ASK ME ANYTHING: A DIGITAL (AUTO)ETHNOGRAPHY OF REDDIT.COM

Kathryn Thompson

Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of Gender Studies,
Indiana University
May 2016

Accepted by the Graduate Faculty, Indiana University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Doctoral Committee

Brenda R. Weber, Ph.D.
Colin R. Johnson, Ph.D.
Jennifer Maher, Ph.D.
Elizabeth Ellcessor, Ph.D.
Laura Meadows, Ph.D.
April 18, 2016

Copyright © 2016
Kathryn Thompson

Acknowledgements
I would first and especially like to thank my advisor and dissertation committee chair, Brenda Weber, for her personal and intellectual generosity in mentoring, thoughtful critique, and support over the many years we’ve worked together. I would also like to thank the other members of the dissertation committee for their time, feedback, and flexibility – Colin Johnson, Jennifer Maher, Elizabeth Ellcessor, and Laura Meadows. I also want to acknowledge the positive influence and imprint of four other faculty members on my development as a scholar: Mary Gray, Susan Stryker, Mark Deuze, and Alex Doty.

I would like to thank Josie Leimbach for our scheduled writing “tomatoes”, Jenna Basiliere and Brent Barker for unflagging support, and Allison Vandenber, Shahin Kachwala, and Lisa Logan for some of the most fantastic (and numerous) conversations I’ve ever had about feminist theory. I would also like to acknowledge the Indiana University Department of Gender Studies more broadly for their financial and academic support, and give a very special thanks to the Gender Studies office miracle-workers Nina Taylor and Barb Black-Kurdziolek for all of the help and free food they’ve given me over the years. I want to thank my family for all their love and enthusiasm through all of my schooling, from preschool to Ph.D. And last but certainly not least, I want to thank my partner Michael Burton for all of the encouragement, support, and insights he contributed to this project at every stage.

Kathryn Thompson

ASK ME ANYTHING: A DIGITAL (AUTO)ETHNOGRAPHY OF REDDIT.COM

The intersecting systems of cultural meaning and social power that undergird hegemonic structures of oppression such as sexism, racism, heteronormativity and transphobia are in a constant process of discursive (re)construction and resistance. An increasing portion of this ongoing process of discursive negotiation is taking place via social media. This project examines flows of discursive movement and resistance surrounding the intersecting categories of “socially significant difference” (gender, race, and sexuality) on the social news site
Reddit.com. My dissertation conceptualizes Reddit as a city and my interlocutors as its residents, and uses a combination of autoethnography, ethnography, and discourse analysis to argue that the site’s structure and the discursive practices of its users interact to provide space for both the reproduction and resistance of existing hegemonic social formations. Each chapter focuses on mapping a different section of the city—not simply its structural architecture, but also its flows of affect and discourse—in relationship to its residents, the users I interviewed. The dissertation draws from semi-structured ethnographic interviews, participant observation, and discursive analyses of site content to examine “motion” pertaining to difference on three levels: (inter)personal, community, and structural. There is also a running autoethnographic component to the dissertation in which I describe and analyze my own experiences with and responses to the site and my research.

On all three of these levels, I found substantial areas and incidents of both resistance to and reproduction of hegemonic norms. In my examination of the interpersonal “Internet arguments” about difference I observed on Reddit, I connect these interactions to microaggression theory and argue that far from being trivial, these arguments are actually a necessary part of the capillary exercise of hegemonic power, and provide openings for resistance and movement on both sides. The dissertation also examines the labor-intensive community-building practices of the moderators of subreddits based on intersectional difference and the ways in which they both battle hegemonic resistance (in the form of trolling) and engage in their own acts of resistance (through worldbuilding). The last chapter examines the fraught politics of gender, visibility, privacy, and their effects on movement throughout the city.

Brenda R. Weber, Ph.D.
Colin R. Johnson, Ph.D.
Jennifer Maher, Ph.D.
Elizabeth Ellcessor, Ph.D.
Laura Meadows, Ph.D.

Table of Contents
Acceptance Page ................................................................. ii
Copyright Page ................................................................. iii
Acknowledgements ........................................................... iv
Abstract ................................................................. v
Table of Contents ........................................................... vi
Chapter 1: Mapping Coordinates ........................................... 1
Review of Literature ........................................................ 52
Autoethnographic Beginnings ........................................... 65
Ethnographic Analysis .................................................. 69
Chapter 2: The Gendered Labor of Intersectional Safe Space on Reddit .................................................. 89
Autoethnography ........................................................... 90
Strategies and Tactics ...................................................... 116
Conclusion: Bridging Heterotopia ....................................... 133
Chapter 3: “Someone Is Wrong On The Internet”: Internet Arguments and the Battle for Safe Space on Reddit .................................................. 138
Habitability and Safe Space .............................................. 140
The Invisible Flaneuse: Gender and Safety in the City ........... 156
Racism ................................................................. 170
(Unin)Habitable Spaces for GSMs ....................................... 175
I Am A Voyager Through Cyberspace: An Autoethnographer’s Introduction
From Dial-Up to Social News

My first personal portal to cyberspace was opened on Christmas Day, 1998. Our family’s big Christmas present that year was a 56K dial-up modem and Internet access, hooked up to the family computer in the dining room. The “song” of the modem dialing into the ISP quickly became my new favorite holiday tune, one I wanted to play as often as possible. After all the presents were unwrapped, my younger sisters dozing in front of a newly acquired movie, cinnamon rolls in the oven, my mother connected our house to the Internet for the first time. I knew the AOL screen name of one of the popular boys in my class, and considered sending him a message later, but chickened out within moments. I watched over my mom’s shoulder as she clicked around a few sites – Yahoo!, AOL, a very tech-savvy family friend’s webpage. “You have to be so careful,” she admonished me. “Never give anybody your real name or tell them where you live.”

For the first few weeks, my forays online were usually closely supervised. But as time passed and the novelty and perceived danger of the new technology faded, my journeys became more and more my own. Ever the dutifully obedient child, I was appropriately frightened by the horror stories I had heard about online predators, posing as friends and peers, waiting in the shadowy alleys of the Internet to deceive and ultimately snatch me away. Although the technology was new, the warnings weren’t, and as a child of the 1980s and 1990s, transferring the concept of “stranger danger” between contexts happened without much effort.

For these journeys, I would first don a drab, non-gendered handle (my first was thinkr52), wrapping it around myself like khaki, pulling the brim of my too-big hat down over my eyes to shadow my youthful face. Despite the seeming anonymity this afforded me, my age, my gender, my particularity and naïveté soaked through, peeked around the edges of my disguise. I chattered incessantly through endless online games of hearts and spades, and frequented chat rooms with names like “For Teens Only” and “Girl Talk”. I would also attempt to meet people with more “mature” interests, venturing into open chat rooms like “Writer’s Room” or “Sci-Fi Buffs”, reading and posting to message boards about things varying from dream interpretation to Star Wars.

From the outset, I was fascinated by what I found. Depending on what I “wore” and where I went, I could interact with people very, very different than myself, or I could search for those who shared the same quirky niche interests that I did. An aversion to shoes and love for ground texture led me to the Dirty Sole Society (DSS), an email listserv I subscribed to for years afterwards.

However, I didn’t find this kind of connection, either across difference or within sameness, every time I went online. There were many nights of sitting in crowded IRC (Internet Relay Chat) channels, listening to the din of dozens of parallel, effectively closed conversations going on around me. I would sometimes enter online spaces, sense that it was neither designed nor particularly friendly towards “my type,” (how I knew that unconsciously is a fascinating unanswered question), and leave just as quickly.

As more of my peers moved online, I started to hear their travelogues, too, the tracings of their journeys through unfamiliar terrain, both inner and outer. I, as well as a good portion
of my high school friends, used a proto-blogging platform called OpenDiary through most of high school. Here we poured out our hopes and dreams, wrote vaguely coded passive-aggressive screeds attacking the structures of power, both tremendous and quotidian, institutional and interpersonal. We penned coded declarations of affection, filled out endless “surveys” (simply fabricated questionnaires) about our favorite things, people, and activities. The dimly glowing screen provided illumination and shadow, cast light on previously hidden crannies. The light from that 15” CRT monitor warped the familiar daylight forms of my friends and acquaintances into complex, sometimes unintelligible creatures.

Just as I was learning and practicing how to be a coherent, socially legible individual in the “real world” (whatever that means), so too was I learning how to navigate online subjectivity. My online personae, the garb I wore when travelling online, were as varied as the identities I experimented with all through high school. As I practiced painting my face and nails with drugstore powders and polishes, I became cyberchick_101 online. My pseudo-punk phase brought with it the moniker spikepunk182 (creative, no?) and an OpenDiary redesign away from blue skies and clouds to black, neon green, and purple. My artsy phase (as well as my very performative obsession with all things Pikachu) led to various online handles all riffing on “emotion”, “art”, and “pika”. While all of those identities were temporary, transient even, I don’t think it diminished their importance or their “authenticity”.

As I continued to travel through cyberspace, through high school and into college, the terrain, the medium of the Internet itself, was changing under my feet. My overall pattern of Internet usage, my shifting focus from encountering strangers towards better understanding and connecting with friends, was in keeping with the changing social and cultural affordances of the technology itself. Over time, I became more oriented towards interacting with friends on my Facebook and Xanga (another blogging/diary site) pages, and in turn became far less likely to seek out contact with unknown Internet users. One of the few places I still interacted with “strangers” (people outside my existing offline social network) was through the message boards and comment sections of the news/comedy websites SomethingAwful and Fark.com. I was largely a silent participant there, wearing clever niche T-shirts to fit in, listening, laughing at the appropriate times. Every once in a great while I would chime in if I felt I had something extremely relevant to say, but most of the time I was happy to lurk and enjoy the contributions of others. Still, I liked the sense of camaraderie it provided. I liked knowing about major news stories hours or even days before they were picked up by “older” media forms like print and television. I liked being able to laugh at inside jokes, knowing how to correctly respond to the shibboleth “Do you have stairs in your house?” (The answer, by the way, is “Yes, I am protected.”)

Throughout my travels, I remained fascinated by the sights I saw and people I met. I saw images that were breathtakingly beautiful, and I encountered images and rhetoric that were so disgusting, physically or otherwise, that they killed my appetite for days. I met and talked to people living in lands very distant from my own, peered through blurry webcam feeds at the unfamiliar, intimate backdrops of my conversation partner’s surroundings. I read and analyzed the dreams of strangers, sectioned and arranged the bits of their unconscious offered up to me through the screen, re-plated it, sent it back. In all of these various venues, I was privy to conversations, anecdotes, and advice that would have been unobtainable through the position I occupied in “meatspace.”

At the same time, however, I started to see more and more connections between the social location I occupied in the physical world and the positions I tended to take up, the places I tended to go, in virtual space. The Internet, for me, became less about providing a venue to connect and socialize with other unknown users and more about enhancing my existing social bonds and networks. I can’t remember exactly the last time I went into an open chat room, but it must have been somewhere in early college, perhaps at the end of my summer-long 2004 fling with IRC.

It was sometime in 2010 that I started hearing about a website called Reddit. Calling itself “the front page of the Internet,” this news aggregator site provided a place for users to post new and cool content, both user-generated and from around the Web, as well as providing space for comments and debate about that content. What piqued my interest, more than the promise of ever-newer and cleverer content, were the widely circulated screenshots of comment threads. Some were funny (derailing a motivational vignette about exercise into a nonsensical bragging contest about eating treadmills), but many were heartfelt, and most were just really, really interesting. The site seemed to promote these moments of contact between
Autoethnographic Beginnings
As a lifelong traveler and aspiring feminist ethnographer, I think it’s important to document not only where I am, but where and who I’ve been. Consequently, autoethnography plays a central role in this project, as an effort to reflexively situate myself in relation to both the technology itself and the communities I observe. Deborah Reed-Danahay (1997) writes that autoethnography is “a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context” (p. 9). Following the example of other feminist ethnographers of technology such as Annette Markham (1998), Sherry Turkle (1995), and Celia Pearce (2009), this project will consider my own internal, past and present experiences in tandem with the external users, practices, and communities found within Reddit.

Autoethnography is a way of enriching descriptions, establishing positionality, and scaffolding between my own experiences and larger community and cultural structures, themes, and trends (Ellis and Bochner, 1996). This project, at its heart, aspires to construct that scaffolding apparatus, making connections between the interpersonal exchanges that happen on Reddit and much larger socio-discursive structures of ideology and power. Autoethnography enables me to begin doing that work on the most micro of levels, by mining my experiences for clues or patterns that may point to larger trends. Throughout the dissertation, I will weave in autoethnographic vignettes of past and present experiences with Internet technology in general and Reddit in particular.

While I had been lurking around Reddit for at least a year as an armchair participant ethnographer, it wasn’t until I began to write my dissertation proposal that I realized my travels through the site might be more than just a way to procrastinate or kill time while waiting for the bus. At first I was starry-eyed, with high hopes that Reddit had the potential to be some kind of a social panacea, a technological way to bridge difference and facilitate productive moments of exchange and connection. The proposal waxed eloquent about a moment of isolation and networked intimacy, about all the seeming paradoxes of new media coming together within Reddit to facilitate moments of connection between differently situated social actors.

It included my first consciously autoethnographic vignette, describing the moment of intimacy and connection I felt while reading a Reddit thread by a man who hadn’t been able to poop for almost three weeks. His plight connected with my own isolation (I was in the middle of taking my qualifying exams in an empty house in the middle of August), stoppage, and strain (trying desperately to work out the necessary essays to pass the exam). This experience, scatological as it may be, was a clear example of a Reddit-facilitated moment of connection through identification. I had high hopes for the utopic potential of these moments, convinced that enough of them could dissolve the barriers, perhaps even hierarchies, between subjects.

Getting Oriented: Setting and Method
Reddit is a social news site that enables users to post, view, and vote on various kinds of Web content. Registered users supply their own titles for links to content (images, videos, news articles, blog posts) and to make “self posts” (text-only posts authored by the Redditor about a personal experience/asking a question). This content is organized into thematically organized “subreddits”, which users can subscribe to. Reddit’s format is a continuously updating list of links sorted by user-generated measures of popularity (called “karma”) from all of the subreddits that user is subscribed to. Each posted link has its own comment page, in which users can post comments in nested form (replying to particular comments rather than a chronological list of comments). Logged in users are able to “upvote” and “downvote” both posts and individual comments, which contributes to that item’s overall “karma” score. Posts and comments with higher karma appear closer to the top of the feed or comment page, while posts that have been downvoted will sink to the bottom of the feed/comments, and can in some cases, almost disappear. If a comment score is below 0, Reddit’s interface automatically hides it, graying it out (“comment score below threshold”) and requiring an extra click to view it.

Method
Fascinated by the interactions and momentary intimacies across categories of difference I was seeing on Reddit, I set out to explore the possibilities of this medium for connection and communication. My initial aim was to explore, qualitatively, how people were talking about difference on Reddit. It became clear that there were two major components of this practice
that required further inquiry. First, there were the conversations themselves, the comment threads, as textual artifacts. Second were the experiences, perspectives, and contextualizing narratives of the users producing the comments. The first proved easy to find – conversations like these crop up daily in almost all major subreddits and can range from nearly-absent to almost-constant in other areas of the site. The second would require more effort. After obtaining permission from the IRB, I conducted one on one ethnographic interviews with Reddit users who were over the age of 18 and had consented to be interviewed and recorded. My recruitment process went through several iterations. I created my first round of recruitment posts in September 2013. I initially posted in 5 subreddits, selected partially for their thematic relevance to difference (and thus an increased likelihood of exchanges about it). I also included /r/CasualIAmA in an attempt to get a more “generalized” sample (i.e. closer to the “average” Reddit user, defined as white, English-speaking, middle-class, college-aged or college-educated male ages 18-30 (Duggan and Smith, 2013). I corresponded with interested subjects via email and set up an appointment for a Skype interview. The interview length largely clustered in the 45 to 90 minute range, although I did have a few outliers on either end (the longest interview I conducted was a fascinating two-and-a-half hours!). My first-round participants were primarily affiliated with subreddits dedicated to feminism and gender issues, and secondarily with subreddits concerned with issues of sexuality. I also had a few participants recruited through word of mouth/referral or /r/casualIAmA that were not affiliated with any particular difference-based subreddit.

My second round of recruitment commenced in summer 2014. I was seeking perspectives from trans-identified folks, people of color, and specific communities focused on intersectional difference (i.e. race and gender, in the context of /r/blackladies or /r/Asian2X, or race and sexuality, in the case of r/queerPoC). When posting in these communities, I first sent a message to the moderators of the subreddit explaining my project and requesting permission to post recruitment materials for their users. I was impressed by the variety of responses I got back, everything from a friendly but cursory go-ahead to more than one request for IRB/university documentation, which I was happy to provide. Most of the subreddits ultimately were very open to my project, but there were a few who were not, and I, of course, respected that decision.

My sample was not meant to be a representative or exhaustive one, rather a qualitative look at a situated instance of a communicative and cultural interaction (conversation about difference). The technological and social context of Reddit will, of course, influence the participants in and outcomes of these conversations. However, particularly in light of recent national events such as the police shooting of the unarmed black teenager Michael Brown, the broader meanings of intersecting categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality are increasingly central topics of discussion via social media. The interviews enrich and contextualize the textual content, and the content provides a grounded, material set of exemplar discourse in which to observe (or not) the larger social patterns and trends alluded to in the interviews. Additionally, as anyone who has used e-mail or text messaging can readily attest, messages sent through a low-context medium (i.e. text only) have the potential to be drastically misunderstood in tone between sender and receiver. The context and background provided by the ethnographic interviews helps to mitigate some of this potential misinterpretation.

A Note on Omission: Haunted By MRAs
While I endeavored to talk to as wide a range of people as possible with this project, there is one group that I initially planned to include and ultimately decided against it. When people would ask me what I was writing my dissertation on, I would first say, “the website Reddit.com”. Depending on their reaction (recognition or a blank but polite stare), I would then alter my “elevator speech” accordingly. Most of the people I encountered outside of academia (and even within academia) didn’t know what Reddit was. However, the ones that did almost always had an immediate question: What about the MRAs? “MRA” stands for Men’s Rights Advocate, and refers to a member of the “men’s rights movement”, which asserts that through feminist action, the rights of men have been actively and unjustly curtailed and infringed upon, and that men suffer forms of sex-specific discrimination and violence that must be rectified with immediate political, social, and legal action. This movement is not exclusive to Reddit, but the subreddit MensRights is fairly large (over 115,000 subscribers as of 2/9/16) and has served as a key online gathering place and information clearinghouse.
When I first began the project, I had planned to include MRAs as part of my research population. Certainly their perspective, while personally disagreeable to me, was a major voice in the dialogue about difference on Reddit. From my limited knowledge on the movement, it initially seemed to me that the things MRAs were advocating for (specifically more equitable custody and child support agreements, more nuanced depictions of masculinity in media, and increased resources for male victims of domestic violence) were, at their heart, feminist issues. I also planned on approaching members of the MensRights subreddit with an ethnographic and ethnomethodological sensibility – not seeking to debate them on the inherent rightness or wrongness of their perspectives, but rather to gain an understanding of the way that these individuals interacted with the site and the strategies they used when engaging with others. I felt confident in my ability to put my own personal opinions aside for these interviews. At the beginning of the project, I also put more stock in “Redditor” as a unifying identity, and thought that our mutual affiliation with the site might help to bridge some of the ideological gaps between us. I suppose, deep down, what I was hoping to find was that this was all a matter of miscommunication, that underneath the conflict and debate there was a bedrock of shared issues and a desire for equality.

My first direct forays into the MensRights subreddit immediately started to corrode this sense of optimism and possibility. Fully half of the links on the front page were about the supposed preponderance of false rape allegations, with several “gotcha” titles that reveled in the exposure and humiliation of women lying about rape for personal gain. On the sidebar, directly below the subreddit description, was a link to an article “On the difference between the Feminist Movement and the Men’s Rights Movement” on the website A Voice for Men. The long article said, in no uncertain terms, that feminism and the men’s rights movement were directly at odds, and that feminism unfairly gives women an expanded set of rights and privileges at the direct expense of men. There were two phrases that appeared in large boldface type: “There can be no common ground” and “His wallet, his choice”.

Further down the page, in a section railing against the Violence Against Women Act, appeared a picture of a white man with facial contusions and stitches looking mournfully into the camera. This image was especially disturbing because it seemed to me to be Photoshopped or otherwise manipulated – the bruises do not completely follow the contours of his face, and the stitches appear clearly, while the rest of the image appears blurred, as though the subject is in motion. The image clearly symbolizes the narrative of male victimhood presented on this site, although perhaps not in the way the author(s) had intended. It clearly reflects the ways in which reality is literally being manipulated by this group in order to conform to this narrative of systemic male victimization and brutalization by women and feminism. It was very clear that my initial optimism had been misplaced. This was not a group of men who were pushing back against the limiting hegemonic conditions of patriarchy. It was very clear that for this particular group of Redditors, feminism, feminists, and women in general were being cast as villainous deceivers with an axe to grind, who would stop at nothing to punish, swindle, and humiliate men at every opportunity. As a researcher coming from a gender studies department, I was already marked as an enemy combatant.

I reached out to my committee with some trepidation. Should I really do this? Am I putting myself at risk? Is there any reasonable possibility that I will be able to engage with this group of people in a non-confrontational and productive manner to carry out my ethnographic research? The advice I received was equivocal, but tended towards encouraging me to pursue the research, even if it had the potential to make me deeply uncomfortable. All of this occurred in mid-2013. I decided to begin my recruitment in friendlier, or at least less openly hostile, spaces. During the first round of interviews in the last 3 months of 2013, many of my interlocutors expressed grave concerns for my safety when told about my plan to interview MRAs. It was at this same time that news stories started to break about intensive campaigns of online harassment against women who spoke out about sexism online. I followed with concern the developments surrounding Anita Sarkeesian and her YouTube video series, “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games”. This campaign of organized harassment, directly connected to and condoned by the Men’s Rights Movement, intentionally sought to terrorize Sarkeesian and significantly disrupt her life and livelihood, and included unauthorized release of personal details like her home address and the names and addresses of family members, in addition to constant graphic death and rape threats that drove out of her home on more than one occasion. There were anonymous bomb and mass shooting threats that caused her to cancel speaking engagements.

These news stories caused me to start “cleaning up my act” considerably when it came to Reddit. I realized that my comments and post history were littered with identifying details.
In my recruitment materials, I had clearly identified myself as a graduate student in Gender Studies at Indiana University Bloomington. Even though I was away from Bloomington on a one-year fellowship the year I was conducting this research, it would not have been hard to figure out where I had gone from my post history. I had posted in local subreddits asking for recommendations for dentists and had even gone so far as to recommend the apartment complex I was staying in by name to someone who was inquiring about good places to live in the area. If someone with ill intent wanted to find me, my Reddit profile would have given them ample information to start with.

It became clear to me that the more distance I was able to put between myself and my potential MRA interlocutors, the safer I would be. I deleted all of the comments that made any mention of my physical location, and while I still subscribed to and browsed local subreddits, I no longer commented in them. However, I knew these were not foolproof measures, and that just because the information was deleted did not mean it wasn’t accessible anymore.

I also began to consider alternate recruitment methods that would not involve me posting directly to the MensRights subreddit, or identifying myself as part of the department of Gender Studies. I considered presenting my project as a study in “online communication” (which technically would be true, as my PhD minor is Communication and Culture) and leaving out any mention of my affiliation with gender studies entirely. I even went as far as to add a male colleague to my IRB research protocol to serve as my representative, reasoning that MRAs would perhaps be more likely to talk to, and less likely to threaten and harass, a white, male face, voice, and name rather than a female one.

My second round of recruitment and interviews occurred in the summer of 2014. That was also the summer of “Gamergate”, a campaign of organized misogynist harassment, mostly via Twitter, collected under the hashtag #Gamergate. The initial target of harassment was Zoe Quinn, an indie game designer who was accused of sleeping with game journalist Nathan Grayson in order to obtain favorable reviews for her 2013 browser-based game “Depression Quest”. Gamergate also sparked a renewal in the harassment of Anita Sarkeesian as well as game designer Brianna Wu. All of these women were accused of undermining the integrity of the journalism and gaming industries, either by using their sexuality in exchange for positive game reviews or by critiquing sexism in video games and sexist behavior by gamers. Other women who spoke out about sexism in gaming or critiqued the movement itself were subsequently targeted for incessant threats via Twitter and other new media platforms, doxed, and their accounts hacked. Some were “swatted”, in which a false threat is called in to local law enforcement, causing heavily armed police to storm the victim’s house with guns drawn and violently attempt entry, often in the middle of the night.

Although the Men’s Rights subreddit did not take official credit for the attacks, the attitude of the subreddit towards Gamergate was strongly in support of the harassers, and there appears to be significant overlap between men’s rights groups and these campaigns. It was becoming more and more evident that if I wanted to keep myself safe and still interact with this group of people, I was going to have to lie, a lot. I would have to lie about the project, about who I was and where I was from: and even then, I might not be protected.

My initial project proposal, which was approved by the IRB in early 2013, made no mention of any kind of deception. It was approved as “Exempt/Low Risk”, a designation given to non-invasive research projects with little to no chance of harm to the participant or breach of confidentiality. By late 2014, the kinds of measures I had deemed necessary in order to interview MRAs included significant deception on several levels. If I were to follow through with these methods, I would have needed to have the project re-approved by the IRB. Ultimately, I decided that the potential gains that might be made by interviewing MRAs for this project were far outweighed by the very real danger those interviews could pose as well as the institutional complexity and necessary time of submitting my project for re-review.

It took me almost a year to decide to eliminate that portion of my project, and it was not a decision I made lightly. I grappled with the negative effect this omission would have on my sample and the strength of the claims I would be able to make. I also agonized over the political implications of my decision. By keeping my head down and my mouth shut, by avoiding staring into the abyss entirely, was I doing exactly what these trolls wanted? How much of this decision was made out of strategic self-preservation, and how much was made out of fear? Did my capitulation mean these campaigns had successfully accomplished their ultimate goal of terrorizing feminists into silence?

I still don’t have clear answers to these questions. But what I do know is that at the end
of the day, I had to put my own well-being first. I agree that personal discomfort is an inherent and even necessary part of good ethnography: it is an indicator that the researcher is “deep” enough in the culture they’re studying that they have exceeded their own personal framework of social mores and expectations. However, I think that there is a difference between personal discomfort and the possibility of very real and intensely violent threats that might target not just me, but my loved ones as well. The former seems like a reasonable stretch to ask an ethnographer to make, the latter does not.

Reddit as City

Meta...
7,982 active communities, consisting of over 3,253,900 logged in Redditors, casting over 21,900,672 votes."

These statistics beg the question: if Reddit is so well-trafficked and continuously updating, why do so few people outside of Reddit’s particular demographic know about the site? Why is it that the wealth of information contained in Reddit threads rarely, if ever, show up on Google searches? The answer, put simply, is the content on Reddit is not arranged or indexed in a way that makes it easy to “crawl” or make searchable via Google. One of these difficulties lies with Google’s PageRank algorithm, which is designed to rate the validity/importance of sites and to discourage or eliminate spam. Put simply, PageRank measures how important a particular URL is by measuring how many other URLs link to it. The more important the site is, according to PageRank, the higher it will appear on a user’s list of search results. This works well for more conventional networks of content that contain multiple in-links, but fails to mark many Reddit threads as important or relevant because there are no external links to them. While reddit.com itself has a decent PageRank score, the scores for more focused areas of the site (subreddits, comments) are much, much lower, given that there are very few other sites that link to them directly.

Another difficulty lies with the massive amount of content that is constantly being posted to Reddit. Although human users can easily discern that Reddit’s front page is an aggregate list of relevant links, automated “crawlers” simply note the number of links on the page and move on. In addition, content on Reddit tends to burn brightly and briefly: popular threads will accumulate comments so quickly that they outpace Google’s daily indexing process, but die down just as quickly. This lack of new information will then lead Google to mark the content as “stale”, which drives down its position on the results list. Thus Reddit is a city, but a mobile one: a moving target that often can’t be hit by those who don’t already know where it is. This was supported in the experiences of my interlocutors: almost all of them were referred to the site by word of mouth, most from a lover or close friend.

The metaphor of Reddit-as-major-city frames the context of my travels in a way that provides some much-needed perspective. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to make broadly generalizable statements about all occupants of New York City based on a single ethnography of a particular set of residents within that city. In the same way, I realized that even though I was an ethnographer working in a very large digital space, my focus was on depth and nuance, rather than breadth and wide generalizability. Rather than attempting to create a comprehensive mapping of the networked spaces of Reddit, this project is focusing on particular moments of interaction that occur within the boundaries of the site. These moments are structured and facilitated by the overall geography and culture of the site itself, which is why a contextual understanding of Reddit-as-place is crucial to understanding them. However, the broader patterns and formalized structures of the site are also crucially important contextualizing factors that can both enable or prevent the formation and functioning of the aforementioned communities. The massive amount of material that is continuously posted to Reddit is organized through a series of thematically organized subsections of the site (known as subreddits). All subreddits share a standardized URL format: reddit.com//SubredditName. In my interviews, users referred to subreddits either by the subreddit name only, or by saying “R” (pronounced like the letter) and then the name of the subreddit (i.e. “r feminisms”). Users select which subreddit(s) to submit content to, and subreddit moderators have the ability to remove posts in violation of posting rules, whether general to the site or specific to the subreddit. Any registered user can create a subreddit on any topic, and subreddit moderators are not appointed in a top-down manner by Reddit. The subreddit creator is able to approve moderators (who can then approve other moderators). Reddit bills itself as a “social news and entertainment site”. The “social” in its title begs comparisons to other popular social network sites (SNSes), particularly Facebook. Reddit is unusual in that while it has the structural capabilities of an SNS, the majority of user activity does not center on or even utilize these capabilities. boyd and Ellison (2007) define SNSes as “web-based services” that enable users to:

1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (211).
by individual user profiles and connections. Reddit users technically have a “profile” in the form of a registered account (required for posting, commenting and voting), but it is not customizable with additional user-supplied information. Clicking on a user’s Reddit handle will enable you to view their comment and post history, but no other “profile”. Redditors may also add other users to their friends list, but this is mostly a cosmetic change, causing the username of posts/comments made by friends to appear in a more eye-catching red, rather than the standard light blue. It is not possible to view the friends list of other Redditors, but it is possible to “view and traverse” the links and comments that other users (friends or otherwise) have posted on the site.

boyd and Ellison go on to say that “what makes social network sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks” (211). This definition certainly resonated with my own usage pattern of new media technology: moving away from using the Web to find people I didn’t know and towards using it to enhance and maintain my existing social ties. However, there seemed to be something slightly different at work within Reddit, despite its capacity to be used for social networking.

“Classic” examples of social networks could include platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. These platforms could be labeled “identitarian,” in which the focus is on the user as having a personal brand, in which their posted content is closely linked with their both their online and online identity. The primary nodes of content distribution are individual users, and the primary channels through which content flows are interpersonal networks, often established partially or entirely offline. Thus users often feel compelled to post content that will reflect positively on them, or content that is congruent with one’s “offline” identity.

“Context collapse” (Marwick and boyd 2012) is a very common phenomenon within social media platforms, and refers to the conflict between the multiple social identities each user occupies (parent/child, employee, student) and the unified self that is presented in a social media profile (which may or may not be continuous or legible within the context of those other identities).

What makes Reddit different from these more classic examples is that the primary channels for content are not individually created interpersonal networks, but topically-based subreddits. In this way, users are exposed to content posted by people outside their network of interpersonal relationships, sidestepping, at least somewhat, what Joseph Turow (2009) calls the “you loop”, which is the filtering of new media content based on existing connections, previous responses, online behavior of individual users. In addition, the minimal emphasis on individual user profiles or networks does not compel users to create and maintain a congruent online/offline identity, allowing (for better or for worse) greater anonymity when posting content and interacting with other users on the site.

This anonymity and focus on content over existing networks that Reddit provides opens up a particular, semi-anonymized space for discussions about and interactions between categories of difference to occur. This space may not be present or fully utilized by users of “identitarian” social network platforms for two main reasons: lack of exposure to differing perspectives, or fear of offline social repercussions for expressing and critiquing viewpoints on “controversial” topics relating to difference, particularly race. Thus Reddit may prove to be a particularly productive context for these conversations to take place.

Reddit as a platform is also reminiscent, to me, of older chat rooms and message boards, as well as the ethos of the “old” Internet (with a focus on meeting strangers rather than friends). The site itself is text-only (although it heavily utilizes links to images, video, webpages, and other media) and provides a means to meet other Redditors with similar interests. It enables (semi)anonymous interaction with people from differing social, interpersonal, and even national and ethnic networks. As scholars of earlier new media technology such as MUDs (Turkle 1989, Markham 1991) have noted, however, the anonymity of text-based online interaction cuts both ways. It can enable users to be vulnerable and open about particular aspects of their identity, to a degree that perhaps would not be safe or feasible for them to do offline. It also provides a means through which to experiment with other potential identities (Shapiro 2010) and aspects of the self. However, the anonymity afforded by text-only online interaction can also lead to a breakdown of courtesy and/or other social norms, and can lead to flame wars, harassment, trolling, and other hostile behaviors. (A former student of mine in a Gender and Gaming class I taught called this phenomenon “keyboard courage” – I have also seen the phrase “Internet balls”.)

In my experience, both as someone who cares about these issues and as someone who teaches others about them as part of my job, I find that often discussions of difference in faceto-face interaction are often less than productive. These conversations tend to be either
“preaching to the choir,” in which all parties agree almost completely on the topic being discussed (i.e. two feminists discussing rape culture), or very uncomfortable and stilted, “walking on eggshells” kind of exchanges where neither party wishes to offend the other, nor do they particularly want their own beliefs on the topic challenged. On Facebook, the tendency to preach to the (digital) choir is alive and well, and perhaps more amplified due to the selfselective “you loop” of social networks. More contentious discussions of difference are also present on Facebook, but I often don’t see the kind of “knock down drag out” flame wars/arguments quite as often as in other, more anonymous venues (such as the comments on news sites or blogs). I suspect that the restrained tone of these comments and disagreements on Facebook is because users are aware that these comments can and probably will affect their offline relationships. It is also possible, through context collapse, for the negative effects of comments made in a heated conversation about difference to spill over into other relationships, which may make users additionally wary.

Reddit, with its mix of anonymity and fixedness, provides perhaps a more promising venue for looking at these exchanges than “identitarian” sites like Facebook. Reddit users may perceive they have less to lose by engaging with others on controversial topics. Ultimately, it is my hope that the results of this project will help to illuminate productive strategies and contexts for engaging in these conversations. By “productive” I mean that the exchange is nonhostile, both parties are somewhat open to the perspective of the other, and at the end of the exchange one or both parties feel as though their worldview has been expanded. Imagine the massive potential for social change that could be generated if more members of dominant groups are able to have productive exchanges with others that would help them to understand their own position and privilege!

Major Areas

Popular subreddits include r/pics, r/funny, r/politics, r/AskReddit, and r/IAmA. Newly registered users are subscribed to a series of 22 “default” subreddits, which are selected largely based on popularity, appeal, and number of subscribers. The top two subreddits, r/funny and r/pics, boast 4.6 and 4.5 million subscribers, respectively. It was clear from the outset that I was dealing with huge numbers, with a much more massive population than I had previously expected.

These default subreddits, in the metaphor, are very much like heavily trafficked, extremely popular areas of the city: Times Square, Grand Central Station, Fifth Avenue. This is where the most mainstream, recognizable content is, the most popular, the hottest new trends. It is a mix of the familiar and the exotic, in a location that is unconsciously known even to those who haven’t been there personally. The familiar logos of restaurants, glowing larger-than-life, integrate with the urban terrain. Massive billboards and marquees scroll an endless parade of text and images. Pedestrians and traffic stream through the well-worn roadways. The newest information from around the world flows into and out of the city center around the clock. This is about as “mainstream” as Reddit gets, and visibility here is usually short-lived and intense.

Many of my interlocutors would talk about “getting out” of the default subreddits, finding smaller subreddits based on personal interests and/or identity categories, and experiencing an increased sense of relaxation and belonging as a result. Despite my starry-eyed hopes for Reddit to be a means of disrupting stratification and hierarchy, in the most mainstream and well-trafficked areas, the same voices and hegemonic discourses that were being heard loud and clear offline (white, heterosexual, able-bodied, cisgender, middle-class Anglophone males) were also transmitted with great clarity in these spaces as well. It was clear that the discourse and content in these spaces, while ostensibly open to all, privileged particular experiences, narratives, and ideologies over others.

Neighborhoods

I was struck, throughout all of my interviews, by how different Reddit was for each and every person I interviewed. As I asked questions about subscriptions and usage patterns, portraits of their interactions with and within Reddit emerged. Each person had their particular haunts and paths, favorite places – their unique interface with the city. Some Redditors would describe particular subreddits as “home” or “my turf” – a place where they felt safe and understood. It seemed clear that subreddits, or groups of related subreddits, could function as blocks or neighborhoods, places where similar groups of people gather.

Subreddits are related on a horizontal, not a vertical, plane. The term “subreddit” can imply some form of “tree” or “nesting” format in which smaller subreddits are structurally “children” of larger subreddits. However, this is not the case. Each subreddit that is created
sits in vast parallel with the others – slices of a pie chart endlessly dividing. Thus is makes more sense to think about subreddits as neighboring urban spaces rather than an ongoing subsegmentation of already populated space.

Related subreddits will often link to each other: imagining perhaps some subreddits as lively apartment buildings, built too closely together – windows open, conversation, music, smells drifting and mixing from one side to the other. Some of the larger and more organized subreddits will form networks that are much more reminiscent of a sprawling urban college campus, with clearly defined categories and well-manicured walkways for visitors. While

subreddits are structurally separated on the site itself, their content, users, and influence are certainly not. I was always impressed by the breadth of my interlocutors’ travels through Reddit – the far-flung corners, the suburbanized niche communities. Many of them lived and traveled in the same neighborhoods that I felt comfortable and familiar in – neighborhoods for women, broadly defined, or various corners of the “gayborhood.” Certain neighborhoods became more familiar to me than others – some became more familiar, while others, I was warned and found out, were unwelcoming at best and unsafe at worst.

Among those places were the Men’s Rights and RedPill groups of subreddits. These places are known as being explicitly hostile to feminists and feminism. Men’s Rights advocates (MRAs) in particular are known for their campaigns of savage online harassment of people, almost always women, who they perceive as feminist and/or against the project and ethos of Men’s Rights. Almost always the harassment is sexualized and includes graphic death and rape threats, and is often used in conjunction with a practice called “doxxing”, in which personal information about the target such as their legal name, address, phone number, financial information, and information about close friends and family members (particularly if the target has children) are publicly revealed and distributed online. Doxxing will almost always lead to an additional deluge of threats and trolling that can range from the mild-but-annoying (like having 50 pizzas sent to your house) to the extreme (identity theft and fraud, family members and friends being directly threatened with violence).

The idea of “neighborhood” is one that will be significant throughout the project, as the other main inquiry contained in this project explores the creation and maintenance of minoritarian “safe spaces” online, specifically on Reddit. I became fascinated by the complex dynamics at work in these neighborhoods, trying to remain open and accessible to kindred spirits who would benefit from the community while trying to keep out harassers and trolls. Both the people posting and the moderators wrestle with the complexities of creating a space for open, honest speech, while still preventing and responding to harassment, hostility, and derailing.

There are two primary ways in which Reddit’s functions and structures can map directly onto the features of a major city: specialized areas, both mainstream and small scale, and a large population with diverse interests and ideologies. Other mainstream social media networks (Facebook, Twitter) also share these general characteristics, yet the dynamics of user interaction and established norms are very different between all three of these sites. The site features that distinguish Reddit from other major social media networks also drastically affect the way that information on Reddit is displayed, curated, and ultimately received. Reddit has two particular mechanisms that affect “life in the city”: a decentralized, yet extremely interconnected structure (resulting in an extremely flexible sense of imagined community that often expands to “all of Reddit”, at least peripherally), and the karma system (a way for users to vote on content, affecting its visibility).

“Reddit” as an entity is invoked in various ways by Redditors. Sometimes, especially in the larger default subreddits, Reddit will be addressed as a singular entity. Post titles will ask questions or make declarations to Reddit (“Reddit, this is my new dog, do you like her?” “Reddit, what’s the best way you’ve ever seen someone quit a job?”). However, Reddit is also recognized as being made of up diverse users, and posts will sometimes be directed at only a partial segment of Reddit, in ways both broad and oddly specific (“guys of Reddit, dental hygienists of Reddit”). Oftentimes this specific mode of address is meant to elicit specialized knowledge or educated answers to a particular question. This shuttling back and forth between Reddit’s singularity and multiplicity is deeply contextual, and is a common element in many of the interactions my respondents described in their interviews.

There is a doubled valence to the term “hivemind” when used by Redditors, but both meanings implicitly celebrate the perceived (or prescribed) independence of its constituents.
“Hivemind” can be used positively to celebrate the availability of a vast network of distributed knowledge and skills (“I have a question for the hivemind” or “surely the hivemind knows __.”) However, “hivemind” can be used to talk negatively about Reddit or a particular group of Redditors. Often the term will be used in a manner roughly synonymous with “mob rule”. (“Get out the pitchforks and the torches” is a self-aware jest that is common and long-lived enough to be cliché on major subreddits.) In this case, “hive mind” refers to the perceived oppressive unification of diversity, the subordination of individual consciousness and agency to a larger entity. Either way, the notion of individual, independent thought is ideologically, if not practically, prized.

Reddit can be invoked both as a unified whole or as a profoundly fragmented jumble. One of the places where the discourse about Reddit’s unity and segmentation is particularly contentious is in discussions about systemic patterns of problematic language on Reddit. One particular subreddit, “ShitRedditSays,”(SRS) is devoted entirely to republishing, without comment, popular links or comments that are blatantly racist, (cis)sexist, homophobic, trivializing sexual violence, etc. Several of my interviewees were involved with or were familiar with SRS, and observed that when they engaged in conversations about widespread, extremely problematic discursive practices on Reddit, one common response was “there are a lot of different people on Reddit, and just because some of them say x, it doesn’t mean it’s everyone”. This discursive fragmentation of Reddit into “a lot of different people” means that individual “bad apples” can be tidily blamed for their misdeeds, which was in turn used to dismiss the notion that larger systems or patterns of oppression were to blame.

This neoliberal line of reasoning, in which the larger social context is disavowed in favor of an all-encompassing emphasis on personal choice, eliminates the need for any systemic or personal reflexivity about possible prejudices while firmly placing the blame on a few individuals. Only emphasizing a few isolated, egregious cases (as the result of these “bad apples”) also provides a means through which to dismiss these critiques as the product of oversensitivity at best and misandry or other bigoted beliefs at worst.

SRS is largely demonized and negatively regarded outside of feminist subreddits, subject to backlash aimed largely at trivializing their critiques. Reddit as a whole, in these discourses, can be atomized at a moment’s notice to remove the sole irritant or irritants, rather than acknowledging the possibility of something more widespread and pernicious. This allows users to escape the individual discomfort of being called out while simultaneously undermining the legitimacy of feminist, queer, and anti-racist critique.

In these debates, and in dominant discourse on the site more generally, certain voices and perspectives are usually taken more seriously than others. Hegemonic politics of speech and silencing work to “turn up” particular subjects and experiences while “turning down” others in all communicative situations, online or not. However, there is a particular feature of Reddit that quantifies and seemingly democratizes which voices are heard and which are not: the ability to upvote and downvote.

All logged-in users have the ability to vote on submissions and comments in most subreddits by either clicking the up or down arrow located next to it. These upvotes and downvotes contribute to a combined numerical score called “karma,” that can be tracked both by submission and by user. The more karma a particular submission has, the closer it will display on the highest/front page of the feed or the top of the comments page, ensuring greater visibility. A submission or comment that receives little to no attention or a good deal of negative attention will get “buried” or “downvoted to hell”, (posted lower on the page, or not appearing at all). The tangible user benefits of high user karma are minimal – users with higher karma scores are able to post to the site more often (to discourage bots and humans from flooding reddit with spam). However, a high karma score does not affect the position of future new submissions or comments made by that user, only the visibility of that particular link or comment.

The karma system’s mechanical function within the site appears to be straightforward: to automatically promote the visibility of popular content, while hiding content and comments that are deemed by a large number of users to be irrelevant, incorrect, and/or inappropriate. However, the social functions and meanings of “karma” on Reddit rapidly become much more extended and contradictory. Both the designers and the users of the site appear to have an ambivalent relationship to what karma signifies and its (intended or unintended) effects on content and discourse. The official Reddit FAQ entry (2013) on the topic of karma is metonymically contradictory: the first few lines compare karma to “scoring points in a video
game” or “winning the championship”, while the second half encourages new users not to strive for karma in and of itself, but to think of karma as a “reminder of your legacy”. Karma serves a structural function within the site as well. It serves as a justifying reason as well as a metric for tracking individual users and their patterns of contribution and content preferences. It also encourages a form of (neoliberal) personal branding, in which a user’s popularity is codified and enumerated into a single score. This sense of karma as a personal “score” can often motivate Redditors to post and comment more prolifically in an attempt to raise their overall standing.

