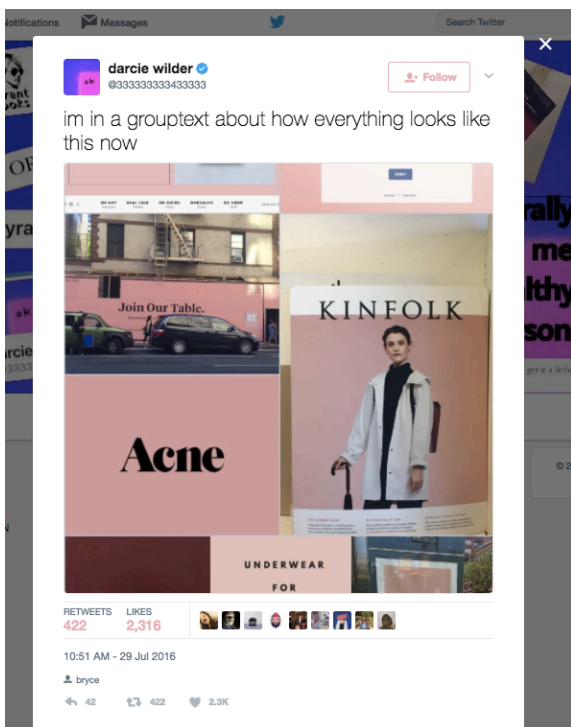
“A more accurate color than Millennial Pink might be: white...A shady white, as white can be so often.”

— Natalie Diaz

“There is a kind of white that is more than white, and this was that kind of white. There is a kind of white that repels everything that is inferior to it, and that is almost everything. This was that kind of white. There is a kind of white that is not created by bleach but that itself is bleach. This was that kind of white. This white was aggressively white. It did its work on everything around it, and nothing escaped.”

— David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (p 10)

Tumblr Pink was *the* color of 2016. By midyear, twitter user @333333333433333 posted a tweet that launched a thousand think pieces about the ubiquity of the color. The tweet read “in a group text about how everything looks like this now” [sic] and featured a collage of billboards and branding material from Acne, Kinfolk, Delish, OK Real, and Thinx Underwear—all in varied



shades of matte and muted pink.¹⁴⁷ Very quickly, a host of clickbait articles and online listicles attempted to construct a genealogy of the trend, referring to the range of colors as “Tumblr Pink.” They traced its popularity back through noted predecessors like the Rose Gold iPhone, the cover art for Drake’s chart topping “Hotline Bling,” visuals from Wes Anderson’s *Grand Budapest Hotel*. But none of the commentators explained why this trend should be connected to Tumblr.¹⁴⁸

Tumblr Pink emerged as a trend from the subset of tumblrs called pale blogs—a genre of digital youth culture on tumblr that glorifies all things #pretty and #pale. Pale bloggers avoid vibrant content and engage a limited visual and affective palette. As the genre of pale blogging has grown in popularity, pale blog participants have begun to benignly describe the coolly erotic, cutesy melancholia of the pale blog as “A E S T H E T I C,” rejecting the idea that their blogs carry any political charge or bias. However, attendant to the rising crisis of whiteness, I argue that pale blogs reflect and rehearse anxieties of white decline at a moment when popular discourse has made

¹⁴⁷ Wilder, “Im in a Group text about How Everything Looks like This Nowpic.Twitter.Com/Gfn8BKA4Xg.”

¹⁴⁸ While some individuals posted commentary and critique on platforms like Twitter and Instagram about the new monochrome of the moment, there were also a number of full length articles that included interviews, timelines, and examples of Tumblr Pink in fashion, home design, and advertising published in well-read online magazines. See: Wheeler, “How ‘Tumblr Pink’ Became the Most Ubiquitous Color in Fashion Branding”; Schwartzberg, “Why Millennial Pink Refuses to Go Away”; “Is There Some Reason Millennial Women Love This Color?”; “The Surprising Reason This Color Is EVERYWHERE Right Now”; Schwedel, Jones, and Scoblic, “Stop Calling Everything Millennial Pink.”

*white fragility*¹⁴⁹ a widely recognized term and as charges of racism-against-whites are on the rise.¹⁵⁰ My analysis reads the practices of pale blogging through the crisis of whiteness to demonstrate how tumblr users modulate the threat of decline by aestheticizing precarity. Their curatorial practices of pale blogging materialize the ethereality and neutrality that subtend white hegemony.¹⁵¹ Reading these complex and deeply chromophobic practices through a crisis of whiteness allows us to see how pale blogs ultimately revive the desire for the dominant fetish object of the West: frontier.¹⁵² Pale blogs, facilitate the reinventions of frontier in digital terms, where it is rendered as an infinite resource that extends forward and backward through time. Moreover, frontier is made available again as an object of desire and possibility for the Millennial generation. Pale blogging is ultimately an exercise in reconciling an anxiety about the possible disappearance of white hegemony as we know it, with the perpetual expansion of white civilization into the technological future. The rise of Tumblr Pink, the main export of the pale blog aesthetic, reflects the marketability of the desire for frontier as it dictates the latest fashion and lifestyle trends. This chapter explores the ways pale blogs establish deliberately unmarked digital territories and mobilize nonrepresentational aesthetic gestures to that camouflage the violence of coloniality as the new cool.

Although, before I move on, I should say quickly what is meant here by the “new cool.” In many popular think pieces, this new trend is interpreted to signal gender liberation ascribed to the

¹⁴⁹ DiAngelo, “White Fragility.”

¹⁵⁰ Norton and Sommers, “Whites See Racism as a Zero-Sum Game That They Are Now Losing”; Craig and Richeson, “On the Precipice of a ‘Majority-Minority’ America Perceived Status Threat From the Racial Demographic Shift Affects White Americans’ Political Ideology.”

¹⁵¹ For a longer discussion on the aesthetic associations of whiteness (like ethereality and neutrality) and their normalizing effect, see Dyer, *White*.

¹⁵² Batchelor, *Chromophobia*.

Millennial generation and drawn from the nominal association with Tumblr. This is asserted through a rather straightforward reversal: pink is supposed to be a girl's color, but Millennials, not beholden to old norms, wear pink regardless of gender. Or, boys are now ok with wearing pink. The idea that boys wearing pink could be politically transgressive is indicative of the limits of the sexual and gender politics that can be read into the Tumblr Pink trend. In that pale blog aesthetics leave intact normative divisions of male and female and, if anything, are invested in normative modes of capitalist consumption and desire, I find it difficult to sustain serious inquiry into the radical potential of pale blogs or Tumblr Pink. Rather, I am more interested in the relationship that is constructed through this aesthetic practice to delicacy, fragility, softness, and vulnerability. What is mistaken for a fabled gender liberation is really a performance by both boys and girls that values vulnerability, and the attendant narrative that they are defiantly drawing strength from weakness by pursuing their individual, liberated desires for pink merchandise. Whereas many subsets of Tumblr have used the site to establish empowered and active communities with radical sexual and gender politics, pale blogs do not engage in the same critiques of power that are sometimes assumed to characterize the platform as a whole. Rather the new, cool trend that emerges from pale blogs as Tumblr Pink cultivates desires that help reconcile the traditional terms of white hegemony with the growing sense of white victimization, while also claiming to be apolitical.

This is the generative work pale blogs ultimately enable. Further developing my earlier analysis, pale blogs enable a modulation of the affective horizon of whiteness. If the problem of the crisis of whiteness is the new capacity whiteness is negotiating for itself, the aesthetic practices of pale blogging and their uptake as the craze of Tumblr Pink resonate as a strategy that makes room for the new victimized role by reframing the old terms of whiteness's power with the new.

So this chapter also illustrates the diffuse operation and elaboration of colonial ontopower—power that operates non-locally, in an experimental and iterative way. Pale blogs host one site of such experimentation that spread in such a fierce way despite being relatively obscure. The outcome of this experimentation emerged as the color craze of Tumblr Pink, which was also dubbed Millennial Pink to suggest the trend itself is representative of a generational zeitgeist. Later in this work I will return to address the more overtly right-wing iterations of the use of the Tumblr Pink/pale blog aesthetic that curb our ability to laud this Millennial movement as positive. Thus, we'll end with an exploration of the IRL examples of the pale blog aesthetic presented as Pantone's color of the year for 2016 and as the marketing schema used by the Alt-Right figure Milo Yiannopolis for his recently published book, *Dangerous* (2017).

ON METHOD & ETHICS

I finally made my own tumblr account in 2012 after casually visiting the site more and more since its founding in 2009. I noticed various trends and subcultures as I perused the site, but my first step into the pale blog rabbit hole really came after reading a piece in the Spring of 2014 on Medium.com by Canadian writer Vidal Wu, in which he critiqued the white standards of beauty, the “pale queerness,” that structured his experience on the gay social networking app, Grindr. Wu was getting hardly any messages. Instead he saw an increase of profiles on which, “Ethereal white boys self-deprecate via selfie, all expensive clothes and sad vibes with an ultra-glossy coat of pre-Internet irony.”¹⁵³ I followed this description of “pale blogs” to tumblr where I encountered a codified aesthetic universe of content that I had only seen a few glimpses of so far in isolated posts.

¹⁵³ Wu, “Sad & Pale.”

But very quickly, the question of how to study pale blogs needed to be addressed, because while everything I researched was technically public content, it is not clear whether pale bloggers actively consent to the public dissemination of their blogs beyond tumblr, or always wish to be identified as the curators of the content they share. The number of landscape images and movie stills circulating on Google Images, Flickr, and WeHeartIt means that pale bloggers rarely have to use original content to populate their blogs. If there is any original element, it tends to be the filter they apply to a pre-existing image, one-by-one (called an “edit”) or through the blog’s theme, which even then is not always a unique invention. Unlike other corners of the tumblr universe where citation is highly valued, the most popular images and gifs on pale blogs have already been downloaded multiple times and re-uploaded by individual users, instead of reblogged from their original sources. This practice is frowned upon if you want to be followed back by the person whose content you are downloading. But it may also have the benefit of getting you more followers if other users see your blog as the source of material they like. The common practice of saving and reposting content without credit makes determining the original source of an image almost impossible.

And yet, there was also the issue that according to the ages many pale bloggers posted on their pages, the majority of them were young teens when they began making pale blogs. In this instance, for those pale bloggers who post images of their own bodies to the site, the question of privacy and permission was difficult to resolve. These questions may hover around my other research interests and are central to the field of internet research, but they are particularly present in a study of Tumblr which is most commonly associated with youth culture on the one hand and graphic pornography or #NSFW (“not safe for work”) content on the other. Pale blogs in particular present a site where these characteristic forms of engagement on Tumblr intersect. Insofar as teens

go to pale blogs to discuss and receive advice about sex, many of the anonymous comments and “asks” (questions submitted to the blogger by a user) by which they do this also function to put their sexual desires or experiences on display. More problematically perhaps, these same youth sometimes share revealing images of themselves among the uncredited suggestive or explicit content that circulates. Popularity is a major element of pale blogs and public posts are all supposed to expand the influence and renown of the individual pale blogger. When they reveal any private information about the bloggers themselves, the questions of whether minors fully understand the implications of public space on the internet, or consent to any and all kinds of attention by posting content publicly, or thereby relinquish any rights to privacy, are all pertinent to this research.¹⁵⁴

Finally, there was the problem of my own perspective as a researcher. My analytic frame is highly critical of what pale blogs as a group produce. I am critical of the imperial desires that are reworked through the aesthetic, although I also take seriously the claim that pale bloggers have apolitical intentions. For example, I don’t interpret pale blogs as anything like cloaked websites, discussed in the influential work of Jessie Daniels, which have pernicious intents that they actively disguise, as I discussed in the first chapter of this study. Generally, I see Tumblr and especially a subset of blogs like pale blogs as a space of high reactivity, but low responsibility. This is an idea I will return to, but as it pertains to my research method, I contend that the pervasiveness of social media has given rise to a set of habituated, almost autonomic processes in that undergird our relationship to technology, and therefore, most pale blogs are archives of the reflexes or bodily

¹⁵⁴ Particularly poignant examples of recent research grappling with the question of adolescent behavior on the internet can be found in the following works: boyd and Marwick, “Social Privacy in Networked Publics: Teens’ Attitudes, Practices, and Strategies”; Ess, *Digital Media Ethics*; Stern, “Studying Adolescents Online”; Battles, “Exploring Ethical and Methodological Issues in Internet-Based Research with Adolescents.”

activation tumblr users have had in response to content. In most ethnographies, a researcher engages in participant observation, or what D. Soyini Madison calls “deep hanging out.”¹⁵⁵ Since on the whole, I am critical of the practices of pale blogging and did not wish to advance them with my own direct participation, I developed a different approach for my digital ethnography that I call “ethical lurking.”

Lurking is a term that emerges from the internet and describes the process by which internet users learn the norms of a particular internet community through passive observation.¹⁵⁶ Another way to describe this method would be “non-intrusive web-based research” as Heather Kitchin offers, “Non-intrusive analyses refer to techniques of data collection that do not interrupt the

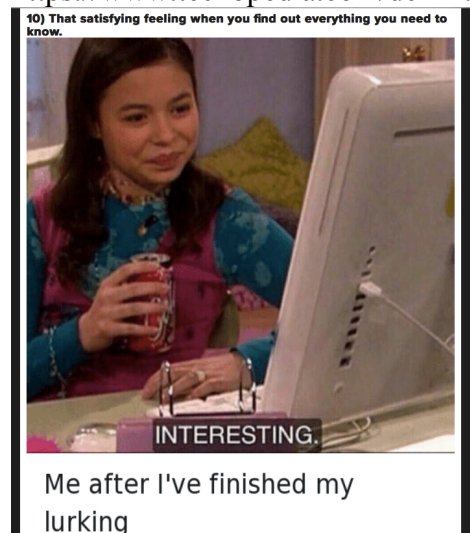
¹⁵⁵ Madison, *Critical Ethnography*.

