

Here Comes the Author:

Evolving Notions of Authorship on Social Media

by

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## Abstract

Roland Barthes argues that “all identity” (142) is lost in the act of writing, and that the text arises through interaction between the reader and the written word. Responding to Barthes, Michel Foucault asserts that this highly relativistic perspective ignores the way that the “author function” (107) serves to render the writer punishable for potential transgressive social, political, or legal ideas that the text disseminates. While for Foucault the text’s meanings are unbound from the author’s intent, he asserts that the authorial role ensures that some social apparatuses are trained on distinguishable individuals. More recently, scholars such as Carla Bennedetti, Sean Burke and Amardeep Singh have nuanced the authorial role, noting that authorial presence can arise through the text. In conjunction with social media becoming central to conducting daily life, some scholars stress the importance of radically revising existing conceptions of the nature of authorship. I argue in this thesis that many genres of internet video on social media confirm and challenge entrenched understandings of authorship, as authorial status vacillates between creators and the wider userbase. Authority over the text’s meanings, and the consequences of certain interpretations, are both decentralized from and centered upon the original creator. At times, authority is spread out amongst other users to both productive and troubling effects. I suggest questions about identity are pertinent to conversations about determining authorship, as many social media users’ lives are packaged as content for their viewership while others author texts without their identity ever being revealed to the public. Ultimately, social media reveals that not only is authorship polysemous and polyvalent in the digital age, but that conflicting and contemporaneous notions of authorship tend to exist at the same time and influence textual reception and engagement.

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## Introduction: The Curtains Were Fucking Blue



1 *"The curtains were fucking blue" and its rebuttal meme*

Internet cultures house an assortment of conflicting and variegated notions of authorship. A meme known colloquially as "The curtains were fucking blue" (see fig. 1), which circulates periodically around social media platforms like Reddit and Twitter, gave rise to another meme, which I will refer to as "the rebuttal meme." "The curtains were fucking blue" exhibits a strain of exhaustion with literary studies and humanities disciplines in general that stems from mainstream perceptions of these disciplines. What is, to those within the field, a careful, evidence-based analysis of a text grounded in a clear theoretical framework can appear, to those without, like the imposition of ideologues' fictions on an untainted text. The contrasting clause on the bottom of the meme reads, "what the author meant," suggesting that the reader's work of "working on a work" (Barthes, 127) is not only contrived, but extraneous. We know what the author meant, therefore the conversation about the text ought to be simple. Meanwhile, the rebuttal meme cribbing from "the curtains were fucking blue" in order to critique it suggests the original misunderstands the purpose of literary studies. The meme represents an alternative English

teacher's voice leading a class through an open-ended analysis of a text rather than forcing the class to view the text their way, asking, "What does this poem *do*?" In my own social media feeds, many of the users I follow are frustrated by the assumption that the author's intent should circumscribe the meanings of the text. Many of these users feel this way especially because some ideas can be meaningful outside of the reader's awareness: viewers may associate the colour blue with different meanings or moods depending on their culture, time, and even if the individual is sighted or not.

"The curtains were fucking blue" is exemplary of a kind of attitude which, in the study of authorship, is referred to as *authorialism*. Authorialism, according to Andrea Selleri, is "the claim... that the object of literary criticism... encompasses, or should encompass, not only the text, but also knowledge relative to the text's author" (2). Selleri explains that a critique is considered "'authorialist' when it treats the literary work less as a linguistic object than as an action on the author's part" (3). Carla Benedetti takes this concept a step further and suggests that authorialism is an "investment" in the notion of authorship that tethers a work of art's existence to the author and marks its meritoriousness; as such, authorialism is not just a matter of "paternity...nor of its correct comprehension... but above all of its artistic valorization" (10). The fact that works of art can have varying levels of status in a culture shows that authorialism exists beyond the matter of authorial intent. Authorialism is a process of imposing and enforcing hierarchies on the reader's engagement with a text.

I am fundamentally opposed to the incurious attitude that "The curtains were fucking blue" promotes, but I am also unsatisfied by the meme rebutting it. Instead of over-investing in authorialism, the rebuttal meme implicitly proposes authorial absenteeism cohabitating with some transcendental version of the text which acts of its own accord: "what does this poem *do*?"

its hypothetical English teacher asks, as if the poem's impact radiates from it, the reader passively receives it and (importantly) the author is not a factor in its production *or* its reception. While the original meme is troublingly uncritical and suggests truth lies in what a creative producer means, it shows that—in the act of reading—many people's experiences of what the poem “does” is influenced by their connection with the author. My fellow students of media studies occasionally suggest that authorial intent does not matter. And my follow-up question is usually: really? It doesn't matter at *all*? Assuming “the author” really did mean “the curtains were fucking blue,” is that not information that could be relevant to the study of literature at least sometimes?

There are multiple, and sometimes conflicting, notions of authorship that coexist in the cultural zeitgeist at any given moment, but these are rarely re-examined. Even the above example memes talk around their axioms about authorship, but they never specifically name them as the topics to be re-litigated. The subject of authorship has not been sufficiently studied even since it was in vogue during the poststructuralists' debate in the '60s, but if there was ever a time when the study of authorship was necessary, it is now. The proliferation of social media and all of the new forms it has incubated since the launch of TikTok in 2018 and the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (never mind the prior two decades) has created an archive so vast that even subjects which we have discussed to death need to be re-evaluated with this new immense body of creative work in mind. What is more, that archive has formed through unprecedented modes of production and communication that are not just instantaneous, but constant. The internet puts the entirety of human history at almost everyone's fingertips almost all the time, which means things that we may have considered to be dead or purely of the past are resurrected. Examining authorship requires bringing some seemingly old ideas forward into conversation with new

media and reflecting back on the ways new media reveals continuities from the past. Doing so, the curious reader might discover whether or not there ever really was a time before the establishment of the English class when the author's perspective went without saying at all.

## THE POSTSTRUCTURALIST MOVE

Literary studies and media studies scholars broadly have been battling their own equivalent of “the curtains are fucking blue” for a long time. The early twentieth century saw some scholars batting back academic support for “consulting the oracle” of the author (Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1946). At the same time, thinkers like Walter Benjamin stepped back from the specific problem of interpretation to consider, on a wider scale, how the author relates to their material conditions: “what matters... is the exemplary character of production, which is able first to induce other producers to produce, and second to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers, that is, readers or spectators into collaborators” (777). As Janet Wolff explains, Benjamin understands the author “not... as an ideal, free, creative spirit, but... as someone with a given social and historical situation, confronted by the conditions of artistic production external to him/herself” (62). Authors are *situated*, that is, their ability to undergo creative production is dependent on, and enabled by, their material conditions. Others, like Virginia Woolf, contemplated the evolution of authorship across history. Woolf particularly lamented that the celebration of individual authors dispatched the more elusive Anon of yore: “The first blow has been aimed at Anon when the author's name is attached to the book... Anon is losing his ambiguity. The present is becoming visible” (385). With the technological and social changes of the 20th century came scattered critical investigations into theretofore unexplored, although everyday, notions of authorship.

What became a defining critical moment for the subject of authorship was the poststructuralists' forceful contributions in the 1960's. Roland Barthes famously argues in his 1967 essay "Death of the Author" that "writing is that neutral, composite space where the subject slips away, the negative space where all identity is lost" (142). Rejecting the "tyrannical" centering of the literary "on the author" (143), Barthes views writing, reading, and interpretation elliptically: the act of authorship has no clear origin point, and the text, narrative, medium, etc. extends continuously through reading. With force, Barthes concludes "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (148). Barthes' concerns stem, in part, from the way capitalist valuations are embedded within, and left uninterrogated by, art criticism which purports to be anti-capitalist. He raises important questions about the counterproductive moves such criticism might make by perpetuating capitalist ideals through privileging the author, a concept which generates value in a market economy. In declaring "the death of the author," Barthes turned attention towards the importance of each reader's experience being brought to bear on the text.

Michel Foucault's rejoinder to Barthes' essay has enjoyed a similarly long critical after-life. Foucault argues that this highly relativistic "notion of writing seems to transpose the empirical characteristics of the author into a transcendental anonymity" (104). Declaring the author dead is an occlusive move in its own right, as it pre-emptively blocks any examination of the discursive legwork the label of "author" does by shelving any examination of the authorial role under readerly activity: "we must locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings that this disappearance uncovers" (105). Foucault is rather more interested in what he calls the "author function" (107); by the time a text has been labelled a text and its progenitor labelled an author, a certain process

of discernment has already occurred which values and formalizes certain creators and creations above others. While the text's meanings are unbound from the author's intent, Foucault believes that the authorial role ensures that some social apparatuses are trained on distinguishable individuals: "texts, books, and discourses really began to have authors... to the extent that authors became subject to punishment" (108). Still, Foucault is not necessarily interested in studying authors insofar as doing so distracts from studying the author-function. Assertively, Foucault (quoting Beckett) concludes: "What difference does it make who is speaking?" (120). Perhaps the most tempered of the poststructuralists' analyses on authorship is Jacques Derrida's, as he argues that "one must... in a single gesture but doubled, read and write" (1697). In literary theorist Seán Burke's words, what differentiates Derrida from his peers was that he "did not ask to abolish the subject, he wanted to 'situate' it, recenter it" (167). All three critics—Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida—questioned fundamental ideas backgrounding notions of authorship.

Both Barthes's and Foucault's essays particularly fall into the traps of absolutism. Barthes provides no evidence to suggest that identity has only ever mattered to the reception or production of a text following the emergence of capitalism and, as such, his argument is very sticky. Barthes's framing unintentionally posits anonymity as the only form of pre-capitalist authorship. By extension, not only is identity purely an invention of the market, but anonymity would appear to be uncommodifiable. Even as Foucault's project is to step away from the focus on the individual in discussions of authorship, his essay does not wholly demarcate individualistic conceptions of the author as the progenitor of the text from Barthes's broader emphasis on the role authorship plays in discourse, the economic field, or concentrating power. In fact, Foucault claims that thinkers like Marx and Freud are "founders of discursivity... They have created a possibility for something other than their discourse" (114). Burke summarizes this

problem: “Foucault is... suggesting that the principle of authorship exceeds the bounds of the body of text which bears [the author’s] name” (91) while simultaneously asserting “the entire discursive formation is hereby dependent on the work of an individual author... not just the corpus, but all the ideas that he makes possible” (92). In the decades since Barthes’ and Foucault’s publications, discourse analysts have meticulously reopened the debate, introducing nuance that earlier contributions lacked. Ultimately, Burke explains,

The closure of representation neither necessitates the exclusion of the author nor can be achieved on its basis. The removal of the author opens a provisional space wherein the methodology can be developed. But once the methodology has been established, it must either return to take stock of that which it has excluded, make reparations, revisions, or continue to neglect the question of the author at the cost of remaining regional, selective, inadequate to the literary object. (51)

Foucault and Barthes are helpful in the study of authorship because they prompt us to consider the economic and legal systems that are in dialogue with a text’s formal components. At the same time, their work set a narrow scope for future scholarship because they privileged an absolute anti-authorialist absenteeism. Therefore, while Foucault and Barthes have much to offer the study of authorship, the fact that their studies were premised on ignoring authors means there is much to return to and “take stock of” before the subject can be settled.

One of the crucial points that ought not to be forgotten about Barthes’s and Foucault’s work is that notions of authorship are caught up in economic and legal philosophical debates. However, the way Barthes and Foucault highlight the interplay between authorship and its economic context, for instance, implicitly frames authorship as a monolithic concept. Both thinkers were reacting to the intermingling legal and aesthetic notions of authorship sculpted by a twentieth century capitalist economy that bled into artistic, literary, and media studies debates on the subject. In particular, liberal conceptions of artistic production as the creation of *property*—as

the process of coming into an ownership role over works of art—blend into understanding the author as the sole authority over the work’s meanings. Peter Jaszi points out that “the cultural figuration of the ‘author,’ as the inspired creator of unique works of art, has interfaced with the legal notion of the ‘author’ as the bearer of the portable rights in literary and artistic property” (30). Jaszi explains that because early copyright law was focused on the rights of booksellers, authorial rights over textual commodities did not calcify in legal discourse until well into the 18th century (32).