Redditors tend to display a very ambivalent attitude towards karma. While many profess disinterest in karma (a commonly used derisive term is “imaginary Internet points”), the lure of accumulating karma and the visibility that accompanies it still proves to be a powerful motivator. Over time, explicit norms and rules for acceptable content have emerged and continue to evolve to prohibit “gimmicky” behavior or repetitive posts for the sole purpose of accumulating as much karma as possible. “Vote cheating”, attempting to manipulate voting outcomes through practices like automatic programs or “vote rings”, is forbidden via officially sanctioned “Reddiquette”, as is explicitly requesting karma in the title of the submission (i.e. “Upvote if you like X” or “For every upvote this gets I will donate $X to charity”).

Both on the site and in the interviews, Redditors are quite self-reflexive about the effects of the upvoting and downvoting mechanism on content. Many point out that it rewards appealing to the “lowest common denominator” popular taste, producing repetitive, shallow content. Flippant jokes, one-liners, and simple references often receive the most comment karma, thus appearing at the top of the page instead of the most relevant/informative/interesting comments.

While there are official rules against “vote cheating” and strong but informal social prohibitions against “karma whoring”, there is no official policy on how to “use” upvoting and downvoting. Upvoting is fairly universally understood to reflect liking a particular piece of content and marking it as important/relevant/funny/etc. However, there seem to be two competing understandings of what the purpose of the downvote is. The largely prevailing understanding of the downvote is as a complement to the upvote, a “dislike” button. In some subreddits, the downvote button (rather than “feeding” them) is the recommended method for dealing with trolls – an accumulation of disapproval that eventually drowns out the disruption. However, some of my interlocutors, as well as some subreddits, regard the downvote button as a way to register relevance only, not one’s personal responses to a piece of content. Downvoting content that one personally might disagree with prevents controversial but perhaps ultimately thought-provoking comments from ever seeing the light of day. It is a way, through the weight of popular opinion, to amplify certain sentiments while muffling others. Depending on the context, this could be a more or less desirable method of social control. Within the city, karma provides a rotating set of bullhorns and billboards, soundproof rooms and blinders. As people speak to each other, perhaps gathered around an interesting piece of art or a particularly titillating news story, crowds may form around these conversations. The larger the crowd, the louder the voices – either popular voices, amplified by the hush of listeners, or unpopular voices being shouted down in a chorus of indiscriminate booing and performative indifference.

33

While some Redditors are critical of the deleterious effects of karma on content, there is also a neoliberal “free market” rhetoric surrounding karma. This is reflected in Reddit’s FAQ page, where the site is described as being a place where “users like you provide all of the content and decide, through voting, what’s good and what’s junk”. Implicit in that formulation is the idea that the inherent, individualized value of content will drive success or failure in an “open” marketplace, rather than other political/contextual/structural factors. Likewise, in this purported free market, the only supposed limit accumulation of karma is the work ethic, creativity, and merit of individual users.

Who Owns the City?

Despite its no-cost, open-source, DIY, user-centered setup and ethos, Reddit generates big data and is worth big money. The company is currently (2016) valued at $500 million, and Reddit’s ownership has changed hands several times in its 11-year existence. Reddit was founded by then-recent University of Virginia graduates Alexis Ohanian and Steve Huffman in 2005. It was purchased by Conde Nast, publisher of Wired magazine, in October of 2006 for an undisclosed amount (although unofficial hearsay places the sell price at around 20 million dollars). From 2006 to 2011, Reddit operated under Conde Nast, and in 2011, Reddit was moved under the (loose) control of Advance Publications, Conde Nast’s parent company. In 2012, Reddit was spun out from Advance Publications and re-incorporated as an independent entity with financial control and their own board, and has operated as such since
then. Reddit is not a publicly traded company – instead, the shares are held (in descending order of magnitude) by Advance Publications, Reddit employees, and “angel” investors. The largest shareholder is still Advance Publications, but it does not have majority control of the shares. It is emphasized on Reddit’s official blog post about the spin-off that these angel investors “collectively own less than 1% of the company, and the amount held by any angel is actually less than that owned by any single employee”.

Discursively and visually, Reddit has always endeavored to put distance between its geek-friendly, open-source, free speech ethos and the context of the company’s corporate ownership, particularly in its years under Conde Nast and Advance Publications. Blurbs under on-site advertising and solicitations for Reddit Gold (a $3.99/monthly subscription that provides access to a few additional site features) emphasize Reddit’s high monthly operating costs and need for user support, which reinforces the notion of Reddit as a self-sustaining, non-corporate entity. All of this makes it very, very easy to forget the underpinnings of capital(ism) that structure the entire city.

These underpinnings, however, are crucial to be aware of. In the city of Reddit, its occupants are constantly generating large amounts of valuable data in the form of pageviews, upvotes and downvotes, comments, and subreddit subscriptions. This data provides a rich constellation of quantitative and qualitative information about users’ preferences, patterns, and networks that can then be mined and (further) monetized. This promise of profit can introduce a potential conflict of interest between the city’s owners and its inhabitants, whereby decisions about controversial content may be motivated by a desire to keep the populace talking and watching (and generating value).

Limitations of the City Metaphor
Despite the numerous structural and conceptual similarities between Reddit and a Western “major city” such as NYC or London, there are also places where the metaphor breaks down, particularly in regards to movement through space. The way that I, and most other users, experience the site is a radically different from movement of a physical body through continuous space. The urban traveler, the flaneur, experiences difference serially by moving from one place, one neighborhood, to the next, experiencing each in turn. While it is possible to browse only one subreddit at a time, thus being presented with pages of content unified by theme, most Redditors, including myself and my interlocutors, typically browse Reddit through a customized frontpage “feed” that combines the top-scoring links from all the subreddits that user is currently subscribed to.

The fact that Reddit is set up to be browsed in this way presents a major challenge to the extremely spatialized metaphors of “city” and “flaneur”. This “feed” structure makes the city discontinuous, a collection of disparate and fragmented parts presented in no particular order. The logic of the town square and the neighborhood fail to map onto this new structure – it resists spatialization, organization. While these pieces of content are still organized in a particular manner, they are not experienced in that same manner.

This way of consuming content is not easily analogized to the flaneur’s ambling through the evening city streets. I could imagine myself “traveling” through a variety of subreddits each day. However, instead of being contiguous, my experiences of these disparate streams of content is segmented, segregated, and in flow with other unrelated discussions. Thematically at least, it’s possible to imagine my daily travels through Reddit within a coherent narrative arc. When I first go into the city, I loop briefly through my corner of the downtown district, scooping up the latest headlines and any names and events of interest. I make my way into my little neighborhoods, get a vegan muffin and soy chai at the radical community co-op/animal refuge run by tatted barista farmers, pass through the women's bookstore, stopping at my favorite watering hole to share a Cosmo and commiserate with the other misunderstood bisexuals.

However, the way I experience these pages and posts is far less linear. They come to me simultaneously, through my main feed, rather than in related sequence. Instead of depicting coherent vignettes or “scenes”, the feed is much more like a series of individual frames from several scenes at once, all spliced together. In this feed structure, small micro-communities I’ve joined—distinct but somewhat disjointable elements of my identity, such as the subreddits r/vegan, r/bisexual, r/polyamory—mix and match with content in which I’m much more broadly (and sometimes incorrectly) interpellated, often into a larger, more generalized identity: Reddit user. This process of parallel and simultaneous hailing, produce these micro-moments of sameness and difference, a repeating reiteration, variations on a theme. But this theme is one in which difference can become flattened—where all content, regardless of context, starts to
appear roughly equivalent. The elements of my identity that might have politicized elements to
them mix freely with hobbies and favorite media texts in a layered but disordered stream.
In some ways, I found this normalization and flattening of difference quite liberating.
Free from the constraints of self-consciousness or social stigma, I relished the ability to seek out
and join ever-narrower communities of interest, to find people who were the same as me. I
searched for others were different, in the same way that I was. But that seeking, that easy
access, personalization, and customization, does have the effect of creating a “revolving door”
of identities which can sometimes be jarring, engendering a rapid shifting of context and modes
of address from one link to the next.

Sometimes, content within the feed will display unexpected synchronicity. The titles or
themes will sometimes speak to each other in an unexpected way—a call and response, a
thematic grouping. Scrolling down through the link titles can be kind of like reading blank
verse—lines of text follow, one after another, in a strange yet sometimes poetic stream of
crowd-sourced consciousness. But largely, after a while, the variety itself becomes familiar,
commonplace—even if the pieces themselves are extraordinary (as Reddit sometimes is).
Phenomenologically and visually, it is easy to experience all difference - even in something as
quotidian as consumer preference - as collapsed and bracketed, marked roughly equivalent in
importance, sublimated under an assumed Same (the all-powerful individual).
This collapsing and bracketing of difference as quirks of the individual dovetails neatly
with larger neoliberal discourses and frameworks that claim colorblindness (and, increasingly,
blindness to sexual orientation as well). This move disavows the larger social and political
context of inequalities that arise from these supposedly individual differences and undercuts
justice claims being made by activists and scholars who critique the larger structural sources of
inequality and oppression—ways in which, despite all rhetoric to the contrary, we are not all
Same, are not all equal in the eyes of the law or in the eyes of power.
Placing the boundary posts between self and Other, us and them, Different and Same,
has always been a project deeply imbricated with hegemonic power. Post-colonial, feminist,
and critical race scholars (Taussig 1993, de Beauvoir 1947, Fanon 1952) have all traced the
mechanisms of the hierarchical power structures that mark certain subjects as Other (as
different from the unmarked, white, masculine universal/Same). Even as these structures and
discourses endeavor to mark the Other as completely subaltern and utterly dissimilar, these

scholars examine the complex ways in which the self and the Other are always already
intertwined and mutually dependent. Michael Taussig (1993) traces the oscillation between
self/Other, and different/Same within anthropological accounts of indigenous peoples in the
monograph Mimesis and Alterity. Here he theorizes sameness and difference as inextricably
intertwined—not opposite ends of a spectrum, but a constantly fluctuating set of circuits of
imitations of imitations—copies without originals. Highlighting this blurring, the messiness of
this categories, is an important project in that it undermines modern notions of the monolithic,
self-evident, unmarked-yet-particular Subject while simultaneously calling attention to both
material and discursive conditions of inequality in colonial practice and representation.
However, in my experiences with Reddit, it seems as though the current tangled
iteration between sameness and difference has taken a different turn—rather than
emphasizing and overdetermining these categories, there appears to be a movement towards
flattening and disavowing all difference, marking it as personal preference that is only trivially
relevant. This reflects a larger cultural move in which some groups, often majority ones, claim
that all forms of critique are equally valid. (An example of this would be the tone-deaf, often
self-righteous deployment of the slogan “All Lives Matter” as a counter to the critiques of police
brutality and the systemic, institutionalized racism and dehumanization of non-white people
encapsulated in the phrase “Black Lives Matter”.)
All forms of difference, whether they be racial or sexual identity or the particular brand
of media one likes to consume become, to quote an eminent scholar of postmodern
subjectivity (I speak, of course, of the Dude from The Big Lebowski), just “like, your opinion,
man,” a form of laissez-faire public pluralism that is simultaneously liberating and constraining.
This incarnation of flattened difference is a dark twin of a more utopic imagining: egalitarianism. In a truly egalitarian society or space, difference is also collapsed and flattened, but in the service of a larger goal – the recognition of all subjects as fully human and deserving of equal rights, despite the circumstances of their birth. The idealized end would be a nonhierarchical social arrangement in which no party or group is elevated over the others. However, this is not the case on Reddit, or in larger neoliberal regimes that seek to disavow the social and systemic underpinnings of inequality and oppression. Instead, the presumption that all difference is only trivially relevant and fully eclipsed by individual drive, investment, and achievement leads to a deeply hierarchized arrangement. Furthermore, because of the ideological underpinnings of personal choice and responsibility, these hierarchies become naturalized and normalized.

I saw firsthand this discursive and ideological flattening of difference when I first began to recruit participants for my research. When I first put out my call for participants, I was unsure what kind of a response I was going to get, so I cast my net widely. This was my initial recruitment post:

Hi Reddit! I am in the department of Gender Studies at Indiana University. I’ve been a Redditor for two and a half years now, and have (somehow) convinced my committee to let me write my dissertation on Reddit. I’m interested in looking at how Redditors talk about and experience difference (gender, race, class, sexual orientation, ability) on the site. I am going to be looking at posted content and comment threads, as well as interviewing as many Redditors as I can about their experiences. I’m particularly interested in the experiences of Redditors who consider themselves members of a “minority” group (this is not just limited to race, but includes any way people get marked as “different”).

Many of the responses I received did pertain to race, class, gender, and sexuality, sometimes explicitly, sometimes more vaguely (“I’m in a lot of minority groups” was an oddly common response). However, I was surprised by some of the other responses from users that identified themselves as “different”. One respondent identified himself as a white male college student who felt different because he secretly loves classical music, but none of his friends did. I had several white teenagers respond saying that they felt out of place on Reddit because of their age. I received several responses from Redditors in other countries, almost all of them male, many of them also teenagers in school. One white woman revealed she was an identical twin. Perhaps the wording of my post was unclear – it seems that many of these respondents interpreted difference not as a socially significant marking, but a more generalized sense of not easily belonging or a lack of fit. I was struck by how many members of an otherwise dominant group (whites, males) considered themselves marked with significant difference, and wondered how it affected the way that they perceived justice claims from other groups marked with socially significant difference.

In this dissertation, I would like to use the term “socially significant difference” to refer to specific categories of difference that correspond to larger patterns of institutionalized inequality as well as their intersections and overlap. My project centers on gender, race, and sexuality as the most prominent categories of socially significant difference, but this definition does not exclude other intersecting factors such as class, ability, and nation. The elements of difference I am most concerned with are the ones that intersect most directly with hegemonic systems of power and hierarchy.

Difference, including socially significant difference, is discursively and ideologically constructed on Reddit in two ways: as a flattened, nearly peripheral set of interchangeable categories, quirks of personality; and simultaneously as an open target for (largely anonymous) speech acts ranging from paternalistic and condescending “mansplaining”, “whitesplaining”, and the parroting of tone-deaf “advice”, to hostile vitriol and threats sent via private message. While the two constructions of difference (“not a big deal” vs. “open target”) may at first appear to be mutually exclusive, the latter, particularly on Reddit, actually relies on the logic of the former. This is most easily seen in the all-too-regular fat-shaming comments and content, where neoliberal rhetoric about self-discipline, self-control, and self-respect makes weight entirely a personal problem, one that is about motivation, drive, and ability to say no to temptation (and not about structural inequalities or physiological variation). Because the condition of people of size is perceived to be caused by factors they themselves are in full control of, openly contemptuous discourse about “fatties” is seen as acceptable, even justified. Reddit as a platform has several structural features that enable this contradictory approach to difference that both flattens and highlights it. As described earlier, the site’s “frontpage” setup is a continuous, mixed feed of new and popular posts from all subreddits.
that user is subscribed to. This causes all sources of difference, from the quotidian to the profound, to appear as roughly equivalent, at least visually. Reddit is also largely text-based:

43

when a user posts, only their username appears. There are no avatars or profile pictures. Images are often an important part of comment threads, but are linked to the image hosting service imgur.com. (For example: a user will post a humorous photo or animated .gif in response to a previous comment by commenting with only the image URL, or incorporating the URL into their response.) The minimalist interface and black text on white background also lends itself to a sense of disembodiment, to experiencing oneself and others as words on the screen.

In some ways, Reddit’s structure mirrors the utopian, post-gender, post-racial future imagined in many science fiction films, novels, and television shows: through technology and progressive social and political ideology, all subjects have been made equal. In these imaginings, women and men, of all racial and ethnic groups, alien and human, work and serve alongside each other in the service of a larger goal, mission, or organization (like Starfleet or the Jedi Knights). Their differences make no difference at all. It is seductive to look at Reddit, particularly its success stories, and laud it as a place where this kind of progressive, postdifference interaction can occur. Users are able to communicate without having their audience instantly know their gender, race, sexual orientation, ability status, body size, class status, and other physical markers of difference that can be assessed visually, either through physical proximity or photographs/video. In many ways, this view of Reddit is extremely similar to the early theorizing surrounding Web technology in the mid to late 1990s, partially because the technological interfaces are, in some ways, remarkably similar. The early technology of the Web, such as MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons), BBSes (Bulletin Board Service/message boards) and IRC chat channels, were all heavily to entirely text-based, with little to no visual or audio input.

44

from the users themselves. Reddit does rely more heavily on linked images, but the site interface itself and the main way that users interact with each other are largely text-only. This flattening and abstraction of difference, however, dovetails painfully tightly with hegemonic neoliberal discourses that seek to overdetermine the role of personal choice and responsibility by downplaying and/or disavowing the impact of larger structural causes of inequality, particularly capitalism. While in some ways difference is minimized, it has not disappeared – and then neoliberal sleight-of-hand transforms all of these “interchangeable” differences (and the lived experiences that result from them) into personal choices. Thus it becomes acceptable, even sometimes noble, to victim-blame. These comments, particularly when they come to criticizing the body size of others, often style themselves as tough love, a kind of “well, somebody’s got to say it” benevolent “affective discipline” that, if submitted to, will transform the subject (Weber 2009). Thus prejudice is retrofit as “self-justified discrimination” - rather than being the product of some kind of irrational, essentialist, one-size-fits-all bigotry, it is cast as simply an objective judgment of a personal set of choices (almost always gone awry), delivered with didactic intent.

This “self-justified discrimination” reflects the ways in which flattened categories of difference are used in the service of implementing, maintaining, and naturalizing hierarchies of power and privilege that mark all subjects as “deserving” of their ultimate position. While egalitarian systems seek to strip away the negative effects of difference in hopes of creating a level playing field for all, this form of neoliberal flattening instead attempts to cast all players as equally capable of navigating the field despite any unevenness it may possess. The focus is shifted from the challenges of the contextual spaces certain groups occupy and towards the individual fitness and tenacity of group members. If one is operating under the principle that all players are equally capable of playing on the current field (which is cast as being level, even though it isn't), then judgments passed on any particular player's lack of performance do appear to be sensible, fact-based assessments of individual shortcomings.

Conclusion: A Moment of Possibility

As I suppose is the case with most dissertations, I started and ended the project with a significantly different orientation towards my object of study. I had a lot of high hopes that were not realized – I found that ultimately, the atmosphere on Reddit regarding difference was not nearly as flexible and accepting as I had initially posited. However, I also found examples of resistance and flourishing within that hostile environment that I did not expect or even think were possible. I’d like to conclude this introduction on an optimistic note, by describing a situation that, to me, encapsulated and exemplified my highest hopes for Reddit as a platform. r/funny is a default subreddit that has more subscribers (over 10 million on 2/10/16)
than any other subreddit. Because of its massive size, posts that do well tend to play to the
“lowest common denominator” – simple images with clever titles that present a joke that can
be quickly and readily grasped. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, many of these posts rely on
sexist, racist, and transphobic tropes, and the joke can often be at someone else’s direct
expense.

On Sept 21, 2012, Reddit user european_douchebag posted a picture to r/funny with
the caption “I’m not sure what to make of this”. The picture was a candid shot of a Sikh woman
waiting in line at the airport looking down at her cell phone. She wore a turban, glasses, a t-
shirt, and yoga pants. She also had a moderate amount of dark, untrimmed facial hair that
clustered around her mouth and sideburns.

The initial top-rated responses were predictable: cheap, pile-on one-liners ridiculing her
appearance and questioning her gender. It was clear that this woman’s appearance and refusal
to conform to Western beauty norms was meant to be the butt of the joke. These kinds of
posts are not unique to Reddit: the long running (and still active) website PeopleOfWalmart
features candid pictures of people shopping at Wal-Mart and is a snide bonanza of class
spectacle, body-shaming, ageism, and transphobia. Both the r/funny post of the Sikh woman
and PeopleOfWalmart fall into the same specific genre of presenting these pictures alongside
cruel and judgmental comments, under the guise of “humor”. This allows participants to feel
doubly superior: they can revel in their own dissimilarity from the people they are bullying as
well as enjoy the sense of being part of an in-group, someone who is “in on the joke”.

Part of the appeal of this kind of online behavior is its anonymity and low risk: the
subjects of the photographs and targets of ridicule are caught unawares, allowing commenters
to pass judgment without fear of recognition or repercussion. The woman in the photo, who
revealed her name to be Balpreet Kuar, heard about the photo’s circulation through Facebook
and went directly to the post. Instead of issuing a stream of invective and condemnation
(which, in my opinion, would have been more than justified, given what these commenters
were saying about her), she posted a calm, well-worded, lengthy comment explaining the
religious reasons behind her decision not to alter her facial hair. I will excerpt some of it here:

“I’m not embarrassed or humiliated by the attention (positive and negative) that this
picture is getting because, it’s who I am...baptized Sikhs believe in the sacredness of this
body – it is a gift given to us by the Divine Being (who is genderless, actually) and must
keep it intact as a submission to the divine will....By not focusing on physical beauty, I
have time to cultivate those inner virtues....I appreciate all the comments here, both
positive and less positive because I’ve gotten a better understanding of myself and
others from this....”

The comment was quickly voted to the top of the thread, with subsequent commenters
commending her for her courage and grace in the face of a very challenging situation. It is
extremely rare to see such a 180 degree turn in the tone of comments in the same thread,
especially in situations in which problematic stereotyping behavior is being called out. In a
circumstance like this, it is much more likely for posters and commenters to dig in their heels
and “double down” rather than acknowledge the critique in any meaningful way.

Even more unusual was what happened next. The user who originally posted the
picture posted again on r/funny 4 days later apologizing for his actions. Again, I’ll excerpt:

“I felt the need to apologize to the Sikhs, Balpreet, and anyone else I offended when I
posted that picture. Put simply it was stupid. Making fun of some people is funny to
some but incredibly degrading to the people you’re making fun of. It was an incredibly
rude, judgmental, and ignorant thing to post....I’ve read more about the Sikh faith and it
was actually really interesting. It makes a whole lot of sense to work on having a legacy
and not worrying about what you look like...So reddit, I’m sorry for being an asshole and
giving you negative publicity. Balpreet, I’m sorry for being a closed minded
individual...Sikhs, I’m sorry for insulting your culture and your way of life.”

This entire exchange, for me, represented many of the good things about Reddit that I
had hoped to uncover and document in my dissertation project. While the user’s change of
heart and willingness to publicly apologize was certainly an important part of what happened,
the particular element that I was struck by the most was how Reddit facilitated a moment of
connection between two parties that were previously separated by a multitude of differences:
gender, cultural, religious. The original poster’s apology clearly indexes a shift in thought, in
which the context of difference is made transparent enough that the shared humanity of the
subject shines through.

Even though this is a feel-good story, I also like that it encompasses many of the
complexities that I ended up grappling with in my research and writing. There is the double-edged sword of the medium itself: it enabled judgment and harassment to circulate as easily as it enabled this one individual to disrupt the conditions of anonymity that make that very behavior possible. There is the complex question of the relationship between the margin and the center, about the burden of responsibility placed on an oppressed group to politely and patiently educate their oppressors.

This dissertation is a blend of travelogue and atlas, ethnography and cartography. I am not seeking only demographic or architectural information for my map. Rather, I am also concerned with the conditions of movement for different users throughout the city. I am seeking to put together a “traffic report” that helps to characterize and describe these conditions and flows: zones of safety and danger, obstructions and shortcuts. Who is able to move freely, and why? Who is blocked, and how? In the following chapters I draw on multiple sources of information about the city (my interlocutors’ experiences as well as my own participant observation) to map these patterns of movement and resistance.

The first chapter lays out the coordinates of the city and the starting points of the project. First, I contextualize the project by situating it within an interdisciplinary framework that includes gender studies, queer theory, critical race theory, and new media studies. In the following ethnographic section, I then establish my own starting points and coordinates. The latter part of the chapter explores the coordinates, both physical and metaphorical, that Reddit occupies in the everyday lives of my interlocutors.

49

The second chapter explores the challenges and rewards of creating and maintaining safe space for intersectional difference on Reddit. I use my in-depth interviews with three moderators of intersectional subreddits to consider the gendered dimensions of the tremendous amount of affective digital labor that moderating these “third places” requires. I also place the labor of moderation within a larger context of neoliberalism and consider the role and responsibility of site administrators in managing the overall culture and safety of the site.

The third chapter examines, broadly, the conditions of livability and safety in the city for various groups marked by difference, and the patterns of accumulated of micro-interactions and microaggressions that serve to de- and re-territorialize Reddit as an online space. I make a distinction between “habitable” and “safe” online space, arguing that “habitable” space is marked largely by the absence of harassment, while “safe” space is marked largely by the presence of some kind of support.

The final chapter describes a particular gendered example of lack of safety in the city: the “jailbait”/“creepshots” subreddits that trafficked in stolen, nonconsensual photographs of underage girls and women. The moderator of these subreddits was a well-known Reddit troll who went by “ViolentAcrez”, whose offline identity was revealed by Gawker journalist Adrien Chen. This chapter grapples with questions of privacy, visibility, free speech, and the impact that intersectional privilege and difference has on inhabitants’ ability to move through and exist comfortably in the city.

I conclude the dissertation by reflecting on the conditions of “success” of my project, both in terms of my results and my degree of affective entanglement with my object of study. I find that this entanglement expanded particular lines and modes of inquiry while foreclosing others, and led me to a very particular vision of what “success” would look like. Using these parameters, my search for connection via Reddit appears to have been largely unsuccessful, particularly since I was equating “resistance” with “failure”. Drawing from Judith Halberstam’s The Queer Art of Failure, I then consider this “resistance” as generative in its own right: a network of blockages and refusals that can serve both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ends.

51

Chapter 1: Mapping Coordinates
Review of Literature
My project, by virtue of its interdisciplinarity, finds itself in conversation with two separate constellations of scholarly work: one on new media and communication, and the other on various kinds of difference, including gender/women’s studies, critical race theory, and queer theory. Rather than trying to give an exhaustive overview of these fields, I will instead focus for this literature review on their points of intersection. There is a long arc of scholarly conversations about the simultaneous liberatory and repressive potential of new media technology, both in general and vis-à-vis difference specifically. It is my hope that the work this project does will be able to contribute in some way to that set of conversations.
Early Theorizations

Early scholars of Internet technology such as Howard Rheingold (1993) lauded the potential transformative effects of this new medium on human communication. Rheingold’s The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier describes his experiences on the WELL (Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link) and the strange, mediated intimacy of interacting with strangers scattered across the globe, strictly through networked textual interfaces. He is perhaps one of the first scholars to make the case that the medium provides opportunities for users to shed physical marks of difference. He waxes optimistically:

Because we cannot see each other in cyberspace, gender, age, national origin, and physical appearance are not apparent unless a person wants to make it public. People whose physical handicaps make it difficult to form new friendships find that virtual communities treat them as they always wanted to be treated – as thinkers and transmitters of ideas and feeling beings, not carnal vessels with a certain appearance and way of walking and talking (or not walking and not talking). (11)

It is certainly true that users with physical disabilities and/or neurological variations have found a welcome social venue on the Web, but Rheingold’s prediction that other markers of difference would be rendered effectively invisible in cyberspace proved not to be as accurate. Another early forum for Web-based user interaction was the MUD, or MultiUser Dungeon/Dimension. In addition to downplaying or obscuring offline markers of difference through the format of the medium, MUDs actively invited users to construct an identity for themselves. As a largely text-based platform with minimal (if any) images, MUDs relied almost exclusively on user-written descriptions (of settings, characters, and actions) to create the virtual environment. Users would then interact with other MUDders through these personae, with the understanding that the character they are communicating with may or may not resemble its creator in any way.

The potential for such radical identity play attracted the attention of feminist ethnographers of technology, most notably Sherry Turkle (1995) and Annette Markham (1999). In Turkle’s Life on the Screen (and its later follow up, The Second Self), she argues that virtual space provides opportunities for users to explore identities and scenarios that might otherwise be impossible. Rather than articulating a disconnection between online and offline life, however, Turkle’s approach employs ethnographic user interviews and theoretical frameworks of hybridity and cybernetics that mesh categories previously regarded as separate. Ultimately, Turkle argues, the identities and actions performed online aren’t separate from the user, nor their personal and social background. Turkle’s early work complicates the easy dichotomies of body/mind and real/virtual that characterized a good deal of the early celebratory discourse about the Internet and difference. It is also oddly prescient, foreseeing a continued blurring of the lines between online and offline, real and virtual, human and machine.

Annette Markham (1998), author of Life Online: Researching Real Experience in Virtual Space also researched users of LambdaMOO. She found that users of MUDs do create characters that are influenced by their social positioning and life experience, and further explores the blurring of boundaries between the virtual and the real for both herself and her participants. Many of her interlocutors very clearly state that they feel a strong connection to their online personae, a connection so strong that they may privilege it over the “real”. She also traces how, for almost all over her interview participants, their usage of MUDs and virtual space for social interaction is in order to gain a greater amount of control over how they are perceived and how they respond to others.

Both authors discuss gender at length in their monographs, and come to extremely similar conclusions. Even though difference is supposed to disappear online, both Turkle and Markham found that chat handles perceived to be “feminine” were subject to more harassment and gender-based attention, and were held to different standards of interaction than “male” or “neutral” handles. For example, Markham writes of feeling much more confident refusing a conversational request when “playing” a male character than she would as a female character or in her offline life. Both of these authors, through personal anecdotes and ethnographic data, make a compelling case that offline structures of (hetero)sexism negatively influence the way “feminine” users are treated in virtual space.

Lori Kendall’s (2002) Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub: Masculinities and Relationships Online also examines the role of offline difference in online interaction. Kendall’s ethnography comes to many of the same conclusions about differences as Turkle and Markham’s work has: namely, that virtual space reproduces these differences and constraints, even in the absence of
any physical cues that would indicate that difference. She reports that users find way to create a
gendered identity online – for example, one of the primary ways users asserted their
masculinity online was through the objectification and sexualization of women. The masculine
homosocial bonding that takes place in Kendall’s eponymous virtual pub leverages offline
categories of difference in order to create a sense of shared sameness. This bonding is virtual,
every sense of the word – simulacra existing in non-physical online space.

Domesticating the Web

Of course, not all of the cultural attitudes towards Internet technology were as starry-eyed as the work of these early theorists. As my mom’s serious warning to me on that
Christmas morning attested, cultural anxieties about the dangerous potential of this new
technology were certainly just as salient as its celebration. A concern of my mother was that
without the familiar markers of physical difference to give them away, child predators online
would be able to seek out, groom, and eventually attack potential victims by posing as children
themselves. Another concern was security of information, with rumors of credit card numbers
and bank information being stolen by unscrupulous thieves posing as official agencies and
overseas investors. Again, the ability to not know who was really on the other end of the
screen was seen as a source of danger, a source of possible social (and economic)
destabilization.

These anxieties stemmed mostly from the newness of this new medium and the lack of
pre-existing social and legal frameworks to contextualize and discipline online interaction. Part

of the danger of the emerging Internet was the possibility of being connected with a stranger
who has the intent both to deceive and to harm. However, as I quickly found out as a newbie
exploring the ‘Net, that that dangerous possibility had a silver lining: it also provided a means
for connecting with strangers, other users, who lacked malicious intent.

Despite every generation believing themselves to be on the cusp of a new epoch of
historical and technological change, histories of technology reveal that these anxieties are in
fact perennial (Baym and Markham 2008), and similar concerns are raised with the emergence
of every new communication medium. Avital Ronell (1989), in The Telephone Book, discusses
how the initial anxieties about the telephone, as a “new” medium, centered around social
destabilization—the potential for any person to pick up a phone and be able to dial any other
person with a phone, regardless of their position in the social hierarchy. How dangerous might
this technology be, if anyone could pick up the phone and be speaking in the mayor’s ear within
seconds? These same anxieties are present in rhetoric about the dangers of the Web
mentioned earlier: both involve the connection, through this platform, of parties that, for one
reason or another, should not be speaking to each other. Thus even though these dangers
were constructed as brand-new pitfalls for a brand-new technology and millennium, they were
in fact simply remediations of older anxieties. Lisa Gitelman (2005) writes that new media is
“never entirely revolutionary: [they] are less points of epistemic rupture than they are socially
embedded sites for the ongoing negotiation of meaning as such.” (6)

This “ongoing negotiation” of meaning present in new media is a process that Nancy
Baym (2010) deems “domestication”. In keeping with the hybrid approach of other feminist
ethnographers of technology, Baym argues that technology and its users are mutually shaped

by each other. This “domestication” is not one-sided (humans gaining mastery over machines)
– rather it is a mutual adjustment of both technical apparatuses and social scripts that makes
room for new technology in the everyday lives of its users. This process of mutual
domestication is not unique to new media formats, either: it encompasses all human uses of
technology, from the simple to the complex. For my argument, I want to focus in on the
domestication of a particular element of new media communication technology: the capability
to put users that would otherwise be separate “together” in some way. I argue that the
potentially destabilizing effects of this capability are one of the main potentials of new media
that domestication attempts to reduce or control.

The technology of the Internet provided “new”, dangerous opportunities for people to
communicate across previously insurmountable boundaries (social, geographical, cultural, or
otherwise). It is if any “new” media technology appears initially as a crumpled, wrinkled piece
of cloth, full of contact points, and is subsequently “ironed out” through the process of
domestication, eliminating those rogue possibilities. Structures of social and technological
etiquette emerge to bring interaction through the medium back in line, to make it more
continuous with more accepted forms of communication, sociality, and stratification.

There are many examples of the attendant cultural anxieties and fears of destabilization
that emerge in tandem with a new form of information exchange, dating back as far as the
advent of the written word (Peters 1999). A more recent example of this process of
domestication is the changing format of the telephone system – from party lines and
switchboards to private, direct calls. While this transition is partially a result of increased technological infrastructure, it also brings with it a different form of sociality. Rather than picking up the phone and hearing neighbors or an operator, the telephone system is now formatted for one-to-one communication between users, based on the dialer’s possession of the personalized code of the call recipient. While technologically it is possible to dial a series of numbers and try to speak to whoever answers on the other end, socially this practice comes to be considered juvenile and rude at best and (borderline) illegal at worst. In this way, the medium of the telephone becomes “domesticated”, and sources of serendipitous, unplanned, cross-hierarchical contact are reduced almost to zero.

If you'll recall from the introduction, one of my first sources of fascination with online space was the potential to communicate with other people, people both very different from and very similar to myself. I couldn’t just pick up the phone, dial it, and expect whoever answered to speak to me about a topic we were both interested in. However, I could go into a chat room which would put me into contact with like-minded people all over the world. The Internet gave that gawky 13-year old in northwest Pennsylvania a means of communication and connection that I would have had no way to access otherwise. Those fascinating moments of contact between the rumpled folds of the untamed fabric were much more common in the early Web than they are now. Jose van Dijck (2013) describes pre-2000s cyberspace as “a bonanza where rules and laws from the ‘old’ territory no longer applied, and new ones had not crystallized yet” (7). Certainly since then a panoply of social and technological frameworks have emerged to structure, regulate, and domesticate how people interact and come into contact online.

Throughout the course of my own Internet usage, I noticed an initially gradual, and then drastic, shift in the proportion of people I communicated with online who were known to me through offline social association. Consequently, the amount of time I spent seeking out and communicating with complete strangers dropped significantly. My usage of platforms changed, chat rooms and message boards being largely replaced by person-to-person instant messaging (AOL Instant Messenger), OpenDiary, Xanga, and eventually Facebook. When the people I communicated with most online, my friends, migrated to new platforms, I would adopt those platforms as well. These online spaces increasingly provided digital frameworks for existing friendship, professional, and kin networks while reducing or eliminating the opportunities for contact between users from completely different networks with no offline connection. My shift in platform usage in was part of a larger change that was happening across the Internet, often referred to as the shift to “Web 2.0”. Web 2.0 is a loosely defined term that describes the “second generation” of new media platforms, with key aspects of these platforms being the potential for users to interact with each other, as well as create and share content. There was widespread hype around Web 2.0 as a way of “making the Web more social” – and certainly it did enable particular kinds of online social contact that may have been more difficult before. However, the sociality these platforms are largely built to enable social networking based on existing ties, rather than to facilitate a means for unknown users to come into contact. Jose van Dijck argues that “with the advent of Web 2.0, shortly after the turn of the millennium, online services shifted from offering channels for networked communication to becoming interactive, two-way vehicles for networked sociality” (5).

The shift to Web 2.0 can be read as a process of domestication, as well. By shifting the focus from initial contact via use of a shared medium (i.e. a particular chat room/website) to contact being based on existing social networks, the wrinkled fabric of the Web is smoothed, stretched tight over the pre-existing framework. Those folds and points of contact are pulled apart, re-distanced. Thus users become less and less likely to come in contact with someone else they don’t know and don’t agree with, and more and more likely to use internet technology to communicate with others known to them who probably share at least some similar viewpoints.

It has been over 20 years since Rheingold’s first release of Virtual Communities in 1993. Since then, the use of Internet technology has become widespread, domesticated, and deeply integrated into everyday life. Studies of online behavior throughout that 20-year period confirmed what early scholars of difference such as Markham, Turkle, and Nakamura had been saying all along: users don’t leave their prejudices behind when they enter cyberspace, and existing dominant offline power structures reproduce themselves in virtual space. Often those with the most power and voice offline (usually white, middle to upper-class heterosexual males) are also the ones who have the most power and voice online.
Lisa Nakamura's work more broadly examines the visual representation of difference, both online and offline. In her earliest work (2005), she observes that the creation of textual “avatars” by users in MOOs and MUDs often rely on specific, racializing tropes about the appearance and behavior of non-white people (she calls these “cybertypes”). Furthermore, these environments can enable a colonizing practice she calls “identity tourism,” in which white subjects are able to “put on” a virtual identity of a person of color (and take it off at will). Nakamura describes these racialized caricatures as “regressive and stereotyped” (xv), divorced from the lived realities of people of color.

Her later work in Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet (2007) explores the Internet as “a privileged and extremely rich site for the creation and distribution of hegemonic and counterhegemonic visual images of racialized bodies” (13). In some of her case studies, hegemonic, essentialist ideologies about people of color are clearly reproduced and reinforced in online visual content such as avatars, as well as (offline) media representations of racialized bodies in cyberspace. However, her analysis also opens up space for images and representations that challenge these dominant racializing tropes, such as the creation of avatars and online spaces by and for a particular minoritarian group (in the monograph, she examines Muslim girls' use of AIM “buddy” avatars and profiles). Nakamura’s analysis highlights the dual potential, the double-edged sword, of new media technology: the creation and distribution of (racializing) images is easier than ever, enabling, to some extent, the proliferation of both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic content.

More recently, Eve Shapiro (2012) investigated forms of identity formation and performance in the networked virtual world known as Second Life. In many ways, Second Life is an extension of the avatar-creation process Nakamura explores, albeit one that has been dramatically expanded to include the creation of customizable, persistent virtual spaces. Shapiro notes that Second Life provides a nearly limitless palette of avatar customization: someone could be a five-headed dragon, a vaguely humanoid cow, a green triangle, a cloud of purple mist, a robot. However, despite this wide range of choices, Shapiro finds that the vast majority of users created avatars that reflect traditional Western beauty ideals – white, thin, able-bodied, long-legged, straight hair, toned/muscular. In both the MUDs discussed earlier in the chapter and Second Life, users have complete control over how they will present themselves online in these particular spaces, whether textually, visually, or both. If difference really did disappear online, then these environments should be filled with a cornucopia of expression and embodiment. Instead, they often reflect hegemonic neoliberal visual regimes that confine the worth and value of a subject with their external appearance and ability to conform to dominant beauty standards.

Scholars studying the intersection of social difference and virtual space in the last 10 years have made several persuasive and overlapping arguments that indicate clearly that offline prejudices and unequal hierarchal structures based on difference are being reproduced in digital space. This illustrates a two-way flow between online and offline contexts, between the digital and the physical. This two-way flow is a break from previous models of humantechnology interaction, which new media scholar Nathan Jurgenson (2011) has dubbed “digital dualism”.

Digital dualism is a paradigm that holds that online and offline concepts are separate, and that there is a qualitative difference between what happens online and what happens in “real life”. Jurgenson likens this model to earlier philosophical notions of Cartesian and Platonic mind-body dualism. However, he argues, this model is becoming increasingly inaccurate and unable to capture the complexity of the role new media plays in everyday life. Gesturing towards recent technological developments such as geotagging, face recognition software, and Wii remotes that merge physical input with new media, Jurgenson argues instead for a paradigm of “augmented reality”, in which “digital and material realities dialectically coconstruct each other”.

As I have argued above, there is ample evidence to suggest that our social conditioning and prejudices have a noticeable effect on the kinds of sociality that is enacted in digital space, which is a partial rejection of digital dualism. However, the other part of that rejection is then acknowledging the profound effects that online interactions have on offline structures of power and privilege. Moving to a paradigm of augmented reality provides a framework from which to argue that online interaction through social media like Reddit is a crucial part of a larger whole. When difference is being discussed (or dismissed, or ignored) online, there is a direct effect on lived experience.
This notion of augmented reality is supported by other scholars of new media as well, although they do not use that specific term. One of the key points in Mark Deuze's (2010) "Media Life" is the idea that we no longer experience life through media: rather, we experience and live in media. He re-imagines media not as something interstitial that experience and meaning passes through – instead, the media itself is an intrinsically constitutive part of the experience. There is no separation. Similarly, Jose van Dijck argues that “connective media” is becoming an increasingly integral component of human sociality.

Joseph Turow describes a pattern of information flow in new media that he alternately calls “you loops” and “filter bubbles”. These terms refer to the self-reinforcing way that “bubbles” can appear around a particular user that distort the information they receive. Examples of this include the use of “cookies” by websites and advertisers, who employ a user’s browsing and search behavior in order to deliver customized, targeted content and advertising to each individual user. This same logic informs the content display algorithms on Facebook:

based on pageviews, “likes”, and comments, these algorithms will display future content that appears to be most in line with previous behavior. In many ways, this filtering is a necessity, particularly in “context collapse” situations that are commonly produced via Facebook. Offline social obligations may mandate that you don’t “unfriend” a relative with wildly different political leanings than your own: however, it is very easy to ensure that posts by that person are not prominently focused in your newsfeed. As a result of this selective pruning, only information that already conforms with or supports your existing worldview will be presented to you, which only serves to further polarize those viewpoints by creating an “echo chamber”.

I am certainly as guilty of this as anyone: my news feed is extremely left-leaning and progressive, and I don’t hesitate to block or reduce the visibility of discourse that runs directly counter to those views. Particularly when it comes to current events, what I’m seeing on my newsfeed is often counter to mainstream discourse. The most recent example would be the controversy surrounding Beyonce’s latest music video, “Formation”, and her Super Bowl halftime performance. My newsfeed was almost entirely positive about the music video and the performance, filled with links to thoughtful essays unpacking the visual symbolism of the video as well as the historical antecedents of the costume choices for her and her backup dancers during the halftime show.

However, outside of my news feed, the response to Beyonce was much different. While my “you loop” lauded her for the boldness of her statements about contemporary Black experience and white supremacy, other “you loops” criticized these performances as unnecessarily divisive and anti-police. There was a call issued on Twitter (not heeded very widely, apparently) to boycott the Super Bowl halftime show. It was clear that two very different sets of conversations were happening about the exact same cultural texts, and it was also clear that there was very little overlap between those conversations. Neither side was particularly interested in engaging with or acknowledging the other, although there was a wider overall visibility of anti-Beyonce discourse. This bifurcation seems to be the most apparent when the topic at hand is related in some way to socially marked difference. Even when both sides attempt to address one another (as with the #NotAllMen and #YesAllWomen and #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter hashtags circulating on Twitter) the message often does not effectively reach the intended audience of the opposing side. Instead, these hashtags become a way to perform a particular kind of affect and positioning that is overtly directed towards an opposing viewpoint, but is largely received by an audience that already agrees with the poster’s perspective.

As I discussed in the last portion of my introduction, one of my hopes for Reddit was that it perhaps could provide an avenue for these opposing conversations to intersect in a productive way. While I did find evidence of that overlap happening in my research, the results were less than encouraging: these interactions were almost always unpleasant arguments that ended with both sides feeling frustrated and surer of both their own rightness and the wrongheadedness of their opposition. I will explore the patterns of these interactions in detail in Chapter 3.

Autoethnography

After talking with my interlocutors, I became aware that the way I accessed and interacted with Reddit was actually rather uncommon. I started browsing Reddit daily in early 2011, entirely on my desktop computer until I got my first smartphone capable of browsing Reddit in 2013. Even after acquiring mobile capabilities, I still did the majority of my Reddit
browsing, and almost all of the research for this dissertation, on personal desktop computers (either at home or in my campus office). I have terrible luck with mobile devices (laptops in particular), and after my second one bit the dust I moved to my current personal desktop. Despite the physical distance and size, throughout the years this machine has become a part of me, albeit a relatively stationary, noncontiguous one: a disarticulated cyborg.

My eyes have spent thousands of hours staring into the same 24” by 12” square of the monitor. Through that square I have seen particular combinations of pixels that have provoked in me a wide range of intense emotions: anger, fear, joy, love. Some of these combinations were relatively quotidian, like the hundreds of hours I spent playing World of Warcraft (that elicited all of the aforementioned emotions, sometimes in the span of a few minutes). Others were more profound – some of the most meaningful learning experiences in my life, particularly when it came to my own position of privilege in the world, I experienced through reading the shared experiences of others.

My fingers have tapped out millions of words on this keyboard, from the academic to the deeply, fiercely personal. I have written almost all of my graduate seminar papers and this dissertation on this computer. It has heard my wildest speculations and my dearest, darkest secrets. I've typed almost all of the messages I ever wrote to my lovers on that set of keys, checked it on that same screen, more than a few times through tears.