¹⁵⁶ “Lurker,” *Wikipedia*, April 9, 2018,

<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Lurker&oldid=835565508>; “Participation Inequality: The 90-9-1 Rule for Social Features,” Nielsen Norman Group, accessed April 22, 2018,

<https://www.nngroup.com/articles/participation-inequality/>; “What Is Lurking? - Definition from Techopedia,” Techopedia.com, accessed April 22, 2018,

<https://www.techopedia.com/definition/8156/lurking>;



Meme from: “10 Things Only People Who Love Internet Lurking Will Understand,” PopBuzz, accessed April 22, 2018, <http://www.popbuzz.com/internet/social-media/10-things-that-happen-when-youre-lurking-online/>.

naturally occurring state of the site or cybercommunity, or interfere with premanufactured text.”¹⁵⁷

Lurkers are present on message boards, read comments and conversations, and are thought to develop a clear sense of an internet community, or even feel an affinity with it, but are not active participants. They generally do not make their presence known, and only certain sites that track page views or other evidence of digital presence reliably know they have been there. Lurkers are not always welcome, especially when they find themselves in an internet community that prioritizes interaction and contribution. But on many platforms, like tumblr, participation is not so central. Or, participation takes many forms, where visiting a blog and passively consuming its content, but perhaps not following or liking the content, is common and expected.

This method is informed by the robust conversation among internet researchers on what kind of place or object the internet constitutes and therefore what counts as internet research and the modes or guidelines which should regulate it.¹⁵⁸ On the one hand, there is the idea that internet research is derived from internet-based tools like surveys, data mining, scraping, and other digitally supported quantitative methods. On the other is the approach to the internet as a place of human interaction, a kind of mostly-public square, in which qualitative methods should be used and internet activity should be interpreted as directly representing individual humans—a question that is complicated further by anonymous message boards or the use of avatars or other aliases. However, Basset and O’Riordan critique the discrete distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods that set up human subjects in cyberspace on one side against pure data on the other. In a critique that I find useful for my work, they point out that “the understanding of the

¹⁵⁷ Kitchin, *Research Ethics and the Internet*, 15.

¹⁵⁸ Ess and Jones, “Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research”; Ess, *Digital Media Ethics*; Buchanan, “Ethics in Digital Research”; Buchanan and Zimmer, “Internet Research Ethics”; Buchanan and Hvizdak, “Online Survey Tools.”

Internet-as-a-space supports a conflation between activity carried out through this medium and the action of human actors in social space. Further, it leads to the argument that any manifestation of Internet activity should be regarded as a virtual person.”¹⁵⁹ Instead, they argue that the internet should be seen as a site for the cultural production of texts, which does not deny the presence of digital things that exist online, but doesn’t overemphasize human presence or anthropomorphize non-human content either. Although they go on to insist on the textuality of the cultural production, a focus on the question of production itself allows us to see the ways that the constant innovation of digital media platforms and modes of engagement, algorithms and input mean that the internet is best approached as an archive of activation. By archive of activation, I mean one in which the intent or direct influence of the individual can rarely be reliably ascertained; rather, the outcome of the aggregate action and the future of its impact demand our critical analysis. In this way, it is as though I were analyzing the activity of digital subcultures like a swarm—at moments it is led by a few singular participants, but what is more interesting are the flows and turns that emerge from the bustle at the level of the whole.

Thus, my approach took this practice of lurking and extended the anonymity I enjoyed on tumblr to my “subjects”—instead of making case studies of individual users’ tumblrs or pale blog networks, I got to understand the practices of pale blogging by repeatedly tracking the latest content tagged with #pale or #paleblog. This gave me an aggregate that I could sort by recent posts or by popularity in tumblr that let me follow the general trends of the practice. I created an independent tumblr account from my private account with the handle @uchromia¹⁶⁰ to keep the

¹⁵⁹ Bassett and O’Riordan, “Ethics of Internet Research,” 234.

¹⁶⁰ This term was a concept I had developed in an earlier iteration of my research. It built from a notion articulated by Elisabeth Wesseling called *uchronian* fantasy. Etymologically, it was a riff on utopia that replaced —topos with the root —chronos to signify the relationship this literature

research separate from my own active participation in tumblr. From this account, I would look through the aggregate of posts sorting for popularity and for the most recently contributed content—noting that often these produced completely different archives, indicating that not all pale blog content that was posted elicited the volume of positive responses it would need to become representative of the aesthetic. I scrolled through thousands of posts, noting which images, gifs, videos, or trends held the spotlight, returned to popularity long after they were originally posted, or only ever had a limited circulation. At the start of the research, when I was first trying to situate pale blogs as a distinct category within tumblr, I followed a number of blogs as long as they used the word pale in their handle or URL. Often, these were heavy hitters in the pale blog world, boasting thousands of followers and extensive, richly populated archives of content. Following blogs was the most I did to contribute to the world of pale blogs—I never publicly posted, liked, or reblogged any content. The original account one creates on Tumblr is public by default and

takes to time, history, and the official archive. Rather than accepting that history has been decided and in the past, uchronian fantasy seeks to return to the potential of different outcomes that demonstrate history's contingent progression. As Wessling asserts, "Uchronian fantasies are inspired by the notion that any given historical situation has implied a plethora of diverging possibilities that vastly exceeded the possibilities which were actually realized. From this point of view, the progress of history appears as a tragic waste, not merely of human lives, but of options and opportunities in general, as a single possibility is often realized by the forceful suppression of alternatives. The alternative histories of uchronian fiction attempt to recuperate some of these losses." *Uchromia*, then, was a concept I developed to denote a particular kind of literary response to colonial affective governance. It built from the root —chroma that etymologically references both the "quality or intensity of color," and the "surface of the body." *Uchromia* gestured towards the concerns of this iteration of the work in that it was interested in the kinds of racial and colonial intensities registering on different surfaces, screens, or intensities of color, just as intensely as we tend to assume it does from the surface of the body. Conceptually, it seeks to establish that broader view of where and how whiteness happens with the conviction that identifying or imagining the profound, and forcefully suppressed possibilities of the (human and non-human) body is an integral element of any future resistance we may take up against modern colonial power. Wessling, "Historical Fiction: Utopia in History"; "Chroma | Origin and Meaning of Chroma by Online Etymology Dictionary."

cannot be made private. So, I made sure my page was empty and no activity I engaged on tumblr showed up on anyone else's dashboard.

Moreover, although I draw my analysis from looking at tumblr content, the images I have included here that are representative of pale blogs are drawn from various google image searches for the tag "pale blog." They are all images I have seen circulated before, among the most popular, and therefore they have been downloaded and reposted so many times that their only meaningful tie is to the genre of pale blogging itself, rather than to a particular author. Finally, I have kept the instances in which I quote from pale blog content directly to a minimum, and have chosen those sources very carefully. The defunct Pale Blog Network does not identify which of its administrators wrote its description; and even if it had, the pages associated with it are no longer active and do not lead to any identifying information. The users who directed the Pale Blog Network may still be tumblr users, but it is fairly easy to change one's identifying information (handle and URL). This means that if you are not following a tumblr directly and you attempt to visit its old URL, you will be directed to an error page on Tumblr with no suggestion of how to find the user's new page. I had the page for the Pale Blog Network saved, as my criteria allowed, but I did not follow any of its administrators. The only individual pale blog I cite, PalePrincess,¹⁶¹ was one of the most popular pale blogs run by a blogger who has actively cultivated a particularly public profile. She had a robust following who commented frequently, her posts regularly received thousands of notes (which are a mix of <3's, reblogs, and comments), and she established recurring series through her blog that enabled deeper participation than most pale blogs.¹⁶² She was also well

¹⁶¹ This is a pseudonym I am using for both her site and her handle.

¹⁶² One of her most popular series were sexual confessions contributed by her followers as "asks," anonymously or not, which Paige would post and comment on, offering observations, encouragement, or advice.

known for making her own edits, posting photos and gifs whose look she had changed herself. From this, hers was one of the few pale blogs on which citation actually meant something—she was often cited when her followers reblogged her content, and she usually posted links to the original images she edited. My justification for using content directly from her site was informed partly by the open and direct relationship PalePrincess cultivated in her blogger persona to her followers and the connection she maintained to her own sources; but there was also the fact that PalePrincess claimed to be 19 years old in the biographical information she included on the sidebar of her page. The earliest record I have of this is a screenshot I took in early 2015, but looking at more recent screenshots, I realize that her age hadn't been updated since then. Perhaps this means she was 19 when she began the blog and never updated it; perhaps it means she chose an age at random. Tumblr facilitates performances of self that present a personal ideal or fantasy, not an “authentic” or remotely verifiable identity. And yet, care must be taken not to exploit the availability of what users do share, especially when they may be minors. I have had several conversations about the ethics of internet research with Allison McCracken, one of the editors of *A Tumblr Book: Platform and Cultures*, the first comprehensive academic treatment of the platform, where a version of this chapter is set to be published. One of the efforts we as contributors to this volume have tried to make is that our subjects remain “un-google-able.” But we are held fast between our sense of ethics and the realities of internet impermanence that sometimes render our efforts obsolete. In a turn of internet irony, as I was revising this chapter, I learned that PalePrincess's page no longer exists. It was taken down at some point between May and June 2018, and a search for her characteristic tags on Tumblr, with which she marked all her posts, returns no results.

PALE AND PRETTY



The dominant unifying practice of pale blogging is aesthetic, meaning the aesthetic takes shape in a performative way as each user likes, shares, and marks content as #pale (or with a range of the other related tags—#paleandpretty, #glowpale, #palegrunge, #foggpale, #aesthetic, or other tags with “pale” in them). In general, pale blog content, which can be text, images, videos, or gifs, adheres to an aesthetic of paleness. Colors are rarely in full saturation and are usually presented in a restricted palette dominated by pastels, soft pinks, greys, blues, and purples. If the color content of an image or gif goes beyond this palette, often times the image is treated either with some combination of lowered contrast, increased exposure, or a white or faded filter. Some bloggers make these changes themselves, called “edits,” and sometimes blog themes come with built in features that automatically apply a filter to make images appear faded on the home page of the blog.

Pale bloggers avoid any vibrant content, and the limited visual palette reflects the affectively restricted expression of pale blogs as well, which is restricted mostly to melancholy, regret, loss, or heartbreak. Expressions of joy and genuine excitement aren't cool enough to count as good pale blog content. But even more striking is the explicit rejection of politics. Accordingly, topics such as social justice are exceptionally unwelcome on pale blogs and discouraged. In the WikiHow article "How to Become a Tumblr Girl," which covered topics like starting a tumblr blog and "Becoming Tumblr Famous", new bloggers are advised to "Try not to be a 'Social Justice Blogger'" and referred to other articles in WikiHow that suggest "pale" as a popular genre of blog to begin on tumblr.¹⁶³

Perhaps to achieve the kind of popularity highly valued in the pale blog world and draw the viewer in, the framing of the body on pale blogs produces the feeling of a certain closeness or intimacy. The background of most selfies is usually the user's bed or bedroom. Otherwise, the image is cropped so tightly that the location is unidentifiable and the body draws the primary attention. This style of framing the body reflects the nature of the technology itself, as many of the photos tumblr users post of themselves seem to be taken with their personal electronics—by the embedded cameras in their computers or on their phones. Pictures of the body as a category, not only selfies, often look to be illuminated by the blue light of the device. The drab, over exposed, washed out, or low contrast images captured by phone or computer cams are fully recuperated in the pale blog aesthetic and valued for this lighting effect and the muted colors it produces. And if the image does not have this look from the device that produced it, the aesthetic is imposed through the edit. Even if they are clearly the work of a professional photographer, most of the images of

¹⁶³ "How to Become a Tumblr Girl."

bodies or body parts that circulate are edited to reproduce the constraints of a computer or phone camera. This means that the body is regularly cut off into single body parts between the middle of the face and the thighs, which is true of both male and female bodies. The full-length shot is rare, as is a fully exposed face. The viewer is drawn in close to the body, but is not given full access to it. This interrupted intimacy is made even more extreme by the prevalence of injured body parts on pale blogs. Even erotic or pornographic images generally display some sort of damage to the body—lips may be chapped, cracked, and bleeding; eyes, presented in isolation from the rest of the face, are often bloody or bloodshot; the neck or dramatically protruding collarbone may be covered in bruises or hickies. In one image of the back of a woman’s thighs it is hard to determine whether the focus of the photo is her exposed vulva or the weltd scars along her legs.

Achieved both through images of the body and the tight framing of many images and gifs of all sorts of objects, the fraught intimacy established by these conventions is the first signal that pale blogs are reverberating with the anxieties of the crisis of whiteness. As Ann Stoler so compellingly asserts, intimacy is a key route through which colonial power is established.¹⁶⁴ Colonial power is not only about administrative offices or military aggression; the intimate itself is “a strategic site of colonial governance.” She goes on to insist that, “to study the intimate is *not* to turn away from colonial dominations, but to relocate their conditions of possibility and relations and forces of production.”¹⁶⁵ If the charge of the crisis of whiteness is to resolve the problem of

¹⁶⁴ Stoler has written extensively on the privileged role of intimacy within the structure of modern colonial governance globally. Her work demonstrates that intimacy itself is a question that links colonial administrations across particular locations and through the modern era, from Palestinian occupation in the 20th and 21st century, to Native American boarding schools in the US and miscegenation in Samoa in the 19th century, as just some of her most recent examples. Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*; Stoler, *Haunted by Empire*.

¹⁶⁵ Stoler, “Matters of Intimacy as Matters of State,” 893–94.

claiming a weakened position, pale blogs take up the motif of weakness and represent it in the state of disrepair visited upon the objects of pale blogs, whether living body or inert thing. The zoomed in presentation of these broken things—brokenness is also an emotional state widely performed on pale blogs—amplifies our proximity to decline, makes it feel close at hand. Yet, as the aesthetic permeates the experience of every piece of content on the blog, the sense of impending brokenness is modulated towards a glorified fragility. Value and desirability become intimately attached to the vulnerability and softness of the pale blog content.