As ever, even after the emergence of modern market economies and the evolution of intellectual property law to include authorial rights, authorship was polysemous. Responding to Foucault’s assertion that the author function did not arise until the early modern period with the “emergence of a commercial culture” (878), Robert Griffin counters that 19th century England saw the explosive growth of an anonymous publication industry. In this environment, a text would gain prestige or value by being taglined as “by the author of...” another popular text they wrote, referring “to [the author] by the title of their works” rather than by their identity (880). Thus, “the relation of filiation between texts obtains even when the author is a fiction” (882). Anonymous authorship flourished in the 19th century because it offered a way for authors to avoid celebrity status and accountability while still enjoying monetary rewards (884). Griffin cautions against comprehending authorship as a monolithic concept and notes that considering the economic and legal domains authorship exists within requires nuance.

Foucault chalks up much of the commodification of authorial signatures to single technological advancements. In particular, the appearance of the printing press is figured in his essay as the flint and coal which sparked the signature. Although the printing press may have enabled novel forms of authorship and its influence certainly compounded with evolving

economic forces, suggestions that what Gerard Genette calls *onymity*—the “most ordinary state” (39) of signing one’s name—is monolithic and is the sole form of authorship to nourish emergent markets transposes *one* notion of authorship from the twentieth century onto the gestalt of authorship across history and cultures. If the emergence of onymous authorship is tied solely to the emergence of market economies and a particular technological development, then we must conclude that markets discouraged or suppressed pseudonymous and anonymous forms of authorship and that onymous authorship does not predate the printing press nor capitalism in any significant way. However, Griffin notes that onymous authorship actually appears even in the Middle Ages (2003, 2). The mistake that Foucault made in his analysis was in not accounting for the various contemporaneous forms authorship takes in one historical moment by instead framing authorship as something which evolves in totality in a teleological progression. That problem prompts me to consider how anonymous, pseudonymous, and onymous authorship have changed across history.

Many notions of authorship are certainly bequeathed to critical conversations by a leakage between aesthetic and legal discussions, and this transference creates philosophical fissures in single historical moments. This is in spite of the way conceptions of the author as the owner of property are often in conflict with historical notions of authorship and the highly collaborative practices of artistic production. Martha Woodmansee points out that the evolution of legal regulation of publication had as much of an influence on authorial status as the development of the printing press itself, which did not occur in a vacuum. Authorship, in some contexts, would have been understood as a craft similar to carpentry or smithing: one generation of specialists would mentor another. This notion carried over into print culture such that, in 18th century Germany, the author would have been viewed as but “one of numerous craftsmen

involved in the production of the book” (15). This way of understanding authorial roles was held by the author “himself... as a master of a craft... a body of rules, or techniques, preserved and handed down in rhetoric and poetics, for the transmission of ideas handed down by tradition” (16). Woodmansee cautions that the “modern push to establish a definitive oeuvre,” while not intrinsically incorrect, “pursue[s] a proprietary authorial impulse which” an author in 18th century Germany, for example, “did not himself feel” (23). Woodmansee’s reminder is valuable, as it prompts us to ask if certain notions were in conflict with others in their own moment. The 18th century elsewhere in Germany, for example, saw writers sowing the seeds for current intellectual property law with thinkers like Kant suggesting geniuses form entirely new material during creative production (St. Amour, 32). The myth of the author as a solitary genius has clearly won out in the legal domain in the language of copyright law, and the lesson should be that there has never been one monolithic notion of authorship in a single moment in history.

As much as Barthes and Foucault suggest identity is unimportant to this conversation, writers return to the subject of identity in the study of authorship in part for the ways it is configured politically. Nicola McCartney, in her project to “critique traditional notions of authorship” (2), argues that Barthes’s analysis serves, crucially, to illuminate the patriarchal and capitalist biases that undergird the authorial role *and* to undermine endemic elitism and commodity fetishism in the fine arts industry particularly. Traditional interpretive concepts of “authorship and genius” are not divorced from discourses of gender and class, and so have an impact on “our understanding of art, gender and subjectivity” (3). The idea of the solitary genius who begets the work of art is a boon in the art market, where the “singular signature” is more valuable by virtue of scarcity and the narrative of the artist as “the tortured individual” (5). For McCartney, Barthesian notions of authorship, while extreme and flawed, interrogate seemingly

settled capitalist axioms buried in popular understandings of subjectivity, individuality, identity, and therefore authorship: “attribution and ownership are gendered concepts” (12), and so “authorship...becomes subsidiary to issues of subjectivity and identity politics” (19). Other scholars point out that to be a woman and an author has historically mattered in the reception of a text. Catherine Gallagher explains that what was termed in the 18th century as “female authorship” was shaped by market forces, as women combatted misogynistic “unsavory associations” (146) on the market that their male counterparts never needed to contend with. Gallagher explains this tension caused by sexist forces suggests the marketplace “is not so much the cause of the phenomenon of female authorship as its point of departure” (xviii). Authorship also intersects with disability. In studying Helen Keller’s authorial history, Jim Swan points out that authorship functions very differently for deaf-blind people and deaf-blind women specifically than authorship functions for able-bodied people (1). Authorship, like everything, is caught between intersections of power.

The reader may already have realized that such an ensnarement applies to all forms of authorship, including the anonymous and pseudonymous ones which Barthes and Foucault ignore in their analyses. Anonymity and pseudonymity are not the apolitical, non-commodified analogs to onymous authorship. McCartney suggests that “anonymity” and “collectivity” present “different mode[s] of artistic production that negotiate the traditional role of the singular author or a biographical reading of their work: through the use of anonymity, pseudonyms, reflective identities and, in some cases, all three” (2). These forms may be necessary for “review[ing] the profile and authority of the artist” (13). McCartney points out that “if we dispense with all branding or identification markers... how can women fight for equality if they are not defined as different?” (143). Patriarchy is woven into many notions of authorship throughout history, but

simply calling for authorship to be discarded does nothing to outline how it affects marginalized people in the real world or what alternatives might be built to authorialist, liberal, capitalist ones. Even McCartney's analysis, which she introduces by its skepticism of the individual authorial voice, leans heavily on interviews with the artists whom she studies. Some utility does lie in trying to understand authorship through the lives of gendered, racialized, and otherwise marginalized individuals in authorial roles. For marginalized people, the signature is meaningful for a different reason. Under oppressive systems, authorial signatures work to verify that *we are here, and so are you*. I know I have always been energized knowing that a piece of media I love was written by a woman. I have been excited to know that a man could have possibly understood, if a piece of media made by a man resonated with my lived experiences as a woman. Bennedetti suggests that, "The act of enjoyment consists in the process of *attribution to an author*" (60, emphasis Bennedetti's). Identity is a gummy subject fraught with flawed premises that are difficult to chew on, but we lose a rich discussion about how it influences textual reception by discarding the topic altogether.

Simply corraling authorship into one digestible nugget for study (let alone for discarding) poses myriad obstacles. Concerns about who owns a text are qualified by aesthetic arguments about who has authority over the text's meanings as well as ethical arguments about continuing to rely on a concept which gestated within oppressive discourses. I think there is some anxiety amongst scholars that focusing on authorship and studying it in relation to the text's formal apparatus is solipsistic, or at worst resurrects Romantic notions of genius. However, this anxiety conflates veneration of the individual with careful analysis of their signature, the way the author might guide the reader, or the way the reader might seek to connect with the author. To say the author does not matter at all is to ignore the profundity of representation, the

way that people can be inspired to create when they see someone with similar lived experience create. On top of all of that, ignoring authorship skates over not only the polysemy of the term “authorship,” but a very important methodological question: what kind of authorship are we omitting from our study? Authorship is an intimidatingly vast concept, and the fact that literary studies has on the whole been quiet in the wake of Foucault and Barthes attributing onymous authorship to just the market, or just the printing press, means the influence of the last century of rapid technological development on authorship is grossly under-explored. Whatever necessity there was to talk about authorship before the invention of the internet intensified with the rapid change the internet has brought.

## **TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENTS**

Technological advancements enable new ways of producing material culture that are fundamentally distinct from older forms of media. While humanities scholars have grappled with the implications social media carries towards our theoretical frameworks, the rapid evolution of internet technologies and internet cultures has resulted in scholarship lagging many years behind the living internet. Marshall McLuhan famously declares “the medium is the message” (7), urging media studies students to consider the ways new media alter our perceptions of the world, “for any medium had the power of imposing its own assumption on the unwary” (15). He opines that even “Marx did not reckon with the dynamics of new media” (38) and, therefore, so much of his theory needed updating with new media in mind even within the 19th century. Old theories have to be reassessed and modified to account for novel characteristics of the age: “If a student of media will but meditate on the power of this medium of electric light to transform every structure of time and space and work in society that it penetrates or contacts, he will have a key to the form of the power that is in all media to reshape any lives they touch” (51).

As a student of media, I want to meditate on the power of the “electric light” of my moment in history to understand its “formal character” in relation to authorship. I take cues from several scholars, like Joseph Andersen, who aims to develop an “hermeneutics of algorithms” by bringing the established scholarship of Gadamer into the context of social media (1480). Aside from extrapolating from established scholarship on traditional media, I also hope to follow the lead of scholars like Adriaan van der Weel, who points out that notions of authorship are going to evolve alongside their material conditions: “the social position of authorship is always found in a particular sociotechnical constellation of a particular literate mentality and a particular dominant technology for the dissemination of texts” (2). Specifically, he emphasizes the way the internet complicates conceptions of authorship that may have previously been settled:

“authorship—and the symbolic capital it brings—is no longer so self-evident; there is a new need for definition. This leads to the larger question of the nature of authorship, and in particular to the question about the intrinsic relevance of attributing text to individual known authors, and its connection with the concept of intellectual property rights” (7). The economic thrusts which lead to modern “sociotechnical” formations of authorship cannot be ignored, even more so when authorship itself is being appropriated and modulated to work against the interests of capital in the digital age.

The study of authorship on social media is further complicated by the highly conversational state of internet media production and the general optimism that state seems to promote in scholars. Woodmansee suggests that new forms of communication undermine liberal notions of authorship as ownership: “in a variety of ways, electronic communication seems to be assaulting the distinction between *mine* and *thine* that the modern authorship construct was designed to enforce” (26). Lawrence Lessig notices that social media enables “democratic”

forms of cultural production “not in that everyone votes, but everyone has access” (52). Unlike other, more established forms of media, such as academic journals which “don’t attach comments to the articles they publish” (64), social media involves the reader’s voice directly with the text itself through comment sections. Carolyn Guertin looks at the bigger picture and argues that new media expands our notions of authorship, which were largely formed around copyright law, commodifying and protecting property. She explains:

Digital work... occupies the space of what is defined as free culture: not a space without property but a space of the free play of ideas... In cyberspace everyone is potentially an author, and... in a user-generated culture, artists exist not at the site of the iconic author-genius labouring in isolation but at a social interstice that might provide a collective model—a model that evades or attempts to evade the pitfalls of consumer culture, commodified objects, and collective exchange. (1)

Guertin says that bringing literary studies in conversation with these new mediums is a fruitful move, because new media contain “literary [and] aesthetic value” and users are “occasional writers who write to feel connected... to make themselves heard within a community of like-minded social beings, who tweet because they can... As a manifestation of sociability and constructive relations that may be a new model for a living art form... [this] relational aesthetic is a... political project because it makes social relations rather than art a political issue” (5).