It is only in recent years that my living situation has allowed me to keep my computer desk in a room other than my bedroom. For many years, I slept in the same room that my computer was in – drifting off to the dull whirring of the fan, comforted by the soft glow of the case lights. Even though the computer was not a laptop I could physically take into bed with me, it was still connected to and a part of my regular sleep environment.

The context of my access was very particular, and represented to me a sense of intimacy and ostensible privacy. My computer, and by extension Reddit, was figuratively and literally located in my “inner chambers”. Looking back, there does seem to be an overlap between the location of my personal computer and the trajectory of my thoughts and theorizations about the connective potential of Reddit. When I began the project, I was much more optimistic about the kinds of connections and conversations I’d have, perhaps overestimating the potential positive mediating effect of Reddit. When I was closer to the computer, I felt closer to Reddit, more sure of my utopian theorizations. But as I started to access it from different places – especially in public using my smartphone – my perceptions became more moderated. I didn’t feel that special sense of connection.

For me there was something quite isolating about using my smartphone to browse Reddit around other people, especially when I wasn’t at home. I could easily get completely absorbed in a thread and block out everything happening around me. Sometimes I would do it intentionally, as a way to pass time in noisy environments (usually while I was waiting in line on campus somewhere). The act itself requires a particular physical posture – head down, one hand cupping the phone, eyes focused on the blue light of the screen, deciphering the lines of text.

When I was using my smartphone heavily to browse Reddit, the site became an infinitely expandable time-filler, an endless stream of new and interesting information in my pocket. It gave me something to do while I was waiting (and it made me realize just how much time in a day I spend waiting, in some fashion or another). Sometimes I would sit on the couch in the evenings and browse on my phone, my partner on his (also on Reddit). Although I tried not to make a habit of it, I would sometimes browse in bed before I went to sleep, especially on the weekends.

What was the difference, then, between those two modes of access? Why did one feel like it was facilitating connection while the other seemed to preclude it? For me (and, as it turns out, many of my interlocutors), the key factor was interactivity. When I browsed Reddit on my desktop computer, I had a particular technical capacity readily available to me. I could have multiple links and threads open at once and could easily type my responses and queries. I felt more connected to the community because I could readily participate in the discussions I was reading if I wanted to. When I was on my phone, I felt like I was only capable of reception, not transmission – a forced flaneur.

There are many compounding, confounding factors that also affected this overall change in my experiences of Reddit. My smartphone’s ability to browse the site occurred at roughly the same time that I was conducting the interviews for this dissertation and receiving a multitude of different perspectives in a very short amount of time. Reddit has also ballooned in size in the past 4 years that I’ve been writing this dissertation, and in that change I have seen a subsequent effect in the modes and quality of interaction, especially in the larger subreddits. In
short, many things changed all at once: my perspective shifted and expanded, the context and method of my access shifted, and the site itself was also growing in size and complexity.

Ethnographic Analysis - Methods of Access

All of my interviews began with several questions about the respondent’s site usage patterns. Knowing how long my respondents had been Redditors and their patterns of site usage allowed me to tailor the interview to meet their level of involvement. These questions also gave me a fascinating look into how other users, other people, were experiencing Reddit. In my introduction, I framed Reddit as a city, and compared my personal interactions with the site to traveling through a fragmented, heterogeneous urban landscape. I was deeply interested in getting a look at what my interlocutors’ “Reddit cities” looked like. Were they even cities at all? The responses I received reflected a range of experiences. While some agreed with and expanded on the “city” metaphor, others experienced the site in a different way. Alice compared Reddit to a series of private or semi-private parks, while Jean said that Reddit, for her, is a kind of thirldspace that is neither entirely real nor completely imagined. I found that structuring my interviews in this way also had the added, unexpected benefit of putting the respondent at ease, by providing them an opportunity to definitively answer easy, relatively non-threatening but still personal, topically related questions. It implicitly established them as the expert on their own experiences and a valuable source of information. These questions generated quite a bit of data, more than I was expecting. Respondents had a lot to say about the specific ways that Reddit fit into their everyday lives. In the following section, I will describe my interlocutors’ various intersections with Reddit: their access devices, methods, and contexts, how they discovered the site, how often they use it.

69

Access Devices

In the preceding section’s autoethnography, I described how the physical context of the way I was accessing Reddit affected the way that I conceptually and affectively engaged with the site itself. My interview questions specifically asked my interlocutors to describe the physical circumstances of their travels through Reddit – how and when and where they accessed the site. An overall holistic goal of the interviews was to get a sense of the place that Reddit occupied in the respondent’s everyday life, and knowing the material context of their interaction with the site was essential.

It did not take long after I began my interviews for me to realize that my own method of access (mostly desktop, some phone) to Reddit was quite atypical. The majority of my interlocutors reported that they used laptop computers, either alone or in combination with other mobile devices, to access Reddit. Some users reported using a desktop, but no one reported using one exclusively – rather, this use occurred in conjunction with other mobile devices. A small number of my interlocutors (2) indicated that they used all four modes of access on a regular basis.

As my research continued, a composite picture of my interlocutors’ Reddit access methods began to emerge. For almost all of them, Reddit was a part of their everyday life that was constantly in flow - between mobile devices, between home and work/school. The fact that most of my interlocutors used mobile devices to access Reddit meant that their access to it was much more always-on and constant. While each user had a collection of certain places where they tended to access the site the most, many of my respondents also reported using it when they were no place in particular, or in between places: waiting in line, on the bus.

70

The table below shows the number of respondents (out of 22) that indicated which devices they regularly used to access Reddit.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Access Devices</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Laptop Only</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desktop Only</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Tablet</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All modes of access reported (phone, laptop, desktop, tablet) - 2

The most common combination was a laptop with a smartphone or tablet. My interlocutors also reported using different devices for specific purposes and modes of site usage. When “out in the world” at work or school, my interlocutors used almost overwhelmingly used smaller mobile devices (usually phones) to access Reddit. Colleen reported having a separate account for her phone with subscriptions to different kinds of content than the account on her laptop. When at home, users reported modes of access that were more evenly split between laptop/desktop computers and mobile devices.

Phone is for when I'm at work or out around town. My laptop is for when I'm at home or traveling. - Jane

I'll use the one on my phone, if I'm just scrolling through and want to look at funny pictures. But if I'm actually interested in being part of the discussion I'll use my computer...it's really annoying to try to type something on my phone. - May

Yeah, it really depends on what I'm trying to do. If I'm more just browsing, I'll use the app, the phone. - Ramon Olivares

This bifurcation makes sense, especially in light of the technical limitations of Reddit on mobile devices. Browsing the site on a smartphone tends to be a one-way, largely receptive mode of interaction. It is easy to browse through content and upvote and downvote, but textual communication is far more time-consuming and inconvenient, particularly on a pocketsized mobile device with a small screen and no separate keyboard. In fact, users will regularly apologize for typographical errors in their posts by citing phone use (“sorry this is so messed up, I'm on my phone trying to type all this out”).

While it is possible to perform most site-related actions from a mobile device (with the exception of certain moderator functions), interactivity is still profoundly constrained by the screen size and input capabilities of the accessing device. The limiting factor to participation that my respondents mentioned most frequently was the lack of a full keyboard:

Because the phone gets very cumbersome. There's so many links, it's such a tiny screen. And especially if I want to leave a comment, I just want to bang it out, you know? - Alice

Both Bluetooth keyboard and touchscreen can't keep up with my typing speed (laughs), so I prefer the laptop because then I can actually respond in a coherent manner. - Lana

If I'm writing like a serious comment, I'm usually going to write it on a computer. - Ramon Olivares

I mentioned in my autoethnography that I found browsing Reddit via smartphone to be an isolating experience, despite the promise of intimacy and immediacy that comes along with having always-on access in my pocket. In my experience, the sense of isolation and distance I felt was primarily between myself and the people around me (strangers and friends). However, it seems that in the accounts of my interlocutors (and most likely in my own experience as well), there is also a sense of isolation or disconnection from the imagined community of other users that can accompany mobile device usage.
Frequency of Use
The amount of time that my interlocutors reported browsing Reddit varied significantly, both between and within respondents. Some of my respondents reported only using Reddit a few times a week, or having periods of days or weeks where they would not use Reddit at all, only to come back to it after some time had elapsed. On the other end of the spectrum were interlocutors who reported using Reddit for several hours every single day, without exception. LB, my most prolific interlocutor, reported using Reddit in some fashion between 8 and 9 hours per day. However, the average frequency and duration of Reddit use among my interlocutors was lower: still every day, but between one and two hours.

Often my interlocutors gave their average browsing time as a range rather than a fixed number, illustrating that their interaction with Reddit tended to be fluid and kinetic rather than fixed. Usually this usage range was spread out throughout the day and across devices. It was common for interlocutors to check the site in short bursts throughout the day, and then have a longer browsing session in the evening. Users often also reported different patterns of use on the weekdays versus the weekends, with the weekends much more likely to have blocks of uninterrupted browsing time. Some of my interlocutors reported more erratic patterns of use, in which they would occasionally spend a large amount of time browsing Reddit in a single sitting:

Those are averages. There have been days when I'm sitting there for like 6 hours looking at stuff. -Dan
Some days I could spend upwards of 10 hours on there, easily. because there's just nothing happening at work, and ehh, don't really want to watch TV, and so I end up dipping in, and I'm in it all night. -DM

Physical Location and Timing
The physical locations where my interlocutors reported regularly browsing Reddit clustered into three categories: home, work/school, and what I'm calling “interstitial space”. In each of these settings, Reddit browsing can serve different purposes and Reddit itself can serve as a means of entertainment, a means of information access, and a way to pass time (and sometimes all three at the same time). In the following section, I will explore both the “where” and the “when” of my interlocutors’ Reddit usage, and how the convergence of these factors affects the quality and meaning of their experience.

Reddit at Home
The most common place and time that my interlocutors reported using Reddit was at home in the evenings. In this context, Reddit was almost always used as a vehicle for recreation or relaxation, and was mentioned in the same breath as other sedentary home-based activities like watching television or video games. Reddit usage at home was not usually described as a physically isolating experience, since most of my interlocutors reported using mobile devices like laptops or tablets (and less often, smartphones) while at home.

One particular mode of home usage appeared across several interviews: Reddit browsing in the evening as a form of “parallel play”, either alone or with a domestic partner. Specifically, numerous respondents said that they watched television and browsed Reddit at the same time in the evenings, either with or without their partner present:

Sometimes I'll sit in my living room and do it on my phone and watch TV. But usually I use my laptop. It just depends if I want to drag it off my desk with the charger and everything. -Hermione
Respondents who described being physically co-present in the same room as their partner while browsing Reddit reported that both people were engaging in their own individual forms of media consumption. This presents a way for both parties to passively spend time together without much direct, active interaction, adding a limited interpersonal social dimension to the at-home Reddit browsing.

I've never been a person to visually engage, which is part of the reason I enjoy Reddit.... So he'll [husband] be sitting in there watching Breaking Bad, and I'm on the Breaking Bad subreddit reading the episode recap. -Lana
While I'm doing other things, I'm also Redditing...if my wife's watching TV, I'm probably on Reddit. -LQ

When they did mention a specific location for their usage, my interlocutors described browsing Reddit in common areas of the home, most often the living room. As evidenced by the fact that many of my interlocutors browsed Reddit in conjunction with watching television and with other people who are also consuming media, it seems fair to say that when they were at home,
Reddit appeared to function primarily as an entertainment source and leisure activity similar to television watching. The portability of mobile devices, however, means that Reddit usage does not have to be confined to one particular area of the home. A running joke on Reddit is the use of the site on a smartphone in the bathroom as a source of reading material (replacing, specifically, “the back of the shampoo bottle”). In my introduction, I describe the deep and strange connection I felt with the Unfortunate Unpooping Man, and the way Reddit seemed to facilitate a very specific kind of intimacy. I actually think that one of the things that made that experience so intimate was the fact that it was centered around what was happening in the bathroom – one of the most private areas in the home, a place of solitude. The pictures of the bathroom setup provided an immediate glimpse into the inner workings of this person’s home – the color scheme of the carpet and shower curtain, the pile of throw pillows arranged on the linoleum in front of the toilet.

In the course of conducting my research, I learned that the way I most frequently browsed Reddit (in a fixed location, on a desktop in my bedroom) was rather uncommon. However, some of my interlocutors did mention using Reddit in their bedroom, more specifically, in bed. In looking at these usage patterns, a picture emerged of the role Reddit plays in the home for many of my interlocutors: a fluid, mobile, always-on entertainment source that can be transported from room to room, able to go places that a more traditional television or desktop computer setup can’t. This is a double-edged sword, as RZ explains: Sometimes I’ll use my Kindle...It’s really dangerous, because then I’ll have Reddit in bed, and then I don’t sleep...So I kind of quit using it for a while, because I was like - I need to function, and I need sleep. –RZ

Media scholar Mark Deuze (2012), expanding on the work of Zygmunt Bauman (2000) describes new media as “liquid” as a way of capturing its potential for flow and movement. I would like to hone this metaphor further by considering what kind of a liquid Reddit, specifically, might be. It appears to behave in a similar manner to water – its low viscosity allows it to trickle into tiny cracks and pores. Like water, it is not immediately corrosive to most vessels, although it has the ability to erode or weaken particular surfaces over long periods of time. As I will discuss in the upcoming sections, I also observed that my interlocutors sometimes struggled to erect and maintain compartmentalizing barriers between different areas of their lives: work and leisure, socialization and solitude. Some of those barriers proved very effective at containing the liquid of their Reddit usage (like metal or plastic), while others were more susceptible to its weakening effects (such as a waxed fast food cup that will grow soggy over time).

RZ’s troubles with Reddit use in bed reflect the difficulties posed by media “overflow” into other compartmentalized parts of life (in this case, the replacement of the beneficial activity of sufficient sleep with nighttime browsing). RZ was not alone here - other interlocutors struggled with “containing” their Reddit use to particular times, places, or contexts.

Reddit at Work

The locations of my interlocutors’ Reddit usage outside the home clustered into two main categories: at work/school, and in interstitial space. In both of these instances, Reddit is still a portable and flexible source of entertainment and information, but takes on an additional function as time-filler/time waster. The way my respondents described their Reddit use at work was, in some ways, similar to their home usage, particularly in the sense of it being a “parallel play” activity in which Reddit is one of multiple things vying for their attention.

I have 3 screens available to me at work... I have one of them going with NVivo [qualitative research software], I've got the other one usually with a transcript, and Reddit or my mail will be open on the third screen. -Jean

While I'm at work, I'm kind of on Reddit the whole time, and then I'll have a little break from it, because I leave after work and go do things, and eventually when I get back to my dorm room I'm on Reddit a lot more then, too. -LB

If I'm in my office hours, I'm probably on Reddit. -LQ

The main differentiating factor between home use and work use of Reddit is the element of “labor” or “working”. The boundaries between Reddit and “work” proper are muddy and vexed, both within the site and in the life experience of many of its users. Many Reddit users that I interviewed described the vexed role that the site played in their leisure and work lives, and the rhetoric surrounding work and play in the content posted to the site is equally ambivalent. Two primary and coexisting attitudes layer work and play inside of each
other in striations that make differentiation even more challenging. The first: Reddit is fun, but
can take up all your leisure time; Reddit is serious play, Reddit is somehow more than just a
game. The second: Reddit is something you can do at work to avoid working. Thus Reddit and
Redditing is demarcated very explicitly as “not work”, even though it takes place in a space
explicitly marked for work.
de Certeau (1984) refers to a similar practice as a tactic of resistance using the phrase
“la perruque”, a French term that describes doing one’s own work (or play) on company time
and/or with the use of company equipment. The computer work, bodily movements, and
intellectual labor that Reddit requests or requires of its users does look remarkably similar—in
some cases, identical—to compensated work, particularly in the technology sector. Staring at
a computer screen, clicking, reading large amounts of plaintext, and typing are all actions that
could be, at any point, either work or Redditing. Play and work become even more difficult to
distinguish, for both the worker and the supervisor. A common comment on funny content will
be some variation on “Great, now you made me laugh out loud in class/a meeting/at my desk
and now everyone’s looking at me”, thus compromising the performance of the diligent,
attentive student or worker, revealing them to be at play within the work space.

This weakening and dissolution of the boundaries between work and play is a
phenomenon that is not limited to my interlocutors, or to Reddit users as a whole. It takes
place within the larger economic and social context of an unstable and insecure job market and
a labor force that is subsequently expected to be increasingly flexible in meeting the demands
of their employers. Play has expanded into the workplace, but work has also expanded into
time once designated for leisure and play. Sometimes work takes over leisure time entirely in a
net increase in the amount of hours worked per week, consistently on the rise for Americans
and Brits since the 1970s (Hunnicutt 2013). Work can also expand into leisure time in subtler
ways through the omnipresence of cell phones and e-mail (and cell phones that can check
email), causing workers to be “on-call” to varying degrees, even when they are not physically at
their place of employment. The “time famine” (Perlow 1999) caused by chronic overwork can
prevent the enjoyment of uninterrupted blocks of leisure time (or any leisure time at all).
Futhermore, the “play” of using Reddit or other social media platforms is, in itself, a
form of unpaid digital and affective labor (Terranova 2000, Andrejevic 2008, 2012). This “free
labor” is “simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited” (Terranova
34). Thus even when users are not browsing Reddit at work proper, they are still engaging in a
form of labor that is producing value (in this case, data points for marketing purposes). All of
this is occurring within a larger neoliberal imperative towards ever-increasing the productivity
and flexibility of the labor force.

Reddit in Interstitial Space
The home and the workplace were the two stationary locations in which my
interlocutors used Reddit the most. Although they did move around within those locations

(even at home), the overall context was the same: “I’m at home”, or “I’m at work”.
However, there was a third location where my interlocutors reported spending a notinsignificant amount of
time browsing Reddit. While the context of this usage remained
internally consistent, the physical location was not static (and sometimes the structuring
context of the space itself was motion: i.e. using Reddit on transit like a bus or airplane).
I have chosen the word “interstitial” to describe this mode and location of Reddit usage
because it indexes its “in-between-ness”. It can take place in a physically in-between space
(public transit was the most commonly reported example), as well as space that is temporally
in-between. Multiple interlocutors reported using Reddit as “filler” for these moments of
transition:
I would say it's on in the background at work almost constantly, like it's just something
that's a filler, when I'm waiting for a phone call at work, or between meetings. -Jean
I guess whenever - taking the bus to school, or sitting down for lunch, or when I want to
not be working but I'm on my computer already. [laughs] –Ramon Olivares

The other major context in which my interlocutors reported using Reddit in interstitial space
was on mobile devices when they were waiting for something or someone. In this
circumstance, the purpose Reddit serves for these users is more explicitly as time-waster or a
time-filler than it is in other circumstances (like browsing Reddit at home in the evenings in
front of the TV).
I do have [Reddit] on my phone, but that's only for emergencies, like when I'm waiting in
the doctor's office or something. -Elizabeth
I help my mom run errands a lot, because my mom's legally blind. So when she's getting
her hair done, I'm sitting there for 3, 4 hours while she's getting her hair done, tracking
through Reddit. –Jean

In the previous two quotes, my interlocutors are describing Reddit use that takes place in a largely non-interactive environment (waiting in a room or in a line with strangers). It provides the person waiting with something unobtrusive and self-contained to do to pass the time. It can also be a way to avoid social interaction, particularly with strangers in public places, as it reduces or eliminates the possibility of accidental eye contact or other forms of unintended social engagement.

However, it was not completely unheard of for this kind of “interstitial” browsing to happen even among a group of people who are known to the user. Dan used the term “microRedditing” to describe the behavior of one of his friends:

One of my best friends is also a Redditor, and I will catch him micro-Redditing on his phone between turns when we’re playing games, or while we’re watching films. –Dan

This example of “micro-Redditing” is a particular layered fusion of the “home” and “interstitial” modes of Reddit access. Here Reddit is functioning both as a mode of leisure time entertainment as well as a time-filler. This type of browsing requires a rapid shuttling of attention back and forth between one’s surroundings/social situation and the content being displayed via Reddit.

As is the case with using Reddit in the bathroom and while in bed, micro-Redditing during social situations is an example of the “liquidity” of new media, specifically Reddit. Its easily segmented, always-available content flows through and occupies cracks in time and space that more “solid” forms of media (such as television and film) are unable to penetrate. The question then becomes: does this liquid erode ever-larger channels around itself, like water through mud? Is its very presence necessarily, or even predictably, destabilizing?

I mentioned in my autoethnography at the beginning of this chapter that I didn’t realize how much of my day I spent waiting until I started browsing Reddit on my phone. In the case of Dan’s friend, it seems that his definition and timeline of what it means to wait has been expanded to include nearly any form of delay, even the delay between turns in a board game. Time, as the saying goes, is money: a sum that is being segmented into ever-smaller chunks. These gaps provide moments of opportunity and possibility: for sociality, for consumption, for the extraction of free labor.

In a way, micro-Redditing during one’s leisure time is a mirror of the use of Reddit on work time. In both circumstances, browsing Reddit is an activity that is folded into the current context, usually covertly (Dan says that he “catches” his friend micro-Redditing). The complex and messy interdependent duality of free digital labor (as both pleasurable and exploitive, chosen yet coerced) explains many of the seeming contradictions about what this behavior could mean. On one hand, it could be read as an act of resistance, a conscious redirection of one’s labor, however temporarily, away from their employer and towards ostensible leisure/play. On the other hand, it could also be read, simultaneously, of a triumph of neoliberal efficiency, time-space compression, and market encroachment: that even small, private moments, at work or at home, are being monetized and capitalized on as opportunities to extract micro-amounts of unpaid digital labor.

Efforts to Contain/Curtail Usage

For many of my interlocutors, trying to balance the double-edged potential of new media “overflow” into other aspects of their lives (work, sleep, relationships) was an important and ongoing struggle. Many of them expressed some degree of dissatisfaction with the amount of time they spent using Reddit and other forms of social media, as well as a desire to reduce their usage, both overall and in particular contexts (like while at work, or when in bed).

Two of my interlocutors (Mary and DM) mentioned that they intentionally had not installed Reddit on their smartphones, despite having the technical capacity to do so. Their reasons vary somewhat – Mary’s choice seems to be an overall effort to reduce the temptation to overuse social media, while DM is attempting to compartmentalize his use of devices related to his job:

If I put it on my phone, I’d use it more, and I kind of want to restrict myself. –Mary

I took it off of my phone. I don’t do any Facebook or Reddit or any of that shit on my phone anymore. I’m trying to get to the point where I do it only on the tablet...I’m using the phone more and more for work, so I’m trying to get to the point where I don’t do the fun stuff on the work device. –DM

In both of these cases, these users are making a conscious choice to re-establish some
form of separation and boundaries. Mary wants to be separated from the constant temptation of Reddit on her phone. DM’s desired separation is a greater distinction between his workrelated and leisurerelated use of devices. They both are taking concrete steps towards redirecting their energy, attention, and labor somewhere else, thus establishing a small space of resistance to the neoliberal imperative to “make every minute count”. When it comes to new media usage, time is money. The “liquid” of Reddit, especially as available through smartphones, can sink deep into the cracks and crevices of everyday life. While some users find this pleasurable, others are unhappy about this leakage. Dissatisfaction with one’s amount and manner of Reddit usage manifested most commonly when I asked my respondents about the frequency and amount that they used Reddit on a daily/weekly basis. Many of them were sheepish or apologetic about the amount of time they spent browsing Reddit, often expressing initial nervousness about disclosure that was often padded through humor or self-deprecation. When asked about the frequency of her Reddit usage, Anne first responded, “Oh, do we really need to come up with numbers?” and laughed before giving the amount of time she spent on the site. When reporting the time she spent using Reddit, Alice admitted she was downplaying the frequency of her use:

Once a day, at least. Maybe twice a day. I probably check it a lot more than that, but I’m trying to make myself seem like a reasonable human being. (laughs)

I’ll be honest, it’s every day for a little bit more time than I’d like to spend on it. -Dan

Respondents would often use strongly negative descriptive language when talking about their usage habits. Ivy described the frequency of her Reddit usage as “a horrifying amount”. LQ said that her usage was “multiple times a day…. It’s terrible.” Sterling described Reddit as “an ever-present background radiation of information”. All of these terms connote danger and undesirability, but also serve to position the respondent as somewhat self-aware: both of the patterns of their own behavior and the potentially harmful effects that may come from that behavior. This is also reflected in Alice’s comments, with the implication that a “reasonable human being” would not use Reddit as frequently as she does.

Reddit Discovery Mechanism

I also asked my interlocutors how they first found out about Reddit. They all seemed to come to Reddit in one of two ways: via face-to-face word of mouth, or through mentions on other websites. Word of mouth referrals were more common among Redditors who had been site members for several years, while referrals via search engine results (although almost never Google, as discussed in the introduction) and mentions on social media tended to be more common among newer users. Some of my interlocutors could not remember how they first heard about Reddit, but most of them did. Furthermore, many of them could name the specific person, website, or piece of content that brought them to Reddit in the first place. Jean reminisces:

I think a friend of mine mentioned it once or twice, the whole front page of the Internet kind of thing. And then I got sucked in by exploring. I can even remember the exact post that sucked me in. It was a gif of a convenience store being robbed, and a man in a wheelchair and a Latina woman ended up being the ones tackling down the guy that robbed the place, and some guy ended up going and hitting him with a wet floor sign, and I don’t know why, that sent me into it. He spanked him with that wet floor sign, and I was like, that’s hilarious, what else is on here?...And it just one line, like, Piso Mojado motherfucker, something like that. It was Spanish, and other people didn’t get it, and I was just cracking up by myself.

There was one remarkably consistent pattern that emerged across the all accounts of word of mouth referrals: while I had both male and female-identified interlocutors, all of them found about the site by talking to men. In particular, several of my female interlocutors found out about the site through current, former, or potential boyfriends:

I think I had an ex-boyfriend who introduced me. – Anne
There was a classmate, who I had a giant crush on, who browsed Reddit, and sat in front of me, and we would chat, and totally goof off during class. And so I was always looking over his shoulder at the pictures. So through conversation, I ended up getting hooked into Reddit. -Elizabeth
My boyfriend at the time was a frequenter. I’d also heard about it on campus (at the University of Minnesota) and my brother occasionally mentioned it. -Jane
My boyfriend has been using it for ages. And he was just like, you should look at this website, it can be whatever you want it to be! -Ivy

This pattern stuck out to me for two reasons: one, its remarkable consistency, and two,
its similarity to my own method of discovering Reddit, which was also through a male romantic partner. Although I had heard the name of the site before, I had written it off as in the same category as 4chan, Slashdot, and Fark.com, other male-dominated Internet message board/link sharing sites. Although I didn’t ask them specifically, I extrapolate that the experiences of my female interlocutors being referred by boyfriends was probably quite similar to my own. In these cases, the boyfriend operated as a conduit and buffer between these female interlocutors and this ostensibly male-dominated site. I think there is also additional significance to the fact that these recommendations were not simply from male friends, but lovers or potential lovers: perhaps that closeness could give the recommendation additional weight, or imbue it with an authenticity or promise of suitability that might be absent in other contexts.

I also found that word-of-mouth references from friends were often comparative: Reddit would be mentioned as a better alternative to an existing site. These friends also tended to have some kind of insider knowledge or expertise that made them a credible source for referral:

I went to MIT for undergrad, so there are a lot of computer programmers there...I think that was one of them that said, hey, this site is cool. –Ramon Olivares

Actually, I was on Digg forever, and then the mass Digg exodus was like, Reddit is so much better... I actually had a friend who worked at Digg, in the revisionTV, and all that, out in San Francisco. -JackieLake

The existing sites that my interlocutors most frequently reported being referred from were (in ascending order of prevalence) Slashdot.com, 4chan.org, and Digg.com. The features and user bases of all of these sites overlap with Reddit in a number of ways: they are all content aggregators driven by user contributions. They tend to be technology-focused or technology-

inspired, and the audience of the site is presumed to be heterosexual men. Slashdot and Digg were early adopters of user moderation systems for comments and content, a precursor to the more complex “karma” algorithms that Reddit employs. Digg also used a content voting system that is very similar to upvoting and downvoting on Reddit.

While it is relatively easy to chart an arc from Slashdot to Digg to Reddit, 4chan’s relationship to Reddit is more complex. 4chan’s primary focus is user-generated content, almost exclusively images, it is famous for its utter lack of moderation and complete “anything goes” philosophy, particularly on its most popular section, called /b/. In comparison to the pseudo-anonymity of Reddit usernames, 4chan is even more anonymous, with each post being given a randomly generated post number that is not tied to a particular user account. Content is only sorted by posting timestamp and is not threaded (meaning that while users can reference and link to specific posts, those posts are not automatically moved to appear underneath the “parent” as they are on Reddit).

There are hallmark elements of 4chan that can be seen in Reddit. 4chan boasts an extensive taxonomy of boards focused on different content (such as music, anime, technology, and guns), to which Reddit’s subreddit structure is certainly indebted. The expansive notion of Reddit as a “free speech site”, a place and platform for everything and anything, offensive or not, is a clear influence from 4chan. Digg and Slashdot, in comparison, were more tightly focused on technology-based topics and did not bill themselves as this kind of a “catch-all”. However, the most prevalent way that my interlocutors came to Reddit through other websites was in “the great Digg migration,” in which large numbers of disgruntled Digg users moved to Reddit in the second half of 2010 after Digg introduced a very unpopular site update.

This update changed the way content appeared on the front page and was perceived to be a vehicle to generate traffic and revenue for larger partner websites like mashable.com. The primary complaint seemed to be a lack of individual user agency, which Reddit offered in spades, through the upvoting/downvoting/karma mechanism, unlimited customizable subreddit subscription, and the ability of any registered user to create their own private or public subreddits.

Chapter 2: The Gendered Labor of Intersectional Safe Space on Reddit
Autoethnography

While I was writing my dissertation proposal, I found myself consistently circling themes of paradox and contradiction within new media. I kept noticing these persistent, insistent
dyads - seeming opposites that existed simultaneously. Public and private, intimacy and
disconnection, sameness and difference: they flickered tantalizingly in front of me, clearly
evident yet frustratingly difficult to pin down. Somehow, to me at least, Reddit enabled all of
these things, all at once, serving as both a massive anonymous public and a venue for a form of
incredibly intimate sharing. Somehow, browsing Reddit made me feel simultaneously
connected and isolated - connected to the imagined community of other (sub)Redditors all
over the world, but alone, quiet, at a computer or behind my mobile phone. In that same way, I
read comments and saw content that connected me to the intimate details of the experience of
people situated in radically different situations from my own – an experience at once familiar
(affirming our shared humanity) and strange (distances and contexts that seemed almost
insurmountable). So many perspectives were available to me, and in my early days of Reddit, I
wanted to consume and collect them all. I devoured passionate screeds about Turkish
nationalism, the comments of hundreds of hotel night audit clerks swapping weird stories, the
contributions of Redditors who were also professional biologists, chemists, and physicists
answering science questions in everyday language.

My initial apparatus through which I tried to articulate this particular set of interactions
was cosmopolitanism – specifically Henry Jenkins’ (2006) formulation of the “pop
cosmopolitanism” that convergent new media forms can provide. And while Reddit continued
to provide me with a nearly endless stream of globally generated content, the longer I used the
site, the more I started to notice the casual racism and misogyny that permeated the
mainstream areas. These same areas that provided me with such intimate glimpses into the
lives of those radically different from myself, opportunities to affirm the small ways in which we
are all connected, all one - these areas were also making me unpleasantly aware of my gender,
my objectified, female body, the casual way racism was deployed uncritically as a tool for
humor with the assumption of my (white) tacit approval. Even as I was able to participate as a
supposedly unmarked member of a public, even as I was counted as “one of us”, I saw the ways
in which this designation was contingent on a variety of other, intersecting structures of social
hierarchy and status.

In the process of researching and writing this dissertation, my focus and argument have
shifted immensely, requiring a shift in theoretical apparatus as well. In this chapter, I explore
alternative theorizations and paradigms that attempt to capture the heterogeneous,
paradoxical qualities of this particular mediated form of interaction (Reddit, more specifically
subreddits focused on intersectional difference). I am deeply indebted to one of my moderator
interviewees, “Jean,” who suggested to me the connection between borderlands/third space
and online space, particularly Reddit. This chapter will utilize the concepts of “third space”,
nepantla, and “heterotopia” as frameworks for an understanding of Reddit that works on both
a large and small scale.

Third places, Nepantla, and Heterotopia

Ray Oldenburg, author of the 1989 now-famous book The Great Good Place: Cafes,
Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How
They Get You Through The Day chronicles his anthropological and sociological observation of
what he calls “third places” – public spaces that are neither home (the first place) nor work (the
second). These third spaces, Oldenburg argues, serve a vital social role by temporarily leveling
the status of its occupants while providing a casual venue for connection and group
identification. Often connected with leisure or play, these places of destratified, casual
interaction help to weave and reinforce the fabric of society and democracy.

Two years prior, in 1987, Gloria Anzaldua published her groundbreaking work
Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza. In this piece, her focus is on a particular set of
“borderlands”, hybrid spaces that exist around and between borders, geographical, ethnic, and
other. The hybrid subject, the mestiza, inhabits multiple spaces, worlds, and identities,
often never entirely at home in any single place. Anzaldua describes this “mestiza
consciousness”:
This assembly is not one where severed or separated pieces merely come together.
Nor is it a balancing of opposing powers. In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self
has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third
element is a new consciousness-- a mestiza consciousness-- and though it is a source of
intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down
the unitary aspect of each new paradigm. (101-102)

She also introduces the concept of nepantla, “an Aztec word for ‘torn between ways’”
(100). Nepantla exists at the vulnerable and liminal space between worlds, between borders.
Sometimes referred also to as “third space” in the writing of Anzaldua and others, nepantla
epitomizes the blurring and shifting of boundaries that is so central to the figure of the mestiza,
the fluid, kinetic, intersectional, hybrid subject. It is a space for potential connection with and within the unknown, a site of simultaneous pleasure and risk which does not flatten difference between subjects but instead exists in the “bridged” space between them.

Although the name and attributions of these theories are sometimes used interchangeably, there are some crucial differences between Oldenburg’s and Anzaldua’s “third places”. The third places Oldenburg describes are stable, physical locations with codified social rules, often tightly interwoven with other social systems such as capitalism (the coffee shop, the bar, the general store) and binary gender structures (barbershops/beauty shops, gyms). These spaces can and do encourage the relaxation of particular social norms and implied hierarchies (i.e. “just the guys” at the barbershop temporarily disregards some race/class distinctions). In some ways, they seem to serve a mildly carnivalesque, Bakhtinian function of providing a structured space for temporary leveling or inversion in the name of reifying existing social order.

However, while these spaces may temporarily destabilize particular hierarchies, they structurally and culturally reinforce others. Feminist ethnographies of gender-segregated third spaces (traditionally women-only) such as gyms (Malin 2010) and beauty shops (Furman 1997) have noted the ways in which environments such as these provide culturally specific opportunities for occupants to resist or reinforce dominant ideologies regarding their own or others’ difference. These ethnographies, particularly Furman’s Facing the Mirror: Older Women and Beauty Shop Culture, emphasize the connective potential these third spaces can have for communities of particular groups of people (in her case, Jewish women). They also acknowledge the limitations of these spaces, particularly in terms of class-based obstacles to accessing and participating in particular spaces and communities. Thus while third spaces have the potential to unite groups, they can also divide, by introducing financial and spatial constraints that prevent some group members from accessing them.

Subjects occupying multiple marginal identities, such as the mestiza, often find themselves falling through the cracks in these third spaces, even ones based around one category of difference that they occupy. The mestiza knows well the simultaneous, arbitrary power and irrelevance of boundaries, is always mobilizing what Chela Sandoval (2000) calls a “differential consciousness” in order to navigate these multiple subject positions. Just as the intersectional subject is complex, hybrid, multiplicity – so, too, must be the third space that can accommodate her: nepantla. Adela Licona (2012) argues that nepantla is the third space of the mestiza and other intersectional subjects, “a space that materializes what borders seek to divide, subordinate, and obscure“ (11). Nepantla exists at the borderlands, the space opened up between edges, borders – it is inherently, constitutively intersectional, hybrid, fluid. However, this means that nepantla is always on the move – requiring active engagement to construct and maintain.

Despite their many differences, these models of “third space” and “nepantla” have one very important aspect in common: they were both created almost 30 years ago. In the intervening time, the structure, both physical and social, of everyday sociality has been drastically impacted by new media technology (Castells 2006, Baym 2010, Deuze 2012, Turkle 2012, van Dijck 2013). The democratizing interconnectedness of the “Great Good Places” Oldenburg mentions has largely been supplanted with other, more networked modes of social interaction. Some of the places have disappeared into anachronism – for many, the “community centers” of the book’s title seem to be going the way of the “general store”. Even within the “great good places” that are still fixtures of everyday life today (cafes, coffee shops, beauty parlors, bars), social interaction has become increasingly mediated and networked. Sherry Turkle (2012) calls this phenomenon being “alone together,” a condition characterized by physical, but not mental, co-presence. My interlocutors described this exact behavior when they told me about browsing Reddit in the evenings with a partner in the same room. Connection and interaction are still occurring within the boundaries of the space, but not primarily between the people occupying it – rather, most of the interaction splays out in a multitude of directions through the use of new media technology.

For example, consider a familiar fixture of the college town: the coffee shop. While there will almost certainly be at least some conversation, it is almost entirely between people who are previously acquainted and met there specifically to talk. Faces are bathed in the bluish glow of laptops and mobile phones. The soft clicking of keys and buttons blends with the easy-listening music and hiss of the milk steamer. Each patron, while physically in the third space of the coffee shop, is also simultaneously occupying another third (or perhaps fourth?) space –
Scholars of new media, particularly the early scholars discussed in the introduction, hailed cyberspace as the ultimate third place, a space in which all could be equal, communicating in “pure form”. However, cyberspace rapidly lost any sense of separation (and, increasingly, anonymity) as use of new media technology permeated nearly all aspects of life – rendering it an increasingly dominant fixture in both the “first” and “second” places of home and work (Baym 2010). Thus the model of the “third space” loses traction when applied to cyberspace. However, some later scholars began to leverage another spatially-based theoretical apparatus to explain the characteristics of cyberspace: Foucault’s notion of the “heterotopia.”

Foucault (1986) uses the term “heterotopia” to describe spaces that are fundamentally mixed: utopia (literally no-place) and dystopia, fragmented in time and space, on the outskirts of society and/or constantly moving. These potential sites of heterotopia are always a product of culture – in fact, his First Principle of heterotopia is “there is probably not a single culture in the world that fails to constitute heterotopia. That is a constant of every human group” (4). Heterotopias are always bound up in human organization, and in the context of (post)modernity, they increasingly overlap conceptually and spatially with the city (Handlykken 2012).

At the beginning of this chapter I described being fascinated with and puzzled by the simultaneity of contradictions in new media, extremes flickering back and forth, occasionally overlapping into an eye-boggling hologram. In the course of my research, however, I found that these paradoxes of incongruity are not particular to cyberspace, nor even to postmodernity. In fact, many of the very same categories, anxieties, and distinctions I found myself wrestling with were also hallmarks of the city: “the ambiguity of modernity, where the city is dystopia one moment, and utopia the next” (Veel, 160). The concept of heterotopia approaches this duality in a manner that appears to fundamentally differ from the “third space” and “nepantla” paradigms. These paradigms, despite their other differences, both emphasize these sites as spaces of destabilization, liminality, blending, and hybridity. The heterotopia, in contrast, is always a juxtaposition of “extreme poles” (8) – where the “real sites…within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (3). Heterotopias are not concerned with internal synthesis or harmony; rather they have “a function in relation to all the space that remains” (8).

Foucault’s characterization of heterotopia’s schizophrenic shuttling between extremes aptly captured the seeming paradoxes that had initially fascinated me about Reddit. It allows for contradictory notions to be actively held in tension with each other, provides critical traction in the areas where opposites continue to co-exist instead of melting completely into hybridity. However, it can also be deployed in conjunction with third-space/nepantla frameworks. Teresa Davis’s (2010) cyberethnography of online spaces for transnational migrants uses both the idea of Babha’s “third space” and the heterotopia in order to explicate the workings of one particular online group of diasporic Indian women. Ultimately, Davis characterizes this online migrant group as a heterotopic third space, one that is constituted by both the fluid, hybrid “third space” (that migrants and others can occupy) and its discordant elements, its members and postings scattered across time, across national borders, across the world.

The practices and discussions Davis describes in her ethnography are heterotopic: crisscrossing between utopian and dystopian. Longing for a nostalgic past place, Chennai, India, was a “very strong thread that tied the group together and references to the happy times when they were all at university abound” (672). In parallel, there are also “discordant notes….a complex moving back and forth between a utopian longing for the past and the realization that that place has now changed irrevocably” (673). Other discussion threads confronted racialized “model migrant” stereotypes, and grappled with the complexities of cultural assimilation, particularly salient topics since almost all of the women were in the process of raising their children outside of India.

However, the online space in which these discussions took place, the context in which it occurs, also accurately fits the definition of an Anzalduan third space. It is constituted through borders, and at the intersection of multiple spaces and identities. The subjects within, like the mestiza, also straddle multiple boundaries, are at the junction, the meeting point, of two (or more) cultures. The shifting, liminal space of the nepantla provides a shared contextualizing framework for those inside it, occupying the space that is constituted in the gaps at the
This chapter draws on a specific set of interlocutors to examine a particular set of subreddits that are focused on intersectional difference. In a manner similar to Davis, I will employ a dual theoretical apparatus that uses the concepts of both heterotopia and nepantla to explore these communities. My ethnographic data comes from three ethnographic interviews I conducted with moderators of three different intersectional subreddits. These in-depth interviews ranged from 45 minutes to almost 2 hours. The rest of this chapter will examine the challenges and strategies of maintaining intersectional online safe space, as experienced by my interlocutors as both moderators and community members. From the outset, it was clear that tremendous labor goes into creating and maintaining these communities. All of the interviewees spoke of the necessity of intentional, active, and continuous involvement, often by a team of moderators, as well as the complex and constant balancing act between openness/accessibility and security/protection. I will describe the constellation of methods and tactics that the moderators employ to maintain this delicate balance, and conclude by considering the broader social justice implications of the practices and possibilities that occur within consciously maintained intersectional safe space.

Challenges
The first challenging aspect about Reddit as a venue for safe space is simply its enormity. Boasting 71.25 billion page views, 54.9 million posts and submissions, and 535 million comments in 2014, the site is a massive, constantly updating collection of information. While the subreddit structure helps to sort much of this material thematically, this directory is also massive: in 2014, Reddit reported over 8,000 active subreddits. The metareddit directory (not officially associated with the site) monitors over 6000 subreddits. As I discussed in the introduction, subreddits range in both size (very small to very large) and specificity (very narrow to very broad). This heterogeneity can make small communities hard to find, particularly if they are not connected to other, more popular subreddits. One of these methods of publicity is the “sidebar”, an area of the screen on the subreddit’s front page that often includes posting rules/guidelines, FAQs, and links to related subreddits. These lists of related subreddits, particularly on the larger and more general subreddits, break down into a detailed taxonomy of increasing specificity. For example, the sidebar on r/funny links to r/Jokes, r/Humor, r/punny, r/comics, r/standupshots, r/reactiongifs, r/AnimalsBeingJerks, r/lolcats, and so forth – 25 in all. However, the subreddits in the sidebar are selected at the moderators’ discretion, and are not automatically generated. Subreddits are also searchable by title, but my interlocutors reported various degrees of success with finding subreddits this way, particularly if it is small and/or oddly named.

The Necessity of Intersectional Third Space
“There’s a subreddit for everything” sounds overhyped, but it is largely true. Just as there is a detailed taxonomy of subreddits related to just about every hobby, media text, and video game one could imagine, there are also many, many subreddits devoted to particular categories of difference. Within these categories, my interlocutors most commonly reported subscribing to and being aware of mostly gender/sexuality and nation/region based subreddits. The most popular gender-based subreddit, by far, is r/2XChromosomes, (abbreviated henceforth as 2XC), with 2.6 million subscribers. This number, however, is not indicative of the popularity of “women’s issues” on Reddit, because 2XC was made a default subreddit about a year ago. “Default” subreddits receive higher visibility and traffic because they are part of a revolving list of around 25-30 subreddits that appear on Reddit’s main page, which users can view without creating an account. New accounts are also automatically subscribed to the same list of defaults, which can be unsubscribed to. Other non-default gender-based subreddits (r/feminism, r/mensrights, r/women) have subscription numbers ranging from 20,000 to over 100,000 subscribers, but none come close to the millions of subscribers that 2XC has. This leads me to believe that the large number of the subscriptions to the subreddit come from new users who have been added automatically.

In my introduction, I used the metaphor of the city to conceptualize Reddit, and describe default subreddits as intensely public, bustling places: Times Square, Grand Central Station. Making 2XC a default subreddit was the equivalent of re-routing a major traffic artery through a residential neighborhood. This change provoked extremely mixed responses from existing members of 2XC. Some lauded the increased visibility and mainstreaming of female Reddit users, while others lamented the influx of subscribers and trolls alike as fundamentally
altering the pre-existing dynamics of the subreddit and its perceived “safe space”.

Many of my interlocutors were recruited from a post in 2XC (before it was made a default), and I received mixed responses on whether or not they perceived 2XC as a supportive and inclusive environment, both before and after it was made a default. Some responses were very positive, clearly indexing a level of perceived comfort and belonging. However, it is important to note that the users that expressed the most comfort were also the users that tended to occupy intersecting axes of privilege, namely whiteness:

I found myself in 2XC, and was like - wow, this place is great! I love this! This place is like - it's not ultra-focused on feminism, but it's a very welcoming feminist atmosphere.