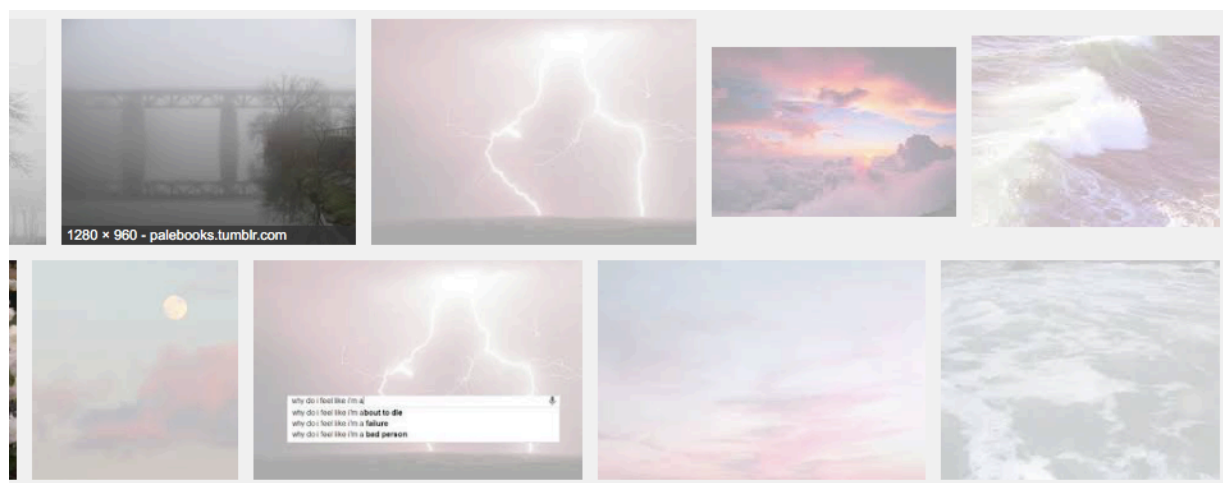
There are other aesthetic features of pale blogs beyond the visual. Sometimes pale blogs have embedded music players which cycle through variously ambient, echoey, and forlorn sounding music by artists like Lana del Rey or the Arctic Monkeys. The use of music, original layouts, and edits heighten the atmospheric quality of the pale blog. These features simultaneously imbue all the content with ethereality and cement the pervasiveness of the pale aesthetic by linking together images of different kinds, disparate places, and different modes of engagement (like watching gifs or videos, liking, listening) in a kind of synesthetic experience. Taken together, these features transform pale blogs from personal collections or archives of content available for a viewer to peruse, to a rich networked environment populated by highly regularized kinds of experience, invitations to interact, and modes of stimuli.

Pale blogs began to appear on the internet as an identifiable type of tumblr in late 2012. In Spring 2013, artist Rosemary Kirton wrote a piece trying to describe the aesthetic being curated by these tumblrs, which she called “soft culture.”¹⁶⁶ Because of the speed with which trends rise

¹⁶⁶ Kirton, “Follow For More.” Kirton was compelled to write this piece trying to analyze pale blogs because she noticed that images of her art or her face were being shared, uncredited, across these tumblrs.

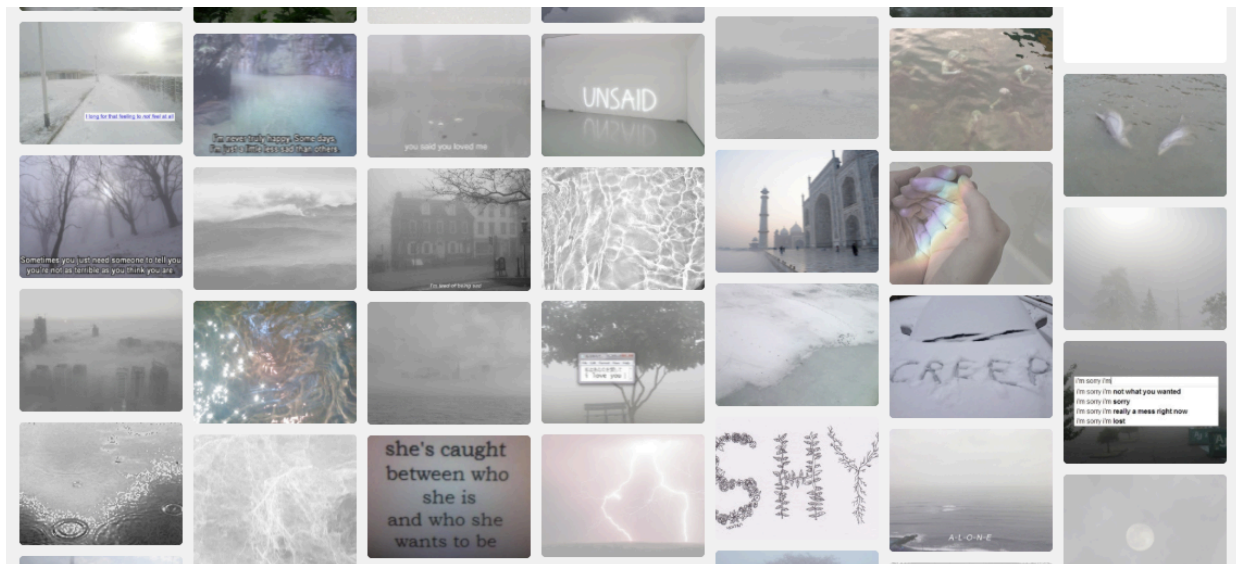
and fall on the internet, Kirton thought her commentary was already “worryingly stale” when she finally published her piece on tumblr in October 2013 and later on Medium.com a month later. By June 2013, the name “pale blog” had become a more established term, demonstrating that the genre had developed further by the time Kirton finally published her commentary. But it was still a little unclear to those outside the subculture what pale blogs were or did. On a Gaia comment board asking, “what the ***** is a pale blog??” one user anonymously offered “ya it’s pale soft grunge like picture of gurls smoking and bruises and stuff.”¹⁶⁷ While it’s true that the images and gifs of bodies are striking elements of pale blogs—for their ambiguous stance on self-harm and drug use, their erotic charge, and simultaneously gruesome content—I will argue that it is the relationship facilitated to place, not through bodies, that is the most significant, if not defining feature of pale blogs and thus the most important in their performance of whiteness.

PALE PLACE: A DIGITAL FRONTIER



¹⁶⁷ “WHAT THE ***** IS A PALE BLOG ON TUMBLR [ADULT TOPIC].”

While images of people and body parts are shocking and draw a lot of commentary, natural landscapes or cityscapes feature just as often on pale blogs, if not more. Most of the time these images convey a kind of barrenness or isolation, even when they are full of objects—places are usually covered with a thick layer of fog, smog, snow or rain, and there is rarely human or animal life evident. Pictures of non-domestic sites, like commercial buildings, alleyways, or roads are usually absent of people, although they may feature some hints of human presence with fluorescent light and neon signs. Light itself could be said to be one of the major features of pale blogs. Although most of the content of pale blogs is very low contrast, shadows feature prominently, as do rainbow or iridescent light. Light reflecting on water, the glow of the moon, the sun through clouds or fog, and lightning bolts are common in pale blog imagery.



As all locations are confined to the same aesthetic limits and flattened by the hazy pale blog edit, the effect is that pale blogs create non-places out of all places. Take for example the varying presentations of bodies of water. From small bathtubs or shallow pools, to birds-eye views of the ocean, back down to zoomed-in images of foamy waves or rainy puddles, and then to first-

person perspective shots of rivers or fountains—the shifts in scale across these images that are all of bodies of water, unified under the pale edit, and otherwise stripped of other identifying or distinguishing information creates an associative effect that allows them to all stand in for one another. After thousands of similar images accumulate, they all become a kind of watery nowhere. Images of place are not only of sprawling panoramic land or seascapes, but pale blogs routinely construct or invent non-places out of light boxes, untraceable corners, or animated settings. Similarly to the way images of water, as just one entry point, associate together, other “places” that replicate similar properties begin to seem to fit into the watery category. Refracted light through water makes other images of prismatic light (like hands “holding” a rainbow), or twinkling and reflective surfaces (like the reflective pavement of a city street that mirrors the image of the buildings above), or flashes of light (like lightning bolts) seem like they belong to the same category. The smooth polished floor of an art gallery, reflecting a neon sign on the wall gives the feeling that maybe it is flooded with still water. In this reading, I chose images of water as an example from the collection above, but one may begin with images of fog or forests or cities or interiors and extrapolate their properties out in the same way until all the images seem of a kind. The sky becomes the city becomes the corner becomes the light becomes the bedroom becomes the sea becomes the matte haze becomes no place in particular becomes every place. As arguably the dominant feature of pale blogs, the circulation of these associated non-places constructs an account of place itself as virgin territory in the realm of the digital. These non-places form a digital world of terra nullius, or no-man’s land, that betrays an extant desire for frontier.

Terra Nullius was a policy most closely associated with Australian politics, but present in the projects of European colonialism globally, of claiming a territory to be unoccupied no-man’s

land, and therefore available for European settlement.¹⁶⁸ This was a deceptive policy as practically all of the land brought under European rule was quite thoroughly populated, but the process of strategic unseeing spread to other aspects of the production of modern life. We may identify the aesthetic versions of terra nullius that become central to Western art practices in David Batchelor's concepts of chromophobia and negative hallucination.¹⁶⁹ As Batchelor elaborates them, these are both aesthetic and political concepts. Chromophobia is an aversion to color or the privileging of neutral colors and white, and negative hallucination is the refusal to see color even where it is present. Both of these are at work in the pale blog aesthetic. The main elements dictating this trend derive from radical modes of not seeing, a dynamic relationship to disappearance, decline and nonbeing, fragility, negative space, dullness, and unfeelingness. As Batchelor emphasizes, this is not just a matter of taste. The consequences of chromophobic practices or negative hallucination make the aesthetic a site of validation for colonial desires. As he explains, "Once again, it appears that we are not dealing with something as simple as white things and white surfaces, with white as an empirically verifiable fact or as a colour. Rather, we are in the realm of *whiteness*. White as myth, as an aesthetic fantasy, a fantasy so strong that it summons up negative hallucinations, so intense that it produces a blindness to colour, even when colour is literally in front of your face."¹⁷⁰ Indeed, it is these pernicious ties to the act of not seeing—or the emptying, bleaching force of colonial ontopower, bleaching effect of whiteness as Batchelor describes elsewhere,¹⁷¹ and the bleaching effect of the pale blog edit—that reveals the problematic obsession pale blogs perform to place. Pale bloggers claim to be doing nothing political, and yet

¹⁶⁸ Fitzmaurice, "The Genealogy of Terra Nullius."

¹⁶⁹ Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, 47.

¹⁷⁰ Batchelor, 47.

¹⁷¹ Batchelor, 10. The full quote may be found in the epigraph of this chapter.

the central object of pale blogs is the fantasy image of open land, devoid of either color or competing authority, ready to be entered. The entire aesthetic practice of pale blogging (open to anyone who has access to the internet and an email address) functions as a kind of democratization of participation in white western narratives that celebrate the enterprising initiative of the imperializing Man, whose prerogative is to move into new places, make the unknown known, harbor desires for virgin land, and arrive there to find it already empty.



This desirous relationship to territory is central to the pale blog aesthetic and, almost in an over determined way, claimed to be beautiful. This can be read explicitly in the many landscape and non-place images that are overlaid with text, phrases of longing that offer the viewer and blogger the opportunity

to desire space and land. Take for example, the above image overlaid with the caption “It’s you. It’s you. It’s all for you.” The viewer is placed on the shore of an unseen, unmarked location with a view of an island off in the distance. The revelatory assertion, “It’s you,” resonates with the echoes of a classic cinematic encounter when the central, fated character is finally identified as “the one.” Indeed, the viewer is named as this one and, upon encountering this image, finds the serene and sprawling inheritance for which she is destined: “It’s all for you.” In sharing this image, the pale blogger is both the viewer to whom the territory belongs and the authoritative voice offering the desire for territory to her followers. The fantasy promoted by this engagement with territory, particularly concentrated in this image but present in the thousands of non-place images

that circulate through pale blogs, is dripping with the lust for land that characterizes the West's relationship to frontier.

While terra nullius signifies a frontier that should prove an easy conquest, frontier as a general category is an important resource in the West—so important that it is conceptualized in such a way as to never be truly exhausted. As David Wrobel compellingly details, the frontier was the characteristic symbol of the American democratic experiment. Many opined that American democracy could only function as long as there was a frontier because it was a “safety-valve” that could absorb the desires and discontentment of the modern Western man.¹⁷² A nationwide sense of anxiety rose in the mid 19th century as the amount of arable land decreased and new settlements poured into the less desirable southwest or newly reclaimed land from Indian reservations. The desperate turn to the semi-arid territory of the United States was motivated by a fear that to acknowledge there was no land left would foment such broad unrest that American democracy would quickly collapse, perhaps inciting a chain reaction across Europe. So, if the frontier could not be preserved physically, it would be retained abstractly. When the land definitively ran out in the late 19th century, the West as a whole worked very hard to preserve the idea that the frontier was still available by transferring the notion of frontier into other resources. Some solutions advocated imperializing missions into international territory,¹⁷³ but many of the new “frontiers” didn't resemble land at all. In the 20th century, frontier was to be found in and satisfied by the

¹⁷² Wrobel, *The End of American Exceptionalism*.

¹⁷³ Expansionists lobbied for several projects on the conviction that the US “should be sharing in the bounties of the ‘New Imperialism.’” (Wrobel, 53.) For example, there was a brief campaign led by Canadians that advocated the US annexing at least part of Canada based on the argument that the Canadian government was not maximizing the use of the abundant territory of Canada. Wrobel also details that after US victories in conflicts in the Pacific and the Caribbean that expanded US rule into the Philippines, Hawaii, and Cuba, anxieties over not having enough land were temporarily sated.

terms of the New Deal, the Space Race, the enterprising business acumen of the modern capitalist, as just a few examples. As Wrobel points out, frontier has historically been an abstracted resource across the West, regardless of its quantifiable supply. The production of frontier as a digital resource on pale blogs is a straightforward continuation of the abstraction of frontier that began at the end of the 19th century.