Acknowledging the existence of a “relational aesthetic” requires recognizing the author-function, as it were, is not a fixity, and proceeding scholarship must therefore reckon with the existence of polysemous *authorships*. Recognizing that plurality and nuancing the scholarly debate on authorship is necessary for reigning in optimistic attitudes that the internet enables novel and radically new forms of authorship (and may resemble an inchoate counter-hegemonic creative space). Bradley Wiggins points out that “cultures are lived; the digital is programmed. A merging of the two represents a technological achievement tantamount to praise and concern”

(22). The word “democratic” implies a greater degree of collegiality and conscientiousness in internet culture than there really is. Most of internet culture did not arise with a careful and concerted effort to create healthy and facilitative forms of communication, and the distribution of authority on social media is worryingly toxic as often as it is encouragingly collaborative.

In the burgeoning study of social media in humanities disciplines, there is some concern that scholars (along with the users on the platform) focus too much on identity. Geert Lovnik calls for the development of internet formalism in the humanities: “it is time to look for elements that can make up a network Siri outside of the identity-obsessed cultural studies and ethnographic or quantitative social science approaches... What we need are appealing critical concepts that will survive as robust memes and transform into socio-technical protocols... Humanities should do more than describe the times we're living in” (22-23). Lovnik’s concern with the focus on identity stems from his belief that, “Identity is not merely a question of ethnicity, language and statehood, but is enriched and distributed by a fluid data collection taken from games, music, television, and the internet. The heterogeneous identity is not merely fragmented but gives people the very possibility to connect easily to others” (115). Lovnik is correct in pointing out that identity is more than just where we rest on these axes, but I wonder about some of the potential ethical holes in this mini-manifesto. Within the context of social media, there are already vernacular versions of the “appealing critical concepts” which Lovnik stresses need to be created. The task ahead for academics is not to strut into these spaces and create entirely new tools so much as it is just to learn the existing rules of the workshop. Furthermore, the idea that an “internet formalism” can prosper by breaking away from “identity-obsessed” disciplines like cultural studies and social sciences is slightly worrying to me. In fact, social scientists have long urged one another to emulate the skills fostered in literary and media

studies. Clifford Geertz, discussing the need to analyze authorial presence and signature on a scientific text, says,

Just what is it—beyond the obvious tautology, "a work"—that the author authors? The first question...that of signature, is a matter of the construction of a writerly identity. The second...that of discourse, is a matter of developing a way of putting things—a vocabulary, a rhetoric, a pattern of argument—that is connected to that identity in such a way that it seems to come from it as a remark from a mind. (8-9)

For Geertz, analyzing authorship subverts the illusion of objectivity that surrounds scientific reports. In the same way, humanities scholars can nuance the study of the formal character of social media by understanding how the identity of creators on social media inflects the content they produce. Whereas siloing scholarship forecloses refreshing otherwise stale debates, humanities scholars have much to gain by bringing what we know to the attention of our colleagues in other disciplines and learning from them in kind.

I am also unconvinced that an internet formalism *can* be developed without accounting for identity because of the way social media is structured. Lovnik points out that social media has oriented people on the platforms to think about identity: “The massive uptake of Facebook in particular has spurred an identity crisis of yet unknown dimensions, circling around the question of who we are and how we should present ourselves online. In the age of social media we’re not looking to externalize other possible selves but the true self deep inside” (38). To meditate on the formal character of the internet, we will have to consider the things that internet creators do. That is, if social media users are thinking about identity and trying to explore their identities when they produce, what do we have to gain by totally ignoring the subject? In one editorial, Zadie Smith opines that people are “reduced” on social media, including their “character” (58). However, it is possible to consider the ways social media does not reduce, but rather re-orient users towards their own identities and understand this movement as a “new habit of perception”

(McLuhan, *Gutenberg Galaxy*, 23) without limiting the discipline. I echo Amardeep Singh, who explains, “The culture of blogging, as one of many epiphenomena in the post-printing-press era, shows that the socially determined value of authorship is evolving and even *growing*... the concept of authorship is inextricably tied to the particular technology in which published texts are created, owned, and distributed” (32). Thus, if the technology is based on how we package, “reduce,” or articulate identities, then it stands to reason that discussions of the formal character of social media will (and ought to for the sake of thoroughness) cross paths with the subject of identity—the author’s name, relationality to axes of power, and station in an historical moment.

Despite the fact that literary, theatre, film, video game and media studies equip studious social media users to approach new media effectively, there are two reasons I think scholars tend not to: first is a general luddite inclination in each that instills fear in people when the subject of new media arises. Second is the often unexamined conflation between careful study and subscribing to the Romantic notion of the author as genius. Throughout this thesis I rove through the very old and the very new in the hopes of providing one more example to other humanities scholars that they likely have the tools already, and we ought not to be scared of approaching new media just because this media is shown through a blue light. More than that, the disciplines have been remiss not to teach students careful discernment: when it matters and when it does not to talk about the author, how to go about it, and how ethical conversations shift when the author is alive versus when they are dead. We might be alarmed to think of a genetics program, for instance, not teaching ethics to its undergraduates: upon fostering close reading abilities in our students, what are we enabling them to do without discernment?

Within the most famous poststructuralist essays on authorship and even in the budding field of internet humanities, there is a surreptitious slide from arguing against authorialism to

arguing against the concept of identity. Even in more nuanced studies, the subject of gender or ability in relation to authorship is introduced in such a way that suggests most of us expect to take for granted the elision between identity and authorship. This slippage is not so problematic when we are opting to study authorship *more*, but that slippage is certainly messy when the notion of studying identity and authorship is conflated with authorialism or, worse, resurrecting preeminent Romantic notions of the author as genius. But this reticence is not useful: many years of pre-eminent notions of genius cannot be counted as *study*. The general trepidation scholars feel towards new media outside of computer science departments melds with the overall underexplored terrain of the study of authorship to create a massive dearth of critical work.

Because the internet sparks constantly evolving dynamics between author and audience, there is an urgent need for scholars in the humanities to adjust pre-existing notions of what authorship even *is* in these newfound contexts. I am interested in the possibility that this newness belies resurging, receding, or long-retained elements of older forms. My thesis explores the evidence that social media retains many elements of the literary, theatrical, and cinematic and video game-ish in its composition and culture. At the same time, social media has wrought a new audio-visual milieu. This is a unique combination in a distinct moment of history. Some of what is new is old. We need to study the new with consideration of more established forms, to not pretend that in order to fashion a particular toolset we need throw out the whole workshop.

## **CHAPTER BREAKDOWN**

My thesis undertakes the analysis of the formal components of select sample texts from social media to contribute to a nascent internet humanities. My aim is to show that some old notions of authorship have been resurrected in the new, and entirely unexpected new forms have developed to challenge established modes. In the context of social media, “the author” is a

fluctuating identity that highlights the connections and interactions between various individuals before, during, and after the creation of the text. In many ways, evidence of authorial presence arises in and around the text in a relational aesthetic.

My first chapter, “Confessionals, Cancelled: Distributed Interpretative Authority on YouTube,” studies “cancellation” videos by two prominent YouTubers in the beauty community, Tati Westbrook and James Charles, and two prominent YouTubers in a video essayist community centering on media and political analysis, Natalie Wynn and Lindsay Ellis. Cancelling, or heated backlash on a community-wide scale, designates these creators as the accountable actors for the social and political transgressions in their videos, tweets, and Instagram posts. Drawing evidence from the totality of their online presence via other blogs and videos in varying ways, the creators explain ways their content has been misinterpreted by their communities of fans and colleagues, contesting the authority of the claims. These videos are founded on dialogue within online communities, wherein the audience’s interpretation of the creator’s work and behaviour is suggested to be as authoritative, if not more so, than the original creator’s interpretation.

My second chapter, “The Author is Here: Audible and Mimetic Authorship,” examines three memes from the short-form video platform, TikTok. Specifically, I examine the birth and proliferation of the memes, “Two Pretty Best Friends,” “Here Comes the Boy” and “It’s Enough Slices!” The first, a video of user JayRScottyy in his car telling a misogynistic joke, the second, a video of user june\_banoon singing to a cat approaching her on a driveway, and the third, a video of YouTube music reviewer Anthony Fantano screaming at another video of a person cutting pizza, are all unassuming and brief. Users on TikTok responded to and expanded upon these videos mimetically, inspiring the creation of thousands of reiterations. Theorists like Bradley

Wiggins suggest internet memes pose discursive arguments by building on a presumed knowledge base about the meme. Others, like Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, argue that media “remediate” (or refashion) older media while maintaining their own novelty. These memes exemplify that awareness of the original authors enriches engagement with the memes to their fullest, but it is not the sole criteria to participating in meme culture.

In my third chapter, “Intimations of Living-Dead Authors: Immediate Collaboration and the Techno-Scribal Revival,” I examine the livestreams of prominent Twitch streamers, Lilypichu and Pokimane, in conjunction with Contrapoints’ YouTube livestreaming channel, ContrapointsLive. I analyze the improvisational style and structure of livestreams (with the live chat attached directly to the video and sometimes featuring in the video itself) to explore the ways these streams distribute the authorial role and authorize various forms of production around a particular text. Furthermore, I draw on historicist accounts of medieval manuscript cultures, where readers would become authors through writing marginalia on original manuscripts, to expose continuities between past and present authorial/readerly interactions within livestream chats which feature in the video itself. Reader/audience reactions are written on the video itself in the form of the “chat.” Livestreams emphasize the dialogue between the viewership and the streamer, destabilizing notions of authentic texts created by a particular author even as they promote creativity around particular streamers’ identities.

I’m a lifelong social media user and internet denizen. I was six years old when I signed up for my first Hotmail account to chat on MSN Messenger with my friends, and I have been online ever since. Creating things to post online has always been a way for me to situate myself within those communities, to participate in them. I even make YouTube videos and have gained a small community of viewers who provide me with financial support, feedback, and social

connection. While most scholarship around internet media has been conducted by academics who watched the internet evolve, I evolved with the internet. Social media has always been fused to my peer groups, my hobbies—every part of my life has been tied to social media. When I think about my life, I think about my identity as it is melded with my role as a YouTuber, a writer, and a producer on social media. There is a certain way that scholarship around social media and authorship has failed to reflect not only my lived experiences on social media, but those of the many people I have connected with around the world throughout my life.

My lived experiences have coloured my curiosity about the subject of authorship since I read Barthes's essay for the first time, and my positionality as a cis white woman affects how I approach notions of authorship. I approach my study already sympathetic to the frustrations creators deal with in interfacing with certain malignant characters in their audiences. As well, I am cognizant of the ways misogyny can inflect audiences' reactions to women's content. I attempt to be sensitive to the ways racialized and trans creators in my case studies may experience similar but distinct prejudices through creating online. I do know that theorists writing about authorship and (now) the internet have thought rigorously about these things, but their work often feels removed from my reality, where being an author on social media is fundamental and dealing with readers sometimes means dealing with bigotry. While there is much for me to take from Barthes, Foucault, and many of my predecessors in internet humanities, I think it is important for scholars to be exposed to the perspectives of young people who have lived their lives online.

## Chapter 1: Confessionals, Cancelled: Distributed Interpretative Authority on YouTube

I begin this chapter far afield of social media with Dadaist Claude Cahun. McCartney, writing on Cahun's surrealist autobiography *Disavowals or Cancelled Confessions*, suggests Cahun's work reveals that identities, and authorial identities specifically, are polysemous. Photos accompanying *Cancelled Confessions* include Cahun in a cloak covered in masks that she can take up (animate) at any moment as her true face, suggesting, as McCartney says, "no one identity is more secure than another" (42-43) because these masks "are de-animated" when they are set down, hanging "in an anticipatory state of suspense" (45). Identity shifts according to which mask the author takes up at any time and who is looking at the wearer. Cahun's, McCartney says, is an anti-autobiography grappling with the dialogic nature of creative production and the fragmented nature of the self. Instead of asserting one truth about Cahun's life, the text contests the monolithic conception of the artist and posits a context-dependent vision of the self. The malleability of identity has drastic implications for authorship. McCartney notes that Cahun's photographer and partner,<sup>1</sup> Marcel Moore, has not received the same legacy as Cahun despite the fact that Moore photographed her own shadow into the photos alongside Cahun and despite her instrumentality in bringing Cahun's work to life (55). Photographers are not usually seen in the work from their position behind the camera, and so this shadow signposts the coexistent perspective of a watcher who is involved in the production of the text. The shadow is both authorial and spectatorial, relevant evidence to accompany the cancelled confession and superfluous stamp evincing other perspectives in the production of a work of art.