-Lana

I remember when 2XChromosomes started, I remember when it began, and I thought it was a fantastic idea. And it was tiny, 200 users or something. And I was like, this is genius, because yeah, there isn't really a place like this on Reddit, for women. And that's great. –S2

However, 2XC was also frequently a subject of critique in the interviews, critiques that revolved mostly around how “safe” the space was perceived to be for various marginalized groups. The ongoing attention and influx of comments that 2XC received as a result of being “made a default” was one point of contention:

Jean: And I guess you see the same thing on 2XC, now, because it's a default. You have all these people coming in, I have an opinion, and it turns into a conversation about men, or it turns into a conversation about this, or why do you have to be separate, that kind of thing.

Me: Or, like, hey, guys, did you guys know there's still a pay gap?? Women get paid less than men, did you KNOW that?? Just over and over again. Women are sexualized in the media. It's like yes. Yes, thank you. (laughs)

Jean: I kind of knew that already, thank you very much.

In these examples, the increased visibility of the subreddit has attracted members of a dominant group (in this case, men) to a community previously centered on the concerns and perspectives of a subordinated one (in this case, women). These visitors range from the curious but uninformed to those who come in with an axe to grind. Despite their intentions, both groups of majoritarian outsiders can be incredibly disruptive to the “safety” of a differencebased online community. The effects of openly sexist trolling and harassment is much like graffiti: splashy, immediate vandalism that is easily neutralized with a fresh coat of paint (content deletion/user banning), but also just as easily rewritten. This disruption is an intermittent but temporary intrusion, a nasty, periodic insistence that no minoritarian space is immune to the dominant group’s hostility.

The disruptive effects of well-meaning but un-, under-, or mis-informed majoritarian visitors are subtler but often just as profound. These uninformed visitors alter the terrain in a different way: picking flowers, throwing coins into the koi pond, wandering across the fragile grass. While not consciously malicious in intent, these actions can still be profoundly disruptive. Whether they realize it or not, these kinds of visitors often derail conversations by posting comments that are either egregiously misinformed or try to shift the focus back onto them as majoritarian subjects:

It's funny about 2XC. There's a lot of - there's men in the subreddit, that's great, that doesn't bother me at all, but you can tell when they come in after it gets to the frontpage, and they start it as - "As a man", comma. Then it gets a little hairy, and then it gets back and forth, back and forth. –JackieLake

The visitors in question are (ostensibly cisgender) men who question the need for separate space for women, or try to foreground their own responses to issues that affect them, as men, indirectly or not at all, while directly affecting women (the #NotAllMen phenomenon). Because these posts usually don’t break the official rules of the subreddit and are not worded in a hostile manner, they often do not give moderators sufficient grounds for banning or deletion. However, the overall effect is a pernicious erosion of safety, a constant re-enactment of the kinds of physical and symbolic marginalization women face on a daily basis. The threats to safe space, however, are not entirely external. Many of my interlocutors, particularly women of color, characterized 2XC as a place where they felt neither particularly safe nor welcomed. It is ironic that despite having experienced this kind of majoritarian marginalization firsthand through the influx of male visitors, it is still reproduced within the community by a continued focus on the concerns of women who occupy other intersecting axes of privilege: largely white, middle-class, cisgender users:

Women who wanted to speak their opinions couldn't, because they were effectively silenced by the - you know - I want to say dogma of the sub. And for women of color, in
particular, a lot of our issues were sidelined. And ignored, and even dismissed, outright. So whenever we tried to bring it up - it very much felt like it was just a community of white girls who want to talk about their issues. –Alice

A clear theme that emerged from the interviews was the intense stratifying effect of intersecting categories of power and privilege on these “single-issue” subreddits (i.e. ones that focus only on gender or nation), for example, the concerns of white women being foregrounded in 2XC. Two of my interlocutors happened to also both be subscribers to r/india, and independently corroborated the other’s assessment of the subreddit as a space heavily focused on male issues, perspectives, and concerns. In both of these cases, as well as in other location- or culturally-focused subreddits, the bulk of the content skews towards an audience that is assumed to be otherwise majoritarian, mitigating or eliminating the supposed leveling effects of the “third space”. This further perpetuates the multiplicative erasure of the intersectional subjects within its boundaries, even if it claims to be a space devoted to difference.

Susan Stryker argues in Transgender History (2008) that this kind of stratification is nothing new. In her discussion of how one of the first transgender organizations (FPE – Foundation for Personality Expression) was managed by its leader, Virginia Prince, Stryker eloquently summarizes the past as well as the present:

“Prince personally controlled membership in these groups well into the 1970s, and she limited members to married heterosexual men, excluding gays, male to female transsexuals, and biologically female individuals. The membership restrictions of FPE, and the form and content of its meetings, demonstrate a familiar pattern in minority identity politics in US History – it is often the most privileged elements of a population affected by a particular civil injustice or social oppression who have the opportunity to organize first. [emphasis mine] In organizing around the one thing that interferes with or complicates their privilege, their organizations tend to reproduce that very privilege.” (67)

All the moderators that I interviewed felt the effects of this stratification, and described, in one way or another, their desire for a more specific, intentional, culturally specific space for interaction. They often cited the dearth of resources and representation within existing subreddits as a primary motivator for creating and/or maintaining their subreddits:

I joined Reddit when it was new. It provided a lot of cool content, I saw the potential for it. And when they allowed people to make reddits, I thought it was important to start a community where our voices could be heard. And I believe it's important that there is such a thing on Reddit. -Rommel

And I did - the reason I'm starting it is because I was looking up Latinas, and you find nothing but porn, and that's really problematic when there are lots of Latinas out there who want to be able to communicate with each other, and there's no site like this for them to do it. -Jean

I've seen other posts where Latinas have posted on the subreddit on sex, or the subreddit in 2XC. And they're - because of the culture, they're insulting the whole culture by saying, well, why does your culture do this, it should really be completely different. And it's like - that's not what we're asking about. We're asking for your advice and your help, and if you don't understand those culture issues, it becomes very difficult. - Jean

Moderators also described their motivation to create culturally sensitive spaces for other intersectional subjects to meet and converse. This was most apparent in my interviews with Alice, a moderator of a Desi-American subreddit. This respondent discussed the particular position that second-generation Desi adolescents and young adults occupy, and how isolating this hybrid position can be:

Something like that, that's a little too controlling - that's the main struggle, I think, with Desi-American kids, and growing up between two cultures that are diametrically opposed. That was what this sub was kind of the space for, just dealing with that schizophrenia. Because it is really hard, essentially living a double life. So as firstgeneration kids, it's a very unique challenge. And it's even more unique because …I feel like it's separate from other immigrant experiences, because we have our own intact culture and civilization, that's lasted - it's the oldest civilization, almost. It has a huge rich history that isn't quite as easily absorbed into the American fabric as other immigrant communities. So there's that to contend with. - Alice

Throughout these interviews, it is clear that these third spaces are necessary ones, spaces that can bridge the gaps between identities, between cultures. They can create presence where
before there was absence, provide connectivity and a safe venue for sociality with other group members. However, the safety and integrity of such spaces often require a significant amount of unpaid digital and affective labor by site moderators to create and maintain.

The Labor of Intracommunity Maintenance and Discourse Management

One of the main goals of the interviews I conducted with these specific interlocutors (Rommel, Alice, and Jean) was to gain a holistic sense of what constituted their moderation duties and the place that their moderator role and Reddit occupied in their daily lives. In the case of these users, Reddit seemed to function as a liquid that is able to flow into available cracks of time and space in their lives. However, for moderators this liquid is more viscous, stickier - dense with the weight of the labor it requires. As a result of this, their moderation activity tended to be concentrated to specific places, devices, and times of day.

As I discussed in chapter one, some of my interlocutors intentionally structured their access conditions to Reddit in order to compartmentalize it and prevent unwanted "overflow" into other areas of their lives (like work or sleep). These distancing/boundary setting practices were even more important and prevalent among the moderators I interviewed - all of them used some form of compartmentalization in order to separate Reddit and their moderation duties from the rest of their everyday routine, both online and off. Given that moderation may look, feel, and be much closer to work than play, the compartmentalization of the demands of that particular role could be read as an act of resistance to the ever-encroaching requirements for a worker's ultimate "flexibility".

In addition to using devices to compartmentalize the times and places where moderation takes place, all of the moderators I spoke to also cited efficiency as the other driving force behind their usage practices. Much like the interlocutors in chapter one who preferred to use a full keyboard rather than a mobile phone to type out long text-based responses, these moderators preferred the capability of a laptop or desktop when performing this work for ease of use.

When I asked my interlocutors to define their moderation duties, all of them cited managing the safety and culture of the subreddit as an essential priority. There were three tasks subordinate to this larger goal: adding content, facilitating conversations, and defending against and cleaning up after harassment and trolls. The first two tasks are abstract and ongoing, projects without an end, and require consistency and dedication. The last task is much more contingent and often has to be dealt with rapidly and unexpectedly. The moderators I spoke to regarded the removal of problematic, troll posts and posters as necessary, but not sufficient, for building a sense of community. In the absence of trolls, safe intersectional space does not automatically flourish. These various ongoing maintenance tasks require an additional significant dimension of affective labor on behalf of the moderators, who have to navigate the challenge of being both disciplinarians and facilitators, sometimes at the same time.

All three moderators I spoke to had different ways of going about these tasks. First, especially for new subreddits, moderators must take an active role in providing content for the subreddit. Through posts and comments to other users, the moderator models the kind of behavior and content they would like to see on the subreddit. This can be a long and discouraging process with minimal reward:

For the first year, it was sort of like talking to an empty room. I was the only one posting any content. I was commenting on it, someone might even reply, but no one ever did. About 6 months in, I started seeing some voting patterns, some negative, some bad, some positive, both ways. Because it would shoot - you could see downvotes and upvotes. They recently changed it so you can't see the downvotes. But I can see that someone was responding at least, even if they weren't upvoting. It picked up after that, about a year and a half after that. I started to see some people of color, some white allies, I call them allies, commenting and supporting the general idea of the community. -Rommel

The distribution of labor required in keeping these subreddits safe and relevant varies widely. Sometimes it will fall entirely onto one or two moderators. Larger subreddits usually utilize a team of moderators as a matter of practicality: the work required rapidly outpaces the capacity of even the most dedicated single individual. Rommel reported spending 2-3 hours a day, each day, on moderation duties. Support in the form of additional moderators helps to ease that load:

[about a newly appointed moderator] He went through the entire history of old past comments, old posts, looking for anybody that I happened to miss, in terms of banning, or disciplining. And he's just been going at it for the past 3 months, and finding out all
these problematic users, which is great. Because I can't always be watching the community... He's been literally reading every single post and every single comment, going back. It's very tedious, I imagine. But he's on a mission, and it's great to see that energy. -Rommel

I'm not the most active moderator. We have another moderator who is - honestly, she should be paid for what she does, she does so much. She's just incredible... I know I don't work nearly as hard as she does, on maintaining the sub. -Alice

I do wish it was a bigger subreddit and we got more people coming in. But I understand that moderating is something that takes time. And it is something you have to be on top of, and unfortunately with all my other duties, that's hasn't been able to happen. I created it in the hopes that other people would become interested in moderating and helping me do this, and it just didn't happen. So I try to keep it going a little bit, but I know it's not as well moderated as it should be. - Jean

These quotes illustrate the tremendous amount of labor that these moderators perform on an ongoing basis – much of it unsung, unpleasant, and uninteresting, and all of it unpaid. I argue that this work is a form of digital reproductive labor: continuous, unwaged, feminized labor that occurs behind the scenes but is necessary for the continuation of “productive” (i.e. revenue-generating) site function. The selection and posting of content and discussions is a constant process that could be likened to planning, preparing, and serving meals to a household. Enforcing subreddit rules involves a complex constellation of affective and practical tasks that could be akin to childrearing. Moderators strive to provide a good example while maintaining harmony and promoting growth, and often end up in the same unfortunate boat as mothers: invisible or underappreciated while things are running smoothly, but often the first to be blamed for any mishaps. And just like analog reproductive labor, digital reproductive labor through moderation is not without its share of downright dirty work. The ongoing “cleanup” of managing harassment and trolling in these subreddits takes an additional toll on moderators by forcing them to come into contact with a continuous stream of hateful, threatening, and potentially traumatizing language and images targeting a personal and vulnerable aspect of their own identity.

Two of my interlocutors suggested that to be successful at this kind of labor, a particular kind of tenacious personality type is required:

I was a single moderator for a long time, almost 5 years. Somebody super stubborn, and I am. -Rommel

I feel like I am very thick-skinned, hard-headed, obstinate about - I don't take shit lying down, I'm that kind of person. And I think you kind of need those qualities to be a moderator. But there are people who don't feel that way, they're more susceptible to that kind of online commentary. And it's those people you have to look out for. -Alice

While the sources of problematic posts and comments in these subreddits were most often malicious outsiders, moderators may also have to respond to problematic posts from community members as well. These are not posted with the intent to troll, but are perceived by the moderators (and often other community members) as compromising the focus of the community or even the safety of the space itself. These cases can prove particularly challenging for moderators to deal with, as the content that is technically not breaking any rules (relevant topic, no hostile/prohibited language) but nevertheless does not contribute positively to the culture of the subreddit.

Here was one guy who was not Latino, who was a white guy. He did have some good insight, but he wanted to take over the subreddit. And other people thought he was just posting everything, posting too much. But technically he's not breaking the rules, and he's adding this interesting discussion, so what do you really do? You have to balance that. Yes, you have the freedom to speak, because I don't believe in telling people you can't speak here. But at the same time, he's scaring off other women who might think, why is this white guy posting in a Latina subreddit about Latina issues? Jean in this particular case, this flood of (technically relevant) posts was sidelining the contributions and discussions of actual Latina users. This is made especially problematic when the poster reveals himself to be a white male who isn't personally identified with a Latina/o identity. Jean describes having to reconcile her duties as moderator, her vision for the overall purpose of the space, and the feedback she was receiving from community members:

Well, I did send him a private message, and say, I'm so glad for your participation, this is just getting off the ground, we really appreciate it, but it's a safe space for women as well, and the fact that you are posting so much is becoming problematic. And some of the women were actually telling me to just ban him from the subreddit outright, just kick him out. Which I didn't feel comfortable doing, because technically, he wasn't
being disrespectful in any way, he was just over-posting. Interested, I guess. And he was insulted...So he continued, and I said, I'm not banning you, I don't believe in banning you, because you haven't broken any of the rules of the subreddit, but please tone it down so other people can feel comfortable with you. And your insight is important. But I think I turned him off, and I turned them off, and it just became this big thing. -Jean

Jean is interacting with several entities here: her “constituents” in the subreddit, the problem poster, and her own personal philosophy of moderation. The entire task requires a large amount of affective labor on Jean’s behalf as she works to balance the needs and wants of each of the involved parties against her own convictions. This vignette has many hallmarks of a more traditional picture of “women’s work”, as Jean labors to keep the subreddit running smoothly and make everyone happy, despite their conflicting interests.

Moderators also discussed having to navigate differences and disagreements that were completely internal to the subreddit and occurring between two (or more) established community members or groups of members. In the course of my research, I found that these moments of contention emerged most frequently in subreddits focused on issues relating to gender and sexuality. These debates were largely concerned with three issues: the definition and usage of contested term(s) (such as parameters of the categories “feminism” and “woman”); the claiming and misuse of formerly derogatory words (like “queer”, “tranny,” and “dyke”); and subreddit membership/focus/ideology (i.e. the inclusion/exclusion of transfeminine individuals and feminist perspectives condoning/condemning sex work). All of these topics, already fraught issues in “single-issue” subreddits such as 2XC, become doubly so in intersectional subreddits. The double-edged sword of multiple marginalization means that these questions of language, inclusion, and exclusion are even more pressing and necessary to resolve. The moderators I interviewed detailed their struggles to be firm about the boundaries and rules for the space without alienating or unfairly excluding the very people that the space was initially created for.

Another common story in these intersectional subreddits is where a well-meaning but ignorant outsider will come in with a particular question or comment relating to that particular category of difference.

We had one white guy come in, and was like - how can I meet an Indian girl, I think they're the most beautiful girls in the world. We had one weird guy like that. -Alice

We had a white woman who came in. And she's like, I'm white, my boyfriend is Latino, and I'm thinking of dressing up as a taco for Halloween. And we said, you know, that might not be the best idea. Then she's like, how about something Latin? And we're like - that might be a little insulting, dressed as a taco. -Jean

These moments are often ambivalent: on one hand, some of these conversations provide an opportunity for genuine, productive cultural exchange.

So we gave her advice, like, if you want to celebrate Dio de los Muertos, that's great, because she thought about that. But learn about the culture. Don't just do it because it's cool to wear a skull face. So we told her to learn a little bit more. -Jean

On the other hand, these exchanges also reproduce a microaggressive centering of the unmarked center by their expectation that subjects marked by difference are obligated to educate the majoritarian, centered party about that difference. The moderators I spoke to, as well as some of my non-moderator interlocutors, often expressed a sense of exhaustion and eventual resentment at the ongoing stream of ignorant difference-based queries and predictable arguments:

We use a particular definition of racism, and we get a lot of people who come in and are saying that people of color can be racist against white people, and we don't want to bother educating them at this point, because that's too much trouble. -Rommel

But it's more witnessing it, and kind of going, I'm not gonna, because I know where this is going to end. But it depends on the subreddit as well. Because there are some subreddits in which, don't even bother. –Silver

I'm getting into it with some guy, with usage of the word "gay." I made the mistake of calling foul on that in the wrong subreddit, and now I'm being forced to explain why it's offensive. I'm having to argue with them, why is it offensive. They're like no, my friends are gay, and they say that, and it's OK. No, jackass. I'm like - you know what, forget it. Just fucking forget it. I'm not feeding the trolls tonight, go away. There is no snack for you. Go. Begone. -DM

Outside Threats and Trolling
As anyone who has ever read the comments on a YouTube video or news site can attest, harassment, flaming, and trolling is a nearly-ubiquitous feature of public, anonymous online spaces. How this misbehavior is managed ranges widely by venue – from banning and deleting only the most extreme violations, using user-generated popularity scores (like karma) to rank and display content (recently YouTube has incorporated a voting system as well), requiring account registration to comment, requiring new comments/content to be approved by a moderator before posting, or locking/banning comments entirely, either on particular content or sitewide. Most sites, including Reddit, use a combination of these techniques to limit and remove undesirable user contributions.

While all public subreddits have to deal with trolls in one form or another, the troll attacks on subreddits based around categories of social difference are often envenomed with violent and specific vitriol (racist/sexist slurs, death/rape/lynching threats). Some of the trolls are clearly garden-variety bigots with a particular sexist/racist/homophobic/transphobic/xenophobic axe to grind. But it appears that for some other trolls, the “hot button” nature of these topics is simply an attractive and easy way to quickly cause a great deal of disruption and unpleasantness. Whether their ultimate motivation is misogyny or mischief, these external attacks are capable of severely derailing, compromising, or even shutting down a subreddit if not dealt with continuously by moderators.

So at the worst point in the sub, it was like - I feel like there were trollbaiting posts, where these guys would - I can't prove it, but I kind of think they were made by guys pretending to be Desi women, and saying like, I married a guy who's a conservative, this guy, and someone sent him a sex tape from when I was young and wild in college, and now he's furious at me, what can I do to save the marriage? Things like that that were kind of painting Indian women in a bad light. And almost geared to rile up people against Indian women. And that would attract hordes of guys who were eager to take it out. – Alice

So especially when there's a topical news thing, like Trayvon Martin, every time there was an article about it, someone would post it in the mainstream reddit, or r/politics, and then these people would come into our tiny community and not be - pre-101 level, and just talking reverse racism and all these concepts that we don't even give a verbal pass.

-Rommel

[There's this one really weird guy who would make comments about - like, every time I'm in a group full of white people, they always tell me about their controversial conservative opinions, why is that? Just a weird guy...He's a character, he's a real character, people know him in the sub. And he'll make weird comments like that. Why are Muslim people like this. Why are ISIS worshipers - like Satan worshipers, ISIS is like Satan worshipers. And people will be like, shut up. So we have to crack down on comments like that...Any sub that revolves around identity, whether it's cultural identity, sexual identity - it's going to attract people who have very vociferous opinions on that subject...regardless of whether or not they have identification with the subject, they're going to have an opinion about it. -Alice

Intersectional subreddits, particularly subreddits devoted to women of color, are doubly vulnerable to both sexist and racist attacks. r/blackladies is one of the larger and more wellknown intersectional spaces for women of color on Reddit, and has been the subject of ongoing and extremely severe campaigns of trolling and harassment.

A good number of them are honestly white supremacists. I think a lot of them are just trolls, just joining the fun. But I would think that some of them are Stormfronters, but as far as I can tell, they're possibly from Stormfront...They're pretty standard harassers....they attack blackladies. The earliest [white supremacist/troll] community was a subreddit directed towards black people. And that lasted for a good year and a half. And Reddit admins wouldn't do anything about it, people were complaining. And it wasn't until they started attacking the blackladies reddit - they kept creating new accounts, kept coming in. Making comments with slurs, posting offensive images, that sort of thing. - Rommel

There's a subreddit called BlackLadies, which is for black women. And that sub because that sub occupies the intersection of being black and being women, they get it at both ends. They get all the misogynists, and they get all the racists. And it's very difficult for them to just moderate enough, just keep those gross people out. And they got to the point where they wrote a letter, an open letter, to the Reddit admins, saying, you have to do something about Reddit's racism problem. You have to do something about this, because it is becoming unbearable. -Alice
Without involvement from site administrators, the power of moderators is actually rather limited: they can remove posts and comments, ban user accounts outright (where the user receives a notice they have been banned), or “shadowban” an account. A “shadowban” means that while that individual user can see their own votes and comments, no one else can. However, it is extremely easy for a banned user to simply register a new account, and/or use an IP spoofer/virtual network in order to circumvent a shadowban. Thus the moderators of these particular subreddits face the Sisyphean struggle of removing a never-ending deluge of hateful content produced by crafty and persistent foes:

We've been continuously banning people - but like I said, they just create new accounts. It's really a war of attrition at this point. You can ban them faster than they can create a new account. See who's most clever. -Rommel

It's hard to protect against that, because there's no system for that. Besides figuring out who has multiple usernames. And we have a guy, right now, who's just this really angry 24 year old guy, who just leaves really vile messages to people. And he has been shadowbanned maybe 16 times. He just constantly makes a new username, and constantly tries to come into the sub. -Alice

There isn't a safe space on line. There's no prevention, only clean up. On Reddit, I can only clean up my own subreddit, but it takes like 5 seconds to make a new account and get back to trolling. But here in the US, I can't really go anywhere without some sort of racism cropping up. You can't really make racists jokes in the US without penalty against any minority but Asians. –Lady Trieu

In the face of this onslaught of negativity and hatred, why would moderators choose to keep these communities public at all? It is possible to make private subreddits, which are only available to a “whitelist” of moderator-approved members. While this possibility is something that the moderators acknowledged, they also articulated the importance of accessibility. It was a priority for these moderators that members of that particular marginalized group would be able to find and participate in the subreddit:

There's different subs to women that belong to communities - they can talk about the unique issues that they face. You're probably not going to get discussions about Asian women being fetishized and exoticized, you’re not going to get them talking about that in a larger sub like 2X. Because it just doesn't rank as important to them. -Alice

It is also a possibility that for many of these users, particularly younger ones, that the subreddit is the only culturally specific, supportive community they have outside of their family of origin:

There's challenges to being a Desi-American that other American kids just don't get. So this is a space to really help them with that... Desi-Americans are less than 1% of the population. We're already a very, very - we're a visible minority, because of the kind of status that we have in the - coming over here, our parents are highly educated, they've landed solidly in the upper middle class or middle class. As an immigrant community, we do really well, and so we're visible in high-level positions in government, finance, medicine. But dealing with those overachieving - we're obviously obligated to do well, and work hard, because our parents came from nothing and made a name for themselves here. So there's struggles dealing with that as well. A lot of kids talk about that, the pressures they face at home to do well, to be high-achieving. And inevitably getting compared with their peers, who are ostensibly doing better than they are. It's a lot to deal with. So we deal with those issues too. –Alice

There's been conversations about skin color. Which is interesting because I'm very lightskinned for a Latina, but at the same time I'm related to really dark-skinned people, and we're talking about even in our own families, there's this variety. But there is discrimination even within our own ethnic class. So those conversations have been very interesting to see develop. People asking about labels, am I Latina enough, am I not Latina enough? -Jean

This delicate balance between safety and openness, however, requires tremendous labor on behalf of the moderators and even community members themselves. Adjacent to the Reddit-as-city metaphor, Alice compared Reddit to a series of privately maintained parks requiring continual attention:

Alice: Because the way I view Reddit is, every subreddit is kind of like a private park, and it's up to the mod to maintain their private parks. But as far as - the users are going to bring in - you can't set a standard beside posting rules about how the commenting policy should be. You can't set a standard other than that, other than deleting the comments that you feel blatantly disregard those rules, those community participation...
rules. So it's a little different in a sense, because Reddit is user-driven. People will be contributing links and posts that you have no kind of control over. Whereas in a blog, you're the one putting out the material. So you have even more say, and your voice holds more weight in what goes. And I think it's a similar principle when you - your community is only as good as your moderation. And so subs that have active mods are generally, in my opinion, the better subs. Not necessarily - like there are some subs that shouldn't even exist, and I'm sure they're very active.

K: Yeah. There's some real bad ones.

Alice: But it's the same principle, ultimately. But different in application.

115

Strategies and Tactics

The moderators I interviewed used a variety of tools and practices to help maintain the subreddits. The constant, shifting demands of the space required a flexible, eclectic approach, which differed according to individual moderator personality, the social dynamics of the moderator team (if applicable), and the problem at hand. However, all of the subreddits leveraged particular tools in order to create and maintain safe space: active moderator involvement, codified rules, community involvement, and “admin”/infrastructural intervention. As previously stated, moderation requires a considerable amount of affective and intellectual labor. All of my interlocutors emphasized that a high level of continuous moderator involvement was crucial to the success and well-being of a subreddit. This involvement usually involves some kind of direct action, such as banning or deletion of comments/posts. It can also involve direct communication, either through private message (modmail) or through publicly viewed comments. Modmail is a communicative feature which allows all moderators to see any messages sent to and from the account. It is a way of maintaining access to a decentralized network of moderators as well as providing automatic visibility to the rest of the team. It is also a way of reaching all the moderators of a subreddit at once (any private message addressed to a subreddit will automatically go to modmail). It can serve an important “record keeping” function:

Rommel: Also it's kind of important for cohesiveness as a moderator group, to be on the same page. Especially when users come to argue about their bannings or other moderator actions, you have to, at least publicly, show a unified front. You can't show your disagreements to the public.

K: “Go ask your mom, go ask your dad!”

Rommel: Yeah, they’ll try to do that. They’ll send personal messages to try to get you alone. And I ask as a general rule on all the reddits I moderate that we ignore any PMs sent to us regarding our moderator duties, and tell them, you must send a modmail so then all the moderators can see it.

Moderation, however, is not just about dealing with disagreements outside of the community. Occasionally users will perceive the moderator(s) as too heavy-handed and complain and/or request an adjustment of the moderation policy. Some subreddits (particularly r/LGBT) had reputations for being “strict,” which meant that comments and content were more heavily policed and more frequently removed than in other spaces. While my interlocutors could all agree that some degree of moderation was needed to keep hate speech and trolling to a minimum, many of them stated that some subreddits went too far and stifled discussion and dissent, creating “order” at the expense of community engagement:

So that's one incident that I can think of, where I was censored in a safe space, because I was I guess being insensitive to the opinions of the people in the forum. And then you have, for instance, r/ainbow, which was formed as a reaction to the r/LGBT moderators, because they thought that we should have - an LGBT space, of course it's still going to be LGBT friendly, but it's not going to be quite so censored to the point where subaltern opinions aren't allowed to speak. For instance, if you were to say in r/LGBT, why is the T in LGBT, you would get possibly banned, but if you were to say that in r/ainbow, we would be able to have a conversation. -Dan

I didn't really know anything about the Men’s Rights movement before going on Reddit. And there are a couple points that I can kind of see, that I maybe wouldn't have been exposed to before. So it made me expand my horizons a little bit. But it's not done in a very effective way, because of that heavy moderating. There's no - there's no space for discussion that's not - heavily biased because of the place it's taking place in. --Hannah

Too little moderation, even at the community’s request, often proves to invite trouble that outweighs the benefits of slightly loosened codes of behavior:

We had instituted these rules, and at the time, people were like, it's too strict, the sub is
not fun - there were just complaints. So the head moderator said OK, well, let's just take a hands off approach. And we did. And right on cue, there were like posts attacking women, Muslims, Sikhs, all the different minorities of the people who comprise the sub, there was just a whole spate of attacks. And we couldn't do anything about it, because we were hands off. And it got to the point where we lost a lot of major subscribers. And people were making posts like, what the hell happened to this sub, where are the moderators. So finally we were like, we came back, and we were like, if you guys want us to take an active moderating stance, some people are just not going to be happy, and you're just going to have to be OK with that. So we came back, and now the sub has gone on a better track, where we've gotten rid of the trolls, and the more vicious of the people. -Alice

Thus these moderators often found themselves in the ambivalent position of a parent: forced to play “bad cop” sometimes for the greater good, while still maintaining a “good cop” / protector role the rest of the time. Rommel describes their flexible, contextual response to potentially contentious interaction and debate:

It's kind of ad hoc. I'll see two people discussing, and I can see it's becoming an argument, I can see people are starting to get a little bit testy. If you can remain nice and civil, people might actually get something out of this. And everyone has a different moderation style, even within the same community. I'll usually let something play out, and see how it goes, and see if it gets really problematic. Or I can see that it will be. Certain positions, I just know, off the bat, this is going to be a no-go.

A second key strategy mobilized by these moderators to maintain community engagement and development was the creation and enforcement of specific, codified subreddit rules. These rules were posted in the sidebar (which appears to the right of the front page feed of the subreddit), and violation of these rules is usually grounds for banning, with or without a warning. Subreddits are free to create their own rules and guidelines – the only parameter is that any subreddit rules must also abide by the larger rules of Reddit. In other words, subreddits are free to be less permissive than the general rules about what can be posted there, but not more.

Neoliberal Positioning

One of the major complaints my moderator interlocutors had about the way Reddit was structured was its lax attitude towards trolling and harassment. Although these rules have since been updated (more on that in the next section) the 2014 official rules of Reddit are actually quite short, and are a telling reflection of Reddit’s overall neoliberal ideological framework:

Don’t spam.
Don’t ask for votes or engage in vote manipulation.
Don’t post personal information.
No child pornography or sexually suggestive content featuring minors.
Don’t break the site or do anything that interferes with normal use of the site.
All other behavior is governed by “reddiquette, an informal expression of Reddit’s community values as written by the community itself”. While the reddiquette encourages civil behavior, harassment is not explicitly prohibited in the official rules, nor is it grounds for an administrative ban. Furthermore, the prohibition on content explicitly or implicitly sexualizing minors was only added after the maelstrom of negative attention attracted by the /jailbait controversy (discussed in further detail in chapter four). There is no official prohibition on making threats, nor on posting other potentially illegal or distasteful material (sexually violent pornography, images/videos of extreme torture/gore, racist/homophobic/nationalistic hate speech, etc.) The message this sends is quite clear: the technical workings of the site and the voting systems (i.e. revenue-generating functions) are sacrosanct, but aside from child porn, what you post and your behavior towards other users is a matter of optional, personally determined “etiquette”.

This set of rules could be read as following a neoliberal imperative towards deregulation, in which barriers to the “free market” (in this case, the flow of content and karma on Reddit) are removed to create a more conducive environment for revenue generation. Such deregulation makes hate speech and other discursive exercises of hegemonic power appear to simply be matters of personal politeness (or lack thereof). The complex underpinning systems of violence and hegemony that undergird an anonymous rape threat to a female user are disavowed, and it becomes simply another act of interpersonal rudeness (like giving another driver the finger in traffic). This reflects a larger, cultivated hegemonic blindness to and
disavowal of systemic and institutionalized racism: in which the decrease of openly tolerated acts of aggressive bigotry (such as lynching and cross burning) and the election of Barack Obama are conflated with decisive, empirical evidence of the end of racism in American society. The pernicious idea that racism, sexism, homophobia, and all other forms of discrimination are simply matters of interpersonal good manners leads to the erroneous conclusion that the behavioral absence of blatant slurs and explicit threats of violence mirrors a societal structure that is also now free of these oppressive concepts as well. (Which, as we all painfully know, is not true, as we live in a country where a statement as simple as “Black Lives Matter” is necessary to continually, contentiously reassert.)

Most subreddits that I observed that were larger than 50 users had at least some additional rules. These rules varied drastically depending on the subreddit’s size and specificity. Usually, the more specific the topic of a subreddit is (i.e. an Xbox360 subreddit vs a more generalized video game subreddit) the more particular the rules will be about only posting relevant materials and keeping discussions on-topic. The tone of interaction between users is sometimes mandated in these rules as well. Most will have a list of commonly asked questions with links to answers, and sometimes asking a question or making a prohibited assumption that

is already on the FAQ will result in the post being downvoted to hell, pelted with snarky comments, or deleted (sometimes all three).

Within the difference-focused subreddits I studied, I found that many of them, in addition to the categories discussed above, also included definitions of particular concepts as part of their subreddit rules:

I've been in the community to the point where, pretty much what I consider community members are on the same page with the definition of racism. They understand - not necessarily from a system of power, but at least from an institutional racism point of view. We do allow a couple of conceptualizations of racism, just to build a slightly bigger tent. -Rommel

The ongoing discussion and negotiation of these definitions, however, can sometimes derail the conversations and introduce contention:

I'd say that's probably the most primary things that can maybe turn people. Just because, again, a lot of debates I've seen - so much stuff just gets people arguing. I've seen this on Facebook, I've seen this on Reddit, I've seen it on tumblr, so many places, people just getting into arguments about the definitions and terms. And don't get me wrong, they're important conversations to have, but sometimes it feels like they're almost getting so far away from actually discussing the meat of the issues themselves, or outreach, or spreading awareness, or generally whatever people try to do, or just get these conversations moving forward. They kind of get stuck, in those areas, and then just - it turns into this exhausting sort of thing where by the time you actually get to the issues themselves, no one really has the energy to keep talking about them. -Rommel

Of course, these debates are not unique to these communities – but for some users, the stakes of these definitions are anything but trivial:

It's like - can you force a feminist to use what a trans person considers a proper pronoun? Because now you're saying, you're forcing me to reify gender by using a pronoun. So we haven't really come up with a good way to deal with that, other than using a gender-neutral noun like they. And trans people just view that as a basic modicum of respect, to not be misgendered. –Rommel

And they posted, and then they sent MensRights over to the post. And a lot of people came over from, SRS, and basically the social justice Reddit sphere. And they came out in full force, to do battle. Which I appreciated.... But the feminisms TERF thing happened about 6 to 8 months later, and some of those people came back and said, remember when we came out and did that for you, PoC, now you're not standing up for us trans women, guilting me into a particular action or position. It was interesting. --Rommel

The third resource that moderators cited as necessary for a successful subreddit is the subreddit culture and community involvement. While this involvement is necessary, it is not by itself sufficient – other users are required to create a sense of dialogue and support. This involvement usually takes two main forms: posting (content or comments) and upvoting/downvoting. Posting brings new content into the subreddit and contributes that user’s voice and perspective to the overall conversation. The “liveliness” of a subreddit is easy to ascertain through looking at the frontpage: recent posts by multiple users, threads with multiple comments and a “high” karma score (“high” is of course always proportional to the size of the subreddit). Comments add to the conversational and community feel by
contributing new information, posing questions, or offering personal perspectives and support. Upvoting and downvoting is also a powerful way that users are able to exert their influence on a particular subreddit’s culture. These accumulated scores are a live index of an item’s popularity, and can clearly reflect the “atmosphere” of a subreddit. They are also a way of showing support or disapproval that does not require the user to generate any kind of particular response other than clicking the up or down arrow. Both moderators and users alike have reported the ways in which downvoting and upvoting can help to give a sense of a larger audience/community by providing a concrete reflection of general community approval/disapproval.

But in AskWomen, in 2XC, in feminisms, in AskFeminists - if somebody makes a comment that’s just shitty and awful and sexist, and they will be downvoted, all the way to the bottom. And I can go look at those comments if I want to, and I can roll my eyes, and say God, this person's an idiot. But I don’t feel bad about it, because the whole rest of the community has got my back. – Elizabeth
And I’m getting frustrated by that specific interaction. But if I step back a minute, and stop looking at that specific interaction, and instead look at the upvotes and downvotes, then I actually start to feel a lot better. Because generally, my comments are fairly well upvoted. And generally the person I’m arguing against is fairly downvoted. Which means that there are people reading this conversation between us. People that I’m not aware of, that I will never possibly interact with - and they’re reading it, and they're being influenced by this dialogue. And they're agreeing or disagreeing with the points. And they're seeing the flaws in the argument, you know? And that's a positive thing. –Lana
The last resource I will discuss is one that my moderators tried to use only sparingly, although they all spoke about it at length in their interviews: the Reddit site administrators or “admins.” It is very rare that admins will intervene into the daily workings or rules of Reddit, although they have been known to do so in a crisis. “Admin posts,” posts by site administrators, display the moderator’s name in bold red lettering (a function no users have), can be “pinned” to the top of the feed, and are eye-catching and unusual. Usually they involve some change to Reddit’s infrastructure or a major announcement about the future of Reddit.
In some cases, these posts also address a current controversy or crisis: there was a flurry of modposts in the days and weeks following the doxxing of ViolentAcrez and the subsequent deluge of negative outside media attention. Admins have the ability to fundamentally change the structure and functioning of the site: they can add or remove core rules, they can enable or disable particular technical capacities for both users and moderators. As discussed in the section about Reddit’s overall rules, it is clear that these decisions are not neutral but ideologically laden, and provide an implicit and sometimes explicit endorsement of behaviors that others may find anywhere from annoying to deeply threatening.
I wish Reddit took death threats and rape threats, I wish Reddit took these things seriously. Because there are people who suffer from it. And even with active moderation, people will send us PMs saying, I just got this message from this guy, can you - and we can't do anything about it, besides ban him. But he will - nothing's stopping him from aggressively - we had one user leave, because there was a guy aggressively PMing her, and making up multiple usernames, and PMing her. And it just drove her off, basically. Things like that, I wish I could do more. I can't do more. Reddit's admins could do more. I feel like they have the ability to do it. But their goals are completely different. Their goals are, I guess, to become the biggest website, the biggest news aggregate website or whatever. They're all about profit. And so the ethics of that don't align. -Alice
The limits of “free speech” on Reddit is a perennially and hotly debated issue. Before the jailbait controversy, Reddit prided itself on being a venue for all forms of online free speech - and even afterwards, the prohibition on content added to the rules was narrow and limited to patently illegal sexualized content featuring minors. Even with this prohibition, the overall site rules still skew heavily towards a laissez-faire approach that has repeatedly favored the protection of free speech over the protection of the safety and comfort of vulnerable users. The moderators I interviewed were largely unhappy with the limited extent of technical actions available to them to maintain their subreddits. Reddit’s privileging of “free speech” means that the creation of more powerful tools for moderators (especially more comprehensive banning/deletion tools) are a low to nonexistent priority: Moderators really don't have that much power against the throng of users. We're talking about 60, 100 thousand people. And I've been a target of attention before for various reasons. And yeah - it's a form of bullying, in a way. It's not that it's initially intended, it's just when there's hundreds of thousands of people all talking about you,
Similarly, they reported a lack of responsiveness and support from Reddit admins when it came to dealing with ongoing problems with harassment and trolling, particularly within the r/blackladies subreddit:

Rommel

Reddit has a lax attitude in terms of these people, what we term a brigade. What I consider a brigade is any organized effort to come into a safe space and to try to disrupt it. Reddit has a problem, if people are coordinating downvotes, or upvotes. The biggest sin to them, to the admins, is - the racism reddit, they attack blackladies. The earliest community was a subreddit directed towards black people, it was actually [inaudible]. And that lasted for a good year and a half. And Reddit admins wouldn't do anything about it, people were complaining. And it wasn't until they started attacking the blackladies reddit - they kept creating new accounts, kept coming in. Making comments with slurs, posting offensive images, that sort of thing. Which moderators went into overdrive, to try to keep on top of it a little bit. But eventually Reddit did ban the reddit, saying they did vote manipulation. It wasn't the content itself, it was the fact that they were voting on other people comments, or voting on their own material. Rommel

The refusal of site higher-ups to intervene on anything other than technical grounds sends a telling message to members of these subreddits, and, indeed, to all Reddit users: the behavior that was wrong in this case was not the harassment, but the vote manipulation. Again, tampering with the workings of “the (free) market” is verboten, but unrelenting racist, sexist, sexually violent trolling is a less important (and less regulated) matter of personal conduct.

Even other difference-based, non-intersectional subreddits responded to the trolling itself and the concerns of the moderators of r/blackladies with dismissal:

Alice: And recently, there's a subreddit called BlackLadies, which is for black women. And that sub - because that sub occupies the intersection of being black and being women, they get it at both ends. They get all the misogynists, and they get all the racists. And it's very difficult for them to just moderate enough, just keep those gross people out. And they got to the point where they wrote a letter, an open letter, to the Reddit admins, saying, you have to do something about Reddit's racism problem. You have to do something about this, because it is becoming unbearable. And in that article, there was an article that picked up on this news and went on a few websites. And one of the journalists interviewed a moderator from 2X. And the reply that the 2X moderator gave .... So in that article, there's this - subreddit co-founder HighFructoseCornFeces, charming, one of the moderators for 2X. And she said "Racism and bigotry are highly complex problems that cannot be solved by the signing of a letter or a website policing a few of his users while giving the trolls a spotlight. We're patently disinterested. Growing up means realizing combating evil does not mean spending all of your energy stamping out every last flicker of fuckery, but in issuing forth genuine goodness, wholeheartedly and with resonance." How condescending does that sound? She just dismissed - like I can't even explain how awful that sentiment is. It's telling you, grow up, racism is not a problem, grow up, misogyny is not a problem, just be a good person and things will fix K: From that position of privilege, like, I can sit here and meditate about this because it doesn't actually affect me, I can take the high road and be like, well, why don't you just Mmmmmm. (angry noise) Kay. I'm with you on that, that's some bullshit.

A: But you know, Reddit's obviously not going to do anything about these issues, because it's - counterproductive, almost, to its goal of being a big website. As ugly as it is, this is a clear example of the hierarchization of intersecting categories of power, even within oppressed groups themselves. HFCF’s response minimizes and dismisses the deeply damaging effects of this ongoing hostility, suggesting that it is the victims’ inability to “grow up” that is the source of the problem, rather than the harassment itself. Furthermore, it paints the moderators of the space as somehow “above” the current issue, equating the mods’ expressed desire for personal safety and the cessation of harassment with some totalitarian urge to “[stamp] out every last flicker of fuckery”.

Once again we see a neoliberal flattening of difference, a critical failure or refusal to recognize or acknowledge larger systems of institutionalized racism and sexism. Without this context, it becomes possible (although still erroneous) to conflate the racialized, misogynistic abuse suffered by r/blackladies with garden-variety “fuckery”, the inevitable and pathetic frothing of ubiquitous trolls with nothing better to do.
Once again we see that even within spaces and communities centered on difference and resisting oppression, other intersecting structures of power and dominance can and do reassert themselves. This discursive move (equating abuse with “fuckery” and telling r/blackladies to “grow up”) re-enacts a familiar dynamic of power, in which a dominant group denies or minimizes the concerns and experiences of subordinate group members by making them seem irrational, delusional, or otherwise unreliable. While the dismissal in HFCF’s comment is far less blatant, it nevertheless performs the same function: fundamentally undermining the credibility of the speaker (and thus the validity of any justice claims they may be making). Telling the mods of r/blackladies to “grow up” marginalizes, infantilizes, and dismisses the moderators and their experiences.

When Admins Intervene: the Gendered Backlash against Ellen Pao

I conducted the research for this chapter in the summer of 2014. As evidenced in the previous section, my moderator interlocutors expressed a great deal of frustration about the site’s overall unwillingness to intervene in order to prevent abusive behavior. As discussed in chapter 4, Reddit’s stated purpose and philosophy as a “free speech site” meant that site administrators would generally not remove content (or entire subreddits) unless they were in clear violation of site rules and/or U.S. law. Even then, it was often not until after a public outcry (such as the negative publicity from the jailbait controversy) that site admins would intervene.

This hands-off policy was first tested on a large scale in early September 2014 with the extremely popular and extremely controversial subreddit /r/TheFappening. The Fappening was a subreddit that appeared in the immediate wake of the Apple iCloud celebrity nude photo hacking scandal, whose sole purpose was to redistribute these hacked photos to as wide of an audience as possible. “The Fappening” is a play on “The Happening” (a recent film), with “fap” being an onomatopoeic Internet slang term for male masturbation. The subreddit drew traffic to Reddit in record-breaking amounts (250 million page views in just a few days), and the popularity of TheFappening posts meant they appeared on the overall front page (r/all), even to users who weren’t subscribed to the subreddit.