In Irit Rogoff's work, *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture*, she demonstrates that the production of territory or geographies is always inherently a practice of fantasy.¹⁷⁴ She notes that even while frontier is available as a resource and there is land to be given to settlers and mapped, there is still an imaginative overlay of what frontier is and how long it will last—it must be co-produced at the level of national or international imaginary. A similar assertion may be found in the argument Walter Mignolo makes when he suggests that a full account of colonial power must consider the material and immaterial engines of its operation. “The colonial difference is, finally, *the physical as well as imaginary location* where the coloniality of power is at work in the confrontation of two kinds of local histories displayed in different spaces and times across the planet” (emphasis mine).¹⁷⁵ The frontier within the Western colonial project has never been defined in a strict relationship to land or resources. That is to say, the definition of frontier has never *only* been conceptualized in direct proportion or in a directly referential way to the resources it performatively registers. Rather it is a capacious signifier that contains the aspirational future of Western modernity. Frontier is situated as a *terminus* of Western political desire, to recall the way Massumi figures the terminus as the abstract goal towards which a power curve tends. Almost working as a phenomenological description of what it is like to use tumblr, and especially how it

¹⁷⁴ Rogoff, *Terra Infirma*.

¹⁷⁵ Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, xxv.

feels to engage with pale blogs with an eye towards the way they reinvigorate frontier, Massumi describes the concept of the terminus in this way, “The terminus is at once instantaneous in its action and recursive in its causality. This means that the terminus dynamically recomposes at every experiential iteration throughout the field, in a rhythm with the field’s oscillations. It is integrally ingredient to each event, at the same time as it differentially multiplies throughout the field.”¹⁷⁶ Separately from (or perhaps, prior to) the ways frontier may be conceptualized as material resource—this or that plot of land, this or that set of mineral ore, etc.—it is also imaginatively established and is thus contingent and malleable. It is precisely the flexibility of the frontier that is evident in Wrobel’s account as it is imaginatively recovered throughout the 20th century and, beyond the scope Wrobel’s work, into the 21st century’s crisis of whiteness.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Massumi, *Ontopower*, 156–57.

¹⁷⁷ The most recent iteration of this can be clearly illustrated by Donald Trump’s recent announcement that he intends to establish a “Space Force,” reinvigorating the idea that space is an unexplored frontier. Especially notable are his comments that conflate the pursuit of the frontier, and taming the frontier, with a project that will establish a stronger sense of national and economic security—both claimed to be under constant attack or dangerously weakened by the Obama administration. I will expound on the way Donald Trump acts a figure who combines white supremacy and victimhood in the conclusion of the dissertation, although on this point, in which he invokes the frontier in the effort to capacitate power through decline, it is worth seeing the volume and veracity of his commentary: “*The essence of the American character is to explore new horizons and to tame new frontiers.* But our destiny, beyond the Earth, is not only a matter of national identity, but a matter of national security. So important for our military... When it comes to defending America, it is not enough to merely have an American presence in space. We must have American *dominance* in space. So important.” “... Always remembering it’s about that, but it’s also about jobs and the economy. This is a great thing we’re doing... This time, we will do more than plant our flag and leave our footprints. We will establish a long-term presence, expand our economy, and build the foundation for the eventual mission to Mars—which is actually going to happen very quickly.” “Our nation of pioneers still yearns to conquer the unknown, because we are Americans and the future belongs totally to us. Once more, we will launch intrepid souls blazing through the sky and soaring into the heavens. Once more, we will summon the American spirit to tame the next great American frontier. And once more, we will proudly lead humanity—and that’s what it is, it’s humanity—beyond the Earth and

So the production of frontier is necessarily fantasy work; but the work of fantasizing is also necessary to the sovereignty of colonial ontopower. As Mbembe points out, this kind of imaginative production is needed “to provide self-interpreting language and models for the colonial order, to give this order meaning, to justify its necessity and universalizing mission—in short, to help produce an imaginary capacity converting the founding violence into authorizing authority.”¹⁷⁸ The curatorial imaginaries of pale blogs engage in this transformative effort, making space for decline and fragility without disrupting the narrative of supremacy and expansion. They produce a dematerializing account of frontier, not only offering a way to idealize space, but creating channels for desire that imbue the digital with the promise of a host of other satisfying payoffs—like security, future, freedom. The fullness of this account of space is significant because it is not just that pale blogs set up territory as a thing to be desired abstractly. The kinds of relationships constructed to territory through the aesthetic provide a kind of definitional structure to understand what territory is supposed to be in the digital world of the pale blog. Territory is supposed to be a place where the desires of the explorer or the enterpriser live and may be fulfilled. Territory, as it exists vis-à-vis the explorer, exists *as* the explorer’s desires, latent and unfolding with every new post. Territory exists as the body that capacitates the enterpriser to her enterprising

into those forbidden skies, but they will not be forbidden for long... What you’re doing has been incredible, but it will be even more incredible—far more incredible—because we are giving you a platform, the likes of which nobody has ever been given before. I am a big believer. You will go out there and you will take that frontier, which is largely unknown by man or woman, and you will learn everything there is to know about it. And what you’re doing is so important—remember—economically, militarily, scientifically. In every way, there is no place like space.” “Read Trump’s Full Remarks on Immigration, ‘Space Force’ - The Boston Globe”; “Space Force Announcement | User Clip | C-SPAN.Org.”

¹⁷⁸ Mbembé, *On the Postcolony*, 15.

spirit. And at this level of abstraction, the fact of desiring digital territory or constructing territory as an object of activation on a pale blog is presented as just as satisfying as having physical territory. The displays of desirous feeling towards territory emerge as just as good as, if not better than, the idea of going out into real space. This is because as pale blog images circulate, get downloaded and re-uploaded, or rack up thousands of notes, the post itself gives the impression of some access to the seeming inexhaustibility of the internet—not just the inexhaustibility of the audience, but of the popularity it, or you, may reach. The internet as physical infrastructure entails the disappearance of frontier, in which no part of the market is unknown or untouched, exemplified by the sub-oceanic cables that supply internet connectivity gartering the globe. But the internet as a host of frontier, as a user experiences it, expands the possibilities of the world on the imaginative plane through an individual portal or personal screen. The internet—and especially social media platforms like Tumblr—is a key site in the negotiation of whiteness because it expands the kinds of associations we can make between the metaphoric and virtual places it enables, and the political work these associative transformations can do.

The colonial desire to possess and conquer frontier through practices of pale blogging or the identification of the internet itself with frontier, is palpable also in the term “digital native”—the millennial population most closely associated with pale blogging and all social media participation more broadly. Rather than the term being a catalyst for critical questions about indigeneity, whiteness, and colonial technologies, it firmly displaces questions of race so that it is only in debates around the digital divide and racialized access to the internet that the question of race or colonial governance seems relevant.¹⁷⁹ Most often, scholarship that engages the term

¹⁷⁹ In particular, I have in mind, Siân Bayne and Jen Ross, “The ‘Digital Native’ and ‘Digital Immigrant’: A Dangerous Opposition,” in *Annual Conference of the Society for Research into*

“digital native” and mentions race in any critical way, tends to focus on the problem of unequal access to technology across racial groups—what is called the digital divide, or sometimes even digital apartheid. That is, it takes “digital native” to be an empirical population and addresses potential inequalities among its members. Often, these analyses uncritically embrace and contrast terms like native, tourist, and immigrant, while genuinely attempting to address other problems in the relationship between race and technology. Native scholar Jodi Byrd engages a critique of the term “tribe” for the way it perpetuates colonial erasure into the digital age.¹⁸⁰ More broadly, her work rejects the way the category of indigeneity becomes strategically invoked in order to construct a digital frontier, but so far there has been little attention to the term “digital native” and its colonial echoes.

As an unmarked category of modern being, the digital native goes native in digital space and, through the internet, inherits the lost right to frontier, terra nullius, and endless expansion that was exhausted in the projects of previous generations’ territorial exploration of the globe. The

Higher Education (SRHE), vol. 20 (ac.uk/staff/sian/natives_final.pdf [Accessed 20.3. 2013], 2007), http://www.academia.edu/download/4963108/natives_final.pdf; C. Brown and L. Czerniewicz, “Debunking the ‘Digital Native’: Beyond Digital Apartheid, towards Digital Democracy,” *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning* 26, no. 5 (October 1, 2010): 357–69, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2729.2010.00369.x>; Lisa Nakamura and Geert Lovink, “Talking Race and Cyberspace: An Interview with Lisa Nakamura,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 26, no. 1 (June 6, 2005): 60–65, <https://doi.org/10.1353/fro.2005.0014>; John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* (Basic Books, 2013); Marc Prensky, “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part 1,” *On the Horizon* 9, no. 5 (September 1, 2001): 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.1108/10748120110424816>; Hannah Thinyane, “Are Digital Natives a World-Wide Phenomenon? An Investigation into South African First Year Students’ Use and Experience with Technology,” *Computers & Education* 55, no. 1 (August 2010): 406–14, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2010.02.005>; Cheri A. Toledo, “Digital Culture: Immigrants and Tourists Responding to the Natives’ Drumbeat,” *International Journal of Teaching & Learning in Higher Education* 19, no. 1 (2007), <http://www.isetl.org/ijtlhe/pdf/IJTLHE152.pdf>.

¹⁸⁰ Byrd, “Tribal 2.0”; Byrd, *The Transit of Empire*.

practices of pale blogging allow access to this right and access to the desire for this right. Pale blogs actively construct the no-places of the imperial fantasy, and as the internet itself is figured as a new terrain and inheritance of the digital native, this practice doubly reinvigorates the violence of colonial erasure. What becomes evident then, is that on pale blogs, whiteness is performed in a polyvalent attachment to frontier that has both already vanished, and can be endlessly reproduced, endlessly extended with more images and more pale blog edits.

Pale blogs also actively construct the artificial temporal landscape where this imperial fantasy survives. They do this by manufacturing a nostalgia for a time that never was, using the imagery of older technology in the aesthetic. A common trope is to repeat the classic pale blog formula of melancholic text superimposed over an image or gif, but to style the image such that it resembles a clip off a video tape. It may actually be found video footage or, more likely, a video taken on a cell phone and processed through apps like RadVideoRecorder and R4VE that make the recording look as though it were playing from a VHS whose tracking could never resolve. Other gifs and especially images where the focus is text, replicate the look of older Microsoft applications like TextEdit or Paint. While this may give the impression that pale bloggers are obsessed with the 90's, the point to take from this is that rather than constructing a pristine new future, the attachment to everlasting frontier is realized in part by mobilizing a fictive past. The invention of anachronistic space amounted to an "administrative and regulatory technology" in the Victorian era.¹⁸¹ The production of temporal and territorial landscapes of frontier fantasy vests pale blogs with a digitized version of that long-established authority that affirms the West as the executor of past, present, and future.

¹⁸¹ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 40.

PALE PRESCRIPTIONS: TUMBLR AND GOVERNANCE

When subsets of blogs come together on tumblr, they develop in a mutually self-organizing and self-identifying practice through the kinds of content they share and by the kinds of identifying or signifying markers they include with their content (like the tag #paleblog). While tumblrs are sometimes talked about in terms of curation, I would argue that tumblrs are the evidence of having-participated-in streams of content, and the in-time or “real-time” policing of the bounds of that participation by a lack of activation in relation to certain content or overt critique of it. Pale blogging is not just about open participation, but is also strictly policed internally. The priming of colonial desire and the positive construction of place is also accompanied in pale blogs by different kinds of policing and governance strategies—strict enforcement of the aesthetic, the centrality of popularity and following back, and disavowing the relevance of race to the practice of pale blogging. There have been several different pale blog networks and various independent pale bloggers who have taken it upon themselves to dictate the boundaries of the aesthetic. The now-defunct Pale Blog Network outlines the requirements for becoming part of the network on its FAQ page (which include that you can submit your tumblr for review but if you pester them you will be blacklisted). But it also details what you have to do to remain in the network if admitted—primarily, you have to post content that “circulates around that of the pale, abstract, artistic, and surreal” and while “there is no specific criteria”, you can be booted at a moment’s notice for failing to uphold the standards of pale blogging.¹⁸²

As pale blog networks have shut down or their popularity has waned—often as many of the core administrators of these networks close their blogs—the element of policing is still evident

¹⁸² The Pale Blog Network, “F.A.Q.”

in the importance placed on the phenomenon of following and being followed back. The invitation in the title of Rosemary Kirton’s piece to “Follow Back for More Soft Grunge” mirrors the emphasis on following back that pale blogs hold up as the ultimate marker of success in the world of pale blogs. One of the most prominent pale bloggers, PalePrincess of puts a caption that circulates with all of her photos that reads, “? Palest blog of them all ? Follow me, and if you’re paler than I am, you will get a follow back!”¹⁸³

The possibility of following back and reciprocating enthusiasm is set up as the most valuable reaction one may have to a blog. It is a conditional kind of acceptance that generates social value for the superlative tumblr that has more followers than it follows. In this corner of tumblr, popularity and exclusivity reigns and there is a dominant discourse constructed through this search for popularity that creates a culture of self and group-assessment. The sense of assessment is present not only in the independent forums, like WikiHow, where people ask how to make popular tumblrs or offer tips on how “to be a tumblr girl” but in the interaction that many have with tumblrs they follow. Users are encouraged to do a kind of deferential performance that, if successful, will win them the attention of the blogger they are complementing and will provoke a positive endorsement of their own blog, maybe a follow back, and in extremely good conditions, a feature as #BOTW or #BOTM (Blog of the Week or Blog of the Month). This produces a normative and normalizing effect. Not only do pale bloggers generate a set of standards of interaction with each other (for example, when reblogging, it is discouraged to delete the commentary or metadata of the original post, especially if you are trying to get the tumblr you’re

¹⁸³ The symbols that accompany this caption are drawn from a wide range of the old school wingdings symbols like ? ♥ ☺ ☹ ☺ ☹ and others.

reblogging from to follow you back) and create a strict aesthetic range of acceptable material, they enforce these standards through positive and negative means that must be accepted to properly participate in the practice of pale blogging. Despite the rigidity of the standards of pale blogs, the rules generally remain implicit giving pale bloggers the space to deny any political significance to their aesthetic play.