Cahun's project is stuffed with metaphors that are taken up repeatedly in the genre of videos I study in this chapter. Certain genres of internet video on social media are deeply

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<sup>1</sup> Marcel Moore was the pseudonym of Suzanne Alberte Malherbe, the romantic and creative partner of Claude Cahun.

involved in the imbrication of identity, authorial status, and an object which both represents and obscures identity (the mask). Video-sharing social media platform YouTube's name and slogan, "broadcast yourself," gestures towards the stylistic tendencies in content native to the platform which creators use to juggle fragmented selves. YouTube sidesteps the bemusingly porous barrier between creators and their work and, instead, markets itself as a platform for viewers to become content creators and content alike: "You," the person watching videos on YouTube, can broadcast *yourself*.

The four videos I have chosen to study in this chapter fall into a still-metamorphosing genre of online videos that I refer to as "cancellation videos." Cancelling, or heated backlash on a community-wide scale, ranges from campaigns to have an individual de-platformed or fired to discussion on internet forums with an overall critical tone. My final two case studies in this chapter endeavour to outline the etymological and semantic depth to the term. The term's colloquial origins imbue it with a great degree of mutability, and consequently there is debate over whether or not cancelling is a real phenomenon or, assuming cancelling is real, if the purported consequences are more important than the harm caused by the cancelled individual. Cancelling is a process which designates these creators as the accountable actors for the social and political transgressions in their wider political archive, including YouTube videos, tweets, and Instagram posts. In this genre of online video, these creators address criticisms levied against themselves by drawing evidence from the totality of their online presence via other blogs and videos in varying ways. The creators explain ways their content has been misinterpreted by their communities of fans and colleagues, contesting the authority of the claims. What is more, the YouTubers dip into an anti-autobiographical style by telling their stories in order to prove they ought not need to; what is at stake in many cancellation videos is often the idea of privacy itself,

including which details of a person's life are necessary for anyone else to know when the creator is under fire. These videos are founded on dialogue within online communities. Within that dialogue, audiences implicitly claim their interpretation of the creator's work and behaviour is as authoritative, if not more so, than the original creator's interpretation. This claim is "implicit" because audiences will call creators to action (usually an apology) based on their interpretation of the creator's texts, behaviour, and even character. My choice to group these four videos together is rooted in Natalie Wynn's and Lindsay Ellis's decisions to draw parallels between their own public disgrace and those of Tati Westbrook and James Charles within their videos. All of the videos which this chapter deals with are dizzyingly inter-and hypertextual; each was prompted by discussion occurring off of YouTube, citing posts from Instagram, Twitter, and direct messaging apps. Each creator's video alludes to their general presence on these platforms. Conversations about how to interpret the YouTubers' work became so heated that the YouTubers themselves felt the need to step into the dialogue with their YouTube videos.

I want to think about three things in relation to authorship that these oftentimes highly confessional cancellation videos reveal: authorial identity is in flux, with different masks falling off and being placed on the author's face oftentimes against the author's will; that the author's loved ones and colleagues have their "shadows" superimposed on the work of the author; finally, the audience's role as viewer and jury casts its own shadow over the text as the audience disarms and re-equips different masks of their own. It is not that the author's loved ones contributed to the production, but that the audience perceives these people as accountable for the production in some way because they stand on the edge of the author's life. One of the bases for determining authority over text in any given moment is identity, which includes identifiers (gender, age, name, race), biography (private or public details of one's life story), and community (whom the

individual is associated with). People who appear to be close to the author are identified as if they have authority over the author's work at some times, and they are implicated and held responsible for the author's transgressions. As Rosemary Coombe explains, a platoon of collaborators usually bolster the celebrity image. Fan culture enables those who do not own intellectual property to exercise "an ethic of care" (124) over the texts which those with commercial interests do not: "fans respect the original texts and regularly police each other for abuses of interpretive license, but they also see themselves as legitimate guardians of these materials, which have too often been manhandled by the producers and their licensees for easy profits" (124). Coombe concludes, "articulations of identity are possible only in conditions of polysemy, symbolic ambiguity, and a surplus of meaning, when the necessary cultural resources for contesting meaning and deserting identity are freely accessible...our cultural resources are increasingly the properties of others, and meaning is the monopoly of an elite who control the commodified texts that pervade our social lives" (131). One consequence of that polysemy, I argue in this chapter, is that fans can also practice an "ethic of antipathy" where fans justify writing vitriolic comments about creators online by treating creators and their various masks as one and the same. Fans are very concerned with figuring out how many layers of masks the creator's face is hidden under, but often fans overlook the way their own "shadows" or fictions are imposed on the creators.

Geert Lovnik, writing on blogging, explains that the medium "is by default a masquerade; it is impersonation, presentation, and a drive to be seen, present, acknowledged, recognized" (98). Lovnik considers blogs not to be "pieces of creative writing... they should be seen as recorded conversations, extensions of oral traditions... blogging news has transformed from a lecture into a conversation" (99). If blogs, in their written form, can be reasonably

qualified as “extensions of oral traditions” then it stands to reason that these cancellation videos, with their auditory component, may be extending some elements of oral culture. Cancellation videos harken back to vlogs (a portmanteau of “video blog”), an off-the-cuff authentic capture of a person’s life, thoughts, or activities. Typically, vlogs are loosely structured, and work as diaries or personal correspondences between the video creator and the viewer. The texts that I am concerned with are more structured than vlogs, but the context of blogging and vlogging helps to understand the ecosystem, mores, and stylistic trends that the videos to follow come up in. Singh, in his lucid essay on poststructural critiques of authorship in the context of blogging culture, defines a blog as

a public diary that is written and published electronically. As a kind of reinvention of early modern diary form, blogs trade heavily on the conventions of diary writing, including especially the rhetorics of sincerity and immediacy. As public texts, however, blogs resemble other important modes of expression characteristic of modern print-culture. (21)

Debates about whether or not to 'cancel' an author often resort to publicizing otherwise private productions, like text messages. In his discourse analysis on authorship studies, Seán Burke explains that “the importance of autobiographical contexts to this debate goes without saying... countless biographical factors... are privileged whether offered up in exonerative or incriminatory contexts” (5). An author’s productions and private life alike are brought to the fore in the discourse “as an elliptical and indirect form of confession... In both modes, the author’s text is seen to be autobiographical in essence, a text... to atone for the previous errors” (6). Like Cahun’s “Cancelled Confessions,” cancellation videos work as confessionals on being cancelled. The appeal of the cancellation video is two-fold: it offers a titillating confession, one that brings the author’s private life into a public text, and it offers a confession apropos the juridico-political field. YouTubers must fess up and tell the truth about their incriminating histories.

This chapter is centred on the ways those wider interpretive dialogues democratise authority over the text such that the *authority* conferred upon traditionally elected progenitors over the text is distributed, quarrelled over, and represented in the text itself. The audience is able to participate in the text's production directly through YouTube's interface, of course, but more important to this chapter are the ways the conversations users have with each other, and certain creators, *about* those creators eventually surface in the works themselves. Because users on YouTube are expected to broadcast *themselves*, the dynamics that arise out of this democratic medium are complex and shift between lateral and vertical modes of authorising meaning from moment-to-moment. My arguments axiomatically poise the author in her traditional stature as master over the text's metaphysics in order to test these axioms against the new and novel arrangements social media provides. Romantic notions of authorship are resuscitated in some ways in the zeitgeist around these videos, as users may not attribute genius and originality to a specific YouTuber, but they *do* attribute any and all problematic elements to that creation to the point where systemic injustices are sometimes boiled down and these creators become symbols for the system. However, the creators I study in this chapter have far less economic sway over the material conditions surrounding the discourse they are involved in than YouTube itself. In ascertaining the aesthetic confines authorship can be contained within, it is necessary to acknowledge that the medium itself is not untethered from economic mechanisms.

Trace elements of authorial presence, or signatures, work as incriminating compositional cues to the point of view of the creators. The social pressures around the author-function result in the creator being "held accountable" and thus prompt the creation of these videos; YouTube's open emphasis on the creators themselves as entertainment serves as a spacious threshold for understanding the importance of the author's biography in relation to his texts. The on-going

interpretative battles between creators and audiences in these videos rope in the meanings readers find within texts *and* the character of the creators themselves. Cancellation videos both affirm and contradict Barthesian and Foucaultian notions of authorship while revealing the distinct forms of authorial presence on social media. In alignment with Barthes' thinking, the individual creator is secondary or irrelevant to the interpretive authority of the audience. The author-function, then, concentrates discourse upon specific individuals when the text they have created invokes that discourse. Furthermore, the author-function exacerbates the ills of capitalism, homophobia, sexism, and other power paradigms in the estimation of their audiences. At the same time, YouTube etiquette and social mores show how the identities of the individuals behind the texts matter very much to audiences. The YouTubers themselves make these semi-autobiographical, semi-argumentative videos because they have personally been called to account. Foucault's suggestion that the author-function arises (at least partly) to the extent that authors can be subject to punishment is pertinent here, but needs some tweaking: YouTubers' identities matter to their viewership long before they misstep. The misstep matters only because viewers have already begun to believe (either by the YouTuber's design or by the viewer's own thinking) they have come to know the "authentic" author. The cancellation comes when the author fails to live up to that version of themselves which lives in the psychological world of the viewer, and this dynamic affects cancellation videos' formal components. Cancellation videos reveal how the authorial self is constructed and justified, while authority (mastery) over the text's meanings is tugged back and forth between the creators, their collaborators, colleagues, personal connections, and their audiences. While YouTube does distribute authority amongst these users' viewerships in radical new ways, there is evidence in the autobiographical accounts of these videos to suggest that *all* forms of readerly interaction are not endowed with validity at

all times. YouTuber and juridical viewership constantly wrestle for control over certain authorial masks not so the viewer can take them up, but so they can accurately affix them to the author.

### **TATI WESTBROOK**

On April 22nd, 2019, Tati Westbrook, a prolific and popular YouTuber in the Beauty community (a group of creators who produce make-up tutorials and reviews), posted a video titled “BYE SISTER...” to YouTube. The title played on the catchphrase, “sisters,” coined by her fellow famous member of the beauty community, James Charles. Charles uses “sisters” as both a playful name to refer to the whole of his community and an unconventional honorific when speaking of other social media stars he is on good terms with. Charles would refer to Tati Westbrook, for example, as “sister Tati.” In the weeks prior to Westbrook’s upload, Charles posted a paid endorsement to his Instagram story—an ephemeral video format that disappears from the user’s profile after 24 hours—promoting a competing brand of hair vitamins to Westbrook’s own supplemental hair vitamin brand. Charles did not mention Westbrook’s brand in his promotional video, but the mere endorsement of Westbrook’s competitor was a faux pas in Westbrook’s view. Westbrook initially posted her reaction to her own Instagram story expressing her frustrations and distress with what she perceived as an egregious betrayal of her friendship with, and professional support of, Charles. Westbrook explains in “BYE SISTER...” that the video is her serious response to Charles, and its publicity would be more effective for cutting ties with him. This video gained astonishing traction outside the borders of the beauty community; in a matter of days, “BYE SISTER...” gained nearly 50 million views, Charles’s channel lost millions of subscribers, and Westbrook’s channel underwent a commensurate level of growth.