A few days later, senior systems administrator Jason Harvey made a post announcing that Reddit was deleting TheFappening, citing multiple DMCA copyright violations as well as the fact that some of the individuals in the photos were minors, and thus the images constituted child pornography, illegal under US law. In a similar rhetorical move as the one used to justify the removal of r/jailbait, the blog post framed the decision as one that was made for legal, rather than moral, reasons. The post reaffirmed several times Reddit’s commitment to being a “free speech platform”, and emphasized that is the reason for the subreddit’s removal was the imminent legal consequences of its unchecked continuation.

Much like the r/jailbait banning, this decision was not a popular one, and elicited similar kinds of criticisms and complaints. Some users accused Reddit of using the subreddit to generate revenue, only to then remove the content (but keep the profits) in the face of negative publicity. Others pointed to the hypocrisy of deleting this particular subreddit while allowing other, equally odious content to remain (the foil brought up in both of these controversies was the reprehensible group of racist subreddits called “the Chimpire,” organized under the umbrella of r/CoonTown). However, in both cases, the criticism was directed at the action itself (or “Reddit” as a metonym), rather than the particular person delivering the news.

Two months after this decision, in November 2014, Ellen Pao took over the role of chief executive officer of Reddit. At the time, she was also engaged in a high-profile and ultimately unsuccessful sex discrimination lawsuit against her former employer, venture capital firm Kleiner Perkins. Beginning in early 2015, she began to make changes towards the stated goal of making Reddit a safer and more equitable place, most notably banning salary negotiation (as ample research shows that salary negotiation is a process that consistently results in lower offers for women).

In March 2015, the site rules were updated to ban involuntary pornography or “revenge porn”, a form of online harassment that almost exclusively targets women and involves the nonconsensual distribution of erotic personal photos, either through hacking or, more commonly, by embittered ex-lovers seeking to humiliate their former partners by widely distributing their private images. This policy change, like other content-related site rule changes before it, was met with the typical resistance amid cries of censorship and hypocrisy, although the hubbub died down quickly.

The next major change that Pao oversaw to Reddit’s site structure and rules was far, far more controversial and unpopular. On June 10, 2015, the Reddit blog posted a message that was signed by Ellen Pao and two other major site administrators, including (male) site founder
Alexis Ohanian. The post announced “a change in community management”, where admins will now “ban subreddits that allow their communities to use the subreddit as a platform to harass individuals when moderators don’t take action. We’re banning behavior, not ideas”. Five subreddits were immediately removed that were deemed to be specifically inciting and organizing online harassment. The largest was r/FatPeopleHate, a subreddit devoted to toxic invective about and active harassment of people of size, with over 5,000 subscribers. The smaller banned subreddits were r/HamPlanetHatred (another anti-fat subreddit), r/transfags, r/neofag, and r/shitn******say.

The backlash to this announcement was immediate, widespread, and vitriolic. Unlike previous criticisms of site rule changes, this backlash was extremely personal and targeted Pao directly. Anti-Pao subreddits immediately sprung up: one of the tamer ones was “ChairmanPao” which equivocated Ellen Pao and the recent decision with fascism and Nazism. I say “tamer” because the other anti-Pao subreddits were focused on various forms of racialized physical and sexual violence against her person. Rumors swirled that Pao was in league with a secret “SJW cabal” and that the recent announcement was only the first step towards turning Reddit into a feminized nanny state.

The announcement also sparked a campaign of targeted harassment of Pao that involved the release of her personal details as well as a barrage of racialized death and rape threats. The unrest continued through early July with the termination of a beloved Reddit employee, Victoria, who was a visible presence behind the extremely popular subreddit AskMeAnything, in particular the “celebrity AMAs”. Pao was immediately blamed for the dismissal, although it came out several weeks later that she was not responsible for the decision. In response to Victoria’s termination, the moderators of several large default subreddits temporarily set these subreddits to “private”, effectively blacking out some of the largest and most popular areas of the site and costing Reddit significant amounts of traffic and ad revenue.

A petition was started on Change.org demanding her removal as CEO that eventually gathered more than 200,000 signatures. On July 10th, 2015, in the face of intense, widespread harassment and unrest, Ellen Pao announced her resignation as CEO of Reddit, “by mutual agreement”. When this decision was announced, the Change.org petition updated its page to read “Success!”.

Pao’s newly vacated position was filled by Reddit co-founder Steve Huffman, and the change in tone on the site was immediately apparent. Huffman posted shortly after his installation about upcoming changes to moderator interfaces, as well as the new plan to “quarantine” offensive subreddits so that individuals would have to specifically opt-in to see that content. The controversy died down rapidly, even though the changes Pao had made were still in effect: Huffman did not un-ban any of the banned subreddits, and in fact oversaw the subsequent banning of other hate-speech subreddits (specifically the racist “Chimpire” network of subreddits mentioned earlier). The pushback and vitriol that Huffman received in comparison to Pao was negligible, despite the fact that the actions he took were similar to if not even more restrictive than the changes made to the site under Pao’s leadership. This entire debacle was deeply, deeply gendered, with Pao and Huffman being cast as binary opposites. From the beginning, even before she had proposed any changes, Pao was still seen by many users as a deeply “suspicious” figure, questions of gender always-already haunting her leadership via the well-publicized sex-discrimination lawsuit that followed her out of Kleiner Perkins. Prior to Pao, the leadership of Reddit had always been white men cut from the particular cloth of West Coast tech startup culture. Although these men were no strangers to business dealings in general and capital investment in particular (Huffman co-founded a popular airfare-tracking site called Hipmunk, while Ohanian is currently a partner at Y Combinator, an American startup fund that targets emerging new media and tech companies), Pao was nevertheless viewed as an outsider with an agenda from the outset. Bethanye Blount, chief engineer of Reddit, resigned shortly after Pao did. Blount stated that Pao had been placed on a “glass cliff”, which is when women are more often placed into positions of leadership in more precarious and risky situations: in other words, set up to fail. While Huffman and Pao did utilize somewhat different strategies in order to manage the overall functioning and direction of the site, the radical difference in response cannot be explained solely by these differences in approach, but rather by external cultural factors that devalue anything feminine or feminized. The controversial announcement “Removing harassing subreddits” has several feminized elements. The post itself is focusing on personal
harm and safety, discussing the banning not in terms of legality but in terms of safety and protection. It was signed using the first names and user handles of three administrators, two of them female, adding a personalized, human touch to the post. In contrast, Huffman’s updates are not signed, either with his username or first name. His updates focus largely on the technical and functional aspects of the site, about giving moderators “tools” to better control their subreddits, rather than the personal dimensions of harm that can come from the unfettered proliferation of violent content. He also presented himself as more available, by releasing his update to the site rules in conjunction with an AMA (Ask Me Anything) session. In this gendered formulation, Ellen is HR, Huffman is IT. The scratchy pink felt is abruptly changed to the blue linen of a business dress shirt. She is the human touch, he is the glass interface.

As of 2016, the official Reddit site rules have been amended to specifically prohibit “involuntary pornography”, “content that encourages or incites violence” and “content that threatens, harasses, bullies, or encourages others to do so”. Ultimately and functionally, this is a victory: the formerly lax rules regarding harassment have been significantly tightened to now explicitly prohibit hostile behavior, rather than simply discouraging it as a matter of “reddiquette”.

However, this is not an unequivocal victory. The first attempt at these changes was met with intense resistance that was a clear example of “shooting the messenger”: ongoing, racialized misogynistic abuse that was a significant factor in Ellen Pao’s decision to step down as Reddit’s CEO. This vitriolic resistance was only quelled by Pao’s ouster and the reinstallation of a more “trustworthy” and “effective” (read: white and male) leader. Although these protective amendments to the site rules are ultimately a step forward for moderators and users seeking to establish and maintain safe space, it is clear that the undercurrents of racism and sexism that power a good deal of this harassment are still actively flowing.

Bridging Heterotopia

I’d like to conclude by returning to the ideas of nepantla and heterotopia discussed earlier in the chapter as a way of thinking through the shifting relationships between power, relationality, and space demonstrated within Reddit. In her introduction to This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation, Gloria Anzaldua further expands and explores the idea of nepantla and nepantlera, “those who facilitate passages between worlds” (1). She emphasizes the unstable, sometimes unpleasant jostling and disjointedness of living in transition: “Living in this liminal zone means being in a constant state of displacement—an uncomfortable, even alarming feeling” (1). The mestiza may dwell in nepantla whether she wishes to or not – but the nepantlera are different. They are travelers and guides. Because of their intersectional identity, they are able to not only inhabit nepantla, but lead others over and through it to understanding.

Anzaldua calls the work of the nepantlera “bridging.” It is an embodied (“this bridge called my back”) and demanding practice, a verb rather than a noun: Where others saw borders, these nepantleras saw links; where others saw abysses, they saw bridges spanning those abysses. For nepantleras, to bridge is an act of will, an act of love, an attempt towards compassion and reconciliation, and a promise to be present with the pain of others without losing themselves to it. (4)

The tasks and goals of the nepantlera are similar to the ones expressed by the moderators I interviewed. Both seek to increase understanding, to create and protect intersectional space, to facilitate meetings, crossings, and exchanges. Both groups perform this labor not for external compensation, but for internal reasons, and often at their own emotional and physical expense. I would argue that the work of moderating online spaces focused on intersectional difference is also “bridging” in the Anzalduan sense of the term.

Merla-Watson (2012) also connects the affective labor of bridging with the important work of culturally specific social justice. “Bridging, a simultaneously metaphorical and material practice, enables individuals to connect to others, so as to transform and shift the boundaries between self and other without effacing various histories, desires, and differences” (180). Despite the fact that the moderators are maintaining a virtual space rather than a physical one, there is a still a materiality to the work that they do: they use their bodies and minds in order to promote harmony and understanding. This occurs on two fronts: understanding between the intersectional group and “outsiders”, as well as a greater sense of community, connection, and cohesion within the group.

Nepantla, like heterotopia, is a constantly moving target, characterized mostly by the strangeness of the relationships between its constitutive elements. It is not always (or even
usually) comfortable or pleasant to be there, in both Anzaldua's and Foucault's formulations. However, for Anzaldua, nepantla is painfully productive: the raw areas exposed by the dismantling of categories are also open to growth and complication.

I would argue that the space created through actively maintained intersectional subreddits certainly has the potential to be called nepantla. There are moments of tenderness and bridging, of difficulty and conflict, of “honoring people’s otherness in ways that allow us to be changed by embracing that otherness rather than punishing others...a multiplicity that is transformational” (4). They are spaces constituted by borders, inhabited by those subjects who fall through the cracks of single-axis categories of difference and identity.

However, I do not think that heterotopia and nepantla are mutually exclusive, nor do I think they are interchangeable. I conceive of them as overlapping categories – heterotopias can be nepantla, but heterotopic surroundings themselves are not productive of nepantla space, not required for nepantla to exist. While nepantla is about mestiza, hybrid consciousness, “transformational multiplicity,” heterotopias can, even in their mixed state, reinforce singular categories of identity and power. “Heterotopias of deviance” such as mental hospitals and prisons seek to contain and constrain liminality and uncertainty, to pin it down into a singular, self-contained subject: “patient”, “criminal”.

Foucault emphasizes that the very linguistic underpinnings of “utopia” (literally, noplace) sets up the impossibility of its realization. Heterotopias, in contrast, are both conceptual and real places, an unpredictable mixture of times, places, spaces, at times barely controlled fragments of order and chaos. Anzaldua’s borderlands are similarly both physical (the area surrounding the US/Mexico border) and conceptual (the “borderlands” space occupied by the mestiza). The intersectional subreddits are similarly both material and virtual. Housed in a server, their material manifestation is electricity and binary code, silicone and plastic. The labor of the moderators leaves a material trace as well: computer chairs that sag under the weight of hours of daily sitting, aching shoulders, wrists, and heads, keyboards that are so well-used the paint on some of the letters has been rubbed off completely.

The virtual space taken up and occupied by these communities is far more expansive than its meager materiality might suggest. Like the borderlands, like nepantla, these subreddits are both real and imaginary at the same time. They are everyplace – they exist in the ether, reachable through any access point, no matter how remote – and yet occupy no physical “place” of their own – no land or buildings, no meeting space. They exist almost entirely in the minds and hearts of the people that use and maintain them.

The moderators that I interviewed amazed me with their persistence and dedication. Despite the myriad challenges and difficulties they faced, they continued in their efforts to create safe, supportive, intentional online space. These nepantleras treasured the sweet moments in which all of their hard work came to fruition, in which they were able to foster discussion and productive exchange, or provide much-needed support for an isolated community member. It’s on this “high note” that I’d like to end, a reminder of the pleasure and sustenance that these spaces can provide to intersectional subjects seeking understanding.

One of the conversations was a man who came in, a Chicano, who said, I’m dating somebody but my mom doesn’t approve of her, because she is black. And that’s an issue that comes up a lot in Latino families. So everyone butted into the discussion, giving him advice, and just talking back and forth about their own issues with skin color, ethnicity, race, gender issues, that kind of thing. ... So those conversations have been very interesting to see develop. -Jean

And so we get a lot of issues where people, kids, are just trying to stand up for themselves, against their parents, and against the oppressive rules, (laughs) instituted for them... Sometimes they just need to vent, my mom won’t let me go to this party. And we have to be like look, you know what? Just go. And when you come back, beg for forgiveness. [emphasis mine] Just go. There are a whole community of kids who are just like you, who have dealt with the same thing, and look, we still have a relationship with our parents, they haven’t disowned us for going against their wishes. You’ll be fine.

-Alice

Chapter 3: “Someone Is Wrong on the Internet”: Internet Arguments and the Battle for Safe Space on Reddit

Introduction
I went into my dissertation research with a particular set of secret hopes and theories tucked in the back of my mind. My own personal experience of Reddit as a connective medium spurred me to ask research questions that focused on online interactions related to difference. Like any good researcher, I intentionally left my questions open-ended. But I secretly expected that I would find many more instances of the kinds of connections I was experiencing, and that the majority of the interactions my interlocutors would relay would be generative and productive.

Much to my surprise, almost all of the stories that my participants provided when asked about one-on-one Reddit interactions related to difference had varying shades of negativity, prejudice, and disconnection attached to them. These stories did not confirm or corroborate my notion of Reddit as a uniquely connected mechanism for bypassing existing categories of difference through facilitated direct communication. Rather, these anecdotes illustrated that when it came to patterns of discussion related to difference on Reddit, the bulk of these conversations were profoundly structured by users’ positions in larger hierarchical structures of power and privilege.

It’s easy to get caught up in the seductive fantasy of “digital dualism” that I described in the introduction, particularly when it comes to Reddit. I certainly felt a sense of optimistic kinship when I read those breathlessly excited first scholars of new media, about digital frontiers and second selves. When the communicative method is only words on a screen, composed and read silently, likely in private, it is easy to overextend this abstraction of exchange of information to the social content of the messages themselves. When I started this project, I did precisely that: erroneously equated the textuality and relative anonymity of Reddit with erasure or mitigation of the intersectional social positions each user already occupies.

This surprising pattern of negative experiences and exchanges regarding difference on Reddit emerged very early in the research process, and shaped my approach in subsequent interviews. As respondent after respondent recalled memories of casual slurs, flame wars and flurries of hostile private messages, I built an alternative understanding of what was happening on Reddit, and it was far less harmonious and insightful than what I had initially hoped to find. I went in looking for moments of connection and understanding, and instead largely found interactions marked by various degrees of disagreement, exclusion, and unpleasantness. Material relating in some way to these “internet arguments” made up a substantial portion of my data, much more than I was anticipating. It is crucial to understand both the mechanisms of these disagreements as well as the larger ideological context in which they occur and are informed by. To that end, this chapter will examine the stories of internet arguments told to me by my interlocutors in an attempt to understand and contextualize these individual interactions within a larger framework that considers “resistance” as multivalent.

In this chapter, I will first revisit the idea of the flaneur and lay out a theoretical approach to Internet arguments, examining their larger ideological functions and why they should not be written off as inconsequential quarrels. Next it will introduce the notion of the “embattled commons” as a structuring analytic for thinking about the online space of Reddit as a whole – a space that is constantly being de- and re-territorialized. I then illustrate the very real costs and casualties that can result from these attempts to seize and maintain territory.

Habitability and Safe Space
As the images at the beginning of the chapter attest, online disagreements are typically framed as silly and insignificant, even hilariously pointless. (The "Internet Argument!" image is a longtime favorite of mine.) As new media and social media use becomes increasingly widespread and integrated into daily life, the experience of internet arguments is much more common than it used to be. Ten years ago, Internet arguments were largely confined to message boards, discussion forums, and email listservs, which meant that only somewhat techsavvy people who regularly interacted with and via these platforms would be familiar with this particular kind of digital disagreement. However, the advent of Web 2.0 and its increased focus on sociality and user interaction across many widely-used platforms caused the opportunities for disagreement to proliferate almost infinitely. These arguments are now so commonplace as to be endemic to new media, even to more casual or novice users – the banality, ferocity, and inanity of YouTube and news website comment sections is taken as a matter of fact. These arguments are usually written off as inconsequential, as immature digital squabbling between users who don’t have anything better to do with their time and energy.
This makes sense: anyone who has experienced an Internet argument knows these exchanges are almost always frustrating/infuriating, unpleasant, and difficult to disengage from. Furthermore, the “sunk cost” of these interactions hardly ever produces a worthwhile outcome – either both parties snipe endlessly at the other, trying to get in the last word, or one (or both, or more) parties eventually refuses to engage further (usually citing the “closed-minded”/rude behavior of their opponent). It is very rare (in my experience, anyway) that one or both of the involved users leave the conversation feeling like their perspective was effectively communicated and understood.

Make no mistake: these arguments, on Reddit and elsewhere, can be and often are asinine and, in the global scheme of things, inconsequential. They can be an endless siren’s call of disagreement and strife—the XKCD comic at the opening of the chapter captures this sense of foolishly urgent, sleep-depriving futility, the never-ending Sisyphean battle against those who are Wrong On The Internet. However, we should not be too quick to overgeneralize and dismiss all of these interactions as completely irrelevant. There are times when more is at stake than simple opinion or preference – when these arguments are about contesting and constituting the very fabric of social reality, particularly when it comes to issues relating to difference. The majority of the internet argument experiences that my interlocutors relayed to me fell into this second category. The preponderance of these stories within my research data suggests that something more significant is taking place than simple, petty one-on-one argumentation.

One of the things that drew me to Reddit as a subject of study in the first place were the one-on-one exchanges I saw, these moments of seemingly random and intimate connection between users. I saw, and experienced, those connections build into communities, and expand even further into a shared, generalized “Redditor” identity. I was very optimistic about the potentially transformative and connective potential of Reddit when I first started the project. These one-on-one connections that I was seeing appeared to be happening outside of and across categories of difference – a form of temporary, long-distance, anonymized yet personal intimacy that I thought could be harnessed to foster productive intergroup communication.

In the course of my research, many of the patterns that I found ran completely counter to my initial theorizations and expectations. In this particular case, I was both right and wrong. I was able to find significant, widespread shared experiences among the Redditors that I interviewed of one-on-one discussions and connections, which confirmed the idea that there was something about the medium or setup of Reddit that facilitated these kinds of exchanges, and that my own connective experience was not anomalous but rather typical. In my introduction, I invoked the figure of the flaneur. The flaneur is he who travels, a figure of detached engagement, archetypically an artsy, white, male wanderer of 19th century London or Paris. While the flaneur does have roots in a specific historical and spatial context, he is also always-already an abstraction, a symbol, a sign that points to something else. In the ideal, the flaneur is a centered subject, able to move effortlessly through the city, enjoying all the sights and sounds of cultural exchange that urban life has to offer. He can be abstracted to represent any number of things: an itinerant and detached methodology, a symbol of bygone leisure since overrun by capitalism and modernity.

The flaneur also represents a fantasy, an imagined masculinized ability to move without friction or resistance through space and social context. In this ideal, all space is open and habitable to the flaneur. This absolute freedom of movement could not be possible, even for a subject who would have more mobility and privilege than most. There will always be places in the city he will find uninhabitable: where he will be unwelcome, where he will feel or be unsafe and/or actively endangered or threatened. The fine clothes of a London dandy may assist the flaneur in his movement through middle- and upper-class spaces, but they will also mark him as an easy target for robbery should he venture into a seedier part of town. Along with his performance of class, the flaneur’s masculine gender presentation allows him to move through the streets without fear of sexual harassment or assault.

When I first started to ask my interlocutors about their connections in the city, I initially expected to find some romantic version of 19th century London or Paris: pleasant interactions in cafes and parks, informal salons. However, what I encountered was far more heterotopic, more along the lines of what an actual flaneur probably would have experienced. I found intellectual exchange, but I also found heated arguments, disagreements, and skirmishes. I saw beauty and diversity, but I also saw ugliness and danger. These clashes I observed were not simply individual moments of disharmony – they were occurring inside of a larger context: the ongoing struggle to determine the conditions of “habitability” on Reddit for different groups. At this point I would like to distinguish the concept of “habitable” online space as overlapping with, but also distinct from, online “safe space”. Most of the conditions associated
with habitability are marked by absence and lack rather than presence. A habitable space is one in which abusive language, hostile private messages, and degrading imagery directed at particular aspects of one’s identity is not pervasive or condoned. Habitability is always relative and uneven due to the particular position the user occupies in intersecting axes of difference, such as gender, race, and sexuality. Reddit is habitable across the board for white, heterosexual, male-identified users, but for female-identified users and/or people of color, that habitability is far more tentative and patchy.

A safe space must at least be habitable, but a habitable space may not be particularly safe. For example, a well-moderated subreddit about current events could be perfectly habitable for a trans-identified individual (marked by the absence of harassment and the lack of transphobic language) without necessarily being a safe, productive space to discuss transspecific issues. As discussed in the previous chapter, many of my moderators were motivated to start and maintain subreddits specifically focused on intersectional difference precisely because of the lack of these opportunities elsewhere on Reddit.

I define safe space as possessing all the qualities of habitable space, with additional shared contextual and ideological frameworks between users. Safe space is not a place in which everyone agrees: rather, it is a place to voice thoughts and ask questions with the reasonable expectation that all parties involved in the discussion will remain respectful even in disagreement. The moderators I interviewed often cited openness to debate (in good faith) as a crucial component in their definitions of safe space:

Where you don't feel afraid to voice your opinion. As long as you voice it in a respectable manner, you're not trashing people, you're just like, look, I disagree because of such and such. That for me is my idea of safe space. Because otherwise - there's a difference between safe space and echo chamber. Because you do run the risk of everyone having the same opinion all being bottled in this one venue, to just talk about this one thing, that they all share an opinion on. That's not really - that's boring to me. If you all have the same opinions, what's the point of even participating? I like having discussions, and I like being in places where I can have thought-out, insightful discussions on various topics. So to me, safe space is more about encouraging civil dialogue, rather than having a space where certain people from a certain identity can congregate. - Alice

I would say it's somewhere where you feel open to talking about issues without the fear - and even if there's disagreement, it's still respectful disagreement. I think those are the main things. You can post whatever you want, and you can post your opinion, and it might be contrary to everybody else's opinion, but as long as you're respectful in your responses, [not] you should just die, you should get raped. - Jean

In my interviews, I asked my interlocutors a particular set of questions about how safe and habitable of a space they perceived various parts of Reddit to be, particularly when it came to direct discussions about difference. The majority of the experiences they relayed to me were negative in some way, and rarely ended in any kind of concrete resolution. I had a notion that the absence of markers of difference and explicit power structures was inherently liberatory, that justice (or at least a lack of overt oppression) would form in a vacuum. This one-on-one connection was happening, throughout Reddit, but instead of transcending or circumventing difference, it was more often than not a re-assertion and reification of existing power structures (racist cisgender patriarchy is a concise term to start).

The Internet arguments about difference that I observed, as well as the experiences of my interlocutors, have led me to theorize that these disagreements about difference are an integral and granular part of the ongoing struggle for habitable and safe space both inside and outside of Reddit. Thus these interactions are always-already bound up in power and the ongoing construction of hegemonic social reality. What is taking place in these exchanges is a capillary exercise of power that is necessarily encompasses more than simply its participants – a complex pattern of movement and resistance.

Territorialization is a concept taken up by philosophers Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (2006) in their two-book series “Capitalism and Schizophrenia.” The word “territorialization” more generally simply means to organize or establish a space as a territory that belongs to or is under the jurisdiction of a particular entity (usually the state). However, Deleuze and Guattari employ an expanded, kinetic approach that considers not only physical space but also abstract concepts and cultural structures as territories. For them, territorialization is a process by which a sign, concept, or object is “organized, stratified, signifies, [and] attributed” (9), “programs
[that] desire to valorize certain organs and objects at the expense of others” (Holland 19). Deleuze and Guattari argue that all territory is in a “hydraulic” (liquid) state of flux, and is not singularly “territorialized,” but rather is constantly in the process of de- and reterritorialization. To put it simply, de- and re-territorialization are processes in which connections are (respectively) broken and created. De-territorialization is “any process that decontextualizes a set of relations” or “detach[es] a sign from its content of signification” (Massumi 51), while re-territorialization seeks to re-establish context and significance (although, crucially, re-territorialization is not only an inherently conservative project that seeks to re-establish a disrupted status quo).

These concepts are mutually constitutive and intertwined. Throughout both volumes of “Capitalism and Schizophrenia,” the authors emphasize that these processes are not binary opposites, nor are they mutually exclusive. Rather, much like their arborescent (hierarchical, stratified) and rhizomatic (decentralized, smooth) models of organization, each contains the other: “there are knots of arborescence in rhizomes, and rhizomatic offshoots in roots” (20). Almost all de-territorialization is “relative”, meaning that some degree of re-territorialization follows after. Absolute de-territorialization, much like the “body without organs”, approaches impossibility: an idea that is conceptually feasible but largely unattainable or unsustainable in practice.

The particular encounters that I examine in this chapter, as well as the patterns of interaction I describe more broadly in the rest of the dissertation, can be read as an ongoing process of de- and re-territorialization of safe space on Reddit. No single dominant or subordinated group has an exclusive claim to one process over the other, despite the temptation to intuitively link the less powerful group with subversion and de-territorialization and the center with (re)territorialization. However, dominant groups may seek to deterritorialize existing “safe” minoritarian spaces (or push back against a perceived “encroachment” onto an-already territorialized space). Subordinated groups may also seek to re-territorialize spaces and practices that may have been co-opted or quashed by the center. Far from occurring in a cultural or social vacuum, these interactions are moments of potential de- and re-territorialization, a demarcation of the terms of the space. A casually sexist comment or post that has been highly upvoted serves to draw a particular boundary that cuts into a sense of safe space for female-identified users. Furthermore, it also re-territorializes along the edge of that annexed space, by establishing (through the popularity and pervasiveness of sexist content) that while Reddit may not be a safe space for women, it is a safe space in which to speak in a sexist manner about them.

In the apparently neutral structurelessness of Reddit, I observed and my interlocutors reported a strong bend towards the reproduction of various forms of hegemony (racism, sexism, homo- and transphobia). Feminist scholar Jo Freeman (2013) theorized a “tyranny of structurelessness”, in which hegemonic, unequal power distributions inevitably emerge in avowedly “structureless” groups (she was describing second-wave, 1970s consciousness-raising women’s groups). The informal organization that occurs in the vacuum of structurelessness gives “elites” a kind of power that rapidly becomes disjointed from the larger group. “Their power was not given to them; it cannot be taken away. Their influence is not based on what they do for the group; therefore they cannot be directly influenced by the group...the group simply cannot compel responsibility; it is dependent on the interests of the elite” (3).

It is seductive, and intuitive, to think of the Internet, of “cyberspace”, as an “elsewhere”, a moving target. Two initial metaphors (“surfing the Net” and “information superhighway”) that emerged for Internet use both evoke movement and travel at high speeds. Both of these situations (surfing and highway driving) intrinsically require constant forward motion in order to continue. At such high speeds, a disjunction may appear to occur, in which “online” and “offline” become separated: we’ve left our old power structures in the dust. However, the notion of cyberspace as a structureless space that has transcended difference was not supported by the experiences that my interlocutors reported on Reddit about these issues. Some scholars of new media and difference (such as Lisa Nakamura (2002, 2007)) have been resistant to these narratives of cyberspace as friction-free transcendence. They argue that cyberspace is not and never was neutral: we take our social “baggage” with us online. The blueprints for these dominant power structures don’t disappear or become irrelevant. No matter how fast we drive on the information superhighway, reproduction of hegemonic power structures isn’t something we can outrun.

Microaggressions and Molehills
One of the reasons it can be so difficult to recognize and critique the inequalities inherent in hegemonic systems (patriarchy, white supremacy, heterosexism, classism, ableism) is because this oppression appears most often to operate without conscious intent and without using force. In the case of Reddit, one manifestation of this oppression is discursive overoccupation of shared online space by dominant groups in a way that prevents it from being fully habitable by non-dominant groups. This over-occupation runs the gamut from overt hostility to repeated “microaggressions”, in which “brief everyday exchanges...send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership” (Sue 2007).

Each of these microaggressions is a capillary exercise of power, in which the dominant group asserts the exclusivity of its claim to the commons through a continuum of behaviors that include “microassault”, “microinsult”, or “microinvalidation” (Sue et al, 2007). Microassaults are “explicit...derogation[s]” including purposefully hostile behaviors such as name-calling and purposeful avoidance or discriminatory actions. Microinsults are more subtle but still hostile and exclusionary; often with a hidden insulting message to the margin (an example would be referring to particular African-Americans as “articulate”, the hidden message being that this case is an exception to the rule that most African-Americans are not intelligent or well-spoken). Microinvalidations are more subtle still, and are communicative acts that “exclude, negate, or nullify” the experiences, perspectives, and realities of the marginalized group. Individually, each interaction may not seem to be that much. But taken together, a clearly maintained

hegemonic boundary emerges that systematically excludes, invalidates, and oppresses those outside of dominant power structures, seemingly without conscious organization or force. Historically, when members of subordinated groups have called attention to (micro)aggressive hegemonic behaviors (such as feminist critiques of workplace sexual harassment), they are often met with further microaggression and micro (and macro) invalidation. One such trivializing behavior is that the wronged party is “making mountains out of molehills”: blowing a tiny, negligible incident completely out of proportion. In the commonly understood context of this phrase, the “molehills” are provided as the small end of the equation, the mountain’s tiny counterpart. However, like the chapter’s eponymous “internet arguments”, these seemingly insignificant interactions also represent, on a (delightfully) literal level, active displacement of ground and territory.

Speaking as the unfortunate bystander to a lawn in the multi-year process of being overrun with moles, I can attest to the incredible destruction that can come with the accumulation of molehills. They can completely uproot, destabilize, erode, and destroy a yard. The little tunnels seemed harmless at first, barely noticeable – a bump here or there on the ground, the grass still intact. But as time passed, the trails become more established, the intrusions more pronounced and noticeable. Grass started to die in curving streaks across the lawn, the ground underneath cracked and broken in subway-line patterns. When I mowed the grass, I would sometimes intentionally walk on the spongy, bulging earth of the mole tunnels, trying to collapse them down, but I knew I was fighting a losing battle.

Despite all lethal and non-lethal efforts to stop them, the mole infestation continued. Particular areas of the yard got so bad that firm, non-tunneled ground was the rare exception rather than the rule. The grass was mostly dead and the ground sank softly beneath my feet when I walked, its root system completely undermined by the molehills. The yard became harder and harder to mow as the earth became more and more uneven. The blades would regularly choke on the protruding mounds of dirt, ripping up what little grass there was left. There were places in the yard that were so spongy, so completely riddled with these collapsing hollow tunnels, that the mower just sank into the soil, nearly impossible to push. The damage to the yard was extensive, and not easily repairable. Just as the repeated tunneling of the moles and accumulation of molehills completely undermined the integrity of the lawn, the repeated experiences and accumulation of microaggressions serves as a way to undercut and damage those outside of hegemonic power structures.

However, there are places where this metaphor breaks down. The point of making this comparison is in no way to trivialize or minimize the often-precarious lived experience and shared culture of marginalized groups. These “molehills” are indeed also mountains in their own right, and have their roots in long and painful histories of trauma, rupture, and brutalization. There is also a crucial difference between the moles that are tearing up my yard and perpetrators of microaggressive behavior. The destruction that moles leave in their wake is unintentional, but also uncontrollable: they are simply doing what they do, albeit in a way that is extremely inconvenient to those above ground. While microaggressions may be subconscious, they are not involuntary; nor are they inevitable or necessary for survival. Moles are not responsible for their behavior, but people are.

Whether we are talking about matters as momentous as social justice or as quotidian...
and middle-class as keeping a tidy yard, the principle is the same: the pernicious effects of

these small-scale yet systematic underminings are dramatic and profound. In the next section, I continue this spatializing metaphor by considering habitable online space as a “commons” that, while theoretically should be open to all, is nevertheless overoccupied by particular groups in such a way that makes the space unsafe for others.

The Embattled Commons

The term “commons” was originally used to describe a piece of grazing land that is not individually/privately owned, and is instead used by and shared between the surrounding community members. However, for over 150 years, scholars have been using the idea of “the commons” as a metaphor for any shared community resource and the challenges of its regulation and distribution. William Forster Lloyd, an English economist, published a pamphlet in 1833 using the commons as a theoretical example of how individually beneficial actions (in this case, overgrazing by large personal herds of cattle) can be detrimental to the entire group (depletion of grass resulting in a resource shortage).

In 1968, economist Garrett Hardin took up Lloyd’s notion of the commons in an extremely well-known article titled “The Tragedy of the Commons”. Hardin’s article is centrally focused on the conflict between individual gain and overall group sustainability, and concludes that without external regulation, a “tragedy of the commons” will eventually occur in which the sum of individually beneficial actions exceeds the capacity of the shared resource, crippling its ability to sustain and reproduce itself. His article more explicitly abstracts and extends the notion of “the commons” from a physical space to any kind of community resource, physical or non-physical, and also introduces the idea of a “negative commons”: an individual externality/cost that is absorbed by the community at large (i.e. pollution).

In the nearly five decades since the publication of this piece, scholars from a variety of disciplines have incorporated, critiqued, and reworked the metaphor of the “tragedy of the commons”. The metaphor was proved itself a flexible one that was used to argue for multiple, directly conflicting ideological positions. Hardin himself used the metaphor to argue for the necessity of formal regulation (“mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon”) of consumption and conservation. However, Derek Jensen (2007) documents and critiques ways in which the tragedy of the commons is used towards the seemingly opposite purpose: as scare-tactic “propaganda” for the right-wing privatization of public land and global resources.

A source of multiple critiques of the theory was the apparent inevitability of the tragedy, that it painted a historically inaccurate, unnecessarily dismal view of human interaction that also failed to take into account other external social and contextual factors that may serve to regulate community members’ usage of the commons. One of the most famous revisions to the theory was authored by Nobel Prize-winning economist Elinor Ostrom in 1990, in which she argues that the tragedy of the commons is not inevitable. Through examining the practices for managing natural resources by localized communities in Africa and Nepal, she argues that there exist not only theoretical, but practical ways to successfully and sustainably regulate “common pool resources.”

As I examined the patterns of the internet arguments about difference that my interlocutors relayed to me, I noticed a striking similarity between the multiple accounts. When it came to head-to-head interactions about difference, there was always a sense of a boundary being transgressed, a perceived encroachment. This sense of transgression was universally shared: both parties responded defensively despite occupying differing positions of power.

Regardless of who initiates them, these interactions are acts of continual de- and reterritorialization. These moments of de- and re-territorialization were not random and disconnected - they cluster around specific issues and practices, and dispute and contest ownership of and access to a particular territory. I would argue that the territory being contested, more broadly, is “safe space”. An online space that is “safe” is a space marked by a specific set of freedoms, rights, and privileges. Some of these freedoms are “freedoms to” – for example, the freedom to speak openly, or freedom of movement. However, most of these freedoms are actually marked by absence, “freedoms from” – from harassment, from hateful discourse and the use of slurs, to the microaggressions, microinsults, and microinvalidations that can quickly accumulate to make an online space feel distinctly unsafe.

I was drawn to the metaphor of the (tragedy of the) commons because it seemed to capture many of the elements of Reddit I was observing. For a majoritarian subject with existing access to the commons, it can be individually beneficial to engage in microaggressions (consciously or unconsciously). These actions reinforce (territorialize) an existing system of
power which benefits particular groups at the expense of others. Furthermore, the dominant group does not have exclusive ownership over the territory being contested (safe space): rather, it is a shared resource that is available to all community members. In my formulation, to have access to “the commons” of habitable (online) space is to be treated by other users as a full and complete subject, to have one’s concerns and perspectives validated, taken seriously, and seen as worthwhile. More broadly, subjects with full access to the commons are able to move through space and institutions with a minimum of friction and given the benefit of the doubt in moments of potential conflict. They are represented in sympathetic, complex, and widespread ways, enabling them to be seen as individuals rather than tokenized, overdetermined, one-dimensional Others. In short, the commons encompasses almost all of the privileges that centered subjects enjoy (whether that center is whiteness, class-based, cisgenderedness, maleness, able-bodiedness, straightness, or some intersection of two or more of those categories). As the overwhelmingly negative experiences of my interlocutors illustrated, the current state of access to “the commons” on Reddit is not an equitable one. But as Ostrom points out, there are ways in which this tragedy can be averted, where access can be managed in a way that enables the entire community to use the resource. It is possible to sustainably share the commons, but it cannot happen in an unstructured vacuum. The metaphor of the commons also illustrates that, when it comes to dignity and rights, there is enough to go around. Equality and social justice is not a zero-sum game, and there is enough room for everybody at the table (or, in this case, in the pasture). I have called the commons of Reddit “embattled” because while in theory each individual has rights of access, in reality more powerful groups overoccupy/territorialize the commons and create borders that prevent less powerful groups from gaining access. The instances of “border work” I examine in this chapter are happening at these points of intersection between territories. In person-to-person interaction as well as larger symbolic/structural gestures, claims to the commons are implicitly and explicitly made and contested.

Michel de Certeau (1980) makes a distinction between strategies and tactics in The Practice of Everyday Life. Strategies are long-term, pre-orchestrated sets of plans or structures, while tactics are in-the-moment, on-the-ground responses to gaps in hegemonic structures. Tactics “vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them” (37). Strategies are associated with power and institutions, while tactics are ad-hoc mobilizations by the less powerful in an attempt to thwart or evade strategic and hegemonic measures. When it comes to the “border work” encounters that the rest of this chapter will examine, strategies and tactics are being mobilized towards both hegemonic and counterhegemonic ends, in order to stake claims to or enforce exclusion from the commons. What takes place through these repeated microaggressions is a major part of how hegemonic structures are able to reproduce themselves, in both structured and apparently “structureless” online environments (such as Reddit). The first section of the remainder of this chapter examines my interlocutors’ experiences of instances of hegemonic “over-occupation” – interactions in which causal racist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic remarks serve to territorialize the safety of Reddit as an online space. The second section will look at the strategies and tactics that my interlocutors used in order to push back against this overoccupation and attempt to reclaim safer space on behalf of themselves or others.

As discussed in the introduction, the demographics of Reddit skew strongly towards white, college-age and/or college-educated, heterosexual Anglophone males between the ages of 18-29. Almost all of my female-identified interlocutors reported noticing at least some instances of sexist behavior, and some shared experiences of being targeted more directly. I would more broadly contextualize these experiences of harassment and systematic invalidation as an overoccupation of the commons that re-territorializes the conditions through which female-identified users can occupy and travel the city. Practices, content, and expressions that are considered “everyday” can and often do contain casual, heterosexist microaggressions against women that make the space less habitable. For a flaneuse strolling through a digital metropolis such as Reddit, the “city streets” will look different than they did for the flaneur filled with additional danger and catcalls. “Male until proven otherwise”
I think the biggest thing I've noticed, is this perception, and assumption, that you're male until proven otherwise. And there are many times that when proven otherwise, you're not necessarily treated nicely. -S2

And somebody said something about - that's great, congratulations, good for you, dude...When people disagree with you, the intensity really - either they assume you're male, or it's really diminutive. Like - people going and saying, look, buddy, I know you're trying to help, but you're wrong because of these reasons, kind of thing.

-Colleen

Around three-quarters of my interlocutors were female-identified in some form, and several of them individually and independently mentioned running up against a primary and common assumption when interacting with other Redditors: the notion that the person on the other side of the screen is (white and) male. This shorthand is reflected in visual representation as well – the canon of minimalist “rage faces” that appear in user-generated, often self-representational “rage comics” are understood to be, by default, white and male.

All other forms of difference are visually marked with some kind of additional “attachment”, much like a paper doll. Characters were signified as female by the addition of a hair template with a headband and bow. Non-white race was often indicated by using a brown colored fill tool (or even manually “coloring” into the image), whereas the template left as-is signified whiteness. More complex forms of representation emerged over time – rage faces and “attachments” grew, somewhat, to include slightly less simplistic representations of difference. However, the underlying assumption that fueled that visual representation is the same: whiteness and maleness is the base, the default, the center.

This implicit centering may seem like a very small thing, insignificant even, particularly given the demographic makeup of Reddit. If the majority of users identify as male, isn’t assuming that any hypothetical interlocutor is male simply a sensible discursive shortcut? I would argue that assuming most Redditors are male is not in and of itself intrinsically sexist. However, the implicit centering that results from the extension of that assumption provides extremely favorable conditions for hegemonic sexist power structures to reproduce themselves in the apparent “structureless” or “neutrality” of Reddit as a medium.

Stereotyped, Harmful Representations: Good Guy Greg and Good Girl Gina

Many of my interlocutors, both female and male identified, identified a persistent pattern of stereotyped, microaggressive representations of women that reinforced hegemonic expectations of femininity across many or all of the “mainstream” subreddits. Particularly egregious offenders were the extremely popular r/pics, r/funny, and r/AdviceAnimals – the latter two subreddits being the source of several sexist “funny” memes. Mary nicely sums up here the Madonna/whore dualism that structures this kind of content:

The douchebag girlfriend, too. ...either she's a good girlfriend because she gives you oral sex when you've been dating for two years, or she comes home and bakes a cake for you, wow, she's so awesome. Or the bad one is always - she's cheating on me, woe is me, my life sucks. -Mary

For a specific example, this next section will focus on two particular memes: Good Guy Greg and Good Girl Gina. Each of these figures comes to represent a powerful nexus of interlocking hegemonic ideologies about masculinity, femininity, race and class. Knobel and Lankshear (2007) argue that Internet memes are an “objective and distinct social phenomena” that have the ability to create “affinity spaces” (Gee, 2004) where informal social learning takes place and meaning is transmitted.

Image macros are a particular form of user-generated meme that combine small amounts of text (typically less than 20 words) with images. In most cases, the background image remains the same while the text changes, but some macros have the same text over different images (the most popular of these being the “FAIL” macro, which adds the word “FAIL” to relevant images). Macros are extremely easy to make: several websites (such as QuickMeme or MemeGenerator) offer free templates of the most popular background images, which then only require the user to type their caption in the appropriate boxes.

Good Guy Greg is a meme with a static background: an image of a confident, friendly-looking white man in a blue polo shirt, smoking what appears to be a joint and smiling. The text on the macro describes one of Greg’s many everyday good deeds, which are almost always pulled from the creators’ personal experiences. They usually describe the actions of someone...
else as opposed to oneself: sometimes these macros will be submitted to Reddit under the headline “Good Guy Roommate” or “Good Guy Teacher”.

First picture: “Borrows $5, Pays Back $10”  
Second Picture: “Leaves for class before roommate in winter, scrapes ice off of windshield for him”

Greg’s actions range from using common courtesy with friends and strangers to more elaborate acts of kindness, sometimes at personal expense. The repetition of the same background photograph in each image macro serves to fix Greg as a generic everyman, a universal figure of kindness and generosity. The relationship between the (ostensible) author of the image macro, the audience, and Greg is a shifting one - while most of the macros are written in third person, some are written using a second person mode of address. (Examples: “Notices you don’t talk much, doesn’t talk about you not talking”; “Accidentally goes through yellow light while you’re following, pulls over and waits for you”).

In describing the considerate things that Good Guy Greg does for “you,” Greg is rendered even more kind, personal, and relatable. He is usually imagined as a friend or a kind stranger, but rarely as “your” lover or boyfriend - macros that describe Greg’s relationship to a partner are overwhelmingly written in third person, and his romantic relationships are assumed to be heterosexual. (Examples: “Loves his girlfriend, doesn’t write it all over Facebook”; “Gives flowers to his girlfriend on Valentine’s Day, and also to his girlfriend’s single housemate”).

Good Guy Greg’s origins are somewhat fuzzy, but the macro is rumored to have emerged from the popular image-sharing website 4chan, in their notorious /b/ section. The first Good Guy Greg macro was posted to Reddit on May 19, 2011, and remains a popular submission in the AdviceAnimals subreddit, an area of the site devoted exclusively to image macros.

Approximately 6 months after Good Guy Greg appeared as a popular image macro, a Reddit user posted a stock photo of a smiling, conventionally attractive white woman with her hair streaming behind her, hand on her chin, in the AdviceAnimals subreddit with the caption “Puts the toilet seat up / After using the toilet”. The title introduced the woman in the image as “Good Girl Gina.” While the first macro received a lukewarm reception, more “Good Girl Gina” macros soon began to appear.