Pale blogs occasionally address race directly, but only to dismiss its relevance to the practice of pale blogging. The widely followed pale blogger, PalePrincess, not only posts original content and edits, but takes a lot of asks and responds frequently to questions. She even made an FAQ page on which she dedicated two separate posts to race. In the first post, she responds to the question, “♡ Are pale blogs racist?” with:

I can not stress enough how much I get asked this on a daily basis and to be honest it's quite ignorant. Pale blogs are basically posts that have a white filter/tint to them—they have nothing to do with skin colour. There are different types of pale blogs—mine being pastel and others being mixed pale, pretty pale, foggy pale, sexual pale, dark/glow pale, and personal pale. Pale blogs are a lot more common on Tumblr than you think! Check out these asks I have gotten regarding pale blogs and skin colour if you want to truly know how I feel about it all. I am def not racist :c

This reflects the ways that the audience for pale blogs and youth on tumblr are aware of larger discourses about race and whiteness today—whether they are sympathetic or critical. But these bloggers routinely state that what they are doing has nothing to do with race. They either

justify their claims by demonstrating the “diversity” of pale blogs as a genre, like PalePrincess does in the response above, or by claiming that there are people of all colors to be found on pale blogs and so they are not strictly white. Although, it should be noted, in her second post about race PalePrincess asserts that as a neutral matter of aesthetics, dark skin just often doesn’t *work* for her edits. Moreover, on independent forum like WikiHow, newcomers to tumblr looking for advice on how to make a popular blog are discouraged from becoming social justice bloggers—the tumblr equivalent of the SJW (social justice warrior). The aversion to topics of social justice specifically demonstrates the fact that this is already a well-known and available archetype for teens when they become active on tumblr. It also perhaps suggests that pale bloggers are reacting directly to other subcultures on tumblr which are actively invested in questions of race and social justice. But more importantly, it mimics conservative and right wing claims that circulate on the internet about how unpleasant, aggressive, and irrational discourse is (and by extension, the people fueling that discourse) that critiques whiteness. What is most important to me here is the way their disavowal of questions of race is presented as an unmarked question of taste or dismissed as an unfaithful expression of the intentions and true character of the pale blogger, and therefore an irrelevant or “ignorant” critique. Here, echoes of the discussion on the crisis of whiteness from chapter 1 return. Although #TakeUsDown more overtly denigrated “liberal” or critical discourse by reframing it as an attack on whites, in her dismissal of the charge of racism, PalePrincess also reveals that she feels personally judged and unfairly attacked.

But I do not wish to be drawn into a debate about skin color on pale blogs because pale blogs present a moment for us to read the *nonrepresentational* production of race and coloniality. Looking at pale blog content and pale blogging practices then, we have to be attentive to how and on what surfaces race is reproduced, reorienting ourselves away from understandings of race that

take the familiar object as the dominant lens. So while there are images of the body on pale blogs, they are not central to a pale blog's production of race, and they are not interesting or particularly significant for their skin color. If bodies are interesting on pale blogs, it is for the way vulnerability is expressed on the body, *in addition to* all the other types of objects that appear on the pale blog. It is not really that the body is taken as a site to express vulnerability, but that the body is reduced under the aesthetic edit as a soft, vulnerable object just like all the other objects. Lips can be cracked like a sidewalk. The body is able to be decentered among a field of other bodies that are non-human and which collectively present the motif of decline that pale blogs unrelentingly recuperate. But the body is not the engine of the chromophobic practice—the production of whiteness on pale blogs does not emerge from the skin, and the skin is not representative or even suggestive of the ideal pale blogger. Frontier is the main engine driving the production of whiteness on pale blogs. Pale blogging the frontier maintains the power of white supremacy and colonial authority, and expands whiteness's capacity for vulnerability with every edit.

Many digital studies scholars use the term “participatory culture,” first developed by Henry Jenkins, to describe what emerges from digital media platforms like Tumblr in contrast to older forms of media that were controlled by a small number of people and projected to the masses.¹⁸⁴ Participatory culture is meant to invoke the control individuals have over media in the digital age as producer, promoter, and audience. However, for the kinds of participation I am analyzing on Tumblr, the meaning of participation in this literature insists a little too forcefully on the conscious agency of each individual internet user. While some users make and upload their own content

¹⁸⁴ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*; Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*; Jenkins, Itō, and boyd, *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era*; Carpentier, “Power as Participation's Master Signifier.”

(which still may very well be uncredited, existing content ripped from the internet), the creation of a blog genre doesn't primarily rely on this generative contribution. Rather it depends on the participation of many in a kind of internet temporality that is associative rather than linear; cycling and simultaneous clicks, liking, sharing, reposting, seeing, reacting to content that determines the aesthetic as it affirmatively circulates. I view the kinds of participation that emerge on the whole from pale blogs as a kind of interaction between bodies that is iterative, that constitutes or articulates a kind of "engine of process," as Massumi puts it, and that has everything to do with how people will be governed because it will normalize the new orientations and horizons of bodies some of whom are participants and some who are not. Pale blogging exemplifies the ways that self-organizing and iterative waves of emergence and habituation not only become self-sustaining, but in their automaticity they produce, entail, or operate through kinds of governance. As the aesthetic solidifies, "the conceptual formula returns as the matrix for each iteration. Its reality is felt even where the events it governs do not take place...The keyest of the key points: 'engine of the process'; and 'governs.' ...They imply that the conceptual formula possesses some form of the causal force toward its own inflected unfoldings." I would argue that the majority of the 'participation' on Tumblr reflects the activation, stimulation, and resonance that has various habituated physical expressions or correlates determined by the platform, like the <3 (like), the reblog, the comment, the tag, etc. The platform of tumblr is structured to preserve and archive this activity in the collective and individual pages of the site.

The iterative movement of pale blogging gives rise to new kinds of normalizing orientations and normalized horizons for the body. They are normalizing partly because the participation already happens in a primed environment of what Nigel Thrift calls the "technological anteconscious." By technological anteconscious, Thrift means the set of habituated

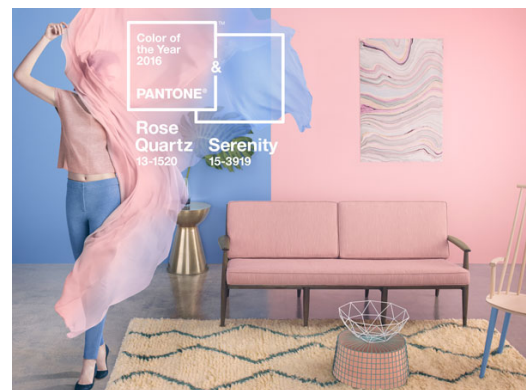
values and normalized reactions primed by the technology that saturates our everyday.¹⁸⁵ The technological anteconscious refers to how one might be inclined to participate in digital life; and it is ultimately reflected in the aggregate archive that takes shape as pale blogging. Thrift's notion suggests that some of the interactions engaged in a space like tumblr go even deeper than being unconscious, rather they are superimposed on our actual experiences like a second level of feeling and perception. On this screen of virtual activity, we see reflected very broad social values and conditions that are much more far reaching than individual desire, although they may manifest in individual actions. In a space like Tumblr where the majority of actions can be so minor—the scroll, the <3, the reblog—what is really on display is the resonance of larger social questions and values, crises and negotiations of the meaning and sources of modern power. The impetus to abstractly resolve these crises in aesthetic terms is activated on the platform partly by virtue of its own structure, and partly by the proliferating narratives we have of social media as itself a new frontier—as a new space of ultimate entrepreneurial or expressive opportunity, pivotal in the latest wave in the pitch towards globalization, the latest step in the progress of modernity towards some techno-social zenith of advancement, interconnectedness, and exchange.

The abstract nature of the commitment to frontier is what helps us draw a through line from the more violent allegiances of the colonially oriented pale blog aesthetic to the neutral way this aesthetic is presented to the public for consumption as the craze for Tumblr Pink. Tumblr Pink became trendy independently of the pale blog aesthetic from which it emerged (even though, we can be sure that the trend forecasters who identified Tumblr Pink as the next big color were aware of the aesthetic practices of pale blogs and the other similar digital subcultures emerging alongside

¹⁸⁵ Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory*, 10.

pale blogs, like vaporwave). It is not the popularity of pale blogs themselves that caused tumblr pink’s commercial popularity—pale blogs are rather obscure for a mainstream audience—but rather the underlying and unmarked commitment to producing frontier. At the same time that pale blogs have started to unmark themselves as just Aesthetics, Tumblr Pink has also gone through its own unmarking. As it is increasingly understood as a color of a new generation, symbolizing the frontier of a new future, it is also referred to as Millennial Pink.¹⁸⁶ The technological anteconscious provides a conceptual ground to link the attitudes, institutions, and performances that prime the scene for the spontaneous production of something like a pale blog, and for the eventual download and analog viral spread of Tumblr Pink. This is the final stage in the aesthetic abstraction of the desire for frontier: the original, analog desire for space is satisfied by supplanting real space for digital space, and then by rematerializing that spatial desire in the desire of color in the craze of Tumblr Pink.

PALE BLOGS IRL: TUMBLR PINK



¹⁸⁶ Jones, “This Is the Colour of Our Generation and Is Anyone Surprised?”; “What’s With Generational Color Trends Like Millennial Pink?”

The most authoritative example of Tumblr Pink was one half of Pantone's color of the year for 2016, Rose Quartz. Rather explicitly retaining the pale blog origins of the trend, the color of the year from 2016 was actually two colors: Rose Quartz (a pale pink) and Serenity (a pastel blue). These colors were presented as a pair, often blended into each other, which reproduced the greyish bruise value central to the pale blog aesthetic. The marketing materials for Rose Quartz and Serenity remained faithful to the rules of the pale blog as well, both visually and in statements put out by Pantone executives.

Pantone releases a promotional video along with the marketing materials that announce the color of the year. The purpose of the video is to demonstrate the mood the color conveys and to give examples of its possible use in different spaces or objects. Unlike the promo videos of Pantone's other colors of the year which focus mostly on the color itself, the video for Rose Quartz and Serenity contextualizes the popularity of the colors historically. The dual colors of the year for 2016 are presented in contrast to 2015, a year the video characterizes as one of political and social unrest.¹⁸⁷

The video opens with "2015" in white block letters fading in on a black background. For the first twenty seconds, the music is percussive and fast paced. Clicking electronic and industrial sounds are layered over the audio of the video clips that are themselves a series of quick cuts and double exposures. The sounds of typing and texting are overlaid with fireworks and missiles launching; a shot of the side of a glacier breaking off and falling into the sea is followed by children being bullied in an alley; there are protests, people texting, taking selfies, or waiting in long lines; marching boots, dividing cells, the Facebook like logo, and droning alarms all flash across the

¹⁸⁷ Pantone, *The Pantone Color of the Year for 2016 Is Rose Quartz & Serenity*.

screen in a hectic cacophony. The chaos finally fades out as the Pantone logo fades in to present the doubled “Color of the Year 2016” Rose Quartz and Serenity in a puff of pink and blue powder. The soundscape of the last half of the video is composed of soothing piano tones, the faint chirping of birds, and the long held whole notes of a softly singing choir. In this last half, none of the background images emit their own diegetic noises. Instead, the images are all presented in the same visual and aural aesthetic of Rose Quartz and Serenity. In white block letters, the words “BALANCE,” “CALMING,” and “WELLNESS” are overlaid on different scenes showing parts of female figures draped in billowing, gossamer fabric in Serenity and Rose Quartz ombré. The colors of the year are also presented as light, emanating from two glowing cubes, or shining on large cumulus clouds as though during sunset. Finally, a classic pale blog landscape image fades in—a foggy winter shot of a river in the forest in a blue and pink filter. The landscape is overlaid with the word “TRANQUILITY.”

Rose Quartz and Serenity are meant to form the basis of an aesthetic experience that brings about the resolution of political turmoil. Commenting on the color, Leatrice Eisman, the Executive Director of the Pantone Color Institute ominously described that, “Joined together, Rose quartz and serenity demonstrate an inherent balance between a warmer embracing rose tone and the cooler tranquil blue, reflecting connection and wellness as well as a soothing sense of order and peace.”¹⁸⁸ This order is achieved through the chromophobic monochrome of the pale blog aesthetic and the sense of uniformity it helps to establish. The homogeneity of the pale blog aesthetic emergent in the tumblr pink trend is valued as something inherently good and necessary. Tumblr pink is often juxtaposed to the supposed contentiousness of our political times, as a color that manifests

¹⁸⁸ Pantone, “Pantone Color of the Year 2016 | Rose Quartz & Serenity.”

“quietude.”¹⁸⁹ While this rhetoric resonates with conservative claims of the impending threats to Western society that must be met with more law and order measures, it also deftly associates the appreciation of standardization and a rejection of disruption of the status quo with being fashionable and not politically suspect. In fact, quietude offers something more: the feeling of total escape from political concerns. The notion of quietude, declared by the heads of the design world, more authoritatively claims the distinction between politics and aesthetics that pale bloggers insist on. Pursuing quietude—that is, decorating your space in Tumblr Pink—assures an escape from indictment, scrutiny, or reproach, because it is easy to claim that what one is doing is not politically motivated; it’s just about beauty and serenity—the opposite of what politics signifies in this moment. It’s a claim that reads as a little more than hypocritical when the spaces most celebrated for their Millennial zen have a distinctly colonial chic look, complete with straw hats, wicker, and dense tropical greenery accenting the plush pink décor.¹⁹⁰ On the colonial era map, pink was a rather ubiquitous color as it designated the British Empire. Accordingly, pale pink has a long-standing symbolic relationship to conquest masquerading as soft civility, ensconced in the British empire’s characterization as the “‘empire on which the sun never set,’ a truly geographical metaphor for the Empire’s supposedly seamless global unity.”¹⁹¹ This orientation returns in the

¹⁸⁹ Wheeler, “How ‘Tumblr Pink’ Became the Most Ubiquitous Color in Fashion Branding.”; Other examples of articles that assert that Tumblr/Millennial Pink is soothing, calming, or otherwise counters contentious feeling can be found in: Thorpe, “This Is The Scientific Reason You Will Never Get Over Your Millennial Pink Obsession”; “‘Millennial Pink’ Is the Colour of Now – but What Exactly Is It?”; “Millennial Pink”; CGK, “How ‘Millennial Pink’ Can Help Market Your Business.”