At first blush, “BYE SISTER...” is a vast departure from Westbrook’s usual productions; she does not offer advice for achieving certain make-up looks and she is not reviewing any

beauty products. Even though the video is no longer available under Westbrook's official catalogue, it contains certain stylistic elements which function as Westbrook's surrogate signatures. She is, for instance, backgrounded by the same set as her make-up tutorials (see fig. 2). Because this atypical video is filmed on her usual set, Westbrook appears like she has set her professional beauty guru mask down, packed her props away, and shelved her channel's specialised focus to address her audience seriously. In other words, Westbrook seems to film her video "after hours" to build a feeling of authenticity, a performance which does not seem like a performance. At the same time, using her usual set as opposed to an entirely different location invites the audience to recall their trust in her. Westbrook evokes the authority of her YouTuber persona and her parasocial connection with her audience through her video's mise-en-scène and draws the viewer's attention to her seriousness. Parasocial relationships are relationships a viewer typically forms with a media figure wherein a fan comes to feel a familial, romantic, or friendship bond with a public persona (Tukachinsky, 1-2). Parasociality is characterized by the strategic moves the (typically) famous party makes to solidify the connection their fans have with their persona. Recording this video on her typical set allows a YouTuber to open her discussion on the terrain that the parasocial connection was formed. She gets to be herself,



2 Tati Westbrook in her beauty room

bringing up her personal problems, with all the benefits conferred on her by her professional mask.

Beyond functioning as miniature signatures, Westbrook's body language, intonations, and general comportment interface with the editing style to construct the habitus of her natural self and ultimately draw attention *away* from the boundaries of her set. "BYE SISTER..." is edited similarly to Westbrook's usual content, as the video is structured mostly by jump-cuts which extricate dead air, pauses, or bad takes. There are several moments where a jump-cut manufactures an improvisational, unedited, sincere and authentic affect. In one instance, Westbrook finishes speaking, looks away and fingers a lock of her hair. At this point, the shot is interrupted by a jump-cut to Westbrook as she begins speaking again. Westbrook's pause coupled with her facial expression just before the cut convey that she is overwhelmed by her emotions and she needs a moment aside to recover her composure. Westbrook pauses and says under her breath, "This is really hard to do," before another jump cut when she is seemingly overcome with pride over Charles's professional and personal development. She also makes intermittent eye contact with the camera, tending to look away when she appears to be vulnerable and making unbroken eye contact with the camera when she is angry. This footage is precisely the type of footage that is usually removed to create a jump-cut. Westbrook uses these emotive displays to dispel the feeling of a highly manicured, professionally polished performance. Going off-script in what is ostensibly a moment of heightened emotionality is a common strategy on YouTube, and Westbrook's implementation invites the sympathies of the audience as much as it sculpts a seemingly authentic representation of herself.

Westbrook's video provisions her fans' ethic of antipathy towards Charles, which swelled in the wake of her video's release. Public forums were largely silent on problems with

Westbrook's approach, including one instance wherein she sneaks a casually homophobic stereotype about gay men into her video; based on the way her viewership moved to support her in the wake of this video's publication, I believe her careful performance of her authentic emotions carries many viewers comfortably past the potentially dangerous ramifications of her speech. Charles, Westbrook explains, made jokes about primarily being attracted to straight men which she was uncomfortable with: "oh my God, you tried to trick a straight man into thinking he's gay yet again!" Westbrook eventually explains that the problem with Charles's behaviour is that he seems to be "cracking someone's sexuality." What is more, Westbrook prefaces this story with a meandering soliloquy about her own "forgiving heart." Westbrook's accusation is vague and indistinct, but she manages to contour her story with self-reports of her stellar character to the claim she is making instead of presenting evidence supporting her claims. Thus, Westbrook's authenticity is proof in and of itself against Charles's character. Announcing her authenticity is central to much of Westbrook's self-representation. Amardeep Singh draws from Lionel Trilling's outline of sincerity as "a Renaissance concept of self-presentation" and understands authenticity as that which

requires a more strenuous moral experience than 'sincerity' does, a more exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in, a wider reference to the universe and man's place in it, and a less acceptant and genial view of the social circumstances of life... authenticity, in short, is a certain ethical way of being, while sincerity is primarily a way of saying, a rhetorical posture. (24)

Authenticity has several meanings here: this is a Tati Westbrook original, in that the video is not a forgery, and Westbrook is being "authentically" herself, as in she is being "strenuous[ly] moral." Westbrook even asserts that her fidelity reflects strong moral character. She is authentic and therefore trustworthy, sincere and therefore the right person to side with. Westbrook's

authenticity constructed through the video's formal components is more crucial to her video's argument than the actual arrangement of ideas in the video.

Much of Westbrook's argumentation in her video hinges on the economic damage she believes Charles's disloyalty has posed to her brand, which is obfuscated by her invitation to the audience to view her video as a genuine and heartfelt self-expression. Walter Benjamin argues in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" that "the cult of the movie star... preserves not the unique Aura of the person but the spell of the personality, the phony spell of a commodity" (182) and that "the distinction between author and public is about to lose its character" (183). The disappearance of a "distinction between author and public" is not a strictly unhealthy development in Benjamin's view. In "The Author as Producer" Benjamin expounds, "the bourgeois writer of entertainment literature does not acknowledge this choice" of whose interests he works in service towards, but nevertheless "he is working in the service of certain class interests" (758). The deterioration of this "spell" may be beneficial in the class struggle, he continues: "the most urgent task of the present-day writer [is] to recognize how poor he is and how poor he has to be in order to begin again from the beginning" (776). If, as Benjamin argues, it is the duty of the bourgeois author to align herself with the interests of the proletariat and to use her creative productions to empower others to create, Westbrook's video is entirely inapposite to this project. Westbrook does recognize this class disparity, and works to mobilise it in her favour rather than enable readers to produce their own videos, make-up styles, etc. She attempts to convince the audience she is their friend, that despite her wealth she and they are on the same side.

Meanwhile, Westbrook's finances come up again and again in her video. For one thing, before Westbrook deleted the original "BYE SISTER..." from her channel, she allowed

YouTube to play multiple advertisement breaks interrupting the video. Part of what inspired this video are the profits that Westbrook says she lost to Sugarbear Hair. Westbrook continually contrasts this highly unrelatable story about hypothetical lost revenue with that of her former life in poverty before YouTube: “I started out with nothing. Nothing.” She warps the audience’s sensitivity to that class disparity and distracts from her own abstention from aligning with their interests through this juxtaposition. While addressing Charles, she implicates Charles as a greedy, wealthy elite who has built his largesse off the support and funding of his subscribers:

If you don’t have my back, at least have your subscribers’ back dude! You have millions in your account to hire security. I tell you I can’t be bought, I would have left. People were like, what was he supposed to do? Leave. Have loyalty to the fanbase that put that money in your bank account instead of lying to them.

Westbrook eventually swivels back into an emotionally vulnerable affectation as she says, “You’re my family, I love you, still. This is not about money. At all!” She explains that her vitamins are “selling like hotcakes.” Westbrook situates herself alongside the audience by signposting the disparity between Charles’s class position and theirs. Westbrook takes up the mask of a version of herself with a life station that is more relatable to the average viewer. An important part of these videos is dialoguing with the audience, recognizing that the creators are doing some form of collaboration with them, and involving the audience in the creator’s goals and creative accomplishments. YouTubers will commonly announce “we” have reached a certain subscriber or views milestone to include their viewership in their personal achievements.

“BYE SISTER...” invites the audience to occupy the position of an authoritative, collectivised collaborator with vested interests in Westbrook’s success. In some ways, this warps Benjamin’s polemic that, “What matters... is the exemplary character of production, which is able, first, to induce other producers to produce and, second, to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers—

that is, readers or spectators into collaborators” (777). Westbrook’s conflict with Charles, and her entreaties to the goodwill of the audience, do not work as inducements to the audience to produce their own works. She does involve the audience in the interpretation and writing of her autobiography and Charles’s, implicating them as collaborators in practicing an ethic of antipathy through visual and verbal dialogue. These inducements expose an asymmetrical distribution of authority; Westbrook is the one with the camera, and her audience’s involvement in the production begins and ends with increased engagement (and therefore profit) on Westbrook’s channel. This is not to ignore the agency of the viewer to detect Westbrook’s cues and discern which person is more trustworthy, who has the “best production” and the “best political tendency.” Rather, the extent to which the audience can meaningfully dialogue with Westbrook is limited to the avenues YouTube provides them, and the way Westbrook alone profits from her enticements to the viewer to interpret her words suggests that the way the audience is enabled to become producers on YouTube may be illusory.

Westbrook’s intended audience is hard to discern, which troubles any endeavour to situate Westbrook as an author. Taking inventory of the ways Westbrook addresses many different people muddies the picture further: Westbrook addresses James in the first and third person; she addresses the audience in the second person; she addresses Gabriel Zamora, another creator in the Beauty community, in the first person; and finally, she addresses James Charles’s mother in the first person. To *whom* the video is addressed raises questions about the text’s purpose and who Westbrook herself is. Westbrook will shift between talking about and talking to certain people, turning and addressing them tactically at different points in her video like a prosecutor might address a jury. So even when she turns to address other people who she has called to the stand, the purpose of swaying the jury colours every word. Autobiographical and

biographical evidence plays an important role in authenticating Westbrook's perspective, but what is noteworthy in her video is that she claims authority over *Charles's* biography as well. Westbrook invokes her biographical history alongside Charles's to build a case for her own authority, as Charles's close friend and collaborator, over Charles's texts, actions, and even mind. To Westbrook, promoting Sugarbear Hair on his Instagram was proof that "You should have held onto your integrity. You're a phony." Westbrook accuses Charles of being inauthentic and of betraying the audience/author relationship. Westbrook implies that Charles is so altered by fame that only she, his long-time collaborator, can correct him, authenticating her status as an author by de-authenticating Charles's. Her video shows footage of Charles at her wedding, not because Charles did anything wrong there, but because this evidence of their intimacy is meant to make Westbrook's authority more obvious. YouTube videos involve the YouTuber and their audience in an act of mutual viewing: the YouTuber makes eye contact with the camera while addressing the audience as if the audience is behind the camera itself. Like Marcel Moore's shadow extending into the frame, the audience's presence and perception is imprinted onto the formal apparatus of the video itself. They are called to be present in Westbrook's pseudo-litigation in the way a jury might be, and Westbrook invokes the audience to assess which "mask" James Charles wears is his true face. The punitive tone in Westbrook's video moralizes the authentic author and favours Westbrook herself for mobilizing her audience to her advantage.

## **JAMES CHARLES**

On May 10th, 2019, a visibly distressed and teary-eyed James Charles uploaded an eight-minute-long video entitled "tati," in which he expressed his remorse for having associated with Westbrook's competitor. Far removed from Charles's typical style, "tati" was recorded on a cell phone, in a hotel room, with no prepared script. Twelve days later, having deleted this original

video, Charles posted a longer video entitled “No More Lies” methodically addressing Westbrook’s accusations in “BYE SISTER...” The video gained as much and as widespread attention as Westbrook’s video, drawing almost all of Charles’s lost subscribers back to his channel and resulting in a loss of one million to Westbrook’s. Unfollowing/unsubscribing is, on social media, a way for viewers to speak loudly and together against a YouTuber. Users will commonly announce their egress to a creator through their comments, but a collective action like what happened with Charles’s following is highly unusual and (even without comment from the un-subscribers) was interpreted by many media outlets as a sign of condemnation from his audience.<sup>2</sup>



*3 James Charles on his typical set*

Charles’s videos are typically shot with much higher production quality on an entirely white set with a DSLR camera. Charles is known for his vivacious make-up tutorials and games with quick jump cuts and background music overlapping Charles’s rapid-fire speech. “No More Lies” features Charles in this more familiar setting, but like “tati” it is starkly disparate from his usual style. “No More Lies,” features an austere soundscape with very little music, Charles’s

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<sup>2</sup> One commentator at *Out*, Rose Dommu, observed that in the wake of Westbrook’s video, Charles had “become public enemy number one over the weekend.”

cadence is slower, and no interjections emerge from his crew. The video is filmed in a familiar setting (see fig. 3), and much like Westbrook's video, Charles's seems to take place "after hours" with his Beauty YouTuber mask set aside.