This is the “Good Girl Gina” macro that first made it to the frontpage of Reddit (meaning it received a great deal of positive attention from a large number of users) on January 30, 2012:

161

Caption: “Wears a T-shirt at the beach, so overweight friend isn’t the only one”

The differences between Good Girl Gina and Good Guy Greg are stark, despite their similarity in name and format. Good Girl Gina’s actions are much more particular, and the vast majority of the image macros describe some kind of feminine behavior, behavior of hers that caters to men, or both. (Examples: “Brings pound of bacon to third date, ‘I thought I’d cook this for you tomorrow morning’”; “Divorces you, doesn’t take your stuff”) She is portrayed as self-sacrificing, sexually receptive (but not promiscuous), and interested in the comfort and wellbeing of others (particularly men). (Examples: “Lets you know she’s crazy, before you bang her”; “Notices you checking her out, smiles and takes it as flattery”). While Good Guy Greg is imagined as a friend or perhaps a kind stranger, Good Girl Gina is almost exclusively imagined as the “girlfriend” of the reader, and the “you” in the second-person macros is imagined to be romantically or sexually linked with her in some way, either through a relationship or as a potential suitor.

It is clear that these image macros are constructing two very different and extremely gendered visions of what it means to be “good”. Greg’s goodness is portrayed as universal: he does things that good people do. His gender performance rarely openly factors into his good deeds, but when it does, (such as when he is kind to women), it is still concordant with larger structures of hegemonic masculinity. He does not go out of his way to cater to women’s desires specifically. Gina’s goodness, on the other hand, is intimately tied into larger conventionally gendered notions of what it means to be a “good girl” in a contemporary Western (and largely US) context: pretty, self-sacrificing, sexually receptive, attentive to the needs of her partner or potential partner. The image representing “Good Guy Greg” is a candid, non-professional photo, while the image that represents “Good Girl Gina” is a professionally shot, posed photograph that may or may not have been retouched postproduction, reflecting
the emphasis placed on women’s appearance as an indicator of their “goodness” and overall worth. The critique that men are considered to be the universal subject whose gender is at best “irrelevant” while women are constantly saddled with the burden of specificity is not a new one in feminist thought. Simone de Beauvoir, in her famous 1949 monograph *The Second Sex*, argues that:

The terms masculine and feminine are used symmetrically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers. In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. (5)

The idea of the masculine standing in for both the positive and the neutral is reflected in the ways in which “Good Guy Greg” is constructed as a universal representation of non-gendered good behavior, while Good Girl Gina’s deeds are defined almost exclusively through the “limiting criteria” of her gender.

The sexist overtones of “Good Girl Gina” macros did not go entirely unnoticed by Reddit users, particularly users associated with feminist subreddits. Informal critiques of the stereotypes and expectations placed on Gina began to circulate shortly after the macro gained popularity and more widespread visibility on the site.

Caption: Only considered a “good girl” because she conveniently does whatever you want her to do

Seeking more quantitative data to back up the anecdotal observations of this pattern of sexism in Good Girl Gina macros, the Reddit user LaTeX_fetish analyzed all “Good Girl Gina” memes uploaded to the Quickmeme website (a site Reddit users often use to construct image macros). This user found three major categories for Good Girl Gina macros: captions that sexualized her in some way and praised her for being sexually available (“Gives you a blowjob, doesn’t expect you to go down on her”) captions that dealt with “female stereotypes” such as taking too long to get ready or being difficult in arguments (“Says she’ll be ready in 10 minutes, actually is”) and captions that praised Gina for not “rocking the boat” by calling attention to herself or her femininity. (“Is a girl gamer, doesn’t try to whore herself out for attention”) Of the 1,390 memes analyzed and weighted for popularity, 65 percent of them contained at least one of these elements, while 43 percent contained both sexualizing and “not rocking the boat” themes.

Clearly, then, these macros are prescriptive in addition to being descriptive: to be a good girl or guy, one ought to do these things. These images concisely mediate larger social scripts about gendered behavior and identity, compressing complex and diffuse social ideals of masculinity and femininity into a short, standardized format. Through visual repetition of identical background images, each individual macro becomes part of a much larger intertext, like individual tiles in a mosaic. Patterns begin to emerge.

These patterns, however, are not neutral – rather, they reflect problematic trends that do not stop with sexist prescriptions for “good” female behavior. These image macros also reinscribe the gender binary; setting up men and women in a hierarchical relationship to one another that presumes heterosexuality. These powerful tidbits of culture continue to place white, young, heterosexual masculinity as the center of human experience, conflating the particularity of this identity category with a claim to broad universality. The specificities of whiteness and masculinity are masked, becoming unmarked, centered, normalized. These particular images and paradigms can powerfully set the tone in the online spaces in which they are deployed, such as Reddit. They send a very clear message to female users (and other marginalized subjects): your experiences and perspectives are not as inherently valuable or welcome here.

Unwanted Attention for being female

The darker side of the seemingly harmless “male until proven otherwise” trope is the demonstrated backlash that occurs when the “proven otherwise” condition is activated. I know from seeing things on Reddit threads, that if you post up a pic of yourself that is not pornographic or sexual, your inbox is flooded for requests from civil to graphic, for more. To hey, you seem really nice, maybe we should hang out sometime, to, I want to, show me the rest of your body. –S2

165
Which is what tends to happen on a lot on Reddit. When you try to post anything, and it's not safe. It's a running joke on Reddit, but if they find out you're a woman, you start getting all of these messages, like, hey can you send me a picture, that kind of thing. Jean The formal and informal hegemonic structures that have been reproduced in the seemingly "neutral" space of Reddit give male heterosexuality such primacy that the simple act of inhabiting a feminized body constitutes an open invitation to be looked at and directly sexualized. This unwanted, nonconsensual visibility serves as an open arena for the exercise of misogynist (micro)aggression and reveals the underlying imbalance of power that allows one party (men) to gaze at and objectify another (women). The combination of these things makes it difficult or impossible for users marked as female to move through the space of "the commons" in any meaningfully safe way.

Public Female Objectification

Visual images of women - in particular personal photographs, were an often-mentioned and fraught topic for my female interlocutors. The widespread pattern of harassing female users for personal pictures mentioned earlier reveal a deep level of misogynist entitlement to women’s bodies. Photographs of women were also often distributed, sexualized, and critiqued on Reddit without their knowledge or consent (more on some particularly odious examples of this in chapter 4).

A few of my interlocutors reported photographs of themselves being directly and blatantly objectified. They relayed to me widely upvoted comments (as well as private messages) that explicitly reduced them to the sum of their physical attributes and traditional standards of sexual attractiveness.

And at some point I posted a picture, and I was wearing a T-shirt, and it was - it's not even like there was cleavage, you could see my upper sternum, it wasn't even that tight, and someone made some comment about like me having a nice rack. -Anne JackieLake described a particular photo post she made in a subreddit called r/progresspics. This weight-loss/exercise-themed subreddit is exclusively geared to “help everyone understand the transformation and journey you’ve been on”. The purpose of posting pictures is to be able to elicit praise and encouragement from others through difficult/demanding regimes of weight loss and bodily transformation. To be clear: there are subreddits called “AmISexy” or “HotOrNot” – this was not one of those subreddits. Despite these clearly stated guidelines, the bulk of comments on Jackie’s post were critiquing her physical appearance – more specifically, her desirability to a heterosexual male audience. Basically all the sub comments were yeah, I'd do her but I'd have to cover the chestpiece, or - and then guys arguing over whether or not tattoos were hot, and...then when I said, this is my goal weight - oh, you don't need to lose any more weight, you're at this, you look like this... and then, you get down further, the ones with just one or two upvotes are: you look great, good job! But like - the very top comment was, why did you ruin your beauty type thing. Actually, the first comment with the most upvotes was - "Amazing, also boobs." And the sub one right below it with the next most upvotes is "Indeed, it's a shame about the tattoo though." The next one said, "Yup, great eyes, great willpower, great achievement, horrible tattoo."

This particular, public form of objectification contains several simultaneous misogynist microaggressions. On a primary level, these objectifying comments are directed at the target (in this case, Jackie). Each comment is an individual moment of microassault, microinsult, or microinvalidation, in which the current online space is made marginally less habitable, little by little. However, these individual interactions take on larger significance because they are also witnessed by a larger public (in this case, all the Redditors reading and voting on the thread/comments. The fact that the “top” (meaning most upvoted/popular) comments were all related to Jackie's sexual attractiveness amplifies their oppressive effect by sending a message to other marginalized users: this kind of sexualizing and objectifying discourse is typical and acceptable. Your discomfort at receiving or witnessing these kinds of comments is not significant enough to warrant a change in behavior. Much like street harassment, this kind of blatant and public gender-based harassment of women derives much of its oppressive power from the ways it is able to operate, relatively unchecked, in the open. And just like street harassment, it makes public/common space unsafe, a constant gauntlet of potential harm. Unwanted private messages and one-on-one sexual harassment

My female interlocutors were able to confirm first-hand (unfortunately), that the trope of female users' inboxes being flooded with creepy private messages after posting a photograph of themselves or otherwise being “outed” as a woman often did accurately reflect
their experiences:

I got a couple [PMs]. I got where do you live, you're hot, would you be interested in this and this, are you a freak in bed, by the way you look I'm sure you are - that type of thing. I also subscribe to a subreddit called BigBoobProblems, because even when - I've always had, even when I was younger, just ridiculous. And we were talking about something like - I can't find a bra, when I was living in a small town. I couldn't find the right sized bra. And then I got private messages like, I'll hold them for you.

- JackieLake

Initially, when I first joined Reddit, I had someone send me a PM, and they said, oh, well, you're awfully proud of your big boobs, aren't you? And I said, I'm sorry? What do you mean by that? And he said, well, I looked at your profile and everything you have to say is about your boobs. - Hermoine

It's stressful getting messages like that. Particularly when a lot of them are PMs, so other people don't see it. I would go on sometimes and see some of the people who hated on me getting downvoted to oblivion, I got some sort of validation from that. There is support within the community, but a lot of them are private attacks.

- Colleen

Private messages are a particularly invasive form of aggression and hostility that can cause significant distress to the recipient. Because these messages are sent directly between users, these interactions occur without any kind of public accountability. This lack of visibility means that often users will say things in a private message that they would not post on a more publicly available format, even with the built-in anonymity of a Reddit handle. While moderators can ban users for content or comments posted in their particular subreddits, they do not have the ability or power to ban users based on the content of their private messages. And I began getting PMs. And in public, the comments were relatively positive. Like they were things like, well, you don't look fat anymore, stuff like that. There were a couple that were inappropriate and made me uncomfortable, but it was really the PMs that really got to me, where people were sexually propositioning me and stuff like that. And I've been on sexist websites before, but I've never had anyone sexually proposition me before, that was a new experience, and that was really shocking to me...I didn't expect the backlash. I didn't expect the level of anger that I got in the PMs, I didn't expect the sexualization. I didn't expect- and this was naive of me, posting in a forum about body discussions, but - I didn't expect that people would be sending me judgment, whether positive or negative, on my body. -Lana

These messages reflect an outgrowth of rape culture that assumes that women exist solely for the sexual pleasure of men, and that inhabiting a female body “in public” (whether physically or photographically) constitutes implicit and unconditional assent to the male gaze. Intrusive, unwanted, sexualizing private messages send a clear message to the recipient(s) that their own desires, personal comfort, and safety are irrelevant to the interaction taking place.

In the beginning of the chapter I discussed how Reddit as a platform is able to provide particular structured opportunities and openings for one-on-one interaction between (somewhat) anonymized users. I had high hopes for the generative potential of these connections, but I found out through my interlocutors that many, perhaps even most, of these one-on-one encounters were not generative, but in fact microaggressions of one form or another that served to reinscribe dominant power structures.

Of all of these one-on-one encounters, perhaps one of its most oppressive instantiations is misogynist, sexually harassing private messages. These messages carry with them the privacy, immediacy, and intimacy of new media – they will flash on a familiar screen, a laptop or phone. Perhaps the recipient sees the message before or while lying in bed. Maybe they will be on public transit, or at work. Regardless of the recipient’s physical location, this particular kind of harassment is doubly isolating. Within the context of the site, it occurs outside of the purview of other Redditors and moderators, meaning that the microassault is not witnessed by others and will almost certainly go unpunished. Within the context of the recipient’s everyday life, these messages have the potential to be mildly to extremely disrupting. While none of my interlocutors reported personal accounts of harassment that extended beyond Reddit, there are unfortunately ample accounts of the potential for online sexist harassment to have farreaching negative consequences in their targets’ offline lives, including stalking, harassment of friends and relatives, and persistent and graphic rape and death threats.

Racism

The most prevalent discrimination and microaggression/hostility that my interlocutors
and I encountered clustered mainly around two axes: gender and race. In some ways, these processes of exclusion were similar. Both leveraged a continuum of micro- to macro-aggressive discourse in order to continuously marginalize, invalidate, and devalue the non-centered group (women or people of color). In both cases, the experiences, desires, and subject position of the dominant group (men or white people) were explicitly and implicitly centered as default, normal, natural, and good, which marginalizes the experiences of all other groups.

I (unfortunately) found in the course of my research that the targets of racism were not confined to one particular group. However, in the mainstream/default, English-speaking subreddits, the most visible and persistent stereotypes and discourse focused on African Americans in particular. The median Reddit user is likely to be male (59%), even more likely to be connecting from the United States (68%) and is extremely likely to be white (77% of respondents in a 2013 Pew Research Center survey). All of these identities are centered, and the hegemonic systems that undergird each of them interlock. In the “structurelessness” of Reddit, structures of white supremacy emerged that enabled whiteness to over-occupy the commons in a similar way to masculinity.

Specifically for black crime, and what it is, and why it is. I don't know, I don't get it. It seems like something your racist grandfather would say, and it's being upvoted on Reddit. And it's being talked about openly. And there is a back and forth, there are people who disagree. But sometimes people can say these things in an intelligent way. It doesn't mean what they're saying is intelligent, but they're saying it in an intelligent way. And for whatever reason, they don't seem to be hiding that. That stereotype, justifying the stereotype. What I'm thinking about, you don't see commenters talking about why it's actually true that women are bad drivers, or can't do math, or what the fuck ever. But I do see commenters, and I see them upvoted, about why blacks actually do commit crime more often. And not because of socioeconomic status or institutionalized racism, but because of, and it's weird, it's really really weird. -S2

The worst that I've seen with racism is, of course, from a linguistic perspective, extraordinarily biased views against people who speak different dialects. And people will always be making fun of, if there's a video of someone speaking a non-standard dialect, they'll be - making claims about their intelligence and their education, making all of these judgments that you absolutely can't make about someone's language. Particularly AAVE (African-American Vernacular English), is extremely looked down upon, by Redditors who, I guess, certainly with the culture of the Grammar Nazi, prescriptive -... you'll find people saying terrible things. -LQ

Both of these anecdotes also reflect the subtler way that racist sentiments often expressed themselves on Reddit, often couched in the rhetoric of “self-justified discrimination” mentioned in the introduction. As Sterling noted in the discussion of transphobia earlier in the chapter, the majority of Reddit users consider themselves to be “liberal and right-thinking” (right as in correct, not as in conservative). Thus more openly gauche displays of racism are less common, or less well-received, than more subtle but still deeply microaggressive ones. This norm lends itself well to the rhetoric of “colorblindness” and “postracism” that also circulates on Reddit (and in the larger cultural context). By falsely and solely conflating racism with overt hostility, these ideas obscure and deny the deeply held and deeply rooted structures of institutionalized racism that operate below and beyond the level of conscious individual intent. They also offer centered subjects an easy “out” by providing a framework in which they are able to excuse themselves from any racialized interactions that may provoke discomfort. And I've seen that conversation happen, in that context. I'm not sure on blackladies specifically, but on a black-oriented subreddit. And I've seen that conversation go down, where the person says, no, black person, let me white person explain to you, black person, why you shouldn't be offended. -Sterling

I think the problem, the main problem, is the definitions of racist and racism that aren't used. So that there are a lot of things that people will say - like, I was just reading this Explain like I'm five, Why is blackface racist? This person was saying, I don't - I'm not trying to be mean, I just - I have white skin, and if I want to go as a celebrity who happens to be black, I will look more like that person if I wear blackface, so - what's, why is that racist? Because I'm not racist. [laughs] And so - if you - I guess I don't know how to respond to that, in a way that's effective. Because, um - I would try to say something about the context, like the historical context of it. And they'll say, well, yeah, that's in the past. But I'm in the present. -Ramon Olivares

While many of the mechanisms of sexism and racism interlock, I also found some key
differences between the processes and interactions that uphold patriarchy and sexism and the
processes and interactions that uphold white supremacy and racism. In my observation, and
based on my interlocutors’ reports, patriarchy was a much more embattled territory on Reddit
than whiteness and white supremacy was. Sexism on Reddit is endemic but regularly at least
contested: racism is just as endemic, but contested far less often.
[People actually think this [racist posts], and they've actually been upvoted. That more
than one person thinks this, dozens of people think this, and this is a discussion that's
happening on the site. –S2]
The presence of upvotes and downvotes as a community measure of approval adds an
additional dimension of visibility to these already-public speech acts. A racist comment with a
high amount of upvotes sends an additional message to marginalized subjects that not only do
these sentiments exist, but they are widely held and socially acceptable to express openly.
Furthermore, because of the way that Reddit is structured, upvoting and downvoting affect the
position in which a comment is displayed, which causes popular content to “rise to the top”
while less popular content is “buried”. Depending on the subreddit, this can mean that
implicitly or explicitly racist content could be extremely visible and attempts to contest it could
be silenced. (It can also mean the opposite – and I did find that in more social-justice oriented
subreddits, explicitly racist content tended to be downvoted).
This corresponds closely with similar microaggressions in face to face social situations, in
which the passivity or tacit approval of others (almost always also centered) contributes to the
oppressive weight of the situation. In both cases, the intended target not only has to bear the
microaggression directly, but the added sting of knowing that there were others who stood by

173

and witnessed their humiliation without intervening. The prominent display of upvoted racist
ccontent also serves to normalize those sentiments, both by repetition and appeal to popularity.
While open displays of bigotry were consistently downvoted in more social
justice/difference-oriented subreddits, these spaces were not free of racialized bias or the taint
of white supremacy. Several of my interlocutors critiqued the ways in which whiteness was
implicitly centered in feminist/female-oriented subreddits (the most mainstream being 2XC,
followed by feminism/feminisms). One of the clearest ways that this centering can be seen in
these subreddits is in the perennial topics of discussion, what is deemed important or worthy:
You're probably not going to get discussions about Asian women being fetishized and
exoticized, you're not going to get them talking about that in a larger sub like
2X. Because it just doesn't rank as important to them. And then you've got a lot of
cdescending women who are like - those poor women in the Middle East, who have
to hide under burkhas. You know, there are feminist Muslim women who also have
their own opinion on that sort of thing. There's no reason for you to have a discussion
about it, as if you know what's better, or what to do... And I'll be honest, I feel like the
brand of feminism that's practiced in 2X, and in those other female-dominated subs, is
more like feminism is for equal rights between white women and men. -Alice
Alice also discusses an instance of cultural appropriation that she uses to epitomize the ways in
which whiteness is centered in 2XC:
A: So for example, what kind of got me unsubscribing (from 2XC), is when I saw this
whole thread about - there was this white girl who dressed up in Indian clothes for her
wedding. Just because. She had no Indian friends... She had no connection to the
cultural heritage. And people were like, that looks great, so open, and whatever. And
there were some Indian girls who were like, actually, that's cultural appropriation, I
don't feel comfortable with that, that's our culture. And it's kind of insensitive for you
to - And those girls were completely shouted down. Completely like, well, it's
appropriate, her friend let her borrow it for her wedding, or K: "She has an Indian friend, so it's OK."
A: Exactly, it's exactly that sort of thing. And it was so dismissive of what people on the
other side, how other people felt about it. –Alice

174

This example is chock-full of microaggressions – from the initial act of cultural
appropriation, to the tacit and explicit approval of other users, to the heavy resistance to
critique of that appropriation. At each step, marginalized subjects are receiving a message loud
and clear: your comfort and objections are irrelevant to this interaction. What you want
doesn't matter, or doesn't matter enough to stop the center from overoccupying the commons.
I discuss these patterns of exclusion and inclusion for multiply marginalized subjects on Reddit
in more detail in Chapter four.
interlocutors, I found that casual homophobia and “ironic” use of slurs are far more widespread than one would expect in a place as “liberal” as Reddit purports itself to be.

**Homophobia**

In mainstream subreddits, occasionally you'll see homophobic comments, or jokes, or stereotypes upvoted. You get a little frustrated, like - the vast majority of people approve of this. And that's frustrating. - Dan

And I feel like maybe it's in the abstract, like we want gay rights in the abstract, but this idea that I have, people throwing around the word faggot as derogatory. And I don't understand this, this is upvoted and funny, just as the n-word has been. But you're fighting for these rights in the abstract, for gay marriage, and you think it's oppressive that the church is blah blah blah, and I don't disagree with you. But don't you think it's oppressive for you to use these words of difference, and I would never use that term, the f-word. -S2

My interlocutors also described the overwhelming heteronormativity they observed on Reddit, which is connected directly to the “male until proven otherwise” phenomenon discussed earlier in the chapter. There is an attendant assumption of heterosexuality attached to this presumed centered male subject position. This attachment interlocks with systems of patriarchy to do “double duty” when it comes to the widespread objectification of women's bodies on Reddit. Although they are less common than they used to be, “NSFW” (Not Safe for Work, usually indicating sexual content that is anywhere from suggestive to pornographic) images of traditionally attractive, young, able-bodied, thin, white women are still regularly upvoted to the front page in r/pics. The most recent incarnation of this trend has been professional pictures of (incredibly sculpted) female athletes in various states of undress. These photos, and their popularity and visibility, serve a dual marginalizing purpose. They objectify and alienate women by creating an impossible standard of hegemonic feminine beauty and desirability that prizes whiteness, youth, and ability. They also serve to fix desire for these particular bodies as universal, normal, and natural, which over-centers male heterosexuality while foreclosing other forms of queer desire.

**Biphobia/bi-erasure**

A few of my interlocutors mentioned instances of discrimination specifically towards bisexuality: either overt biphobia or subtler but still significant instances of bi-erasure. This lack of nuance intersects with other marginalizing discourses such as transphobia to uphold binary systems of identity within the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality. Normalization of these binary structures pushes liminal identities (intersex, genderqueer, non-gendered, trans*, bisexual, pansexual) towards the margins and into invisibility and illegibility. Bisexuals have to be an equal part of this community, and I can't go from a community where I'm called a whole bunch of stuff because one part of my sexuality, only to go to another community and be called something for another part of my sexuality.

-- Yossarian

I mean - you see it a little bit with like, if there's a post about a guy who seems to be kind of attracted to another guy, then he's automatically assumed like oh, he's gay, rather than like oh, he's bi. He has had a girlfriend for 10 years, and they have sex two times a week, but it seems like he likes his best friend like that, so he must be gay. --Sara

These examples also reflect the ways in which structures of privilege can and do reproduce themselves even within groups that are already marginalized. In this case, the centering of monosexuality or cisgender/cissexuality re-establishes a hierarchy that privileges and centers fixed, pre-existing binary identities over non-binary ones. While there are certainly key differences between bisexuality and trans identity, both groups are caricatured and marginalized on Reddit in similar ways.

**Transphobia**

The transphobic microaggressions that my interlocutors reported experiencing and observing were often more general and less direct (although I am certain that transgender users on Reddit do experience direct online harassment). These microaggressions encompassed “microinsult”, “microinvalidation”, and “microassault” (particularly around the use of the term “tranny”). When somebody makes a tranny joke, or - actually, a lot more common than that is when someone completely obliviously talks about "trannies". And you know, oh, I think trannies are some of the sexiest people out there! And I'm like yeah!, but that's not the way you say that... -Sterling

This particular term carried with it an attendant set of harmful, transphobic stereotypes. It overgeneralizes "transgender/transsexual" to a simple and inaccurate caricature of MtF trans women in the early stages of transition. It implicitly references pornography, associating trans
identity (and desire for trans bodies) with hypersexuality and deviance. It is also used as a

transmisogynistic insult to non-trans women, by suggesting that their beauty/femininity is so lacking that they must actually be a (poorly disguised) man:
The double whammy of when the people like to call Ann Coulter a tranny. That's offensive on so many levels - and there are so many good ways to insult Ann Coulter. There's no reason...And it's the presumption that she's ugly, therefore she's bad, and the presumption that being trans is being ugly...but none of those things are true! -Ivy

As I will discuss in more detail in the second section of this chapter (on Change Strategies), oftentimes even gentle efforts to correct language are met with intense resistance:
And I'm amazed, amazed, at how much pushback I get when I very politely, very discreetly, correct that kind of [transphobic] language...because I think a lot of communities that I'm in, people already consider themselves liberal and right-thinking and so on and so forth, and the moment you challenge that, it's just like - they go ballistic. And that's not like a thing on liberals or anything, it's - I think it - they feel like it's safe space, because Reddit's a fairly liberal place. And people generate a self-image, and the moment you challenge that - there are some people who are very good about going, oh, OK, thank you. But there are a lot of people who take it as an attack. -Sterling

Sterling's commentary illuminates the cognitive dissonance that can undergird these reactions. In this quote, he is speaking specifically about transphobic language, but I observed this same kind of defensiveness and posturing when it came to discussions of race as well. In both cases, centered subjects who were called out on over-occupying common space through exclusionary, microaggressive language responded with denial or hostility. This affective response is partially an attempt to regain equilibrium and resolve the cognitive dissonance (“I am a good, tolerant person” versus “Something I said was racist/transphobic; therefore I am not a tolerant person”) that these moments often provoke.

The more “garden variety” transphobic comments and content were much more likely to be seen (and upvoted) in default subreddits (particularly r/funny). However, transphobia was not confined solely to the “mainstream” subreddits. Almost all of my interlocutors were subscribed to or associated with difference-based and social justice related subreddits, and many of them discussed the complex internal politics surrounding the relationships and intersections between feminist and trans issues and spaces.
The two key feminist subreddits that my interlocutors mentioned most frequently in their interviews were r/feminism and r/feminisms. These two subreddits have a complex and not-easily-disentangled relationship: some moderators moderate both subreddits, although both have very separate individual leaders with divergent philosophies at the helm. Ivy echoed a commonly held perception of the core difference between the two: “I know that r/feminism tolerates MRAs, and then r/feminisms tolerates transphobic people”.
The term TERF (Trans Exclusive Radical Feminist) was almost always used pejoratively by my interlocutors in conjunction with discussions of transphobia or perceived transphobic behaviors in feminist-identified spaces.

I found the most god-awful subreddit, that was like really radical feminists saying stuff about how, like trans people were subhuman and terrible, betraying the feminist cause, or, supporting the patriarchy...- Rae

[L]ike when Chelsea Manning came out, I unsubbed from r/feminisms for a while. Because I was like, oh no, there's a trans person in the media, the TERFs are going to come, and I'm just going to go. So that's always interesting. -Ivy

The kinds of transphobia that I mentioned earlier in this section (in particular the harmful stereotypes associated with the use of the word "tranny") were usually bald-faced and easy to pick out. However, the fuzzy boundaries between “transphobia” and “feminist critiques of trans” complicate a clear delineation of what constitutes transphobic behavior/language in these spaces. Rommel (a moderator in r/feminisms and r/racism) complicates the unilateral notion of a TERF and critiques the way the label overdetermines and precludes meaningful

dialogue:
Feminisms with an s, ...has a reputation for being TERF friendly. There's a general position on, in the social justicereddits that trans women or women, anyone who's otherwise, or who critiques the idea of trans-ness, is a TERF automatically. And they need to be basically, wiped off the face of the planet, or just censored or blocked or whatever. They don't want - it's basically a no-platform idea. Which, I get that. If there's something that you feel is threatening your existence, you wouldn't want
them. I don’t know that form, really, of oppression. Our approach to this reddit, to feminisms, is literally all the feminisms, so including the radical stuff. And basically allowing or tolerating people to come in with disputes. I personally do identify as a radical feminist. I do have a personal critique of trans. I don’t identify as any particular gender, so - I personally don’t identify as trans, but I don’t identify as cis either. It’s just a different framework. But regardless of my personal opinions on that, it’s just trying to at least get people have a dialogue, or be civilized with each other, or know when you can’t have a dialogue and just not interact with each other.

This struggle for territory and mutual understanding by trans-identified people in feminist space further illustrates how access to “the commons” can be partial and intermittent, and the ways in which a subject can simultaneously occupy centered and marginal identities. Furthermore, it illustrates the phenomenon described in chapter 2, in which intersecting categories of difference can reproduce hierarchical structures within marginalized groups.

Reterritorializing the Habitable: Internet Arguments and Difference
Venue and Imagined Audience
Sociologist Irving Goffman (1959) described the ways in which all social behavior is, to an extent, an ongoing performance for others. There are “frontstage” and “backstage” modes of presentation, and each social actor is constantly adjusting their performance based on the presence of their “audience” (the people immediately around them and the social structure in which they are enmeshed). Goffman argues that a person plays a variety of social “roles”, and that the performance of those roles is constantly shifting as we travel through our social worlds. A broad example of this would be professional decorum. For a work-based audience, such behavior is necessary and appropriate, but most people behave differently when around friends or family in an informal setting.

The distributed and constant flow of new media, particularly social media, complicates notions of a discrete, knowable audience. For social media users, this means that the potential audience for their performance of self at any given moment is flexible and potentially infinite. This multiplicity of audiences produces what scholars of new media call “context collapse”. Within context collapse, the user’s audience is so broad and interchangeable that they have very few to no contextual clues to guide their performance of self. Furthermore, the absence of audience cues via context collapse means that it is very possible that users can “cross streams” and perform a prohibited aspect of self to the wrong audience (a current example would be employers terminating employees based on personal party photos posted to social media). The research of new media scholars Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2012) reveals that one of the way users deal with this uncertainty is through the creation of an “imagined audience”. Social media users use the context that they do have to imagine the likely audience of their performance with varying degrees of accuracy, and this imagined audience shapes the kind of content that these users produce.

For many of my interlocutors, their internet arguments with other users about difference served a dual purpose. They conceived of these interactions as always-already performative, in which their imagined audience far exceeds the particular user they are currently addressing. The publicness of these one-on-one interactions led many of my interlocutors to view their engagement as part of a larger project of border work and social justice. This publicness also provided my interlocutors with additional motivation to continue engaging with others about these issues, through the possibility that their words and arguments may be positively taken up by other parties who are not directly involved in the conversation.

But I would say it’s still worth it to try to maintain, as a general rule or principle, being able to provide as much credibility and composure as you can, in debates like that. Because there are people watching, and it is possible that you could potentially change minds of people for the better. -- Yossarian

And I didn’t get a reply after [a time-consuming informational post], so I’m not really sure if they got it, or what....but somebody was reading it, because somebody upvoted it. At least someone got educated. - Rommel

One of the major ways that the “audience” of other Redditors manifests is through upvoting and downvoting. Lana discusses how this additional feedback can provide a larger context and motivation to continue an unrewarding interaction:

And I respond, and I give my arguments, and my explanations for my stance. And they continue like misinterpreting what I’m saying, cherry-picking, and basically utilizing every logical fallacy in the book to respond to me. And I’m getting frustrated by that specific interaction. But if I step back a minute, and stop looking at that specific interaction, and instead look at the upvotes and downvotes, then I actually start to feel a lot better. Because generally, my comments are fairly well upvoted. And generally
the person I'm arguing against is fairly downvoted. Which means that there are people reading this conversation between us. People that I'm not aware of, that I will never possibly interact with - and they're reading it, and they're being influenced by this dialogue. And they're agreeing or disagreeing with the points. And they're seeing the flaws in the argument, you know? And that's a positive thing. Like, even if I'm personally having a really negative experience in having to debate such an obvious topic with somebody - it's a good thing to see the upvotes and downvotes, especially on a subreddit like AskReddit or something like that...the conversation itself...was rageinducing. But when you go and look at the upvotes and the downvotes in that dialogue, it's really soothing. It's like -ok, there are people who read this, and they're understanding, and they're internalizing it. And maybe, just maybe, I'm helping some people readjust their worldview. So that's valuable.

Elizabeth also described how community support in the form of upvotes and downvotes can clearly express the values of the audience and make a difficult interaction worthwhile:

But in AskWomen, in 2XC, in feminisms, in AskFeminists - if somebody makes a comment that's just shitty and awful and sexist, and they will be downvoted, all the way to the bottom. And I can go look at those comments if I want to, and I can roll my eyes, and say God, this person's an idiot. But I don't feel bad about it, because the whole rest of the community has got my back. [T]he presence of upvotes and downvotes, and the way that the rest of the community can kind of make itself known, in this numerical and visual way...that's something that keeps coming up that seems really powerful. That community support.

There are also moments where my interlocutors reported seeing microaggressions that were not aimed directly towards them, but they felt compelled to intervene. In their estimation, an unaddressed microaggression was a tacit endorsement of an oppressive status quo. In this case, the effect on and message to the larger imagined audience becomes far more important than the direct interaction with the offending user, with the ultimate goal not necessarily to convert their opponent, but simply to perform resistance to these acts of hegemony.

So even when the person doesn't hear me - I mean, there have been times, and I admit, it's condescending as hell, but there have been times where I have said to a person, look. I'm not trying to convince you. You are the object lesson. You are the visual aid. And that's kind of what I have to leave it at, is trying to say - I'm not trying to convince you, I just think that this needs to be said. A lot of the times, when I speak up, someone will say something shitty, and as someone who has seen a tranny remark, or a bisexual erasure, or things like that, and no one comments - that's disheartening. For that to just be left out there, for no one to challenge it. So I feel kind of like I have an obligation. Not necessarily to convince that person, but so other people who see it will see that someone said, hey, that's bullshit. –Sterling

So I kind of take that approach, even if it's not upvoted or downvoted or no one noticed it, maybe someone read it, and maybe eventually that'll stick in their head, after they hear it a hundred times. "Maybe I shouldn't say that word anymore." -RZ

Private Messages

It was most common for my interlocutors to report their internet arguments taking place in publicly visible comment threads. This was almost always a conscious, strategic decision influenced by several factors: the desire for wider visibility to a potentially receptive imagined audience, the potential for community support through upvotes and additional comments, and potential regulation by moderators (Mods can ban users for content posted in their subreddit, but not for private messages, even if those messages break the rules of the site or subreddit).

However, the visibility afforded by these public exchanges cuts both ways, particularly when it came to heated discussions about issues relating to difference. The setting of these interactions had a tremendous effect on the kind of feedback my interlocutors got when they tried to push back against hegemonic microaggressions. In the previous section, my interlocutors were describing a largely supportive environment that supported the positions they were arguing. In these environments, publicity is likely to be beneficial. However, in a hostile environment, publicity may only serve to make one a target for harassment. Because as much as I care about these issues, at the same time, they can be kind of draining, if you spend too much time engaged in one conversation. And especially when you're narrating - you have to argue against a million different people at once, because you never know what angle people are going to try to - I think someone talked about it as the pile-on effect. -- Yossarian
I don't want to - me saying something to him, I feel like, on Reddit, would just bring more people to his side. And even though he would know that he was wrong, people would still defend his wrong-ness. So I think it's more effective to do that in a private setting, as opposed to, what would be seen as public humiliation. –Jackie Lake

Providing feedback/input
The interview questions that I used specifically ask respondents to describe the strategies they employ when interacting with others on the site. The degree of variance I observed was remarkable: just as each of my interlocutors' experience of Reddit was unique, so were their approaches and strategies to navigating interaction within it. The degree of involvement ran the gamut from extremely interactive and time-consuming to a much more casual and infrequent mode of interaction (often limited simply to upvoting and downvoting). However, despite the variance in frequency and intensity of site usage, it appeared that my interlocutors' approaches clustered around three main strategies.

Upvoting and downvoting
This was the most widely reported mode of interaction, probably because of its accessibility and low risk. Upvoting and downvoting is an easy, anonymous way to support or disagree with individual pieces of content, and the accumulation of these scores become a way for other community members to show support (or express disapproval) without having to compose a comment.

However, as many of my interlocutors pointed out, karma is primarily an index of popularity, not accuracy or even necessarily quality. The official “Reddiquette” page encourages users to use upvotes and downvotes as a form of “community moderation” that promotes new and interesting content while weeding out irrelevant noise, and cautions users specifically not to “downvote an otherwise acceptable post just because you don’t personally like it”. Despite this, however, and particularly when it came to interactions pertaining to social issues like racism and sexism, upvotes and downvotes were being deployed to reflect personal opinions rather than the merit or relevance of a comment or content:

Unless you're able to talk in a very dispassionate voice, it quickly becomes difficult to deal with the kinds of replies that you get...you kind of realize that...it's hard to assess whether someone - like, no one's ever going to win one of these arguments. The only like there's no - there's no board of ethics to come in and assess, who - all there is, really, is downvotes and upvotes. -Ramon Olivares

185

An item’s karma score affects where it is displayed – posts with high karma appear at the top of the frontpage feed, comments with high karma are displayed first in the comment threads. Likewise, low-scoring content is displayed lower on the page or hidden altogether. Because of the way Reddit’s vote scoring algorithm works, in which early votes are more heavily weighted, correctly timed upvotes on a post or comment can cause it to “snowball” in popularity and visibility, and downvotes (or lack of upvotes) will “bury” it (Salihofendic, 2015). Downvoting is a form of incremental silencing. That silencing can cut both ways: it can be used to drown out trolls spouting slurs just as easily as it can be used to deny well-reasoned and well-documented reminders of uncomfortable social facts like institutionalized racism and rape culture. RZ elaborates:

This is definitions, this is you telling me I'm wrong for something that I know is correct. So I think that that's the exact example, of exactly how upvoting and downvoting works ... Upvotes for someone who disagreed with me, and downvotes for me...I get that you might be uncomfortable with that, but when you downvote it, it makes it seems like it's not true. And so I feel like that happens all the time, all across Reddit. It becomes a way to disagree with someone, and a really interesting way that you receive information, on Reddit, because of that. People disagree with or don't think are correct become downvoted, and out of the way, and out of people's sight. And ...things that people think are correct become upvoted, more visible. So it kind of overly perpetuates things that might not be true. Or might be misinformation. Things like that. So I think that's a really, really key way that upvotes and downvotes really affect the way that conversations run on Reddit...the popular opinion is going to become the one that is on top. -RZ

S2 points out that this mechanism can also serve to insulate users from perspectives that challenge their own:

[T]he upvoting, downvoting mechanism, that you can downvote the things which would then put them out of your mind. It's not just confirmation bias, it's like, times a gazillion. The conversations you want to see, the opinions you want to see, the things you want to see. -S2

186
Enriching Perspective
Among my interlocutors who went beyond upvoting and downvoting to composing comments, a central goal of their involvement was to contribute some kind of additional information to the interaction, either on their own or someone else’s behalf. These contributions were often based on personal experience, although they sometimes leveraged outside expertise as well. For Rae, her key goal was to nuance binaries by contributing additional possibilities:

I'm one of those people that likes to fill in little holes in things, and make things more complete, more well-rounded. So whenever I see that this topic isn't being addressed, why aren't we talking about this? -Rae

May described her involvement as “not about me telling someone that they’re wrong, it’s more about me offering my insight into something...try[ing] to give my knowledge and perspective about the issues I really care about”.

For Anne, her desire to defend what she perceived to be an unfairly wronged party was what drove her comments:

I'll try to explain some other person's side of view. But it doesn't even necessarily have to be someone with a characteristic that I identify with - I will defend Muslims, I defend Christians, I'll defend vegans, I'll defend men, women, people who have kids, people who don't have kids. It just really - I'm very good at playing devil's advocate.

Two of interlocutors echoed this particular desire to play “devil’s advocate”, and they were both white (although not both male). Being able to successfully play devil’s advocate, I would argue, is another privilege afforded the center: subjectivity so complex that it is capable of (credibly) holding multiple conflicting perspectives at once. It can be deployed in the service of further entrenching the center, but it can also be used to argue against hegemonic paradigms by presenting an alternate model.

Use of supporting evidence
Some of my most involved interlocutors reported conducting outside research to support the claims they were making in their exchanges. I say “involved” because outside sourcing involves at least a minimal degree of additional effort, and often there was some degree of emotional investment in the outcome of the conversation.

And I would be really super thoughtful, I remember spending like, an hour on a really long ridiculous comment about pornography... - May

Yossarian offers an example of successful use of supporting evidence in a conversation about AIDS stigma:

There were a few people really skeptical there. And I mostly - it turned out well in the end because I was able to provide a lot of information. There are a lot of resources online, I was able to gather information and show them. There are examples of AIDS discrimination happening, there are statistics that show that people will avoid seeking treatment because of the stigma. It's still a problem, it still exists. And that actually went well, because a couple of them were like OK, yeah, I can see this is a problem, that's pretty real....it becomes harder for people to dismiss those issues, or say, this isn't happening. When factually, no, right here, this is happening.

However, supporting evidence only goes so far, particularly if the other party is not already at least somewhat receptive to the other side's perspective. Lana relays an experience that shows sometimes the addition of supporting evidence can serve to shut down the conversation entirely, without resolution:

So I've been called out on privilege occasionally by MRAers, but - what usually ends up happening is when I rebut with sources and all that kind of thing, they usually just end up going, "well, clearly your mind is closed and you're not willing to have this discussion and consider my point of view, so, um, I'm done with this, I'm shutting it down." And in fact, that's usually been my experience. When somebody disagrees with me, and I say, look, I don't necessarily agree with what you're saying, here are my sources, here is why I believe what I do, can you explain yours? The general response seems to be, You know what, clearly you're not willing to have a discussion, and I don't agree with what you're saying, so I'm just not going to talk to you anymore."

Comment Burnout
These repeated, largely negative interactions took an inevitable toll on my users. One of the major, and unexpected, patterns that emerged from my interviews was the phenomenon of “comment burnout”. Out of the 27 interviews I have on record, 18 of them mention this experience specifically. Comment burnout is a usage pattern that I observed in which a user's overall investment in commenting, particularly on issues related to difference, decreases significantly over time. Depleted energy and interest when it came to commenting about
difference was an overarching theme across many of my interviews. All of my interlocutors had been Redditors for more than 6 months, and most had been Redditors for a year or more. With a few rare exceptions, almost all of my interviewees indicated that their past posting and commenting patterns (related to difference) were more time-consuming and involved towards the beginning of their time on Reddit.

I observed comment burnout occurring within a larger overall pattern of decreased engagement with the site over time. Because most of my interlocutors were multi-year users, most of them did report that their site usage was more frequent and more emotionally/intellectually invested than it is currently. My interlocutors cited a variety of reasons for this disinvestment, which roughly fell into two categories: consistently negative, affectively demanding interactions and lack of visible results. The energy that some of my interlocutors reported putting into comment exchanges is affective labor that, in their experience, rarely produced any positive, observable results. The frustrations, indignations, anger, and insults that these interactions provoke are constant and cumulative, and my respondents relayed that these exchanges were frequently unpleasant and unproductive.

And for a little while there I tried to kind of change it from the inside. But after a while you just - it's like - which of these do I care enough about to actually try to save. And you pick one or two, and those fail. And it's like - alright, whatever. I'm done, I'm done here. I don't have any more energy left. -DM

I am so alienated from having these conversations. And that's not the way I used to be, I used to love to have these conversations. And I see how heated some of them get, and I see how - just how much intensity and just meanness, sometimes. From people on all sides...I've seen what I thought for me, comment threads turn into massive, hundreds of comments, you don't know who is going to jump in next type things. And I don't want to sign on for that, because it's never ending. And the emotional exhaustion from it can just be intense. -Yossarian

For many of them, the cumulative and pernicious effects of engaging in repeated “border skirmishes” over time simply did not outweigh the potential (unseen) good those comments may have been doing. Many of my interlocutors also expressed frustration or discouragement with the fact that their efforts often seemed to have no effect whatsoever:

...But when a comment has a thousand points, you're not making a big difference. It feels kind of like you're screaming at a wall. -Dan

And I would be really super thoughtful, I remember spending like, an hour on a really long ridiculous comment about pornography, I think, and how it was damaging to women, or something. I don't even remember their response to it. But I do remember that happening. And looking back on that, I'm just kind of like, ahh, that was a little crazy. And it's not something that's necessarily going to change their mind. -May

Acceptance of the futility or extreme difficulty of attempting to truly change the mind or worldview of another person was a theme that peppered the accounts of my interlocutors reporting comment burnout. For some, this acceptance seemed to be a form of agency within defeat, a self-directed retreat from a seemingly unwinnable battle.

I don't even bother. Because ...how can I change this person's idea? When it's a behavior that's happening right now, I can possibly stop that. When it's this perception about everything, I don't even know that that's - and I feel like it has happened, and it's about behavior, that it usually just devolves into arguing. -S2

I went in so many flame wars, it got exhausting...I kind of shy away from a lot of the gender discussions, because - I don't know that going in is necessarily helping anything. I mean, maybe it is - I love that there's...a voice for that perspective on Reddit, and I think it's really important. But, I don't know that I've ever changed anybody's mind about anything. So it becomes a cost vs. value debate, and it's hard to stay engaged, over time. -Colleen

There's lots of times that I want to comment on things, and I'm like - it's not worth all the notifications that are going to come up on my phone, and the nasty things that people are going to say, and the fact that I'm going to want to talk to everyone in the world about how mad I am about something on Reddit. (laughs) It's just not going to be worth it. So - and that comes up in everything. There was a post today on feminism, I think, or 2X, about a girl that was raped and lost her job and everything, and I was like well, maybe - no, I'm not commenting on this, it's not worth it. It's not worth it at all. It definitely builds - I would say it builds apathy. That's probably what it does. To be on it all the time, you don't want to engage because you just know that you're going to be challenged the entire time. -RZ
Other interlocutors viewed their conscious disengagement from actively pursuing these conversations as a process of maturity and growth, rather than a defeat or surrender. The importance and necessity of these interactions is reframed and tempered by that user’s knowledge and experience of those conversations as unpleasant and largely unproductive. As succinctly stated by Colleen, continued intense interaction presents a “cost vs. value debate” that ends up resolving in favor of withdrawal and self-preservation. Like there's certain things that once upon a time I'd indulge, and now, it's like, it's not really worth it. - Anne

I just need to let this go. (laughs) Because I don't think I could be, I can't - I can't let myself be invested in that sort of thing anymore. So at this point in my life - and I think it's because I care about other things more than I do about arguing with someone on the Internet. If I had a lot of free time, I'm sure that I would have pushed it. But I don't anymore. – May

This pattern in my interlocutors’ behavior reflects a larger pattern of burnout among social justice and human rights (SJHR) activists. In Chen and Gorsky’s (2015) review of a small but growing body of literature on social justice activism burnout, they note that there are several particular aspects of this line of work that lend themselves to quicker and more extreme burnout than other vocational fields. Many of these reasons overlap with the ones my interlocutors provided, particularly the affective intensity of the subject matter and activism work as well as the dearth of noticeable positive change, even after significant and prolonged effort.