¹⁹⁰ “Designbygemini Paints Palm Trees in Millennial Pink at Milan Design Week”; “Colour of the Moment ‘Millennial Pink’ Dominates at Milan Design Week”; “An Observation of the Millennial Pink Trend.”

¹⁹¹ Rogoff, *Terra Infirma*, 75.

craze for tumblr pink, camouflaging normative desires that the modern West harbors for power which are on display in the trend but wholly unmarked.

The shift from pale blogs to Tumblr Pink, is the movement from an online digital culture that constructs an account of space and our relationship to it, to a trend that creates and changes actual spaces for us to be in relation with and occupy. As Tumblr Pink spread as the latest color in interior design, the physical version of the space of the pale blog manifested as more than rooms painted pink or pink décor and pink appliances. It also extended to things like billboards and advertising materials that inserted long intervals of white space into the visual landscape, evidenced in the tweet I opened with in this chapter. The spatialization of the pale blog aesthetic is also the aestheticization of the space according to the rules and desirous metrics of the pale blog. The strict policing within pale blogs that gave rise to such a strict aesthetic reverberates in the desire for Tumblr Pink in its association with re-establishing order. This order is a colonial order. In a comment requested for an article in *The Cut*, the poet Natalie Diaz relates, “A more accurate color than Millennial Pink might be: white... A shady white, as white can be so often.”¹⁹²

In constructing a genealogy of Tumblr Pink, we should remember that power reemerges as a governing force even in places where it is not seen to have a direct connection. We can see this clearly in the competing claims that are made about tumblr pink as a color of a generation with particularly progressive ideas about gender running up against the resonances of law and order, neutrality and normativity in Pantone’s color of the year, and finally the use of the pale blog aesthetic by Milo Yiannopolis. Yiannopolis is a figurehead within the Alt-Right who regularly

¹⁹² Schwartzberg, “Why Millennial Pink Refuses to Go Away.” Perhaps also just as telling is the fact that Benjamin Moore and Sherwin William’s colors of the year for 2016 were just whites, but generally presented in interiors that were consistent with the pale blog aesthetic from the use of pink light.

advocates for a white ethno-state, decries the threat that the increase of non-white peoples poses to the West, rejects feminism, and derides trans and non-heterosexual people, although he himself



is openly gay.¹⁹³ When his book, *Dangerous*, was dropped by publishing house Simon & Schuster, he published it independently using an ad campaign taken directly from the Pantone, pale blog playbook. Billboards were put in major cities like Chicago, New York, and Washington DC that show a platinum blond

Yiannopolis wearing a white blazer, lit from either side by pale pink and blue light.¹⁹⁴ This use of Tumblr Pink demonstrates the underlying anxiety and desire for the restoration of colonial order that is latent in the pale blog aesthetic, but rarely expressed in such overt terms as Tumblr Pink as a trend and pale blogging as a practice are so vehemently claimed to be apolitical.

What I am pointing to is that through the network of relationships catalyzed on tumblr, the genealogy from pale blogs to Tumblr Pink emerges as a kind of normative spread. My research doesn't account for the ways commercial spaces are made pink; rather it reads the digital buzz about the color and the circulation of the aesthetic as something that creates a kind of political continuity; a series of tiny opportunities to be activated by values of Western expansion, and a craving for eternal frontier. To trace the emergence of Tumblr Pink through to pale blogs is to track the contagion between platforms, commercial production, the cultivation of broad social taste and desire. While this chapter has attempted to illustrate that the practices of pale blogging and the

¹⁹³ Smith and Pm, "RETRACTION: Milo Yiannopoulos Is Not a White Nationalist." The title of this article is meant to be sarcastic. Milo Yiannopolis is most definitely a white nationalist.

¹⁹⁴ Gossett, "Chicagoans Are Not Pleased With Those CTA Ads For Milo's Book."

trend of Tumblr Pink expand the doing of whiteness in a way that directly reacts to the crisis of whiteness—that is, capacitating power through decline—the next chapter attempts to address a slightly different valence of the virtualities of colonial ontopower and the strategies it has developed to ensure its own ontogenetic future. Even while new strategies of victimhood are negotiated for whiteness and transposed into new forms to make them seem less problematic, whiteness continues to operate virtually through events that reinvigorate a commitment to the unfolding of western power in more normative ways. This is one of the capacitating effects of the virtuality of whiteness’s operation meeting the highly reactive but expansive space of the digital—whiteness may simultaneously be in crisis and be operating through traditional modes simultaneously. In considering the conjuncture that is the crisis of whiteness, it is imperative to trace not only the new points of negotiation but the longstanding iterative habituations which also function to project whiteness into the future. In the next chapter, I will examine how anonymous internet participants were invited into a relation of whiteness virtually through Wafaa Bilal’s performance piece, “Domestic Tension,” originally titled “Shoot an Iraqi.” With only their IP addresses to identify them, this piece allows us to analyze the way Bilal and his internet assailants produce digital events of whiteness, restaging the military might of the west such that we can think of the participants as *doing whiteness*, or becoming virtually white, regardless of how we may be inclined to identify them racially if we had access to more “official” identifying markers.

Chapter 4

VIRTUALLY WHITE

“The conclusion is inescapable: compared to the cannibals, the dismemberers, and other lesser breeds, Europe and the West are the incarnation of respect for human dignity.

But let us move on, and quickly, lest our thoughts wander to Algiers, Morocco, and other places where, as I write these very words, so many valiant sons of the West, in the semi-darkness of dungeons, are lavishing upon their inferior African brothers, with such tireless attention, those authentic marks of respect for human dignity which are called, in technical terms, ‘electricity,’ ‘the bathtub,’ and ‘the bottleneck.’

— Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*¹⁹⁵

« L’Occident n’est pas à l’ouest. Ce n’est pas un lieu, c’est un projet. »

“The West is not in the west. It is not a place, it is a project.”

— Édouard Glissant, *Le discours Antillais*¹⁹⁶

For thirty-one days in 2007, while the Iraq war raged on, artist Wafaa Bilal sat in a gallery in Chicago before a paintball gun. The telescopic sight¹⁹⁷ attached to the gun was a video camera

¹⁹⁵ Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*. Translated by Joan Pinkham., 70.

¹⁹⁶ Glissant, *Le discours antillais*, 14n1.

¹⁹⁷ “Telescopic sight” sounds like a compelling concept just waiting to be elaborated, but in this instance, I am using the term literally. A telescopic sight is the apparatus attached to a sniper rifle

relaying a live feed of Bilal to a website from which anonymous participants could take control of the gun, aim, and shoot at him. He originally titled this piece, “Shoot an Iraqi.” At the last minute, the gallery owner panicked that the provocation would expose Bilal to potentially life-threatening zeal from his potential audience, and so the piece was renamed “Domestic Tension.” It was a durational performance meant to bait those who Bilal identified as the “armchair warriors of the West.”¹⁹⁸ He wanted them to think critically about Western military aggression in the Middle East, as well as the increasingly game-like tactics of the US military in which drone operators also shoot their targets from behind a computer console. The question this chapter interrogates is how we may come to understand who emerges as these valiant sons, these armchair warriors of the West, or how these digital participants emerge in this event as doing whiteness, as *virtually* white.

When we think of race as an ontopower, and the doing of whiteness as a virtual performance of regulating the potentials of bodies-in-relation to reproduce colonial power, whiteness then becomes available for any body to instantiate or inhabit. I argue that the zealous performance of digitized Western imperial aggression displayed by the participants of “Domestic Tension” is an example of doing whiteness virtually, or being 'virtually white.' Here, I mean to draw attention to both the digital form of the shooters' participation, as well as the nonrepresentational relations catalyzed between the bodies of the users and Bilal. The anonymous shooters that made up Bilal's audience hailed from all around the globe, often overwhelming the system trying to all shoot at once. As each event of firing the gun unfolded, users inhabited the relation as white, actualizing, in part, an investment in the military might of the West, with Bilal's

that helps bring the target into view, and allows the shooter to see farther and aim more precisely.

¹⁹⁸ Bilal, *Shoot an Iraqi*, 17.

body emerging as an object of radical annihilation, figured as the terrorist for whom their domesticity is the target of military power and neocolonial intervention. In this chapter, I argue that this type of digital performance illustrates a new metric for determining how whiteness is done—that is this example helps us to think race as a virtual event, and with this theory I gesture towards the possibility of downloading and applying this understanding of doing whiteness, offline.

The topics I'm going to cover in this meditation on coloniality, virtuality, and whiteness, are the questions of what represents military aggression in the digital age—that is technologized warfare that makes a game out of military action and inscribes an element of telepresence into the techniques of western expansion, directly employing modes of digital being into the doing of whiteness. Whiteness appears as a virtuality and nonrepresentational in the performance. This is evidenced in the fact that visitors to Bilal's site can only be identified by their countries—we cannot reliably “race” them, but we can interpret their willingness to participate as a manifestation of whiteness's immanence and power of emergence. Coloniality here is not just about the fact that the shooters who visited Bilal's site were able to vent some aggression, or participate in a pseudo-military exercise open to the public by way of the internet. The question of coloniality arises in that the shooters are promised to be shooting and Iraqi, at the time a shorthand for terrorist, and the particular application of the technology to this set of bodies makes terrorist objects—it inducts bodies into the relation of military-white and terrorist-non-white.

WHITENESS AND TELEPRESENCE

Bilal's piece, "Domestic Tension," primarily made use of telepresence to find its audience. Telepresence art is a style of art that incorporates technology in order to access and construct different kinds of audiences and audience experiences than what is traditional to the art world. It is an innovation that transforms technology originally developed for military exercises and to reduce soldier casualties or expand the remote capabilities of the military.¹⁹⁹ On this point, Eduardo Kac, one of the faculty at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where telepresence art is a concentrated form, explains:

"Since the beginning of the twentieth century, but particularly since the early 1980s, increasing numbers of artists around the world have worked in collaborative mode with telecommunications. In their 'works,' which we shall refer to as 'events,' images and graphics are not created as the ultimate goal or the final product, as is common in the fine arts. Employing computers, video, modems, and other devices, these artists use visuals as part of a much larger, interactive, bidirectional communication context. Images and graphics are created not simply to be transmitted by an artist from one point to another but to spark a multidirectional visual dialogue with other artists and participants in remote locations. This visual dialogue assumes that images will be changed and transformed throughout the process as much as speech gets interrupted, complemented, altered, and reconfigured in a spontaneous face-to-face

¹⁹⁹ Bilal, 19.

conversation. Once an event is over, images and graphics stand not as the ‘result’ but as documentation of the process of visual dialogue promoted by the participants... To me, telepresence art creates a unique context in which participants are invited to experience invented remote worlds from perspectives and scales other than the human.”²⁰⁰

Other scholarly pieces have engaged Bilal’s work for the way telepresence attempted to enable dialogue and perhaps increased understanding.²⁰¹ For example, Carol Becker, writing the forward to the book project that came out of the performance insists, “This is what [Bilal] expects from a democracy—that it not fear its own contradictions.”²⁰² However, I argue that the telepresent emergence of Bilal’s participants heralds the more-than-human scale whiteness reaches on the internet.

The only documentation of the performance from the viewer’s perspective that remains of “Domestic Tension” is hosted by the Net Art Anthology through Rhizome.org.²⁰³ The page has

²⁰⁰ Kac, *Telepresence & Bio Art*, 3.

²⁰¹ Ingram, “Experimental Geopolitics”; Chambers-Letson, “Homegrown Terror”; Houston, “Remote Control”; James Hicks, “Bringing the Stories Home”; Unger, “‘SHOOT HIM NOW!!!’ Anonymity, Accountability and Online Spectatorship in Wafaa Bilal’s Domestic Tension.”

²⁰² Bilal, *Shoot an Iraqi*, xxi.

²⁰³ The Net Art Anthology is an internet archive of internet-based or internet hosted art projects and performances. The site is presented by Rhizome, a not-for-profit organization committed to preserving and presenting new media art. The Anthology presents pieces from as early as 1984 to the present, divided into five different “chapters” with individual pages for each work. Rhizome describes the mission of the Net Art Anthology in this way: “Net Art Anthology aims to represent net art as an expansive, hybrid set of artistic practices that overlap with many media and disciplines. To accommodate this diversity of practice, Rhizome has defined ‘net art’ as ‘art that acts on the network, or is acted on by it.’ Rhizome prefers the term ‘net art’ because it has been used more widely by artists than ‘internet art,’ which is more commonly used by institutions, or ‘net.art,’ which usually evokes a specific mid-90s movement. The informality of

three basic components. There is a large central window that presents a black and white video feed of the gallery with the icons to control and fire the paintball gun. As part of the view through the webcam, the very tip of the gun can be seen, reproducing the perspective of a videogame avatar from a single player shooter game. In these games, the very tip of the weapon is visible to give the player the impression that she actually has it in her hands. The video feed sits on a large graphic drawing of the globe, next to an image of Bilal himself. In this picture of Bilal, the tip of the gun is pointing straight at him. To the viewer, it looks like Bilal has walked right in front of the gun, giving the participant the perfect shot. Below this main portion of the website are the other two components: on the left, a list of the IP addresses for the last ten shots fired, and a built-in chat room for website visitors on the right.