Charles frequently insists on his own authenticity in this video and endeavours to portray his own inconsistencies as honest mistakes rather than signs of inherent depravity. Intermittently, Charles cuts in footage of himself recorded at a later date (which he refers to as "future James") between the original footage of himself litigating the drama. Future James has no makeup on—unlike present/past James—and he explains that while "doing an insert like this in a video is not professional, trust me... there's so much new information coming to light" that he must record this new footage after his original session to keep abreast of the facts. This is a departure from his normal content too, because his footage is usually filmed within the same recording session. In a way, this note protects against the audience's expectation that inconsistencies in the author's presentation are equivalent to their mask slipping. Authenticity (either the notion that a text is a sincere expression or that it is truly attributable to the original artist) imposes an expectation on an artist to "ensure intelligibility from site to site" and "ascribes a singular and stable referent" to the text (McCartney 10). One of the pitfalls to determining whether or not a text is truly emblematic of a particular artist, and therefore authentic, is that many artists' styles, beliefs, and mediums change throughout their lifetimes. Whatever observers might do to arrange each entry in an artist's portfolio into a clear oeuvre ignores the way collections of works can be iridescent, or can exist on a gradient. Creative producers are placed in one bind where they must evade contradiction, and another where they must conform to the expectations the audience imposes on creators. Charles's quick concessions help him to straddle that seam between intelligibility and consistency which audiences demand from creators. Charles's audience's "shadows" are present

in these moments because Charles is working to present as flawed but self-aware clearly because he anticipated people feeling suspicious about this inconsistency in his video. The inclusion of future James pre-emptively staves off criticism, makes the audience aware of his multiplicity of masks and builds good will with them as he clarifies his intent not to hide anything about those masks from the audience. The moments when Charles assures the audience of his own factual rigour alert to the audience's jury-like shadow extending over Charles himself and influencing the production of the video.

"No More Lies" begins with Charles casting the widespread discussion and scrutiny that had been levelled at him in the weeks prior as unsound, an assertion which takes on an ethical dimension as the video proceeds. Charles's complaints about the way Westbrook and their shared viewership handled interpreting and sharing his biography are rooted in the psychological toll he paid and, furthermore, call into question the legitimacy of totally non-hierarchical models of authorship. Charles begins the video by explaining that "millions of people have weighed in with their opinions and speculation on issues that they know absolutely nothing about."

Westbrook appears to have lied or obfuscated the truth, and the audience, as Charles says, is speaking out of ignorance. Charles invokes his authority as the person living his experiences over the knowledge and interpretations of the people speculating. Charles frames this video as the definitive version of the story in this way; most people do not know the "whole story." He explains that Westbrook's video co-opted "my story, twist[ed] the details, with no facts and no proof." On the contrary, Charles provides screenshotted images of his text correspondence with Westbrook and their fellow influencers, showing that Westbrook participates in some of the jokes she condemns Charles for making and that she fabricated a story about him manipulating another man into intercourse. Westbrook's video is recast here as an act of unethical

appropriation and distortion, where she co-opts Charles's lived experiences and warps them in her own telling. Her version is depicted as inauthentic, fake and to be held suspect. When Future James pops in because “more and more people are speaking” and he wants to have “all the receipts,” he takes authority back from the crowd and adopts the power to provide the definitive version of the story.

The dynamic between Charles and the community of people participating in this discourse resonates with deeply individualistic authorial traditions while, at the same time, inverting them. Romantic notions of the artist as a genius posited the author as an innately superior and highly original artist over their peers. Writers such as William Wordsworth went so far as to argue geniuses were owed permanent copyright over their work on the basis of principles like these (K. St. Amour 12). The way the viewership focuses on Charles here is not as venerative, and in fact their attention is the inverse in the extreme: Charles is singularly, fundamentally flawed and at fault. His endorsement of a different hair vitamin brand is tantamount to being a “phony” sex pest traitor of a friend to Westbrook, which is why so much seemingly unrelated material—like Charles’s sex life and family life—is grouped together in the same pool of evidence. Yet, Charles still must reassert his authority over the text, the boundaries of which extend to his life story and psychological landscape. This individualistic notion of the author as *the* authority is predicated on actual harm suffered by the author in their life. Charles claims authority not on the basis of his work’s artistic merit, but rather because the way his story is told, and whomever tells that story, can affect his life negatively. This is why Charles provides screenshots of a number of people sharing and then retracting lies about him on Twitter and in direct messages. He shows the jury/audience is unable to adjudicate between truth and falsehood, and so whatever narrative they subscribe to is at least incomplete without his perspective.

What might be considered the biographical and autobiographical supplementation to Charles's videos under traditional notions of authorship is expanded, such that the text which the audience views as open for critique and analysis includes Charles's family relationships. I explained above that Westbrook calls on Charles's mother to be a more present parent in "BYE SISTER..." Before Charles published "No More Lies," fellow Beauty Guru and make-up corporation owner Jeffree Star tweeted insults at Charles's younger brother in the wake of "BYE SISTER..." Charles argues in "No More Lies" that Star's behaviour was inappropriate and based on an assumption that Charles's brother was subtweeting people involved in the drama. Charles explains that his brother was suffering from mental illness and negative working relationships in L.A. What is interesting to me about this exchange—Star inserting himself into the fray, Star dragging Charles's teenaged brother on Twitter, Charles disclosing details about not only his own private life but his brother's—is that nobody points out Charles's brother and Star are utterly irrelevant to the hair vitamins debacle. But the fact that they were priorly in community with Charles and Westbrook (Star had collaborated with Charles on previous YouTube videos and that Charles's brother had familial ties to him) seems to be enough of a justification for their public involvement in the story. There are no limits: anyone who has interacted with Charles is authorized to contribute to the collective narrative written in real time as if they were involved in the production of the specific texts in question. This extended collaborator-by-association network of course includes the audience. Aspects of a person's biography, like their relationships, are not just roped into the cancellation video as evidence that the user is not irredeemable. Relationships are fused with the overall meta-text and the people within those relationships are implicated as collaborators in authors' productions and actions.

Charles's side of the drama raises questions about what fuels fans' ethic of antipathy and whether or not the unrestrained distribution of authority over a narrative is always conducive to a healthy media ecology. Some of the other issues that Charles contends with relate to his sex life, as he states in response to Westbrook's allegations that he manipulated straight men: "I'm a nineteen year-old virgin... I would never manipulate anyone to get sexual actions... that is not me, that is disgusting, and the fact that Tati brought this up blows my mind." The implication is that Charles could not have harmed anyone in a sexual interaction because he has never had one. What interests me about this statement (as I take inspiration from Natalie Wynn's description of the debacle) is that Charles does not describe what he has done. In his claim that he is a virgin, the verb in the sentence is "am." He denies allegations about his *actions* by making a claim about his *being*. In several ways, the discourse extrapolates from Charles's posts to determine and denigrate *who* Charles *is*, and likewise audiences' biases about Charles's identity inflect their interpretations of the text (as well as what they claim are its ethical violations). Charles explains that many people published fake screenshots of instant messages from Charles which were either threatening or inappropriate in tone and were used to inflame the homophobic narrative Westbrook spun: "stereotypes about gay men have been, and continue to be, very, very harmful to the community and have been historically used to villainize gay men in society." Far from working to discern if Charles deserves status in a videographic canon based on his own actions, members of online communities release fictitious stories about Charles which align with their perception of him and which are meant to circulate in the community, conflicting with the real story. If the audience is not provided with "the whole story," then the content they create either

in the form of teaspill<sup>3</sup> videos or comments under the YouTube video could create conditions which are dangerous to marginalised people. The drama unravels into a tangled debate about James Charles the person's redeemability based on his status as an author.

While this form of audience participation is troubling, in "No More Lies" Charles still appeals to the audience—directly and indirectly—revealing another layer to the audience's role in the video's production. Like Westbrook, Charles treats the audience like an objective collective of observers and invokes an emotional commitment to them; he explains that he wants "to be open and honest with you guys, the ones who matter." Later, while reviewing the flaws in Westbrook's argumentation, Charles says, "I'd like to pose a question to you, the audience." The audience works like a jury here. What matters is the judgment of the "jury," that is, the viewership with the ability to give the final word on the author. When Charles shows a collection of screenshots of his messages with Westbrook and other prominent members of the Beauty community, he explains that the screenshots are not altered and what information is missing was delivered in the form of impermanent voice memos: "you'll just have to believe me, I have literally no reason to lie at this point." Unlike Westbrook's subtler cues to the audience, Charles directly entreats the audience to perceive him a certain way, offers up evidence to support his self-representation, and declares himself entirely legible. The video leans more towards courtroom testimonial as Charles's words become more confessional. Charles begins to explain the turmoil he experienced during the height of the scandal: "My head... went to a place so dark, that I didn't think I was going to come back from. I can't believe I just admitted that on camera." Charles seems shocked by his own confession and its authenticity, and this moment is one where

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<sup>3</sup> Teaspill videos are a genre of gossip roundup videos. Often teaspill channels will review and provide commentary on celebrity gossip, but they sometimes work as the first point of contact for popular YouTubers who are engaging in PR strategies.

Charles's and Westbrook's videos most obviously converge. This move elides the artifice of the camera, the editing software, and the team of employees who are involved in Charles's career. The audience determines the video's credibility, sincerity, meritoriousness (whether they are phony, truthful, or convincing), and they are also elaborating on the existing biographical information to create their own fictions. Rather than entirely dethroning the tyrannical centering on the author, though, these videos pose ethical quandaries as their circulation threatens to exact real consequences on the people they concern. Instead, the video seems tyrannically focused on the audience.

There are misogynistic stereotypes about makeup that are (usually) directed towards women which frame the use of make-up as an act of concealment. Make-up, in the beauty community, is not viewed as an act of authorial deception, but rather as a tool for enhancing what is already available. This enhancement is, of course, itself a process of mediation. The expectation that a person would share private details about their life if they were innocent is a parallel structure in the culture of the beauty community. If a person truly is just enhancing what they have, they can show their bare face as well as the process they used to build a look. Meanwhile, a duplicitous YouTuber might not be honest about the fact that they started a look with some make up already in place. Charles's and Westbrook's constant claims to authenticity are typical for the beauty community, then, and fans' ethic of antipathy spinning into debates about people's moral essences are not entirely unknown to the beauty community. My two case studies to follow participate in far less explicit appeals to the audience's ability to know them. Wynn, at times, literally dons a mask in her costumes, while Ellis expresses frustration that she is expected to supply what Charles calls receipts. Yet, when these creators make a misstep, the

audience similarly fixes their gaze on the creators and asserts that these mistakes are the creator's true faces after all.

## NATALIE WYNN

Natalie Wynn<sup>4</sup> (also known by the pseudonymous moniker “Contra,” an abbreviation of her channel's name) published a video entitled “Cancelling” to her channel, *Contrapoints*, on January 2nd, 2020, prompted by the online backlash to a portion of her video entitled “Opulence” about capitalism and the excesses of the bourgeoisie. In the video, as in many of her others, Wynn invited guests to read the texts that she planned to cite and then used their voiceovers in the videos. One of those guests, Buck Angel, a porn star and famous (self-proclaimed) transsexual activist, was featured voicing over a quote for ten seconds. Angel's involvement in the video's production, however brief, sparked an immense controversy. A portion of Wynn's audience took issue with Wynn collaborating with Angel (to what extent Angel's involvement even qualifies as collaboration was also debated) because of his objectionable views on trans identities. Angel has historically promoted a conception of transness which invalidates non-binary people, gender non-conforming and non-passing trans folks. Angel insists on medical transition as a form of authentication: he subscribes to the belief that trans folks must transition in this particular way to be truly trans.<sup>5</sup> Non-binary people often do not fit this definition, as medical transition is less often the primary way non-binary people can realize their true selves. The conversation that followed in the online arena (especially

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<sup>4</sup> I will be referring to her by her legal name in this chapter, and I will explore the subject of pseudonymity in chapter three.