Conclusion: Remember the Human

And sometimes, when it works, you have a genuine conversation, and go back and forth, and fully be caring. And it's unbelievable. These people may not have a support system, or at least they don't feel like they have a support system, they don't feel like - for whatever reason, they're turning to an online forum. –S2

Moments of genuine, seemingly random human connection were one of the key things that drew me to Reddit as a subject of study. Although I found that those moments were less frequent than I had hoped during the course of my interviews, my interlocutors nevertheless shared with me some stories of positive, connective, and productive interactions. Yossarian described how a post of his critiquing the gender bias in a network promo for the television show “Community” elicited a mention on Slate and a direct comment from one of the writers condemning the portrayal, using Reddit “as a platform to call stuff out, and say hey, this isn’t cool. And actually get attention”. Anne described a personal thank you message she received from a family member of a person she defended in a comment thread. Rae described a supportive private message she received for consistently bringing up the concerns of marginalized groups in a special-interest subreddit. Elizabeth described a more quotidian but still meaningful interaction in which “I definitely changed their view about part of it, and also didn’t about another part. But it was good, because it was genuine. It wasn’t like, ‘oh, you changed my whole world!’” Rommel described occasional instances of reversal where banned users “would actually apologize and say they would try to do better in the future”.

But I think a lot of times, especially on the Internet, people don't really stop to think that there's another person on the other side of it. Anonymity can do horrible, horrible things to people. So I think it's just that kind of stuff, that people - It's easier to get upset and be all angry about stuff, and it's like - well, you could try to see their point of view, maybe, because they're a person, and they're not hurting you? - Anne

There's somebody on that other side of the connection who has a family, and has a life, and has their mental and emotional issues, and who has an entire situation going on that we may not know, but that doesn't make their experience and their reaction to what we're saying any less valid. And I try and maintain that sense of empathy, which honestly makes Reddit kind of exhausting sometimes, even when I'm engaging with people that I strongly disagree with. -Lana


Autoethnography: The Beginning of the End

The news broke while I was attending a conference on media in Chicago in October of 2012, presenting some of my very early work on Reddit.

Anderson Cooper did a segment on
his eponymous CNN evening program about r/jailbait, a subreddit that had more than 20,000 subscribers and featured sexualized photos of minors (almost always teenage girls) taken without their consent. Some were leaked by family members, some of them were pulled from Facebook profiles that weren’t locked down. Regardless, the point of the subreddit was to pool, exchange, and discuss these stolen pictures. Almost immediately afterwards, news of a similarly-trafficked “creepshots” subreddit surfaced as well. “Creepshots” are invasive, sexualizing pictures of women’s bodies, such as upskirt photos, taken in public without their knowledge or permission.

By this time, I had been traveling through Reddit for a little over a year. I had not yet begun my direct ethnographic research, but I was certainly already well into participant observation. The more I learned about Reddit, the more I realized that it was almost impossibly huge, a sprawling network of information. It was about this time that the city metaphor first started to emerge as a way for me to try to structure and comprehend this vast entity. I was learning just how true the aphorism “There’s a subreddit for everything” was. (My favorite, after all these years, is still r/BearsDoingHumanThings.) My mental map of the city was growing by leaps and bounds, and there were many neighborhoods and areas that I learned about but didn’t directly visit. One of the areas that I did not delve into deeply as an area of research was the large network of NSFW (not safe for work) subreddits: Reddit’s red light district, (so to speak). I had heard the name of the “jailbait” subreddit before the news about it had broken, but I had assumed it was another particular alleyway within that area.

When I found out what it actually was, I was disturbed at what I perceived as the complete disregard for the agency or well-being of the women and girls in these photos. I also felt profoundly unsafe, deeply unsettled, that this was taking place in the city I was so enthusiastic about. I couldn’t help but wonder if there were any creepshots of me that existed, or about my friends with children, who post images of them almost daily. Had any of their photos ever been stolen? Had any of mine? What about my friends who were Redditors? Did I know anyone who trafficked in these stolen pictures?

This controversy already offered ample opportunities for debate: about censorship, about privacy, about the right to “free speech”, about the role of platforms in policing the activity that takes place on them. However, the situation was almost immediately made even more complex. One user, more than any other, was the figure behind jailbait: a longtime and fairly well-liked moderator who went by the handle “ViolentAcrez”. On the heels of the jailbait-related public scrutiny and outrage that followed, a reporter (Adrien Chen) from Gawker “doxxed” ViolentAcrez in a news story, revealing his real name and identity to be Michael Brutsch. Offline, he was a middle-aged, married, white man who worked as a computer programmer for a Texas accounting firm, online, he was a long-running and infamous Reddit figure, a well-known troll, and moderator and curator of r/jailbait, r/creepshots, and a host of other subreddits filled with unsavory images (such as r/cutefemalecorpses).

“Doxx” is an old Internet term that comes from “documents”, and refers to a public “outing” or connection between a person’s online handle and their professional, personal, and community identity. The story thrust Brutsch into an intense, uncomfortable spotlight of visibility and scrutiny. He lost his job almost immediately. I (almost obsessively) watched him go on morning talk shows and Anderson Cooper, watched him as he clumsily stumbled through explanations. When asked to defend or explain himself and his trollish behavior, he wouldmansplain the same answer every time: he just wanted to get a rise out of people.

My immediate gut reaction was one of gratification. “Good, fuck that guy.” The immediate personal cost to Brutsch was significant– he lost his job and health insurance, which he claimed he relied on to care for his disabled wife and support his teenage son. A common refrain from his defenders was that the doxing “ruined his life”. It was hard for me to feel a lot of immediate empathy for him, especially since the kinds of content he curated and propagated on Reddit so clearly had the potential to “ruin” or irreparably harm the lives of so many others, mostly non-consenting women and girls. To me, there was definitely a distinct irony in the fact that his downfall came from a nonconsensual breach of privacy.

Even before the news broke that weekend, I was already hyper-saturated, mentally and academically, with all things Reddit. All the new people I had just met that were interacting with me at the conference knew me, partially, as “the person who works on Reddit”. I was presenting data, speaking authoritatively about my findings. Reddit had been under my skin for days by that point. I was hoping that my research would illustrate my high hopes: that I could demonstrate the platform serving as a connecting switchboard between people from different walks of life. I was excited about the potential of this medium to break down barriers, to
enable mutual understanding. At this stage in my theorization, I still had a rather idealized notion of Reddit as a city of ideas and a cosmopolitan site of connection, and rather specific and restrictive parameters around what constituted “meaningful” and “productive” encounters. Up until this point, I had never found that my everyday offline experience, specifically the way I inhabited my body, was influenced by what I saw posted on Reddit. Although I was certainly aware of the endemic discursive and visual sexism, I had never experienced Reddit to as an actively hostile place to me, specifically, as a cisgender white woman. But I found the underlying sentiment behind these subreddits to be particularly threatening: the notion that women have no inherent right to and control over any and all photographs of their bodies, consensual or not, public or private. To me, the city of Reddit (and by extension, the city of Chicago) had just gotten a little less habitable, a little less safe. The next day, I experienced my first significant moment of bleed-through from online gender-based hostility experienced through Reddit to my lived bodily experience.

Perhaps the effect wouldn’t have been so pronounced if I would have been at home in college-town Bloomington in my usual surroundings, or if I wasn’t so closely identified with my initial framing of Reddit-as-potential-utopia. But I wasn’t - I was in Chicago, a very large, almost totally unfamiliar city, surrounded by strangers. I found out about the news in the evening, and the next morning I remember feeling an increasing sense of self-consciousness about walking in public, even on the pleasant Northwestern campus. The day after I found out the news, I caught myself crossing my legs a little tighter when seated, hooking the top of one foot around the back of my other calf to cinch my knees together (even though I wasn’t even wearing a skirt).

My nervous eyes kept catching the glint of security cameras, darting between men holding mobile phones like they might be taking a picture. The notion rattled me for a few days, although the worst of the paranoia (thankfully) did abate as I left Chicago, fading into the dull, everyday background radiation of rape culture’s toxic paradigms of sexual entitlement. I don’t think I was in any more or any less danger than I would have been otherwise, but it certainly brought gendered harassment to the forefront of my awareness, adding a layer of menace to my perceptions and experiences of the city, both cities.

I had been following everything that had been happening while I was at the conference as best I could on my limited-capacity smartphone. Despite my academic interest in technology, I have incredibly bad luck with laptops, tablets, and most other mobile devices, and so my main computer is my desktop PC that I keep at home. Once I returned to my “battlestation” (what some internet users affectionately dub their desk/chair/computer setups), I pulled up the full versions of the threads I was tracking, caught up on videos, and observed the tremendous amount of debate and disagreement this situation had stirred up. I thought once I was able to discern the larger context of the debate, to see what action was being taken by Reddit to deal with what was coming to light. I was hoping reading the full narrative of events and debates might make me feel a little safer, or at least help me to better understand how this could have gone on for so long without any kind of internal scrutiny. However, what I found only further opened the gap between myself and my close identification with and defense of Reddit. It made me feel more unsafe, more disregarded, not less.

I found manifested in some of these comments and conversations a deep anxiety, a fear, a sense of loss and outrage, but in a darkly mirrored form to my own. Thankfully, there were users who both decried the content of jailbait and noted the double-edged sword of privacy violation at work in the situation. However, a significant number of the exchanges and debates about loss of privacy were centered not around the women and girls who had their pictures unlawfully taken and distributed, but on the effects of doxxing on Brutsch. Several subreddits, most notable r/politics, banned Gawker links in an announcement decrying the doxxing. Threads and comments (and later, some of my interlocutors) would wax philosophical about free speech and censorship, about general issues of online privacy and content regulation. Perhaps even more troubling than the focus on the damage done to ViolentAcrez (I keep being reminded of Steubenville, how the players had “such bright futures” ahead of them) were the seemingly widespread, implicit frameworks being used for these debates, the way certain people’s rights (i.e. Brutsch’s right to privacy and anonymity) were being privileged above others.

Looking back, now I can say that the whole ViolentAcrez debacle was a critical moment of change in my theorization of Reddit and perception of the city. Knowing what I know now, it’s a little surprising that it took as long as it did. I started to realize that the dark places of Reddit were even darker than I had assumed. Like a flash flood, the influx of attention washed
all kinds of debris and pollution out of the alleyways and gutters, secrets rushing past on the muddy, foaming water. Not only did this flood flush trash into the open: it also eroded protective coverings and topsoil, laying bare the network of ideology and infrastructure that undergirded the city. It was clear, to me anyway, that the “jailbait” and “creepshots” subreddits were the extreme end of a long continuum of behaviors that objectify feminized bodies and deny women sexual agency as a part of rape culture. It wasn’t just a few bad apples, a few small communities of frothing misogynists - it was much bigger than that. This was hard for me to swallow, integrate, assimilate. So much of my personal and professional/academic identity was wrapped up in Reddit, and I was so enamored with the possibilities I saw within Reddit to facilitate, on a large scale, meaningful connection across categories of difference. I had just defended my dissertation proposal a month prior. In that proposal, I had a section entitled “Digital Cosmopolitanism” (which connects nicely if unconsciously to the eventual Reddit-as-city metaphor). I wanted so badly for this city to become my city, a place of ideas and communication, a virtual utopia, a place where there was something for everyone and everyone was welcome. What the floodwaters revealed, in both what was evacuated and what was left behind, created the first of what would be many discontinuities and hairpin turns in my own personal identification with and understanding of Reddit and my relationship to it as a researcher.

On Memory and Method
Before I began research in earnest for this chapter, I wrote the above piece of autoethnography. I intentionally allowed myself to write without fact-checking, focusing more on the flow of what I was experiencing and less on its concordance with the details of the larger context. It was only afterwards, as I was assembling a timeline of events, that I realized just how unreliable my recollection was. I had conflated two major events (jailbait and the doxxing) into one, even though they were separated by almost a year. As I wrote the autoethnography, I found it difficult to disentangle my own affective experience, what I remember reading at the moment that it was happening, and what my interlocutors later told me about their experiences of that same event. As I moved into creating a formal timeline, I expected to be moving from uncertainty to certainty – reconciling my unstable, individual recollection with a networked archive of multiple primary sources. At first, that’s what I found: the Anderson Cooper segments, the timestamped news blurbs, some archived Reddit threads. Those pieces fit together seamlessly – there were no “dead” links, no deleted pages. But as I dug deeper into the search results, gaps in that web began to appear, links that were titled one thing but resulted in a generic redirect to a more current page, more 404s, more Reddit threads full of deleted comments. The notion that I was working with a stable, unchanging archive started to break down the further I followed these links. The first unreliable link disrupted the smoothness of the narrative. Although it was cited by multiple sources, the article was just a blurb, the “read more” redirecting fruitlessly to itself. After encountering multiple gaps and inconsistencies, pages that had been edited years after they were first published, it started to become clear to me that this networked form of memory was much more unreliable than I thought it was. Neither my own memories, nor the digital memories I was combing through, constituted static archives. In both cases, information was being organized and retrieved via a series of links, the “destination” pages still potentially changing, alive, open for editing.

I now find myself facing the task of the historian (and the memoirist): creating a coherent, factual narrative of past events out of a pastiche of primary sources, attempting to capture multiple perspectives of the same events. At the center of my sources was Reddit itself – all the content posted there as well as the site’s usage statistics. Surrounding Reddit, there were a few internet-focused blogs (Gawker, the Daily Dot, less often The Verge or TechCrunch) that posted regular coverage of the controversy as it unfolded. It was sometimes difficult to disentangle where exactly Reddit ended and my other sources began. Gawker’s position relative to Reddit was the most direct and the most fraught, although it seemed clear that almost all of this blog coverage was still being written or informed by people who were Reddit users themselves. Surrounding that interstitial layer of Internet blogs were sparse “blips” on national/mainstream media (CNN, The Atlantic) – the most lurid aspects of the controversy bubbling up to a larger, non-Redditor audience. In this chapter, I will draw on multiple perspectives to narrate and analyze the controversial outing (or “doxxing”) of Reddit user and moderator ViolentAcrez, known for his prolific posts and subreddits filled with intentionally inflammatory, bigoted, and violent
content. As I acknowledge in the autoethnographic and reflective portions of this chapter, my own memory and experience of this controversy is unreliable and partial. In order to tell the most complete story that I can, I will endeavor to synthesize narratives from multiple perspectives - both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources, for the purposes of this chapter, include both my ethnographic data and any content that was posted directly to Reddit. Secondary sources are all other non-Reddit sources, in this case largely blog posts and news stories.

I begin with a timeline, a narrative synthesis of primary and secondary sources that gives a historical account of the sequence of events that took place leading up to and surrounding the doxxing. I then turn to my ethnographic interviews, leveraging the multiple perspectives of my interlocutors to create a multifaceted view of the event. Throughout both of these sections,

I trace the contours of two animating debates at the heart of this larger controversy: the role of “free speech” on a privately owned platform like Reddit and the tension between online privacy and accountability. These debates, and their eventual resolution/stasis, reveal larger patterns of power and privilege that structure Reddit, both as a platform and as a perceived “safe space” for a particular set of users and behaviors. In the case of Violentacrez and the jailbait and creepshots subreddits in particular, the right of certain subjects to anonymity and privacy was structurally and rhetorically privileged over others (in this case, the women and girls who had their pictures taken without permission, in both senses of the word). Despite the fact that one of Reddit’s very few official site rules is not to post personally identifiable content, Reddit administrators have had a long history of a largely laissez-faire, hands-off approach towards the accumulation and exchange of stolen personal photos in r/jailbait and r/creepshots. This implicit (and at times explicit) structural approval creates the condition for which a kind of doublethink can take place: the “right” of particular Reddit users, under anonymous handles, to post sexualizing pictures of and comments about girls and women without their consent trumps the rights and agency of the subjects of the photographs. The outing and subsequent downfall of ViolentAcrez was a direct challenge to that paradigm.

Reddit, from the outset, is structured strongly by both a DIY sensibility and an (almost) anything goes attitude towards content. The site’s front page interface encourages users to create new subreddits as a form of participation akin to submitting content. Underneath the “Create your own subreddit” button appears a revolving list of justifications:

Other justifications include:
...for your office.
...do it for the children.
...because you hate freedom.
...for your community.
...for your school.
....for your favorite game.
...for your favorite subject.
...for your hobby.
...for great justice.
...for your town.
...for a fringe candidate.
...for your classroom.

This active encouragement of user-driven subreddit creation is part of the reason that the statement “There’s a subreddit for everything” is not just a platitude. While the justifications on the sidebar may encourage proliferation of discussion, local, and interest-based subreddits, these are certainly not the only kind of subreddits users are creating. While none of the default subreddits are pornographic, Reddit is nevertheless home to a large and diverse amount of pornography organized using the same subreddit taxonomy.

As I have argued earlier in this dissertation, this subreddit structure has the effect of flattening or equivocating difference as well as atomizing it. When it comes to pornography in particular, this equivocation has the effect of stripping the contextual factors of power and consent from the images. Because these crucial contextual factors are missing, sexually violent subreddits like “BeatingWomen” or “PhilosophyOfRape” become structurally just another kind of kink, a particular taste, despite the vast differences between these subreddits and ones devoted to, say, consensual BDSM. This encapsulation also serves an indexing function, enabling users to seek out and/or avoid particular subreddits, but as a matter of
“customization” rather than any kind of quarantine. Reddit does not include NSFW subreddits in the default/frontpage rotation, which establishes a passive “opt-in” policy for all pornographic subreddits. Sexually violent content is not explicitly (or implicitly, for that matter) forbidden on Reddit, which further reinforces the flawed notion that it is just another idiosyncratic preference divorced from the larger context.

Narrative Timeline of Events
In an AMA session on July 20, 2011, when asked directly about r/jailbait and r/picsofdeadkids, general manager of Reddit Erik Martin delivered a response that clearly invoked several key Reddit tropes:

Personally I think they are gross. But let's take the infamous picsOfDeadkids example. The actual content of that subreddit is mostly autopsy photos. Obviously it's a troll subreddit and created to get a reaction, and I'd guess 98% of redditors think it's gross/offensive etc. But what if the name of the subreddit was /r/autopsyphotos or /r/doyoureallywanttogointocriminalforensics and they were sincere in their discussion of these images? Would some of that 98% now be ok with it? I would bet at least some would. What if it wasn't kids but adults? Or historical autopsy photos only? The point is I don't want to be the one making those decisions for anyone but myself, and it's not the business reddit is in. We're a free speech site with very few exceptions (mostly personal info) and having to stomach occasional troll reddit like picsofdeadkids or morally questionable [sic] reddits like jailbait are part of the price of free speech on a site like this.

From the outset, this comment frames the larger social context in which these problematic images are appearing as irrelevant. By rapidly changing the perceived audience and content of the “picsofDeadkids” example to potential medical students, pathologists, and historians, and as adults or long-dead historical subjects, respectively, Martin's comment attempts to dismantle any absolute claim on the inherent worth or morality of these images. He points out other situations in which this kind of content could be acceptable or serve some kind of purpose other than to shock, disgust, and offend, and then collapses larger social structures and contexts into a personalized judgment call that must be made individually. This introduces slippage between these multiple categories, atomizing and isolating the deeply unequal social contexts of these images, rendering their consumption as a matter of individual choice. The comment then ends by invoking Reddit as a “free speech site” – a place where all speech, no matter how distasteful, is tolerated. This evacuates the larger intersectional context, relegating evaluation and critique of the content of those images to personal opinion, which serves to further flatten and oversimplify Redditors' perceptions of difference.

I have taken the time here to unpack Martin's comment because it provides a compact glimpse into several of the key neoliberal structural and discursive underpinnings of Reddit's perceived approach to controversial content. In this response, the concept of “free speech”, as illustrated by Reddit's hands-off approach to content, is valorized, and the context of problematic images is collapsed and minimized into the realm of personal preference and judgment. Martin maintains that “making those decisions...[is] not the business that reddit is in”.

According to this formulation, the only way to truly ensure freedom for all is to have few to no rules governing content and the workings of Reddit as a “market” of information, page views, and ad revenue. David Harvey (2005) argues that “the assumption that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade is a cardinal feature of neoliberal thinking” (7). Discussions of proposed increased content regulation almost always end up invoking all-or-nothing, slippery slope arguments that equate any such regulation with censorship and tyranny.

However, Reddit is not just a market, it is a city, and what is imported, exported, and circulated will directly affect and be affected by the inhabitants. This hands-off approach does not mean that Reddit as a whole is a neutral venue for the sharing and discussion of content. Deregulation does not prevent the emergence of particular hegemonic structures, it simply places them beyond the reach of intervention. This lassiez-faire approach ends up creating what Jo Freeman calls a “tyranny of structurelessness”, in which latent, pre-existing informal and implicit structures and forms of social hierarchy end up reproducing themselves in the absence of any explicit structure. Freeman's insightful piece was first published in 1970, and focuses on the (rocky) transition between second-wave consciousness-raising women's “rap” groups and more formalized, large-scale feminist political action.

The ideas Freeman puts forth in the article map very closely onto the transition between small-scale and large-scale public use of the Internet. Her observations and concerns about the “tyranny of structurelessness” and the reproduction of existing hierarchies within the
burgeoning feminist movement reflect, in an almost uncanny way, the ways in which these same hierarchies of power and prejudice manifested in the supposedly neutral, disembodied “cyberspace” of the Internet.

Freeman argues that it is almost always impossible to have a “structureless” social group, especially on any kind of a large scale. Furthermore, structurelessness itself serves as “a smokescreen for the strong or the lucky to establish unquestioned hegemony over others….the idea of ‘structurelessness’ does not prevent the formation of informal structures, only formal ones….thus structurelessness becomes a way of masking power” (1). Despite what might appear to be a surface commitment to a free and equal space, Reddit’s “structureless” moderation policy actually does the opposite: it creates implicit hierarchies in which certain dominant identities and subject positions (in this case, white, male, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied) and practices (such as creepshots or casually racist language) are implicitly centered as the default, and thus exert a significant amount of control over the content of the site, even as Reddit policy claims the site doesn’t “take sides”. This official “hands off” policy is one of the main reasons Reddit admins’ subsequent actions regarding r/jailbait and other problematic content were so controversial.

First Rumblings
On August 10, 2011, a link to the r/BeatingWomen subreddit was posted with the title “These are real women. These are real crimes. Make this stop, reddit”. This post, which included “an image of a partially clothed woman being brutally beaten by a larger man”, accumulated over 3300 comments in a matter of hours. These comments ran the gamut from outraged shock to impassioned defenses of the “right to free speech”. The post itself was controversial, receiving almost equal amounts of downvotes and upvotes.

Despite the shock and outrage some users expressed at discovering Reddit was home to this content, the seedier side of Reddit was never a tightly-guarded secret. There are networks of subreddits devoted not just to pornography, but to extreme shock images: photos of gore, torture, bestiality, sexual violence and death. These subreddits and content are a sort of ongoing deranged performance art piece determined to outdo itself: an ever-expanding collection of the most gonzo stuff users are able to dredge up from the depths of the Web. In its earlier years, when Reddit was smaller, the infamous troll Violentacrez (who also moderated hundreds of these shock and porn subreddits) received an award for “Best Moderator”, r/jailbait received an award for “Worst Subreddit”, and both operated in the open.

Less than a week later, on August 16, 2011, Reddit admins shut down r/jailbait and banned several of its moderators, claiming they had broken multiple site rules. The situation was presented, by Martin at least, as a necessary cleaning up, a removal of leadership gone amok. The decision immediately ignited debate and controversy, which only intensified after one of the head moderators of r/jailbait and well-known site user ViolentAcrez (who I mentioned earlier) posted a transcript of a chat conversation between himself and Martin. In this conversation, Martin asks him to remove the offending moderators in exchange for unbanning jailbait, and ViolentAcrez refuses. He posted widely across the site that the banned moderators had “done nothing wrong,” and that he “stand[s] behind them 100 percent”. Later that day, Martin posted in an AskReddit thread, further emphasizing that “this was not really about content. It was a very specific situation with a big reddit with specific issues and a bunch of new mods with bad rap sheets.” He frames the exchange as a difference in philosophy, adding that “gag order” is blowing things a bit out of proportion.

In that thread and across the site, debates about free speech and the limits thereof began immediately to rage. The majority response to the banning appeared, particularly across the default subreddits, to be largely negative. I remember seeing three key discursive structures haunting these discussions, patterns and arguments that surfaced again and again. The limits of and right to “free speech”, and particularly the notion that Reddit was expressly a “free speech site”, was hotly debated. “Censorship” was the nebulous shadow of “free speech”, a vague threat to a vague right. Other comments invoked slippery slope arguments:

about restrictions on content, about Reddit admins’ obligation and/or capacity to subsequently police the content of all subreddits.

Although these discussions were widespread and passionate, they were also relatively short-lived. Within a week, discussion in the default subreddits had moved on to newer topics. Jailbait stayed banned until September 2, 2011. On that day, ViolentAcrez (still only known by his web handle) removed the offending moderators in exchange for the subreddit being unbanned. This was done with little to no fanfare, and the subreddit coming back online was
not widely discussed one way or another. It would appear that things were back to normal, at least for the time being.

Wider Visibility

On September 29, 2011, this dark corner of Reddit came under new scrutiny from outside. Anderson Cooper aired a segment about Reddit and r/jailbait in the “Keeping Them Honest” segment of his eponymous news program on CNN. In this four-minute segment, he first briefly introduces Reddit, noting it is a property of Advance Publications, a division within its parent company, Conde Nast, before focusing on r/jailbait specifically. He describes it as a place for “pervy grownups” to view and exchange “photos of teenagers in their bathing suits or underwear and post creepy comments about them”. He also points out the caption appearing on the front page of the subreddit: “Keep a teen off the streets – put her in your van”. The rest of the segment takes Reddit to task for being “totally uninterested in stopping them” (referring to jailbait), and points out the lack of specific rules prohibiting the distribution of personal images in Reddit’s overall site rules and structure. Cooper juxtaposes the more recent positive press Reddit had received with the content and philosophy of r/jailbait, attempting to solicit statements from Conde Nast and Advance Publications, both of which declined to comment. The segment then quotes Reddit general manager Erik Martin, who echoed his earlier statement: “We’re a free speech site and the cost of that is that there’s stuff that’s offensive on there…once we start taking down some things we find offensive, then we’re no longer a free speech site and no longer a platform for everyone. We’re exerting editorial control. And that’s not what we are…”. In closing, Cooper mentions two other controversial subreddits: AsianJailbait and “places where you can see pictures of dead bodies…adults and children.”

For the majority of the segment, the icon in the lower left hand corner of the screen reads “Keeping Them Honest: Child Porn or Free Speech?” The comment offered by Martin is emblematic of Reddit’s “hands-off”, “free market” approach to problematic content, which depoliticizes its context. In the case of jailbait in particular, Martin’s rhetoric disavows the larger gendered social context in which these particular images are being appropriated and circulated, lumping it in with the rest of the “stuff that’s offensive”. This serves to flatten the context of this deeply gendered form of violence, and to imply that it is no less or more disturbing than any other content deemed “offensive” (by whom? and why?). In this statement and the one discussed earlier in the chapter, Martin uses market metaphors to frame jailbait (and its ilk) as an unfortunate, inevitable cost of running an online platform for “everyone”.

A few days later, on October 4, ViolentAcrez created a post in the TheoryofReddit subreddit that contained screenshots of the web traffic statistics for both r/jailbait and r/picsofdeadkids. The statistics showed a drastic spike in page views and subscribers, with 174 million page impressions on the day of the broadcast and 125 the day after. The visibility that Cooper’s segment provided for r/jailbait ultimately provided far more positive effects than negative ones: page views and subscriptions increased, and Martin’s comments made it clear that Reddit admins were not going to ban jailbait based on its content, giving the subreddit a not-so-tacit nod of approval.

r/Jailbait’s Swift End

On October 10, r/jailbait was permanently closed after moderators and site administrators became aware of an October 9 thread in which a user admitted to possessing child pornography. The initial post was risqué but clothed, and the commenter (who claimed to be a 14-year-old boy posting pictures of his girlfriend) indicated he had more photos but this was the only “non-nude” one. The thread rapidly collected more than 70 comments hounding the poster for more images. After a few hours, the same user relented and posted another photo, which was partially obscured by images of the Powerpuff Girls. However, even with the obstruction, the photo appeared to show the clearly underage subject of the photo “engaged in oral sex”. Users then began to post asking the user to send them PMs (private messages) of the uncensored image(s). Reddit moves swiftly, and another post linked to this one was soon submitted that was upvoted enough to make it to the front page of the site, titled “Dozens of reddit posters hound the OP for nude images of a child.”. Jailbait moderator I_RAPE_PEOPLE (I wish I was kidding) posted a comment confirming child pornography had been transmitted, and that the “admins are dealing with it”. Under this internal scrutiny and outrage (as well as the fact that a user monitoring the post notified the FBI about the transmission of child porn), moderators and...
administrators responded swiftly, deleting the post and banning r/jailbait permanently the next day. The decision was, overall, not well received, and there was considerable hand-wringing about the inevitable slippery slope Reddit had presumably begun to descend. A mournful user posted: “Today, with the shutdown of r/jailbait, Reddit has entered a new age...for better or for worse, Reddit has moved from a non-interventionist to a policing organization...Maybe we should start a poll on which sub-reddit will be deemed to be ‘threatening the structural integrity of the larger reddit community’...Whether you agree with it or not, it is a major shift in policy.”

First they came for r/jailbait.
And I did not speak out – because I was not an ebophile.
Then they came for r/trees
And I did not speak out – because I was not an ent
Then they came for r/atheism
And I did not speak out – because I was not an atheist
Then they came for me
And there was no one left to rage for me.

Even some of the posts celebrating its closure were ambivalent, meditating on free speech while trying to contextualize their own responses to the banning. In a 2XC post titled “r/jailbait got taken down...that’s good, right?” the user ruminates: It’s just that I’ve spent half an hour looking at posts that are painting adults looking to distribute sexually explicit images of minors as an oppressed minority, and I’m starting to lose track of what is normal. I love free speech and I think everyone should be able to let his or her freak flag fly, but it’s not conservative of me to think that said freak flag shouldn’t include pictures a 14 year old sent her boyfriend on facebook or whatever, right? Am I being reactionary? Should I care if I’m being reactionary?...

The controversy died down within a week, as controversies on Reddit tend to do, fading into the quick-moving and plastic annals of Reddit history. New subreddits (including the creatively titled r/newjailbait) sprung up almost immediately, and other “specialty” jailbait subreddits like AsianJailbait or MaleJailbait were unaffected by the ban. The solution was messy and not to anyone’s liking: those opposed to it felt it had gone too far, while those in favor argued it had not gone nearly far enough.

On Feb 12, 2012, Reddit admins announced in a blog post that they were adding another rule to the core rules of Reddit: “no suggestive or sexual content featuring minors”. The post itself was apologetic and carefully worded, emphasizing that their current approach of “dealing with these things on a case by case base is unsustainable” and that the policy change was necessary to avoid a “legal quagmire”. It acknowledges the concerns of “some of you worried about the slippery slope from banning one specific kind of content to banning other types of content” and discursively links their concerns to those of the administrators, concluding: “We’re concerned about that too...we’re protecting reddit’s ability to operate by removing this threat. We remain committed to protecting reddit as an open platform”. This is a distinctively symmetrical inversion of Martin’s earlier rhetoric of jailbait as the “cost” of running a “free speech platform” such as Reddit, an unfortunate side effect that must be tolerated in order for that freedom to truly exist. However, it is now the removal of r/jailbait, rather than the tolerance of its existence, that is being portrayed as the necessary cost of doing business.

A Troll Unmasked: The Rapid Downfall of ViolentAcrez
Throughout the ongoing turbulence of the r/jailbait controversy, the subreddit’s head moderator, ViolentAcrez, was a central and outspoken figure. Anderson Cooper mentioned the handle by name during the jailbait segment (pronouncing it Ah-crehz, rather than Acres), and his comments about the issue were used in subsequent coverage in The Daily Dot. ViolentAcrez was a Reddit “power user,” who moderated not only jailbait but a host of other subreddits that trafficked in shock images, sexual violence, racist hate speech, incest, misogyny, and stolen pornography. He was named one of 2011’s “Most Influential Redditors” by the Daily Dot, and r/jailbait won a 2008 “best of reddit” user poll. He was a well-known and well-connected moderator, and his reputation as “Reddit’s creepy grandpa”, constantly pushing the limits of free speech, was one he both cultivated and relished. In an AMA (Ask Me Anything) session, he...
bragged about oral sex with his 19-year-old stepdaughter, adding that her mother (his ex-wife) “got mad, then got over it”.

The anonymity of ViolentAcrez’s infamous online persona was disrupted on October 10, 2012, exactly one year after r/jailbait was permanently closed. Adrien Chen published an indepth profile on ViolentAcrez on Gawker that exposed/“doxed” him, revealing his offline identity. The nearly 5,000-word piece described Chen’s effort to “find out where the troll ended and the real person began.” It revealed details of his offline life: on the other side of the screen, this notorious troll was a 49-year-old software programmer named Michael Brutsch living in Texas with his wife and teenage son. It details his rise to power within Reddit, facilitated by the large amount of unpaid labor he did in overseeing the vast network of over 200 subreddits he moderated, as well as the support he provided for site designers and other moderators. Chen writes that “eventually administrators and Violentacrez came to an uneasy truce...for all his unpleasantness, they realized that Violentacrez was an excellent community moderator and could be counted on to keep the administrators abreast of any illegal content he came across”.

In both his conversations with Chen and his earlier statements on Reddit, Violentacrez was unapologetic about the kind of content he posted and why. He emphasized that he had done nothing illegal, and that he simply enjoyed “riling people up in [his] spare time”. However, he still pleaded with Chen not to out him, offering to delete old posts and/or stop posting altogether in exchange for his continued anonymity. Brutsch, not inaccurately, believed his ouster would “affect negatively on my employment,” rendering him unable to make mortgage payments or care for his disabled wife. In the days leading up to the publication, he deleted his ViolentAcrez Reddit handle, although he denied doing it in direct relation to Chen’s article. He instead said the deletion was because he had gotten tired of his moderation load on Reddit and his constant conflicts with administrators, and framed it as an “amicable parting of ways”.

Despite Brutsch’s objections, the article went live on Oct 10, and he found himself unwillingly and immediately thrust into a very bright, largely uncomfortable spotlight. The attention Brutsch received outside of Reddit was overwhelmingly negative, and had repercussions in his offline life almost immediately. While I had known about the doxxing the same day as the article, I started to see coverage of the story that extended beyond Reddit’s immediate reach. The Gawker article did not mention his employer by name, but within 24 hours Brutsch posted on Reddit (under another handle) that he had been fired from his job and lost his health insurance coverage. He reported receiving death threats.

Over the following days, the story continued to echo across online and offline news venues, including mentions in major media outlets such as Forbes, Fox News, The Atlantic, The Daily Mail, and Wired. The most substantial and notable of these mentions occurred on October 18, 2012, when Anderson Cooper’s current CNN program, AC360, aired a 13-minute segment on Brutsch’s unmasking that included excerpts from an exclusive interview with correspondent Drew Griffin. In this interview, a clearly disturbed and incredulous Griffin asks Brutsch to explain himself and his online behavior as ViolentAcrez.

In the 10-minute interview segment, Brutsch does not come off as terribly sympathetic. For the most part, he does not play the part of the chastened troll, the embarrassed bully, or the disgraced pornographer. He discusses with enthusiasm his activities on Reddit as ViolentAcrez, but is equivocal and hedging when prompted to apologize or admit personal fault. He appears nervous, yet his tone is at times impatient, self-important, even pedantic. When asked directly if his only reason for stopping was “because now we know who you are,” Brutsch answers “Yes” with little hesitation. “There’s really no point anymore. No one is going to buy into the ViolentAcrez mystique anymore, because it’s gone.” When the interviewer presses him about the harmful consequences of his online behavior for others, he seems unable or unwilling to fully acknowledge their full implications. At the end of the interview, after his second hedged apology, he adds tiredly, after a few beats, if by rote: “That and I have, as with the rape and pregnant reddits, I have come around over the last few months to understand that some of these things can be harmful to other people.” The only other mention of the harmful consequences of his behavior for people other than himself was earlier in the interview: “And since then, you know, I have come to understand that there are, you know, there are situations where, you know, things are inappropriate.” For the bulk of the interview, Brutsch’s statements in the interview implicitly and explicitly invoke reasons why he wasn’t really at fault for his behavior. In the same breath as
one of the two apologies he offered during the interview, he blames the site itself for "encourag[ing] and enab[ling] this sort of behavior," adding, "I shouldn't have been a part of it...Nobody on Reddit really had anything to say about it at all." He describes himself as a hobbyist, someone with a "gift for pushing buttons" who "liked going in and making people really mad over what amounted to meaningless things". He repeatedly refers to the "ViolentAcrez character", creating distance between himself and his online persona. He describes the "thrill" of the "meaningless internet points" (karma), likening himself to the "monkey that pushes the button and gets the food pellet".

He continues by comparing his accumulation of karma on Reddit with online games like World of Warcraft and Kingdoms of Camelot: "people play games like that to build up their meaningless stats... exactly the same as 800,000 karma means on Reddit". This response in particular disavows and collapses the intersecting power structures that contextualize and freight with (oppressive) social meaning the content that he posted and curated. While it was probably not intentional, this discursive strategy mirrors the one used by Martin in his defense of r/jailbait and r/picsofDeadkids analyzed earlier in this chapter. By collapsing and decontextualizing the context of the content he was posting, Brutsch dodges the larger implications of his behavior. In addition, this rapid context switching and equivocation serves to obfuscate the deeply unequal intersecting axes of power that enable certain groups to create and distribute violent and bigoted content without direct personal consequence. These discursive tactics attempt to forcefully reframe the stakes of the discussion as personal rather than political. Brutsch equates his online trolling to casual online gaming, and describes his system for funneling content like "rape jokes" and "pictures of pregnant women" into his network of subreddits with the enthusiasm of a seasoned collector.

After the interview aired, Brutsch himself largely faded from the public eye. He did not make any more television appearances, and posted only occasional updates on Reddit about his situation under a new handle. The last piece of coverage I was able to find (2012) stated that he was looking for an IT job in the adult entertainment industry. Outside of Reddit, he was a pariah, an unmasked, disgraced troll. However, the internal response of Reddit users and admins to the doxxing was much more ambivalent.

The publication of the Gawker article did not come as a complete surprise to Brutsch or other well-known moderators and administrators. According to chat logs published after the fact, Chen reached out to ViolentAcrez for comment, which tipped him off to a potential exposure. ViolentAcrez deleted his account before the article went live, but it was not enough to sever himself from the online legacy he had created. Shortly after the article was published, moderators of a few major subreddits (the largest being r/politics, with over 2 million subscribers at the time) blocked all links from the Gawker Network from r/politics. Within a day, there was an extremely brief site-wide ban on direct links to the ViolentAcrez Gawker story that was quickly reversed.

In the statement by the moderators of r/politics, the Gawker ban is framed as a show of solidarity and support for a fellow moderator being unfairly targeted by a "'journalist'" (quotes in original) gravely overstepping the boundaries of his profession. It also performs the same kind of flattening of context, collapsing moral and political objections to particular content with personal opinion and taste:

We should all be afraid of the threat of having our personal information investigated and spread around the internet if someone disagrees with you. Reddit prides itself on having a subreddit for everything, and no matter how much anyone may disapprove of what another user subscribes to, that is never a reason to threaten them. (emphasis in original)

The response of site admins was more ambivalent. The current Reddit CEO, Yishan Wong, posted an internal memo to moderators that was later leaked and published on Gawker. This memo did not mention ViolentAcrez by name but nevertheless reiterated earlier notions of Reddit as a haven for “free speech”, stating: “We stand for free speech. This means we are not going to ban distasteful subreddits. We will not ban legal content even if we find it odious or if we personally condemn it.” The memo also acknowledges, “...let’s be honest, this ban on links from the gawker network is not making reddit look so good.” Wong concludes the memo with a “TL;DR” (reddit acronym that stands for “Too Long; Didn’t Read”) and prefaces a condensed summary of a long text post that states “[Reddit] will respect journalism as a form of speech that we don’t ban. We believe further change can come only from example-setting”.

There were small groups of users that were extremely vocal supporters of Brutsch, including many affiliated with Men’s Rights subreddits. In some subreddits, links to Gawker remain banned to this day. After his employment was terminated, the now-defunct troll subreddit “C1rclejerkers” solicited donations on behalf of their beloved ViolentAcrez via a
PayPal account. The post containing the donation link was titled, “His name was Michael Brutsch. His name was Michael Brutsch. His name was Michael Brutsch. And we will buy him a beer.” The particular structure used by this post (“His name is...”) is a reference to a chant used in the film Fight Club, and evokes a group sense of grief, homosocial bonding, and formalized remembering of a fallen comrade. This lionizes Brutsch by aligning him with the countercultural antiheroes portrayed in the film: yet another victim of an unjust, unnecessary war of political correctness. While there were pockets of substantial support for ViolentAcrez via comments, the fundraising campaign itself collected only meager financial results. Ultimately, less than $200 was raised.

Within two weeks, the fervor on Reddit over the issue had largely passed. Brutsch faded out of the public eye. Another r/creepshots moderator, CreeperComforts, deleted the subreddit within two days of Brutsch being doxxed, posting screenshots of a message that threatened to expose the moderator's personal information if the subreddit was not closed down. Even though active, direct discussion of Brutsch’s outing tapered off rapidly, the debates it prompted about the limits of free speech and online anonymity are still ongoing.

Ethnographic Analysis
Several weeks after I returned from the conference in Chicago that I had mentioned in my autoethnography, I was working on constructing my interview questions for my project’s IRB application. I was still wrestling with the dissonance that the ViolentAcrez story had sparked, and based on the intensity of the debates that I observed, I was not the only one for whom this issue had struck a nerve.

I wanted to know how other users had experienced this controversy as it unfolded. I didn’t just want to go by the voices that were the loudest in the default, major subreddits. What other kinds of conversations, besides the ones that I was privy to, were taking place in other communities? Was the pro-ViolentAcrez sentiment that I observed really that widely held, or the result of an ultimately small but vocal and well-connected group of supporters?

In the interviews, I asked my interlocutors an open-ended question about any controversies they can recall hearing or reading about related to Reddit, providing the ViolentAcrez doxxing as an example. Their responses provided a wealth of perspectives and individualized narratives, which both diverge from and dovetail with the narratives and debates traced in the previous section. All the material I encountered grappled with questions of privacy, visibility, consent, and accountability, albeit often in very different ways.

Key Themes
Agency and Degree of Attachment
My interlocutors’ responses to the controversy ran the gamut from mild to intense, and were largely critical of and unsympathetic towards ViolentAcrez and the moderators and users of jailbait, creepshots, and other problematic subreddits. Not surprisingly, respondents that expressed a higher degree of attachment to Reddit some way tended to have stronger, and more strongly negative, reactions than users who were more casual. There are two primary factors that undergird this attachment: personal identification as a Redditor or part of “the Reddit community”, and active participation in discourse on the site through comments and upvoting/downvoting. Interlocutors who expressed a higher degree of overall attachment and identification also tended to discuss their participation as a form of personal efficacy and agency:

I think this was at the time where I was still kind of more invested in the - the idea of a Reddit community. Where I thought that...would encourage a part of the Reddit community that I didn't want to be a part of the Reddit community. So I would upvote the comments that were like yeah, this definitely needs to go. And not the ones where they were like, where does it end? -Ramon Olivares

In other words, the most invested users were also the users who felt that their contributions had the potential to make a difference and shape the conversation in some way: that their voices would be heard and considered. In this particular context, I am defining agency as an individual’s ability to “have a say” in what is happening around and to them. The more connection my interlocutors perceived between their actions and subsequent changes in discourse, the more agency they could be said to have. This sense of agency and identification with Reddit are mutually reinforcing: invested users are part of an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991) which they protect and maintain through participation and engagement with other users.