The website retains a very limited amount of the functionality of the original performance. For most of the components, that is, this website is not an interactive recreation. The IP addresses for the last ten shots are set and do not refresh. The chat roll is not live, but twenty lines of the chat are posted and available to scroll through. The controls for the gun and the video feed of the gallery—which is empty—are nonresponsive icons. Clicking them does not move the gun or change the perspective through the webcam. However, there is a small gun icon that you can click to recreate the central participatory feature of the performance, and fire the gun. While the gun doesn't actually fire anything on this archived site, the video feed does flash red momentarily with every shot. After each shot, a counter underneath the controls resets and counts down the time until

the term 'net art' is also appropriate not only to the critical use of the web as an artistic medium, but also informal practices such as selfies and Twitter poems." "NET ART ANTHOLOGY," October 27, 2016.

the trigger will be available again to shoot. This time is different after every shot and perhaps indicates one's place in line to take control of the gun.

During the performance itself, the video feed would have shown Bilal living in the gallery—sleeping, eating, chatting with participants on his computer. Now, the gallery space is empty, and all that is left is the grainy evidence of what was an intense, punishing performance. The gun could be turned left and right, but always shot along the same horizon. This line of fire is etched into the far wall of the gallery, which is deeply pocked from the force of the paintballs shot into it, round the clock, for thirty days. The floor of the gallery looks industrial, splotted with paint in uneven smears. But it is unclear what one is really seeing. The resolution on the video is so low, without being able to redirect the webcam, it's hard to make out very much detail other than the basics—the far wall, the air vent in the floor, some light-colored paint on the floor, the line of paintball bullet holes. This was an intentional choice on Bilal's part. He explains, “We also kept the website devoid of sound, and used grainy, low-resolution imagery to create a heightened sense of detachment—something more akin to the experience of a soldier dropping remote bombs than the usual experience of a high-resolution video game.”²⁰⁴ The level of detachment forced upon the digital participant of Bilal's piece comes into shocking relief when compared to color images of the piece or video from inside the gallery that was shot by Bilal at the end of each day as an ongoing vlog—video log—he kept during the performance. Perhaps the most visually striking difference comes from realizing that the paintballs were filled with a bright, mustard yellow fish oil paint.²⁰⁵ The gallery was originally a “white cube” style space, with blank white walls. However, shortly after the piece began, the walls were splotted with oozing yellow paint

²⁰⁴ Bilal, *Shoot an Iraqi*, 22.

²⁰⁵ Bilal, “Domestic Tension « Wafaa Bilal.”

and shattered paintball casings. By the end of the performance, more 65,000 paintballs of paint had been splattered on the walls, the floor, the furniture in the room, the Plexiglass shield Bilal used to not take too many direct hits. Bilal describes cleaning the gallery before he would go to sleep, wiping up pools of paint and paintball casings that lined the floor in a thick, dirty sludge. The task of cleaning became an endless battle. The next biggest difference was the sonic element. The website through which shooters fired at Bilal had no sound. But in the vlogs Bilal filmed, the pounding, explosive sound of the gun echoing throughout the gallery space competes with the volume of Bilal's own voice as he describes his day. The gun shoots in erratic, although constant, bursts. It is deafening and unpredictable. Using the performance website, the only sound to be heard is the quiet clicking of the keyboard or mouse as one navigates through the page. Finally, the fish oil paintballs had a powerful smell that quickly saturated the air of the closed gallery. The paint dripping down the walls dripped into and threatened to block the air vent itself. Soon after the project began, Bilal began experiencing physical problems from the fumes of the paintballs. He was lightheaded, couldn't sleep, and got splitting headaches as the paint started to accumulate on all the surfaces of the room. The distance between Bilal's physical conditions and a participant's access to his performance couldn't be more stark.

VIRTUAL WHITENESS

The performance mobilized the traditional distinction of white/non-white in a number of ways to prime participants' virtual whiteness. First was the overt suggestion of race effected in promising that the target of the performance's aggression would be an Iraqi—embedded in this suggestion is that this Iraqi, then also a military enemy, was potentially a terrorist or stood in for the figure of the terrorist. There is a faint, but present refrain that equates the figure of the terrorist

with that of the anti-colonial fighter or agitator. It is present in the designation Fanon makes that the anti-colonial fighter is a terrorist. This equation is repeated in a citation of Stuart Hall's that the terrorist figure begins to arrive to Europe as decolonized populations, former anti-colonial terrorist fighters, begin to relocate to the metropole.²⁰⁶ These articulations of the political relation that give rise to the terrorist suggest that it symptomatically signals the active operation and existence of colonial ontopower—the colonial must continue to exist in order for the terrorist to have his reciprocal enemy. However, the performance also offers a doing of whiteness through the impression of non-affectability. Recalling da Silva's formulation of the affecting white and affectable other, the illusion of a body's capacity to exist outside relation and act upon another body while itself remaining uninfluenced is foundational to the affective horizon of whiteness. The fantasy is predicated upon an interpretation of the power dynamic intended to come into being between white and non-white. In the proper unfolding of a relation of whiteness, the non-white-emergent body should not have the same capacity to impose feeling or induce receptivity in the body emergent as white. This is not the same thing as the white-emergent body *actually* eschewing any affectability. However, the overwhelming differential in their capacities to affect, along with the impunity often enjoyed once the affective capacities of the white body are exercised, and the extreme examples usually used to illustrate this relationship of affecting-affectable (like extra-judicial murder), can be described as the non-white body effecting barely anything in the relation. Of course, no body is actually impervious to the affecting force of other bodies—it is only in the relation of being affected and affecting that a body even emerges. But the non-white body's capacity to affect the white is so diminished that it may as well not have any such capacity. The

²⁰⁶ Hickey, "THE TIMES Review of the Year 1972."

oppositional paradigm da Silva outlines of affectable versus affecting reflects the dramatic differential in the level of influence these two bodies have over one another.²⁰⁷ In Bilal's piece, the participants are offered the opportunity to emerge through the website as practically-affecting and unaffected from behind the computer screen. Moreover, they are offered an affectable target in Bilal who represents an attempted refusal of colonial power in his proximity to terrorism and therefore a pan-Western enemy. The affective force of Bilal's body is meager consolation—in no way does it rise to the level of capacitating equal and opposite instance of violence on his digital attackers. And yet it still acts on the situation, it still entices a body, even from so far away, to shoot. In Bilal's case having set up the performance himself, it successfully entraps. It offers the opportunity for participants to emerge as white through the affecting-white/affectable-other dichotomy. Of course, the terrorist-other-affectable bodies who are not intentionally staging this digitized act of aggression have an even less desirable set of affects ascribed to them—the capacity to inspire fear, suspicion, and unarticulable challenge, to transform the surrounding bodies out of their unaffectedability (in the right circumstances) into arbiters of western state power. In the face of such a threat, it becomes apparent why the narrative of unaffectedability eliminates the possibility of considering the anti-colonial body equal in force or potential. It conceptually extends the future of whiteness by positing its impenetrability and imperviousness.

In this chapter I engage a reading of whiteness as virtual—a node of thickened investment, an extensive capacity enacted as one half of a relation of colonial ontopower, which makes one emerge through the event as (virtually) white. I articulate this theory of the virtual emergence of whiteness in order to account for the materially significant outcome of the iterative events of

²⁰⁷ Da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*.

colonial ontopower which establish race as a mode of execution, but also construct a doubling structure in which adherence to one's racial category is only one way of properly extending or completing the event. If whiteness exists as a racial category, and as the organizing force of racial categories, then the reproduction of a structure of power which reifies racial categories themselves is the reproduction of that organizing force which insists on their meaningfulness as discrete entities. Extrapolating further, I argue then that too narrow of a focus on the racial categories particular to a local colonial situation misses the larger function established through a global engine of distinction that designates white and non-white. More pointedly, this chapter defines the doing of whiteness as the extension of bodily capacity whose expression takes the form of distinguishing between white and non-white—a second order of the emergent valence of colonial ontopower which remains effectively hidden without an account of whiteness's virtuality. As a virtuality, whiteness is available for any body to produce. The event through which this is achieved is qualitatively and materially different depending on the conditions that induce it. However, in the space of the internet, where many of the materialities often associated with race are difficult to establish as self-evident, I argue it becomes slightly easier to see this virtual production of whiteness, the virtual doing of whiteness as digitized becoming. In a final stand against the traditional trappings of an analysis of race, I argue against the primacy of the visual schema associated with whiteness, arguing that participation in whiteness, the doing of whiteness is available to those, and regularly taken up by those without so called white skin. Thus, this chapter takes Wafaa Bilal's durational performance, *Domestic Tension*, as the conceptual lens that helps to stage the process by which "the valiant sons of the West" emerge anonymously in the digital age as the "armchair warriors of the West"—hidden from view, but telepresent.

If there is to be being to whiteness, its durational quality is limited to the length of the event through which it emerges. I understand bodies as continuously emerging through multiple, overlapping, and asynchronous events at once, which means that some of the relations through which they emerge may not reproduce the intensive categories of white and non-white. In fact, I contend that for most bodies, their production of whiteness brings along with it very little of the term so robustly conceptualized by whiteness studies: white privilege. Instead, I argue that bodies iteratively do whiteness in their participation in a schema of race in which their emergence through racial categories reifies the organizing structure that is whiteness. Useful here is a formulation laid out by Houira Bouteldja writing with the Party of the Indigenous of the Republic (la Partie des Indigènes de la République) in France, in which she insists that in her use of the word “white”, it “is not only to describe the policy of the French State, but also refers to French society and political organizations, including on the ‘left.’ The category ‘White,’ like the category ‘Indigenous,’ is not thought of as an identity. Sadri Khiari recognizes the importance of questioning this term and its risks of ethnocentrism. ‘To speak of Whites,’ he writes, ‘is not to essentialize the White as white...White is a social relation and not a natural fact. It only exists as such as a moment of a social relation of oppression and struggle against this oppression.’”²⁰⁸ My reading takes the principle that white people don’t exist: they happen. But the events in which our bodies are conscripted, and through which we emerge are asynchronous, overlapping, *enchevêtrés*.²⁰⁹

Whiteness studies has so far only accounted for whiteness when it appears to emerge as an alignment between racial category and colonial-ontopowerful iteration. That is, it has so far only

²⁰⁸ Bouteldja and Bacchetta, “Party of the Indigenous of the Republic (PIR) Key Concepts,” 29.

²⁰⁹ *Echevêtré* is an adjective whose connotations and sometimes conflicting meanings cannot be distilled into one word—it means tangled like cords become twisted together; entangled like particles at a distance; frayed; layered, like a mess of papers on a desk or a palimpsest.

accounted for the doing of whiteness when it is verifiably done by “white people.” But I argue that this overly material orientation has missed what Glissant calls the project that is the West. The project of the west operates abstractly, nonlocally, through whatever vectors tend towards its strengthened elaboration. A mere reversal—to begin to interrogate the doing of whiteness done by “non-white people”—also misses the larger formulation possible in this theoretical exercise: an indistinct doing of whiteness, the virtuality of doing whiteness that is not determined through an assessment of skin color. We might think of the doing of whiteness as any activity which aids in the construction of what Bouteldja calls the White Political Field. For Bouteldja and the PIR the White Political Field is defined as a key concept in their political thought: “White Political Field (WPF): designates the space, times, and political logics in imperialist states or in the global interstate system that are structured, especially in their institutional incarnations, by past and present conflicts within the official white group as well as by modes of monopolizing the political arena developed by this same official white group. Similarly, as we speak of bourgeois parties and as we could speak of masculine parties, it’s perfectly legitimate to define the movements that contribute to reproducing the ethnic hierarchizations of postcolonial society as white parties.”²¹⁰ The doing of whiteness does not depend on having white people reliably or verifiably present. This is because the doing of whiteness is about the outcome of an event, not its initiating components.

I want to be historically careful here and note that my argument is also contemporarily situated, within the digital age, which itself is marked by being “postcolonial,” emerging after and out of the period of the struggle for Civil Rights, similar legal adjustments that responded to the influx of people moving to the metropole from the decolonized periphery, and the rise of

²¹⁰ Bouteldja and Bacchetta, “Party of the Indigenous of the Republic (PIR) Key Concepts,” 27.

multiculturalist policies across the West. What has constituted doing whiteness across and preceding these periods has surely looked different considering the differently capacitating influence of the state, the church, and its militaries or military proxies. I am not trying to suggest that colonized peoples colonized themselves. Rather, I am trying to build a more robust analysis of the difference between how whiteness operates as opposed to the narratives through which whiteness claims to reveal or confess its operation—what Barnor Hesse might call “white mythologies.”²¹¹ Let me offer what I read as the radical suggestion latent in the seminal work of Theodore Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*. As he notes in colonial Virginia, the colonial society iteratively invented the structures it needed to ensure its future existence.²¹² These structures—some of which still exist—were employed experimentally, ad hoc, and often discarded through trial and error. One of these inventions was the idea that white people were needed to secure a population that would be properly allegiant to the structure of power that constituted the colonial elite, in the relations they entered into with other colonial subjects and in all colonial situations. The category of whiteness was created to establish an affective complicity with the emerging colonial society, because under certain conditions it became more efficient to establish an affective horizon of whiteness than to continue with the other policies which preceded the category’s invention but did not properly or reliably augment colonial power.²¹³ Allen insists then

²¹¹ Hesse, “Racialized Modernity.”

²¹² Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*.

²¹³ One such example to be drawn from Allen from the second volume includes the implementation of laws that would become anathema to the structure of racial life in the United States, like the laws promoting marriage between male bondsmen and free European women. Through such a union, a slave owner would be granted ownership over the wife and the children of the union, acquiring the property of his property. “Under Maryland law in effect from 1664 to 1692, any ‘freeborne’ woman who married an African-American lifetime bond-laborer was bound to serve ‘the master of such slave during the life of her husband.’ Presented with such an opportunity, many Maryland owners deliberately fostered marriages of European-American

that the category of whiteness is ultimately oriented towards the control of those who become designated as white people. However, I read into his analysis the point that whiteness also functioned in the absence of the designation of white people. Allen's work suggests that there was and continued to be a realm of the elaboration of colonial society that functioned beyond the aims ascribed to the purpose of creating the category of white, which suggests that to look to the category of 'white people' would be much too narrow a focus to understand what has developed over the entirety of modernity as colonial ontopower.