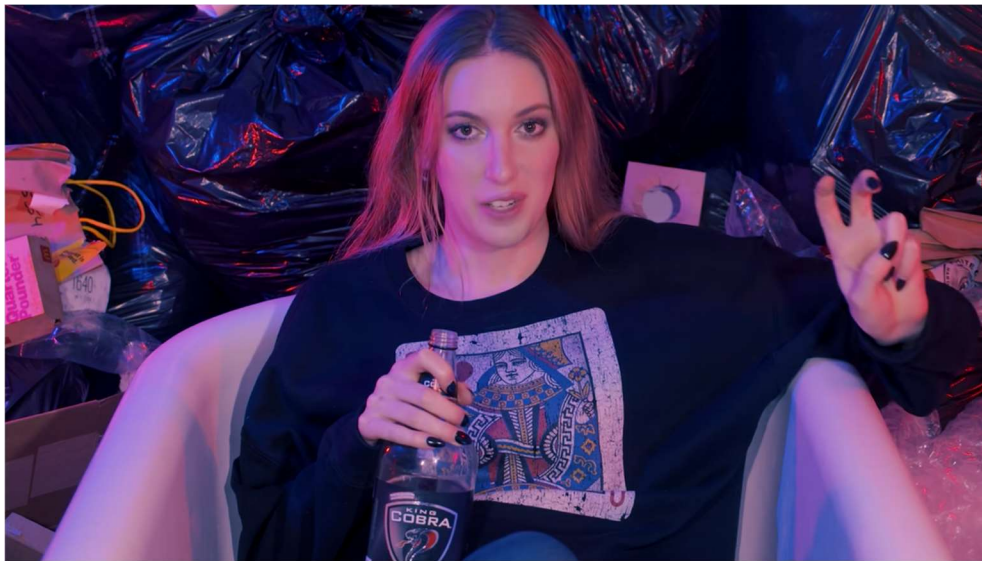
<sup>5</sup> Transmedicalism is fraught in part for its classism; many trans people are too poor to be able to afford the costs involved in medical transition. The philosophy also implicitly pathologizes transness at times, as its proponents often view transness and gender dysphoria as one and the same: disorders. People who do not subscribe to transmedicalism object to this view because the disorders and afflictions that trans people sometimes deal with are a consequence of existing a cisnormative society which treats trans people with hostility. Transmedicalism can, at times, echo eugenicist ideas which lead to the extermination of trans people.

Twitter) was largely around responsible platforming—whether or not people who support transmedicalism should be allowed a platform on Wynn’s channel, and by extension whether or not people who platformed *Wynn* ought to be held to account. This discussion largely circled around Wynn herself, specifically on the possibility that her mask had slipped and she had revealed her inherent badness or irresponsibility by platforming Angel. Some users perceived her betrayal as particularly heinous because she is a trans woman, and working with Buck Angel in any capacity amounted to turning on her own community. In one instance, a comment which Wynn screenshots and includes in her video asserts that Wynn “threw the trans community under the bus.” Wynn frames her account and analysis of her own situation through Charles’s and Westbrook’s public debacle, saying that when she saw Charles’s public fall from grace she “thought: oh God, that’s gonna be me someday.” Wynn explains that when someone missteps in the public eye, Charles for one and herself for another, a “collage of their problematic tweets,” including instances that may have previously been put to rest, begins to circulate online as proof of their fundamental depravity. After that, a significant portion of her video is dedicated to recounting her own missteps on Twitter.

Stylistically, “Cancelling” conserves more of Wynn’s idiom than Westbrook’s or Charles’s videos do of their own. Wynn makes long, argumentative video essays analyzing politics, philosophy, art, and pop culture. As usual, she uses sets with elaborate *mise-en-scènes*; the video’s first scene features a claw-foot tub completely surrounded by black trash bags (see fig. 4). Wynn separates different sections of the video with these sets, costumes, and characters. Wynn often dresses in drag, and decorates her sets with elaborate fantasy and science-fiction-inspired props. By comparison, the costumes in “Cancelling” are much more muted. Her videos typically utilise fixed, face-on camera angles, trained on her against a static *mise-en-scène*.

Zooms are edited in post-production to cover the seams between takes. Wynn usually plays all the characters in her videos, voicing opposing arguments, animating her points while parodying some prominent creators. “Cancelling” adopts much of this same stylistic toolkit, but instead of dividing the lines up by different characters, every differently-outfitted version of Wynn is still herself. In this video, her costumes are more like street clothes, often comprising jeans and sweaters. This suggests she has taken off the mask, removed the facade, and allowed the viewer a more intimate look at her inner life.

What distinguishes Wynn’s videos from my other case studies are the theatrical shades in



4 Natalie Wynn on the set of “Canceling”

her composition; the static camera angles, aesthetic costumes, background music and meticulously organised mise-en-scène contribute to an overall feeling of a stage play recorded on camera. Contrapoints videos will take the archetypal front-facing position of the YouTuber and place that within an obviously constructed environment. Other YouTubers will occasionally break from their initial angles and move through space. Wynn’s counterparts might have a designated set, but these are usually constructed to appear like a room that is otherwise used in day-to-day activities in the creator’s home. In contrast, Wynn is almost always like a player on a

stage with clear limits to the edge of the set. Importantly, Wynn's positioning and camera angles create a feeling that the viewers are a theatre audience. Wynn's typical style evokes a theatrical setting, which is particularly appropriate for "Cancelling" because of the long-standing connections playwrights have made between the dynamics of theatres and courtrooms. As Andrew Brown analyses Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*, he notes that the play

employ[s] the physical and conceptual dimensions of the playhouse to interrogate the law's increasingly professionalized discourses of investigation, evidence, and judgment... various methods of seeing and knowing, from the strictly legal to the broadly social, are put to the test...[the play] transforms the playhouse into a theatre of judgment where characters use both the investigative methods of the law and the flexible power of wit as they vie for advantage... Jonson also encourages his spectators to identify with, assess, and even ridicule their struggles for information and authority, daring this corresponding assembly of loosely formed, impromptu groups of theatregoers to venture their own revealing judgments on the play. Through its staging of the densely layered spaces of the early modern city, *Bartholomew Fair*... create[s] a distinctively spatialized forum of participatory inquiry and response. (154)

Wynn's video captures a similar "struggle for information and authority" that is more literal than the Jonsonian configuration. Wynn dispenses with criticisms against her methodically, even reprimanding her audience if a criticism is built on inaccuracies or lies. "Canceling" is very much a "forum of participatory inquiry and response."

Much of Wynn's video orbits around an implicit ultimatum baked into her authorial status: she must choose between freedom of association, or not having a group of detractors loudly decrying her as a villain. The accusation that Wynn had "platformed" Angel by including his voice in the video is a confusing one. This understanding of platforming treats publicly associating with someone in any capacity, however superficially, as co-signing everything they stand for. Wynn's audience's frustrations with her association with Angel have less to do with the actual content of her videos and more to do with the audience's perception of the author as morally consistent, using the text as the site upon which the author's consistency may be

verified. People are gathered in “new forms of association” (Brown 157), in that they are professionally linked through these vocal cameos, but they do not claim to be part of the same artistic community, nor do they share a common physical space. Carla Bennedetti points out that “there are innumerable examples of” authors having “allergic reactions to being categorized and labeled” (31). Bennedetti explains that facts of the author’s life are important because “they are serious enough to lead to criminal liability, even loss of life or liberty” (61). She also explains that some people do confuse the narrator of a fictional text with the voice of the author (63).

Lindsay Ellis and Wynn have both rejected the label of “breadtuber,” a label created by the community of viewers referring to Kropotkin’s *A Conquest of Bread*. The label corrals a variety of left-leaning content creators on YouTube, although very few, if any, have accepted it. Wynn mentions feeling isolated because a large number of users took to harassing other YouTubers who had ever associated with her (and some who never had) demanding for those YouTubers to speak on the scandal. In one case, a YouTuber named Mia Mulder was probed for an apology for Wynn’s video. A wild irony lay in users soliciting Mulder for any comment at all because she had never even spoken to Wynn. Mulder seems to have been tapped for her perspective purely because she is also a trans woman with mutual connections to people who know Wynn personally. Audiences might group individuals with similar portfolios together, or people who simply follow each other on Twitter, and then impose an expectation that those creators account for each other. Wynn points out that Twitter users who flocked to her friends’ and fellow creators’ pages were effectively “demanding that cis people publicly condemn a trans woman for loosely associating with another trans person.” The reaction to Angel’s appearance in her video aligned with fascistic goals. Wynn says,

I am very suspicious of anyone whose online behavior prompts me to dig through articles full of dead names and sordid scandals involving trans people from almost two decades ago. This is very similar to techniques used against trans people by internet fascists. So I'm pretty suspicious of anyone pushing this kind of investigation. How can you tell the difference between a trans-anarcho socialist with an anime avatar and a Nazi pretending to be a trans-anarcho socialist with an anime avatar? Well, you can't. Anonymous is anonymous is anonymous, whether it's on 4chan or Twitter.

The identities of the authors participating in the discourse around Wynn are important, then. Whether or not those individuals are bad-faith actors who mean to promote isolating a trans person or not is impossible to discern when they are entirely anonymous. The facticity of these interpretations does matter beyond the implications they carry towards the formal components of Wynn's video; the implication here is that the transphobic dispositions of the audience guide them towards a disproportionate, and potentially harmful, response to Wynn's text that affects trans people at large.

Wynn's video evokes questions about whether or not her authorial mask has been entirely discarded or simply turned askew. When Wynn posts a video, Wynn herself is constantly roving on a sliding spectrum from Natalie Wynn, the person, to Contra, the face and voice behind *Contrapoints*. In keeping with the format of cancellation videos, autobiography plays a significant role in Wynn's video. Wynn explains that before she came out as trans, Buck Angel was one of her original role models in the trans community. This factoid can either exonerate her or further incriminate her for associating with Buck Angel, but it matters what life decisions led to her working with him. She states that she was so excited that she could be working with a legendary figure in the trans community that she did not consider the extent to which many

members of her audience would feel slighted and upset by her decision. The concept of an authorial style is contested in the debates around authorship. Singh critiques Foucault's "apparent dismissal of the idea of personal style—the idiolect, or the subject traits that make a given writer's voice distinctive and recognizable" (29). Several times in "Cancelling," Wynn explains that her intent and character were misinterpreted by people who "clearly don't watch [her] videos" because they do not recognize how to read her tweets like someone who "know[s] [her] voice." Here, Wynn's "voice," her idiolect, confers some facticity on her interpretation of her work and, by extension, reveals ways that audiences can act on their interpretations unethically. People extrapolate from what they interpret in the text, make assertions about who a person is, and make decisions about what to do, when they are not familiar with the ways Wynn's voice inflects the tweets. One of the pitfalls to poststructuralist thinking in the sphere of social media, then, is that there are consequences to not discerning readerly freedom when those readers have a direct and instant line of communication to the creators.