However, even when attachment remained high, many of my interlocutors also
reported that this particular controversy had been disruptive to their sense of agency. Colleen expresses feeling vulnerable and frustrated by the seeming inexhaustibility of this particular content:

I think the thing that I found most disturbing about [jailbait] is after it got shut down, there were like 12 clones that popped up. Like, you can't take it off. You can't stop it from happening. If it took that much effort to shut one down, and now there's ten, what does that mean? What do you do? It kind of like, forces you to accept this mass victimization kind of thing, because how are you going to stop it? Which is - kind of a painful realization to come to. -Colleen

The loss of agency that this controversy provoked, both on Reddit and offline, is deeply gendered. The responses of my female-identified interlocutors often displayed, understandably, a higher degree of distress and negativity when asked about the ViolentAcrez/jailbait/creepshots controversies. As my interlocutor above indicates with the phrase “mass victimization”, the women and girls in these photographs are being doubly victimized: first by having their photos posted without permission, and second by Reddit’s conscious tolerance of this content. By not removing or prohibiting this kind of stolen content, Reddit as a platform implicitly and explicitly sends a message to its users that the “right” of those users to gaze at the bodies of unwilling subjects is more important, and more worth protecting, than the right to privacy and/or safety of the people in the photographs. While my female interlocutors’ responses tended to cluster around personal safety and agency (or lack thereof), my male interlocutors’ responses often focused on more abstract issues like free speech, censorship, and Internet users’ right to privacy.

For most users I interviewed, the controversy did not drastically affect their degree of attachment to Reddit itself. While my interlocutors did critique the content, those users who were defending it, and ViolentAcrez, none of them were troubled enough by the events to leave Reddit permanently. Of course, I must acknowledge there is a self-selection problem here: because I did my recruitment on Reddit, only people who were still active users of the site would have seen my materials. Thus those users who were ultimately driven away by the controversy would not have had an opportunity to come across my request for participants. It would seem that the majority of my interlocutors, even the ones with a high degree of attachment to Reddit, were not affected nearly as strongly as I was by the controversy. This is not terribly surprising: my identity as a scholar was, at that point, bound up tightly with Reddit in a rather unique way. However, there was one interlocutor whose response stood out to me, both because it was so similar to my own and because it was dissimilar to many of the others. This respondent found the event particularly disruptive to her degree of attachment to Reddit.

In both of our cases, we experienced dissonance and slippage between what we thought (or hoped) Reddit was and what it turned out to be. In her case, she cites the reaction of others as being the primary motivation behind her decreased identification with Reddit:

And I remember kind of not wanting to admit that I actually frequented Reddit, when that was happening. Because I think a lot of people were making really judgmental comments about Reddit, and how it’s apparently the worst place ever, it houses pedophiles, and that’s not the case. –May

By hearing people refer to Reddit as “the worst place ever” and a platform that “houses pedophiles”, this respondent fears that those critiques would be over-extended to her. Instead of pushing back through increased participation, as KD describes in the first quote in this section, May instead withdraws, “not wanting to admit I actually frequented Reddit”. Avoidance or withdrawal responses, however, are not always the direct result of a perceived loss of agency or a decreased degree of attachment. This particular respondent uses agentive terms to discuss his avoidance of the debates. He frames it as a pragmatic response, a decision to opt out of participating in a controversy that he dubs contentious but ultimately unresolvable:

I know which side I'm on, but I'm not about to jump into the firefight right now. I don't feel that one more voice, especially mine, is going to help at this point. It's two angry mobs going toe to toe about what is right. That's never ended well for anyone. – DM

It is worthwhile to note that this response also neatly encapsulates the difference between the responses of my male interlocutors versus my female ones. In DM’s response, the controversy is a “firefight” with “angry mobs going toe to toe about what is right”. The conflict becomes abstracted, and this abstraction is the crucial difference between these gendered responses. The responses of my male and female interlocutors revealed that there were actually two different and competing debates happening simultaneously.
For my female respondents, their primary focus was on the content (and Reddit’s ongoing tolerance) of jailbait and creepshots. This is understandable, as this content has the potential to have a direct, detrimental, material effect on their offline lives by condoning and perpetuating the notion that feminized bodies (and images of feminized bodies) are “fair game” to be viewed and sexualized under all circumstances and in all contexts. The barriers between public and private are dismantled, with women being told they have no right to complete control over images of their bodies, nor privacy in public spaces, but that they need to respect the “right” of those who wish to gaze at them to do so. The creepshots sidebar used to read: “When you are in public, you do not have a reasonable expectation of privacy. We kindly ask women to respect our right to admire your bodies and stop complaining.”

For my male interlocutors, their focus was on the doxxing of ViolentAcrez and the subsequent fallout, as well as the limits and obligations of Reddit as a “free speech site”. This is also an issue of a collapse of boundaries between public and private and certain subjects’ right to privacy. In both cases, these are subjects whose private lives, images, and bodies have been made public without their knowledge or consent. In both cases, there was a perceived violation of privacy/anonymity, a forceful conflation and collapse of public and private. However, the crux of the difference was that while my female interlocutors tended to focus on the violation of privacy of the subjects of the photos, my male interlocutors tended to focus on the violation of ViolentAcrez’ privacy. This follows the pattern of discussion I saw on the site, particularly in defense of ViolentAcrez (which I will discuss in the next section), where “mainstream” (implicitly masculinized) spaces (such as r/politics) rushed to decry Gawker and the doxxing, while feminized spaces such as r/2XC rushed to decry the problematic subreddits and their content.

Moderators, Admins, and Trolling
ViolentAcrez’s role as a well-known and prolific poster and moderator came up frequently in the debates surrounding his doxxing, as well as my interlocutors’ responses. In the debates I observed, people who opposed the doxxing, supported ViolentAcrez, or both would often cite his history of service to the site and to his significant efforts to support moderators of other subreddits. It is entirely possible, even probable, that had ViolentAcrez been anyone other than a prominent moderator and power user, the display of support would not have been nearly as widespread or structurally significant (the Gawker ban was one of the first of its kind, and domain-level banning has not been observed since then).

Many of my interlocutors had observed the same discussions and debates that I had, but were themselves quite critical of explanations that cited ViolentAcrez’s professionalism as a mitigating factor:

And the other thing that really stood out to me was the number of people that defended the subreddits that he moderated, based on his professionalism. "He moderated over 100 subreddits, and that's just who he was. So just because he was moderating jailbait doesn't mean he's a bad person, because look at all these other subreddits he moderated! He's just a professional mod." And I was like well, anybody who's a professional anything can choose what they do, and how they do it. And he chose to moderate, essentially, a child porn subreddit, that's his choice. You can't defend him just by saying he was asked to moderate it, for various reasons. That's silly. -JackieLake

As before, these responses were also largely gendered: female-identified interlocutors tended to be less receptive to calls for clemency that referred to ViolentAcrez’s history of service, while male interlocutors often gave those explanations more weight (even if they ultimately do not deem them sufficient). This continues to reflect the ways in which the stakes of this debate are inextricably tied up with gender. Both of these gendered responses are concerned with the larger context of this debate, but each side is focusing primarily on a different context. For my female interlocutors, the most salient outside context is the larger matrix of sexism and rape culture that this content contributes to: in short, what may happen to their photographs or body outside of Reddit. For my male interlocutors, often the most salient context was the context of ViolentAcrez’s actions and role within Reddit. This supports my earlier claim that for male users, this controversy is more abstract and contained, whereas for female users, the controversy is more immediate and material, its implications quickly expanding beyond Reddit to everyday lived experience.

One of the other minimizing explanations offered (by ViolentAcrez or others) for his behavior was that it was “trolling”, and that he was posting these images primarily to upset other people and push buttons. Brutsch certainly employed this tactic in the CNN interview as a way to deflect blame and responsibility as well as to assert that his intentions were not particularly malicious: that his aim was simply to annoy, offend, and shock other users. In this
explanation, Brustch is drawing on a larger cultural understanding of the word “trolling” and what it means.

In her 2015 monograph This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things, Whitney Phillips argues that despite often being dismissed as pointless, juvenile behavior with no inherent value,

trolling has a larger cultural and political function that is inextricably bound up in the ideological and material conditions of our society:

Rather than functioning as a counterpoint to ‘correct’ online behavior, trolls are in many ways the grimacing poster children for the socially networked world. (8)

Philips is not arguing in support of trolls, nor is she minimizing the very real effects that trolling can have on the online and offline lives of its victims. Rather, she asks us to consider trolls as “trickster” figures, the “dung beetles” of society. In remixing the sordid and taboo, trolls are making visible the larger cultural structures that draws on Mary Douglas’s (1966) sense of “clean” and “dirty” as “matter out of place”. In addition, trolling can also reveal underlying ideological paradigms. For example, she argues that trolling is “characterized by a profound sense of technological entitlement from normalized [American] expansionist and colonialist ideals” (124) that draws on a deeply androcentric and model of “adversarial rhetoric” that valorizes individuality and winning at all costs (another quintessentially “American” value).

229

By establishing a firewall between person and troll, the mask of trolling simultaneously establishes a second and much more robust firewall between the troll and the object of his attention. (35)

Across the board, ViolentAcrez was extremely well-known for being a troll. However, he was also well-known for his continuous and prolific engagement with Reddit as a user and moderator. In particular, he did a specific kind of “dirty work” that ingratiated him with Reddit administrators: keeping abreast of and removing illegal content.

Demonstrating this reach was the fact that more than one of my interlocutors claimed to have exchanged messages with ViolentAcrez himself. Many of these same interlocutors also echoed one of the key insights of Chen’s article: that the combination of ViolentAcrez’s personal presence and professional service served for some time as an effective counterbalance to his trolling:

And ViolentAcrez, behind the scenes, was incredibly helpful for Reddit for a lot of things, just in terms of what he did.... He was a mod on a lot of the higher things, and he talked to a lot of people. There was a lot of PMing going back and forth with him and a good number of people... And you didn't really see him as a threat... A lot of his stuff was just for the shock factor of it...he was a troll, through and through, there's no question of that. But I think people just put up with it when it was smaller, and they knew him, and they recognized him, and he came around threads and stuff. -Anne

[ViolentAcrez] was in [a moderators-only subreddit] because he was a moderator of several large reddits. So in these communities...they carry their biases. The MensRights moderators were there too. So it was kind of like - people didn't really - other moderators didn't want to touch it. -Rommel

Leaked chatlogs between ViolentAcrez and senior Reddit administrators demonstrated that he had a cozy relationship with admins, receiving advance notice of “a policy change regarding jailbait-type content”. The tone of this chat (as well as in the public announcement of the policy change) is apologetic and framed as an unfortunate obligation: “Don’t really have a choice....everything else is safe. we’re not getting rid of NSFW or offensive content, etc”.

230

Brutsch also emphasized this relationship in his interview with CNN by bringing his gold-plated Snoo bobblehead to the interview, a gift he says he received for his work on the site. (When pressed, administrators later tried to put distance between themselves and Brutsch by saying that the award was the result of a “community vote”).

Free Speech

From the outset, the controversy surrounding r/jailbait was framed in terms of free
speech and the limits thereof. The original Anderson Cooper piece on r/jailbait had a persistent segment blurb at the bottom of the screen that read: “Child Porn or Free Speech?” Both site admins and ViolentAcrez himself relied heavily on the defense that while the content might be distasteful, it was not illegal, and therefore fell under the category of “free speech”. As I have argued before, this way of framing this content flattens and disavows the contextual, unequal amounts of gendered and racialized power that the subject and viewer have in relation to one another, and relegates feminist and cultural critique to the subjective realm of personal opinion and taste.

When I asked my respondents about their experience of this controversy, inevitably, questions of free speech and censorship came up. In fact, this was one of the clearest patterns I observed: when prompted to discuss this issue, respondents framed the controversy, at least partially, as a question of free speech, despite my intentionally open, non-leading wording of the prompt. My interlocutors’ responses were thoughtful, reflexive, and overwhelmingly ambivalent. There was a universally shared perception of Reddit as a “free speech site” (a perception actively nurtured by the public comments of Reddit administrators), although multiple interlocutors critiqued the collapse and slippage around the term itself:

231

And I’m sitting here going - are you fuckers INSANE? Free speech was never meant to protect hate speech, it was meant to protect investigative journalism and freedom of press. Are we really sitting her debating whether or not r/creepshots is beneficial to society in terms of free speech? Are we seriously doing this? Like how, in any argument of the word, is that beneficial? -Lana

As Lana does in the above comment, several of my interlocutors invoked the First Amendment specifically when talking about this issue. “First Amendment” is an ideologically freighted concept that taps into several overlapping paradigms at once: American nationalism, patriarchal authority, and the role of the state in regulating behavior are just a few connections. Although none of my interlocutors used the term “Founding Fathers” specifically, many of them appealed to the idea of original authorial intent and authority when discussing free speech and its limits.

Overwhelmingly, in both the discourse on Reddit I observed and in the responses of my interlocutors, the boundaries of free speech are perceived to end where the law begins. This reflects another implicit condition of the debate: these arguments were US-centered and used a particular, Americanized notion of “free speech”. In many ways, this makes sense: Reddit is a US-based company, ViolentAcrez is an American citizen, and the majority of Redditors are American (68%, according to a 2013 study by the Pew Research Group). However, this specificity is never spelled out, just implied.

My interlocutors also weighed in on the debates around the limits of free speech, and whether the concept of a “free speech site” is even legally and philosophically sound to begin with. While some respondents were ambivalent, others were quite clear:

Free speech does not apply to a site like Reddit, because that's not government enforcement of speech, and free speech has always been a fundamentally limited right, for instance, it's illegal to yell "fire" in movie theaters, and the Supreme Court upheld 232

that...So people are applying misunderstood facts to a context that the facts don't even belong in. -Dan

The fact that the images in r/jailbait and r/creepshots were technically legal (even if they were morally reprehensible) significantly muddied the waters of the debate. Because the images were not regarded as expressly illegal, often the terms of the debates would reframe around the right to speak freely and disagree. This serves to flatten the contextual particularity of these problematic, sexually violent images, casting them as simply another flavor of preference. The pernicious effects of this flattening can be seen most clearly in the “slippery slope” arguments against the banning:

That's legal. And here's the problem. I like freedom, I really do. And I - if that's what some people want to do, it's infringing on the victims, it's infringing on their privacy, most definitely. But you can't ban free speech in one area, and then leave in another. And then claim that it's a free world. You know? If that's what you want, if you want a board where people can discuss and talk and post things, then you've gotta allow - if you're gonna say it's free, then allow everything. -Max

In this response, Max employs two key Reddit tropes: Reddit as a “free speech site” despite others' objection, and the selective (de) valuing of privacy for different groups. While he acknowledges that creepshots and jailbait “infring[es] on the victims...on their privacy”, it is also framed as a form of pluralism: “if that's what some people want to do”, saying that removing the subreddits is “banning free speech in one area”. Because they're not illegal, the reasoning goes, these pictures are a form of speech that should be tolerated in the pluralistic,
free-speech platform Reddit purports itself to be. Objection to this content is forcibly, discursively reframed into a binary set: legal or moral. By collapsing all critique, feminist and otherwise, into the realm of moral/personal taste, political and social critique of the intersectional context of these images is made to take on the tenor of mere individual opinion.

Without that firm ground to stand on, it is much easier to imagine a tumble down a slippery slope.

And I'm kind of torn, on the topic. Because on the one hand, I'd rather not be associated with a site that has that kind of content. But on the other hand, if it's not straight-up illegal, you know, at the same time, I can't really get behind the idea of saying that there are certain topics that are just not allowed to have their own subreddits... I get a little bit itchy when the main hub is saying certain kinds of content is not allowed. Especially if it's not illegal. -Sara

In the case of r/jailbait and r/creepshots in particular, a user's purported right to personal “free speech” (in the form of posting and consuming this content) is directly at odds with the rights of the subjects of these photos to privacy. Trolling is another area in which users' personal freedoms overlap with each other, and often their presumed innate right to unrestricted “free speech” is used by trolls as a defense or justification for their behavior. Philips argues that free speech is a term that can be selectively mobilized for particular ends:

[Free speech], which so often is cited by people whose speech has always been the most free – namely straight white cisgender men – to justify hateful behavior towards marginalized groups. In these cases, claims to protected speech are often less about the legal parameters of the 1st Amendment and more about not wanting to be told what to do, particularly by individuals whose perspective one doesn’t respect. (133)

As discussed earlier in the chapter, the actions of Reddit admins set a clear precedent in valuing the potential benefit of Reddit as a “free speech” site over the violation of non-Redditor privacy. However, the human cost of this Faustian bargain was not lost on many of my interlocutors:

It's such a blurry line. It's so hard to monitor what's going on, on the Internet. And I'd want everyone to have as much freedom to say whatever they want, but at the same time, I don't. People say so many hurtful things...lots of really hurtful things. –May

Privacy and Visibility

Part of the appeal of the figure of the flaneur is his virtually boundless optics: his ability to see all of the kaleidoscopic facets, areas, and denizens of the city. Accompanying the fantasy of unlimited movement is the fantasy of an unfettered gaze, the capacity to visually consume any and all aspects of the city the flaneur might come across. However, this visibility is not reciprocal. While the flaneur is not invisible, he still has more control over his own visibility than most due to his gender, racial, and class privilege. He is not the subject of any particular disciplining gaze, he is not sexually objectified by others nor is his (white, middle-class) body marked as dangerous or deviant. Part of his mystique is his chameleon-like ability to alternately stand out or blend in. If he desires, he can draw attention as a dandy, but when he is finished, he is still unmarked enough to slip between contexts. The flaneur can see without being seen, watch without being watched.

Questions of privacy and visibility are at the very heart of this debate. On a fundamental level, the key tension is between different individuals’ rights to privacy in different contexts. Three related threads are tangled together here: a person’s right to privacy/anonymity online, a person’s right to anonymity/privacy in public, and a person’s right to control the manner in which information about them is obtained and distributed in both contexts. The situation is further complicated by the fact that in the case of Violentacrez/creepshots, these rights (VA’s right to online privacy/anonymity vs. the right to privacy of the subjects of the photographs) are directly at odds with one another.

One of the reasons it is so difficult to define where the boundaries of privacy end and begin is because those lines are deeply context-dependent. What may be perfectly appropriate...
According to Nissenbaum, there are two major “informational norms” that make up privacy: appropriateness and distribution. The above example (a night out with friends versus a business meeting) indexes vastly different levels of appropriateness. Appropriateness is determined largely by social and cultural norms, and will vary somewhat based on the particular person, information, and situation in question. Requesting (or revealing) information that falls outside of those realms of appropriateness is considered a breach of privacy. For example, a person has a reasonable expectation that their personal medical history will remain hidden from inappropriate queries (such as advertisers or employers), and only be revealed in an appropriate context (in this case, the doctor/patient relationship). Furthermore, appropriateness does not have to be symmetrical (“share and share alike”) – in the case of medical information, it would not be appropriate for a physician to share their personal medical history with a patient, even though it is appropriate for the patient to reveal their information to the doctor.

The standard of appropriateness governs the sharing of information largely on a one-to-one scale within one particular context, and hinges on the individual. Distribution, on the other hand, refers to cross-context “moving or transfer of information from one party to another or others” (122); in other words, what happens when personal information leaves the hands and control of a particular subject and comes under the control of another. Continuing the example of personal medical history, if a physician or hospital were to sell that information to a drug company, privacy would be violated in terms of distribution. Distribution and appropriateness often go hand in hand: while the information is appropriate to share in one context (patient to care provider), it is not appropriate to share in another (marketing), and that cross-context sharing constitutes a violation of privacy.

Nissenbaum concludes that “the benchmark of privacy is contextual integrity; that in any given situation, a complaint that privacy has been violated is sound in the event that one or the other types of the informational norms [appropriateness/distribution] has been transgressed” (119). This framework proves particularly useful when considering the competing claims of privacy violation in the Violentacrez/creepshots controversy, because it enables us to think about privacy in the plural – that instead of an individual’s singular right to privacy, it might be more accurate to think of that right as a collection of contexts for information sharing, each with their own set of parameters and norms. This multiplicity opens up space, and enables an analytical approach that does not assume privacy as a binary and zero-sum concept.

One of the major criticisms of Gawker, from ViolentAcrez’s supporters, was that Adrien Chen had gravely overstepped his bounds as a journalist by publishing personal details about Brutsch. The primary thrust of the privacy violation claims hinged on distribution: that Chen’s article (unjustly) transferred private information about Brutsch across contexts. Accusations were made that Chen was only revealing this information for personal gain and visibility, which presents questions of appropriateness in addition to distribution.

Interestingly enough, those who defended creepshots, jailbait, and Brutsch often made the argument that while Chen’s article violated Brutsch’s privacy in an unacceptable manner, the content of these subreddits did not constitute a violation of the privacy of the subjects in the photos. Although none of the commenters specifically or explicitly invoked Nissenbaum’s framework, the arguments nevertheless incorporated the two standards of appropriateness and distribution and claimed that the photographs in these subreddits violated neither. In many contexts, appropriateness is well-delineated by rules and implicit and explicit social norms. However, in other cases, appropriateness is contested and murky. In the case of creepshots, supporters argue that inhabiting a body that appears in public space constitutes an implicit agreement to be gazed at and photographed, thus these photos meet the standards of appropriateness and are therefore not a violation of privacy.

In the case of subreddits trafficking in pictures taken from one context to another (such as jailbait or subreddits devoted to distributing hacked nude pictures such as TheFappening), defenders claimed that this content did not constitute a violation of privacy because the digital images were on the Web to begin with. Just as creepshots argues that women have no right to privacy over their bodies when in public, subreddits like jailbait argue that the subject of an image that has been stored or sent in digital form, securely or not, has no further right to privacy regarding that image. This same line of reasoning is echoed in defenses of other stolen photo content like “revenge porn” or hacked/“plundered” online image storage.

Those who supported ViolentAcrez decried the doxxing, arguing it was one-sided. In
Vigilantism takes on a new form? How do we guarantee justice and punishment that fits however "bad" their actions are? What happens when, as a result of social media, doxxing and online witch hunts that may or may not accurately pinpoint the person or people exposure be deployed (if at all), and by whom? How can we distinguish between “justified” outing outweigh the personal cost to the person being outed? How should visibility and public question about visibility: does the perceived greater “social good” that may come from a public uncompromising figure, “deserved” what happened to him. Sipple’s case raises a more complex implications. She opens the article by briefly telling the story of another, pre-Internet “doxxing”: the outing of Oliver Sipple, an ex-Marine who successfully thwarted an assassination attempt on President Harold Ford at in event in 1975. Harvey Milk revealed Sipple’s gay identity to the press despite Sipple’s strong objections, wanting to claim him as a “gay hero”. The visibility was devastating to Sipple – he became estranged from his family and the White House distanced itself from him after the announcement. In the years following his outing, Sipple turned to using alcohol and food to dull his pain, and eventually died in his sleep of health complications at age 47.

boyd’s usage of a sympathetic anecdote re-frames the question and moves it away from what had previously been at the heart of the debate: whether or not ViolentAcrez, a decidedly unsympathetic figure, “deserved” what happened to him. Sipple’s case raises a more complex question about visibility: does the perceived greater “social good” that may come from a public outing outweigh the personal cost to the person being outed? How should visibility and public exposure be deployed (if at all), and by whom? How can we distinguish between “justified” doxxing and online witch hunts that may or may not accurately pinpoint the person or people who are responsible for these socially unacceptable acts?

[H]ow do we as a society weigh the moral costs of shining a spotlight on someone, however “bad” their actions are? What happens when, as a result of social media, vigilantism takes on a new form? How do we guarantee justice and punishment that fits

Information - photos, social media accounts, screencaps of CreepShots posts - that [the author] plans on using to ‘out’ Redditors who she considers sexual predators” via anonymous tips to police. This blog, and the entire “Predditors” project, mobilizes public visibility as a defensive tactic, a way of dismantling the anonymity that these men hide behind. Public shaming as a way of controlling and discouraging socially unacceptable behavior is not a new strategy, but can take on new forms online as a controversial and double-edged instrument of control. The first target of the Predditors blog, a high school substitute teacher who submitted upskirt photos of his underaged students in class, now has charges pending against him after a search (prompted by the Predditors tip) revealed sexually explicit texts and nude photos on his phone that he exchanged with girls as young as 16.

Of course, things are never as simple as they appear, and while I was relishing in the gritty vigilante justice of seeing anonymous creeps unmasked and humiliated, there were other critiques of and perspectives on the doxxing being circulated. These critiques largely centered on two separate issues: the legitimacy of ViolentAcrez/Reddit’s claim that content like jailbait and creepshots fell under the purview of free speech, and the ethical and moral implications of doxxing, visibility, and public shaming as a mechanism for changing and preventing undesirable behavior. To conclude this chapter, I would like to examine critiques focusing on the latter debate about the politics of visibility.

Well-known scholar of new media and Internet sociality danah boyd weighed in on the issue in an article titled “Truth, Lies, and ‘doxxing’: the real moral of the Gawker/Reddit story” that appeared in Wired magazine later that month (October 2012). boyd, overall, is critical of the doxxing, arguing that public shaming is an extremely powerful act with profound moral

239

240
the crime when we can use visibility as a tool for massive public shaming? Is it always a good idea to regulate what different arbiters consider bad behavior through increasing someone’s notoriety – or censoring their links?

My interlocutors, similarly, wrestled with the ethical implications of doxxing, although they almost exclusively focused on the tension between ViolentAcrez’ right to privacy and the right to privacy of the subjects of the photos.

241

[Creepshots] was an awful subreddit….exposing it to the light of day, I have no problem with that level of doing things. I can maybe see where some people might want to have a conversation about whether or not you can do that, and maybe there could be a more constructive way that those conversations could be had, whether or not you can reveal someone’s information like that. But at the same time, people were already kind of doing that, with the subreddit. –Sara

“A more gratifying way to fight fire with fire”: SRS and the Politics of Visibility

The conversations that I had with my interlocutors about visibility and problematic content on Reddit were often haunted with mentions of a particularly well-known and controversial subreddit: ShitRedditSays, usually referred to as SRS. This subreddit is an attempt to shine a spotlight of visibility on content that is “bigoted, creepy, misogynistic, transphobic, racist, homophobic, or just reeking of unexamined, toxic privilege”, but their tactics and reputation are highly fraught, particularly outside of feminist-leaning subreddits. SRS is not a default subreddit, but has nearly 75,000 subscribers (74,174 on October 1, 2015). SRS posts all follow a very specific format: all posts are links to specific problematic comments which are quoted (without comment) in the title, followed by the number of upvotes it has received in brackets. Here is a recent example from a highly upvoted thread in r/funny:

“Obligatory comment about how much of a stuck up bitch that woman looks next to him.” [+1329] “Thank you stuck up bitch for giving me my highest rated comment!” [+350] “she's a grade A cunt. and now the whole world knows it.” [+140] “Can we request an AMA to ask her why she's a Cunt?” [+24]

My interlocutors’ perspectives on SRS were almost all ambivalent. Many of them felt that SRS was performing a necessary function by bringing these problematic comments and attitudes to light, but many of those same interlocutors also disagreed with their methods.

I didn't feel like, because SRS has such a, I guess bad reputation, it's really hard for people to take it seriously. And I think it is something that needs to be taken seriously. But whenever SRS does it, it becomes a joke for a lot of people, and it negates any good doing that they might be accomplishing, in some ways. –May

There's a lot of people that say really, at least in my opinion, really nasty things online. And then when they get criticized for it, they use SRS as this boogie-man type, oh, SRS is going to invade, they're going to jump in on this post. It's like - there's legitimate criticisms to be made of your posts, you can't just dismiss everyone that's criticizing you. –Sara

I think SRS is a really important thing, of keeping people responsible for what they say on Reddit. Because otherwise I think it's kind of a free for all. And you can see why nobody's going to know who you are. And SRS kind of tainted a lot of Reddit, a lot of subreddits for me. -Mary

Despite SRS’s reputation as an angry, pitchfork-wielding mob, the stated purpose and policies of SRS are explicitly hands-off: their second rule in the sidebar is “SRS is not a downvote brigade. Do not downvote any comments in the threads linked from here!” Rather, SRS bills itself as a “circlequeef” (a feminized play on circlejerk, a term that refers to a conversation, thread, or subreddit that is endlessly self-congratulating and self-reinforcing, devoid of any real debate or disagreement) and warns potential posters that “interrupting the circlequeef is an easy way to get banned”.

Because of these rules, the criticism of the spotlighted problematic comments is self-contained within SRS itself. The sidebar tells users to “Pretend that the rest of Reddit is a museum of poop. Don’t touch the poop.” This seemingly conflicted approach is one of the reasons my interlocutors were so ambivalent about the subreddit. It raises the question: who is SRS for? What purpose does this visibility and critique serve if it is limited to an audience that already agrees with everything being said?

There are several elements here to unpack when it comes to critiques of SRS and its methods, many of which are addressed in the subreddit’s FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions).

242

The first is the expectation that by pointing out problematic content on Reddit, SRS is
necessarily obligated to attempt to correct that injustice or the larger culture of Reddit in some fashion. The second element, related to the first, is the notion that SRS should be choosing tactics that are the most “effective” (i.e. less alienating and more palatable to the center) rather than showcasing and mocking examples of problematic views. This often leads to a phenomenon the subreddit’s leaders have dubbed “concern trolling”, in which a conversation is derailed by “feigned or misguided concerns about the actions of the circlejerk”. The SRS FAQ maintains that the purpose of the subreddit is not in and of itself an attempt to change Reddit, but rather to serve as a “break room” where users can “laugh, vent, and commiserate without being dismissed, silenced through downvotes, or needing to explain why the comments suck over and over again”. The overall tenor of the FAQ seems to clearly reflect a user base that has collectively experienced comment burnout, describing “sincere debate” as “a tiresome, fruitless experience 98% of the time” and describes SRS as a “substantially more gratifying” way to “fight fire with fire”.

However, despite the avowedly self-contained character of the subreddit, the spectre of SRS (and the attendant epithet SJW, “Social Justice Warrior”) was still apparently one that struck a chord with the rest of Reddit. Several Redditors have programmed “bots” to make automated posts to alert the poster and others in the comment thread when their comment has been linked to SRS. These bots are not associated with SRS, which reveals a deep anxiety about visibility and scrutiny. Although the comments are deleted or banned quickly, oftentimes users who have found their comments posted to SRS will come to the subreddit to protest. Oftentimes these critiques hinge on claims of “reverse discrimination”, in which the subreddit is accused of perpetuating the very same prejudiced actions they purport to be against. This argument can be explained (although not validated) by considering the larger processes through which Reddit flattens and equivocates various categories of difference. By this logic, these users see very little difference between an SRS post mocking white supremacy or misogyny and posts that mock people of color or women, and thus feel obligated to call out this seeming hypocrisy. Under this constant onslaught of centered subjects telling the margin why they are wrong and shouldn’t be offended, it is understandable why SRS has developed the ruleset that it has. As I discussed in chapter 2, Internet arguments about difference are often draining, unpleasant, and usually do not result in either party changing their mind (and in fact, usually makes both sides more entrenched and hostile to each other). However, this leaves us at an unfortunate impasse, in which two separate loops of conversation are set up, with both sides “preaching to the choir” about the rightness or wrongness of their actions and discourse.

Conclusion: Honey, Vinegar, and Feminist Ryan Gosling
This brings us back to a hallmark of Web 2.0 raised in the introduction: self-reinforcing, polarizing “filter bubbles” which filter out content based on an individual user’s usage patterns and expressed preferences. I certainly don’t want to conclude by devolving into relativism here. I am not arguing that these bubbles and loops are equally valid: it is clear that they are not. But when there is no overlap at all, or no overlap that occurs in good faith, there can be no productive exchange and no movement of ideas. It is also important to note that Reddit’s primary purpose is not necessarily to set up conversations or facilitate intergroup understanding, but to generate traffic and pageviews. In that respect, the emergence of polarized “looping” communities such as SRS and MensRights illustrate the success of that endeavor. They are able to attract specialized audiences, many of whom have a deep affective connection to that particular ideology that fuels a lucrative stream of site interaction and discursive productivity.

These particular structural and market forces that support the current polarized status quo are formidable, but not insurmountable. Furthermore, early evidence suggests that “ingroup” methods of conveying meaning (such as image macro memes) can be used as a kind of Trojan horse to introduce members of these polarized communities to outside ideas that would otherwise be rejected as too threatening, unfamiliar, or discredited. I’d like to close this chapter on an optimistic note by discussing the Feminist Ryan Gosling meme.
Feminist Ryan Gosling is a meme that first appeared on Tumblr in 2011. It was created by university student Danielle Henderson as a way to humorously keep track of the feminist theories and theorists she was encountering in her coursework. The meme does not use a single image, rather features various photographs and screen stills of the Canadian actor Ryan Gosling looking pensive overlaid with text that blended feminist theory with an attempted come-on. This meme was a play on a meme that has been in existence since 2008, in which pictures of Ryan Gosling were overlaid with corny pick-up lines that always started with “Hey girl” and mentioned typically feminized intimate activities like cuddling and foot massages.

These lines usually referenced the context of the photo or an external event (for example, “Hey girl, all I want for Christmas is you underneath the mistletoe and the sheets”). The “Hey, girl” Ryan Gosling meme and, to a lesser extent, Feminist Ryan Gosling, did enjoy some limited visibility on Reddit. It was most popular in 2XC and related subreddits (such as 2XC’s meme-based spin-off, TrollXChromosomes). It did not receive much play within the more mainstream subreddit “AdviceAnimals”, which is the designated posting place for imagemacro type memes.

In 2014, University of Saskatchewan psychology Ph.D. students Sarah Sangster and Linzi Williamson conducted a small-scale study of 99 undergraduates to determine if exposure to Feminist Ryan Gosling memes made men more amenable to feminism. They reported that after viewing Feminist Ryan Gosling memes, male endorsement of feminist beliefs (as measured by an instrument called the Feminist Perspective Scale) was higher than it was in the control group (who viewed the same photos of Gosling without any text). The effect on women was not as pronounced; the female-identified participants in the study who viewed the memes often already self-identified themselves as feminists and indicated a high endorsement of feminist beliefs. The authors were also careful to emphasize that these memes did not have a significant effect on whether or not subjects self-identified as feminist, only their endorsement of feminist beliefs immediately after exposure to these images. This is a small study that is obviously limited in scope, but one that I find heartening.

“Feminism” is a deeply ideologically freighted term, and much ink has been spilled over the connotations of “the F word” have driven young women (and men) away from claiming the title. Aside from spaces particularly delineated as such, “feminism” is not a particularly popular term on Reddit. It mostly rears its head in the form of an impressive gamut of straw-(wo)man characterizations of the movement, from obsolete historical artifact to misandrist conspiracy. These Feminist Ryan Gosling memes could serve as a way to circumvent some of the negative connotations and attendant defensiveness through a combination of humor and a familiar format.

I actually see some overlap between the effectiveness of the Feminist Ryan Gosling memes and the replacement of Ellen Pao with Steve Huffman. In both cases, there is a net positive outcome as far as social justice is concerned: men feel more favorably towards feminism, and Reddit has removed many hate speech subreddits and amended the site rules to explicitly prohibit harassment and threats. However, in both cases, this forward motion is only accepted when it is delivered by a white man. The overall message has been “wrapped” in a more familiar and non-threatening package in order to make it more palatable to a resistant majoritarian audience. This loops us back around to SRS and a particular condescendingly used adage that is often invoked in relation to their tactics: “You’ll catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.” More often than not, these kinds of comments are tone policing or “concern trolling” presented as practical advice, a disguised mandate to avoid anything that would make “the center” (in this case, white, heterosexual, middle-class, young American males) uncomfortable. Those seeking to make Reddit a more habitable space for all subordinated groups face a particular challenge of any liberation movement: how to navigate between accommodation and appeasement while avoiding heavy use of the (ultimately ineffective) “master’s tools”.

Conclusion – Success, Failure, Connection, and Resistance
Throughout this project, I have found autoethnography to be both a blessing and a curse. It provided a unique way for me to explore my own affective responses to Reddit and unpack my relationality to it as both a researcher and as a participant. Being actively in touch with my own (often intense) affect about the things I was observing provided me with a particular entry point from which to begin my theorizations. But this intense affective charge also made it difficult for me to consider certain possibilities and caused me to close down
potentially productive lines of inquiry – such as investigating more of the Men’s Rights content, even without speaking to any MRAs directly, or using a more nuanced approach to the ViolentAcrez controversy that didn’t place my personal disgust and feminist outrage front and center.

This strongly autoethnographic approach also led me, at times, to overgeneralize the particularities of my experience, especially when it came to my working definition of terms and concepts like “connection” and “difference”. The project itself was spurred by an affectively intense sense of connection I had during my qualifying exams that was facilitated through Reddit. While that experience was extremely generative, I can see now that I conflated several elements of my affective imprint of that particular situation with what a “successful” interaction via Reddit should look like.

What I would like to do in this conclusion is attempt to disentangle the working meanings of two sets of key terms in my project: success and failure, and connection and resistance. Using Judith Halberstam’s The Queer Art of Failure, I then want to return to some of the interactions and patterns I deemed “unsuccessful” or “failed” and consider alternate understandings of these “failed” attempts as generative and illustrative in their own right.

First, I was defining “successful” interactions as always connective in some way, providing a temporary linkage that somehow transcended social stratification and allowed a glimpse of mutually recognized, shared humanity. Additionally, I defined (implicitly) that “productive” interactions have an additional element of personal transformation vis-à-vis issues of difference towards socially just ends. The story of the Sikh woman I told at the end of the introduction is an exemplar of what I considered a “successful” and “productive” interaction, especially the clear moment of understanding in which direct exposure to the shared humanity of another causes an immediate (and publicly declared) change of heart.

My ideas about what constituted a failed or non-productive interaction were similarly colored by my own experience and intense affective responses to those experiences. I would describe myself as a non-confrontational, sensitive person, which means my tolerance level for conflict and hostility is probably lower than most. I think this caused me to over-expand the boundaries of what I considered “failure” to include any interactions that produced negative affect that remained unresolved. Labeling all contentious interactions that didn’t end with a complete change of heart as partially or completely unsuccessful hinges on a very particular and somewhat narrow definition of “success” that conflates the removal or suspension of interpersonal blockages to understanding as the ultimate goal.

Using this rubric for success, my project could be read as a chronicle of failure and disappointment, a long documentation of an ultimately null result. I wrote in my autoethnography time and time again about being surprised and disheartened both by the large amounts of conflict, hostility, and harassment I found and the seeming lack of the transcendental connections and interactions that had so strongly drawn me to Reddit in the first place. Woven into this notion of “success” was also an implicit expectation of movement, progress, and change, which caused me to label the looping circularity of many subreddits and discussions as yet another failed aspect of the larger project of intergroup understanding.

In this formulation, “resistance” can serve as a foil for “connection”. Resistance, blockages, stratification: these are all synonyms that refer to an obstacle that must be overcome or bypassed/transcended in order for connection to occur. By extension, if connection and transformation are necessary conditions of success, then it follows that resistance and a lack of visible change are conditions of failure. There are significant parts of my argument that read resistance as a sign of failure. In my readings of my interlocutors’ accounts of Internet arguments and comment burnout, I characterize particular displays of resistance to change (sexist, racist, transphobic sentiments) as obstacles to be overcome. The ultimate success or failure of the interaction, then, hinges on the removal or circumvention of this resistance.

In The Queer Art of Failure, Judith Halberstam argues that there is tremendous potential in failure, failing, and losing, as a way “out of the usual traps and impasses of binary formulations” that “makes peace with the possibility that alternatives dwell in the murky waters of a counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique and refusal” (2). Failure, particularly queer failure, allows subjects to “escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development” (3) and engage in “active and passive forgetting” (54) that “loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being” (88).

The Queer Art of Failure also associates failure with resistance, but via a very different
Halberstam emphasizes the potential for acts of failure to also serve as acts of (intentional) resistance to hegemony. Citing James C. Scott’s Weapons of the Weak (1987) and Seeing Like a State (1989), she argues that what often is categorized as “failure” in contemporary heteronormative imperatives towards efficiency and reproduction could also be acts of refusal to submit completely to these disciplinary forces. Queer “failure” to follow heteronormative timelines and structures of kinship and reproduction also creates queer alternatives that “lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive lifestyles, negativity, and critique” (89).

“I started out looking for connection, but found a lot of resistance instead,” could be a glib summation of my initial results. Under the previously explored set of assumptions that elevates a particular form of connection as the ultimate goal, this would appear to be a discouraging result. However, it becomes clear that it is far more generative to view this resistance as a form of evidence in its own right – not as the foil to communication or a sign of failure and futility. Outside of the context of “failed” interactions, generative resistance appears in other places in the project, particularly in my discussion of the extensive labor of the subreddit moderators I interviewed. I discuss the strategies and tactics that moderators use to resist outside threats and trolling. Their labor is also a form of resistance to hegemony, a repetitive task that carves out a niche in often actively hostile online space for the intersectional communities they moderate.

Using this expanded definition of “resistance”, it is possible to see connection and resistance as two complementary, rather than opposing, central through lines in the project.

Decoupling the implicit conflations I had made between “connection”, “resistance”, “success”, and “failure” allows for a more nuanced understanding of the patterns I observed. Resistance is only possible with opposing force, competing movement – which means that the places resistance is found is an indicator that change, contestation, is occurring. Although it is frustrating and disheartening to see the intensity of vitriolic misogynist backlash (a particular form of resistance) and white supremacist “self-justified discrimination” on Reddit and elsewhere, it is also an indicator that something has been provoked, that a challenge has been issued in some way, that some part of hegemony feels deeply threatened enough to strike out with such force. Resistance is not movement’s antithesis – rather, it could be read a sign that indexes proposed or attempted movement. It’s on this slightly more optimistic note that I’d like to end: associating resistance not exclusively with hostility, trolling, breakdown, and failure, but also with critique, refusal, and world-building possibility.

Works Cited


261


262


263


Williams, Lauren C. "Redditors Call CEO Ellen Pao A Nazi, Ask Her To Resign For Deleting Abusive Threads." ThinkProgress. 11 June 2015. Web. 12 Jan 2016.

267


268

Kathryn Thompson
thompkca.indiana.edu

Education
Indiana University, Bloomington, IN
2008 - 2016
Ph.D., Gender Studies
Dissertation Title: “Ask Me Anything: A Digital Ethnography of Difference on Reddit.com”
Minor: Communication and Culture
Concentration: Cultural Representations and Media Practices
Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA
B.A. (Honors) in Psychology
Minor: Computer Science
2003 - 2007

Awards
Future Faculty Teaching Fellowship, Indiana University
Departmental Travel Grant, Gender Studies, Indiana University
Mabel LaDuke Fellowship, Indiana University
Board of Regents Scholarship, Indiana University of Pennsylvania

2013—2014
2013
2008 – 2009
2003 – 2007

Teaching Experience
Indiana University, Bloomington
Bloomington, IN
Associate Instructor, COLL-P155: “Public Oral Communication” 2015 - 2016
• Developed all lesson plans and activities, led classroom discussion and speech practice, held office hours, and administered all grades for 2 sections of 24 students.
Associate Instructor, GNDR 101: “Gender, Culture, and Society” 2014 - 2015
• Developed all lesson plans and activities, lectured and facilitated classroom discussion, held office hours, administered all grades for 2 sections of 25 students.
Indiana University, South Bend
South Bend, IN
Adjunct Instructor, WGS 100: Introduction to Gender Studies
Adjunct Instructor, WGS 302: “Cyborgs, Babe Scientists, and Hermaphrodites with Attitude: Power, Technology, and Difference” (FA2013), “Gender and Video Games: Intersectional Difference On and Off the Screen” (SP2014)
• Designed syllabus and overall course structure, lectured, led class sessions, held office hours, and administered all grades for one section of each class (ranging from 10-35 students).

2013 - 2014

Indiana University, Bloomington
Bloomington, IN
Associate Instructor, GNDR 205: “Cyborgs, Babe Scientists, and Hermaphrodites with Attitude: Power, Technology, and Difference”
• Designed syllabus and overall course structure, lectured, led class discussions, held office hours, and administered all grades for one section of 15-25 students.
Associate Instructor, GNDR 104: “Gender, Media, and Fan Cultures”
• Designed syllabus and overall course structure, lectured, led class discussions, held office hours, and administered all grades for one section of 40 students.
Associate Instructor, GNDR 101: “Gender, Culture, and Society”
• Lectured and led class discussion, collaborated on curriculum and exam development, held office hours, and administered all grades for two sections of 25 students.
Grader/Associate Instructor, GNDR 225: “Gender, Sexuality, and Pop Culture”
• Tracked student attendance and participation, held office hours, corresponded with students via email, and graded exams and papers for one section of 75 students.

2012 - 2013

2011 - 2012

2010 - 2011

2009 - 2010

Publications
(Accepted, Forthcoming) "Pleasures and Paradoxes of New Media: an Autoethnography of a Redditor." Texas Speech Communication Journal Online.

Presentations

“The Visual Language of Difference in Ragecomics.” Poster Presentation, InfoSocial: A Media,
“Queer Songs to Sing Along To: A Performance Approach to Karaoke”. Pojo Prize Winner, Qualia Panel. Mediating Culture: Experience Harmony and Discord, IU-OSU Folklore and Ethnomusicology Graduate Student Conference. Bloomington, IN: March 2011.

Related Professional Experience
Peer Reviewer, Journal of Teaching and Learning with Technology (JoTLT). September 2014.
Women’s and Gender Studies Governing Board Member
Indiana University South Bend, 2013-2014 academic year
Conference Organizing Committee Member and Session Organizer, “Preparing Future Faculty” Conference
Indiana University, February 2013
Assistant Conference Coordinator, “Post-posttranssexual: Transgender Studies and Feminism”
Indiana University, April 2010

Professional Organizations
Member, National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA)
Member, Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS)

Research Interests
Internet metaculture, gendering of technology usage, representation/narration/mediation of difference online, phenomenology and autoethnography of new media