What is at stake in this thinking is the ability to keep the shifts and transformations in the strategies of colonial ontopower in view. Many have likened the manipulation of affect to Foucault's conceptualization of biopower because indeed all bodies have the capacity to be destroyed.²¹⁴ The result of affective modulation always carries intensively within it the possibility of death. And the infliction of death or destruction of all sorts of bodies has been a central weapon in the arsenal of tendencies or strategies of colonial ontopower—beyond the human body there have also been animals, plants, cities, judicial structures, capacities for intimate relationships, languages, relationships conceptualized to the cosmos and the divine all put to death under the colonial power curve. More than that, modernity, conceptualized as the period in which the project of colonial ontopower has taken shape, has also manufactured modes of attunement and attraction towards new kinds of deaths—the crisis of intelligibility detailed by Jonathan Lear and other instances of live extinction imposed upon indigenous populations globally; the viral spread of videos recording the deathly force of the state emergent as the institution of policing; the deathly

women and African-American men bond-laborers in order to get the benefit of the added unpaid labor time of their descendants.” Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 134.

²¹⁴ Puar, “Prognosis Time”; Anderson, “Affect and Biopower.”

pleasures of the military videogame that are restaged by the performance considered in this chapter. New configurations of social life are brought into being in colonial ontopower, but not with any significant commitment to vitality. This is evident in the rhetoric Jane Bennett so deftly critiques that the world has in general entered an age of disenchantment, inertness.²¹⁵ That the primacy of vitality may be so easily discarded in the understanding of modernity reflects exactly the stakes of being able to preempt or at least accurately account for the dangerously creative force of colonial ontopower, or whiteness.

It is therefore necessary to return to my earlier articulation as the crisis of whiteness as a crisis of hegemony and add a point of clarification: the crisis of hegemony that is the crisis of whiteness is not a *total* crisis. By this, I mean that it is not the entire structure of colonial ontopower that is thrown into crisis, despite the centrally problematic nature of the position whiteness is attempting to negotiate for itself as a new racial victim. As this chapter works through, taking seriously the nonlocality of ontopower, I argue that the forms of doing whiteness are more capacious than those which seem to implicate “white people.” Whiteness does not depend on white people, and as the crisis of whiteness is unfolding along one stretch of the power curve, this chapter points instead to another area in which the relationship whiteness takes to threat, in a slightly different iteration than it articulates itself as racial victim, capacitates bodies to whiteness regardless of racial designation. The threat in this case is the threat of terrorist aggression. Wafaa Bilal’s performance piece restages an event of imperial military response by the West, but opens it up to everyone, to any participant having the proper technology to visit the site. To a certain extent, this interpretation recalls the more polyanna-sounding invocations of our universal

²¹⁵ Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*.

inclusion in humanity, the normative tropes of universal equality the West so assiduously narrates as both its burden and its inheritance. But perhaps then, the answer was there all along. Insofar as the West capacitates equal participation in anything, it is that it seeks to enable and secure total participation in whiteness, in the future of its own ontopowerful elaboration. Here I am drawn to the larger point made by Glissant when he specifies in a footnote that “the West is not in the west. It is not a place, it is a project.” (my translation) Quoting Glissant at length:

« Effort “intellectuel”, avec ses poussés de répétition (la répétition est un rythme), ses moments contradictoires, ses imperfections nécessaires, ses exigences d’une formulation à la limite schématisée, très souvent obscurcie par son objet même. Car la tentative d’approcher une réalité tant de fois occultée ne s’ordonne pas tout de suite autour d’une série de clartés. Nous réclamons le droit à l’opacité. Par quoi notre tension pour tout dru exister rejoint le drame planétaire de la Relation : l’élan des peuples néantisés qui opposent aujourd’hui à l’universel de la transparence, imposé par l’Occident (1), une multiplicité sourde du Divers. »²¹⁶

“‘Intellectual’ effort, with its bursts of repetition (repetition is a rhythm), its contradictory moments, its necessary imperfections, its demands of a limited schematic formulation, is very often obscured

²¹⁶ Glissant, *Le discours antillais*, 14.

by its own object. For the attempt to approach a reality, eclipsed so many times over, doesn't just immediately give itself over to a series of clarifications. We reclaim the right to opacity. By which our tendency towards existing upright rejoins the planetary drama that is Relation: the momentum of infantilized peoples who today oppose the universality of Transparency, imposed by the West, a deaf multiplicity of Diversity.” (my translation)

In this portion of the text, Glissant points to the underlying contradiction mobilized so strategically by the West that sets up diversity as though it were Relation—what I read as the fullness of bodily capacity, beyond the strictures of colonial modulation—and therefore elides the way representation, real full representation within the epistemological frame of the West actualizes a complicit participation in the project of Transparency. The doing of whiteness is the making-transparent of ourselves and others within the categories elaborated as the “diversity” of the West—a “diversity” which Glissant insists is rather a “deaf multiplicity” established through a violently manufactured need for recognition, and demand to remain recognizable.

Thinking ontopowerfully, an event is not significant for what it was, in and of itself. An event is only significant for what it capacitates—it is only meaningful as the unfolding of a set of conditions of possibility for what comes next. Coherence is achieved retroactively in what is capacitated to have a future, which is another way of saying, what happens. I use the phrase *being virtually white* in order to gesture towards the gerundive unfolding of the event and the relation being performed and entered into. There is no such thing as “white people” or white subjects or subjects that are white outside of their performance, the process of their extension through the

event. “The only subject there is in the completed sense is a ‘super-ject’: the ‘final characterization of the unity of feeling’ at an experience’s peaking.”²¹⁷ In that participants in Bilal’s performance establish something, the “final characterization of the unity of feeling” that was the event they effectuated was whiteness. They were doing whiteness, making whiteness happen virtually.

The power to become virtually white, is primed in the structure of Bilal’s performance, but it is not a forgone conclusion. It is certainly not determined by the whiteness participants supposedly arrive with. Whiteness has to be determined in what they choose to do on the website, what they actually make happen. Massumi explains that in the actualization of an event, its “pragmatic playing out is always speculative in the sense that what will come of the process is to some degree an open question until its ‘final characterization’ of itself at its point of culmination. En route, it is speculatively anticipating what it will have been. That speculation is entirely active. It is the ‘how’ of the experience getting where it’s ultimately going with itself. The co-composing of formative forces constitutes in each exercise of experience a novel *power of existence*: a power to become.”²¹⁸ Indeed, one of the more heartening elements of Bilal’s performance came after going viral on Digg.com and drawing such a volume of traffic that Bilal ran out of paintballs, that a group emerged that called themselves “Virtual Shield” and figured out a way to click the gun to the left, preventing it from firing at Bilal.

The combination of digitization and virtuality certainly signals a new stage in the ontopowerful constitution of the colonial. In particular, it facilitates the virtualization of its categories and conflicts, it virtualizes the event through which bodies may emerge in the service

²¹⁷ Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 12.

²¹⁸ Massumi, 24.

of colonial ontopower, and pitches no small portion of the digital sphere towards the normalization of these affective relations. I would argue that the expansiveness of “the digital” as a realm that includes not only militarily useful technology, but has now uploaded so much of the social and continues to expand the opportunities for participation in both devices and programs (mobile phones and the limitless number of applications they can handle, for example), has allowed for this particular iteration of a crisis of whiteness. It is as though, reaching an acceptable size, it leaves enough space for whiteness to capacitate new recruits and not foment resistance that takes stock of the capaciousness of ontopower. Instead, whatever resistance forms happens in a reactive way, like Virtual Shield that interrupted Bilal’s performance but couldn’t meaningfully interrupt the larger act of military aggression and Western imperialism, the reverberations and consequences of which the West has quickly become attuned to consuming on and as a digital platform. The conclusion of this dissertation returns us to the question of how the crisis has been unfolding as this research has been taking place and argues for the understanding of the digital as a site of the negotiation, but ultimately not upheaval or disruption, of whiteness.

Conclusion

ON MEMES AND WHAT MORE THE INTERNET HOLDS FOR WHITENESS

“Le colonialisme ne doute pas réellement de la solidité de son système. Il ne se sent pas fondamentalement en danger. »

— Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre*²¹⁹

The Great Meme War of 2016 ended with a major victory—the election of Donald J Trump to the presidency of the United States. For the alt-righters who conceptualized themselves as being “at war”—the rather one-sided aim of which is to try to populate the internet with as many far-right memes as possible—the election was just a battle in a long line of imagined conflicts, but it was one that gave them time to regroup, develop new strategies to secure their position, and make new memes. In a way, the Great Meme War signals a state of resolution for the ongoing crisis of whiteness I have been tracing throughout this text, from its disruptive emergence as a discourse of decline in the first chapter, through its aesthetic reconciliation in chapter 3, and alongside a normatively understood position of being under attack in which one can make recourse to military force in restaged, digital self-defense in the chapter preceding this one.

However as colonial ontopower is future-oriented, and as the crisis of whiteness continues to express itself in cries of white victimization, this research signals the need to keep track of how whiteness is proliferating on the virtual edge of the future through digital technology. An important next avenue to track this will be to explore the ways memetic practices have been instrumental in revitalizing white nationalism for the 21st century as both a political project of empire-making and

²¹⁹ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 80.

as a digital site of play and imagination. The term “meme magic” invokes this mix of the ludic and the pernicious as it describes the IRL (“in real life”) effect of the memes that promote white nationalism and white supremacy. Meme magic refers to the kind of materiality/tactility a meme accumulates, or the force it gathers as it spreads beyond its creators to influence the formal realm of politics. An internet meme is the propagation of digital content, shared from one user to another.²²⁰ It references both the content that is shared (messages, jokes, words, photos, videos, gifs, dance, gestures, etc.), and the action of it being shared across one or more digital platforms, as well as the way the process of participation in the meme, and the development of it as it congeals into an identifiable and codified referent. The idea of meme magic not only lends political heft to the violent jokes and snark of the alt right, but it attempts to explain the alluring nature of white nationalist memes themselves and why they go viral. Quoting from the digital encyclopedia of memes, Know Your Meme, they describe meme magic in the following way:

“Meme Magic” is a slang term used to describe the hypothetical power of sorcery and voodoo supposedly derived from certain internet memes that can transcend the realm of cyberspace and result in real life consequences. Since its coinage on the imageboard 8chan, the fictitious concept has gained popularity on 4chan’s /pol/ (politically incorrect) board and been heavily associated with several in-jokes and shitposting fads on the site, including Ebola-chan, Baneposting and Donald Trump. Some have

²²⁰ Milner, *The World Made Meme*; Shifman, “Memeology Festival 05. Memes as Ritual, Virals as Transmission?”; Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*; Shifman and Thelwall, “Assessing Global Diffusion with Web Memetics.”

compared it to the occult concept of the egregore, an autonomous psychic entity which influences the thoughts of a group of people.²²¹

I suggest that allure emerges in the intersection where the digital meets the affective resonance of colonial ontopower and amplifies its attendant desires—the desires for land, resources, and racial dominion. Memes have recently become a major tool in conceptualizing how to a future for the contemporary white nationalist project by reconfiguring the conception and importance of the state itself in favor of a pan-white alliance whose terrain is the digital platform. Digital modes of sociality present an opportunity to recuperate frontier as a virtual performance and to rewrite the history of how the power of whiteness itself was constructed. The idea of meme magic sanitizes a recommitment to values of empire and domination in the digital age, recasting the violent ideologies of white supremacy traditionally rooted in hate and inequality into a different emotional landscape that emerges from digital play—or, magic. If the notion of colonial ontopower denotes the modes through which colonial values and organizations of power continue to reverberate into the present, memes and meme magic generate a dynamic discursive and performative repertoire for the millennial generation to participate in a project of white supremacy both online and off. Building from this notion of colonial ontopower, the orienting questions we need to bring to bear to digital studies are not how far technology removes us from structures of power or governmentality that constitute the modern, but how much of it we retain.

A guiding principle for my thinking here comes from Frantz Fanon who offers a very richly affective take when he says,

²²¹ “Meme Wars.”

“le colonialisme ne doute pas réellement de la solidité de son système. Il ne se sent pas fondamentalement en danger. »

“...colonialism never really doubts the strength of its system. It does not feel in actual danger.”²²² (my translation)

We might add to the Fanon, Mignolo’s assertion that “there is no modernity without coloniality and that coloniality is constitutive, and not derivative, of modernity.”²²³ The modern comes into being as the work of colonial force—certainly funded through colonial enterprise—and so when we arrive to the question of the 21st century and all the breaks or fissures it either heralds or promises us, I hear Fanon’s voice louder than ever, “...colonialism never *really* doubts the strength of its system. It does not feel in actual danger.” Meme magic is a self-consciously future oriented act, with an explicitly ontogenetic purpose. In that it suggests the future direction of expressions of whiteness on the internet, it also signals a potential resolution to the crisis of whiteness, a really diffuse, widespread set of performances, activations, that finally accomplish a recuperation of white supremacy in an overt way that is also picked up and validated by the government or Trump administration—that is presents a kind of Gramscian synthesis between the cultural production of the people and the aims of the state.²²⁴ More broadly, I want to insist that this way of seeing and reading the relationship between race and the digital as a site of colonial-ontopowerful negotiation and invention reveals new perspectives from which to track the contours of this conjuncture and the directions it’s taking toward new syntheses of whiteness. The challenge is not to be surprised by the appearance of white supremacy, but to be vigilant in our effort to accurately identify where

²²² Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 80.

²²³ Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, ix.

²²⁴ Hall, “Gramsci’s Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity”; Hall, “Gramsci and Us.”

it emerges through an understanding of colonial ontopower and the resonances of whiteness that thicken in the virtual.

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