The type of readerly activity Wynn objects to in this part of "Cancelling" ties together a network of associated creators not based on their involvement in a specific artistic production, but on their familiarity with one another. The people who are closely associated with the author elsewhere—not necessarily in the original transgressive text, are guilty by association. Media has always reoriented the way audiences and artists associate with one another; Brown suggests theatre "depicts a realm where the common pursuit of pleasure gathers diverse people into new forms of association" (157). New forms of association revealed by cancellation videos compel people around artists to step forward, account for their connection, and atone, even if it does not make sense for them to. Wynn shows screenshots of Lindsay Ellis and Abigail Thorn's tweets responding to crowds who had called for them to apologise for Natalie featuring Buck Angel in

her video. Sarikakis and Kraug notice that fan culture creates its own hierarchies which seat “*uber-fans*” with “enough knowledge of” the work “to be ‘authorised’ to finish” it (549). Henry Jenkins famously borrows from DeCerteau in suggesting fans take back power from media industries: “Fans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images... far from sycophantic, fans actively assert their mastery over the mass-produced texts which provide the raw materials for their own cultural productions” (23). In this way, *knowing* the author is a valuable form of knowledge over the texts they create. Anyone who sits in close proximity to the author is *authorised* and is therefore culpable. That is to say, the creator’s friends and family are posited as *uber-fans* regardless of their involvement in the production of the video. This makes sense, but at the same time the fact that people reached out to Ellis and Thorn raises questions: were they probed merely because they exist in the public eye? Thorn’s family was also threatened. The person who initially suggested involving Buck Angel in the video was Wynn’s collaborator, Theryn Meyer. Meyer’s Marcellian “shadow” was not explicitly visible in the video, though, and so the audience chalked up all of its content and every possible contingent consequence of it to Wynn exclusively. The kind of interpretive work Wynn’s critics implemented, rather than prove the death of the author or the unimportance of her identity, home in on the author and her identity. This specific mode of reading does not take pieces from the content of the text, but rather enables entirely organic fictions to be mapped outside the borders of the text onto real people and is justified by an ethic of antipathy.

As much as Wynn’s style might distance her from the immediate relationship with the audience which Charles and Westbrook’s videos constantly invoke, “Cancelling” still falls within the intimate traditions of blogging and vlogging. Like the similarities between Wynn’s work and that of Cahun, “Cancelling” expresses the older internet mediums’ overturning of

traditional modes of authorship. In fact, the way Wynn and her personas slip together in the eyes of her audience shows what is at stake, how the shadow of the jury cast on the text itself confuses the interpretive, writerly, and readerly roles in its penumbra. Singh's work shows that this is not a unique phenomenon to YouTube:

Blogging... forces a reevaluation of the poststructuralist critique of authorship... Blogs revitalize the concept of authorship... because the culture of this...writing form has been dominated by author-oriented ethical precepts that provide the basis for public debate in the era of the internet....We are interested in Authors and Authorship, though especially with the diary form the image of author as transcendental creator seems less relevant than the narrower concept of the author as thinking, feeling, human subject. (22)

It is pertinent, then, that so many of the criticisms that Wynn shows in this video assert that her "true" character has been revealed and the "mask" has come off. The viewership treats a lapse in Wynn's judgement as the most immediate expression of who Wynn is, an authenticity which was hitherto hidden by her disingenuous political outfit.

While this cynical attitude towards the character of the author poses a unique blockade to productive discussion (the good people do is never considered proportionately illuminating of their character as the bad, which establishes unreasonable standards for evaluating the character of both authors and the people they associate with), it is not novel. According to Singh, a culture of holding bloggers accountable for "statements that are perceived as irresponsible or unfair" and "discredit[ing them] where appropriate" has persisted since the emergence of blogging culture (25). Singh points out that pseudonyms in blogging culture "are not simply masks, but fully developed personas" (27). Some of the critics that Wynn responds to interpret her character, Justine, as a transmedicalist and claim that "because she... *maybe* wins the fictional debate, I am

a transmedicalist.” Wynn’s rejoinder to these accusations is: “this is literally just bad media comprehension. Like it’s a failure to plausibly interpret a video that some people did find genuinely emotionally difficult. And so much of the response to that video is just pure emotion. I always hear, ‘I don’t care what you intended, trans people were hurt by that video.’” Rather than Wynn autocratically assuming the mask of her characters, or distancing herself from them, the viewership imposes their own representation of one of her “fully developed” personas on Wynn herself. Despite Wynn creating several videos supporting non-binary people, she explains in “Cancelling” that some users online argue she supports transmedicalist ideas. One of the screenshotted tweets that Wynn features in her video points out that Buck Angel “being” in her video contradicts the rest of catalogue, to which Wynn retorts: “You know, if your interpretation totally contradicts the videos I spent hundreds of hours making, do you think maybe your interpretation could be wrong?” Wynn’s video aggregates, represents, and exchanges with an on-going recorded conversation about her work which understands Wynn’s work as a piece of her. Wynn’s personas are the site of interpretative struggles, where Wynn and some members of her viewership, and some who may not even watch her videos, “vie for advantage” over the text. On social media, the boundaries of the text remarkably enfold the author herself, and emotionally-charged discussions about the author, while often highly antipathic, are framed as ethically so.

## LINDSAY ELLIS

On March 26, 2021, Lindsay Ellis tweeted her thoughts about a 2021 Disney film, *Raya and the Last Dragon*, comparing it to the popular American children’s cartoon, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. *Avatar* is an American fantasy action series inspired by anime, Hong Kong kung-fu cinema and Chinese wuxia films which aired from 2005 to 2008. Like *Avatar*, *Raya* is an American film set in a fantastical (Southeast) Asian-inspired setting. What prompted Ellis to

draw the comparison was the fact that both properties' worlds are divided up into a small number of nations each with their own unique theme.<sup>6</sup> According to Ellis, "some Southeast Asian artists and animators read the tweet as being dismissive and reductive and implying all Asian-inspired things are the same genre... [However], several of the people who started this hadn't even seen the movie." Ellis attempted to engage with the influx of criticism, extending an olive branch in one tweet: "I can see where if you squint I was implying all Asian-inspired properties are the same, especially if you were already privy to those conversations where I had not seen them." The way Ellis worded this tweet exacerbated some of the response to her slip-up, as her use of the word "squint" was interpreted by many as a dig at monolids invoking sinophobic stereotypes. Ellis released "Mask Off" on April 15, 2021, styling her argument after Wynn's video to take inventory of her previous public slip-ups (many of which were mentioned repeatedly during the *Raya* discourse) and, similarly, dispense with some of the criticisms.

As with Ellis's other videos, which are typically set in her office environment, the mise-en-scène in "Mask Off" accords with the typical mise-en-scène of many other YouTube videos:

*5 Lindsay Ellis in her office*



<sup>6</sup> *Avatar*'s world is divided up into four nations named after the classic elements (water, earth, fire, and air) and *Raya*'s world is divided into five nations which are each named after a part of a dragon's body Fang, Heart, Spine, Talon, and Tail

the ‘set’ feels like the space the YouTuber lives in, rather than a set or otherwise obviously artificial space. Her mise-en-scène also contains some objects that reflect her sense of humour: throughout “Mask Off” a candle wrapped in a copy of Johannes Vermeer’s “Girl with a Pearl Earring” rests on the desk beside Ellis with the added quirk of Snoop Dogg’s face photoshopped onto it (see fig. 5). Like Wynn’s, Ellis’s video conforms to her typical structuring. She provides historical context for a cultural object, conducts media analysis, and contextualizes her study in broader cultural shifts. She utilizes zooms in a way that augments her sarcasm or self-deprecation. For example, when she relates how her follow-up tweet to her original one accidentally called back to a racist stereotype about East Asian people’s phenotypes, the video cuts away from her tweet to Ellis, sitting at her desk with her face in her hands, as the camera zooms closer. The zoom punctuates her exasperation with herself, mimicking a scrutinizing stare from the audience and from Ellis herself. Not only does Ellis leave a stylistic ‘signature’ on the video, the formal components of her video mimic Ellis’s own participation in looking at herself alongside her audience.

Compositionally, much of the video draws attention to Ellis’s point of view, suggesting her biographical writing in this story is tied to her own subjectivity. At the same time, Ellis does much to alert the viewer to how much of her own story she withholds from the audience and tries to decenter her private self from the discussion. In discussing the end of her friendship with actress Mara Wilson, and later when relaying the story of her own sexual assault, the camera cuts away to a TV error signal screen, accompanied by loud beeps. Withholding information and including those redactions suggests that *some* biographical information is relevant to the text, but not *all*, and that Ellis is entitled to privacy over her own life story. In a way, the biographical information that she has to provide to validate or invalidate certain readings of her words is

intensely private and painful, and none of these users are deploying their stories to exert tyrannical influence over the readings of their texts. The redactions load otherwise negative spaces in the video with meaning and situate these moments in a distinct perspective.

As Ellis explains, viewers believe “that the list of sins is the real me, and the other stuff is profit or something.” The idea is that the mask has accidentally fallen off and has revealed an ugliness beneath. This metaphor demonstrates that there are problems with the way many people treat malice, poorly thought-out actions, or even harmful mistakes as the truest expression of humanity. Goodness, intentional and careful positive actions—these are merely covering for inherent depravity. Like Wynn, Ellis loses her authority over understanding what she says or intends to say because of what she does unintentionally. Like Wynn, she also roots her cancellation in the conflict between Charles and Westbrook. In one self-deprecating joke about apology videos getting lots of views, she references Westbrook’s productions in the hair vitamin controversy and therefore cheekily likens her own motivations for making her video with Westbrook’s explicitly profit-driven agenda. As she relates when she explains how people try to convey the gravity of the Raya tweet: “Party B is like, ‘I don’t get it. And party A is like, ‘ah but she has a long history of problematic [sic].’ And then party B is like, ‘I get it now!’” Ellis’s life and history are used to contextualize and reframe this particular interpretation of her tweet, but her own thought processes are not factored into the evidence. Ellis explains later, after apologizing for the mistakes that she has been asked by other users to apologize for, that some people might wonder why she has taken up so much time to discuss herself. Her rejoinder, “I didn’t make this about me, you did” reveals the confusing core of the cancellation videos I have analyzed in this chapter: whomever the second person pronoun “you” refers to is not entirely clear. Whereas Wynn’s use of the word “you” refers to specific tweets that she is responding to

at various points in her video, Westbrook's use oscillates between Charles and her audience and other users to referring to all these groups in the third person, and Charles specifically refers to the audience in his direct address. Solidifying the identity of the audience, and understanding *who* the creator envisions when she makes this kind of direct address, is helpful for situating the author.

Just as Wynn's and Charles's friends and family were pulled into the discussion and called to account for the YouTubers they were connected to, some women who were friends with Ellis were criticized for associating with her. One YouTuber who is friends with Ellis, Saritza Hernandez (Princess Weekes) was harassed and called a "straight white woman" in one tweet which Ellis shows in the video (Hernandez is a queer Black person). The video also shows a collection of tweets wherein Ellis's other friends, Jenny Nicholson and Sarah Z, are called out in a gleeful tone, "Jenny next" after they found out Ellis was being cancelled. Not only is Ellis's essential character called into question because the audience was "reading into [her tweet] something I did not say," but also Wynn and Ellis's videos were partially created to show that other users are connected to the act of authoring a text when they were not involved in its production. They claim sole authorship over their videos to take accountability for their flaws. Biographical information and personal relationships are more than just context—they *are* text on social media. These things colour the way Ellis's more recent work is to be interpreted.

In the wake of this Twitter-based fiasco, Ellis was prompted to litigate her making a rape joke after being sexually assaulted. While that was surely distressing enough, as I was in the middle of writing this thesis, Lindsay Ellis quit YouTube. In a post to her Patreon page entitled "Walking Away from the Omelas" (referencing the story by Ursula K. Le Guin), Ellis says her "life ended" when she was cancelled, and disclosed experiencing extreme stress-related physical

responses to the debacle. There are amazing benefits to social media enabling everyone to create all the time, but this has also happened in what is an extremely toxic space. People were able to head each other off and tell each other lies about Ellis before they even saw the video, and there is, again, a suspicious glee to the tone of the conversation. I do not know that the end of the Romantic notion of the author was all for the best if it meant we would not also replace it with a uniform sense of responsibility to be respectful to other people online, and if the appropriation of social justice vocabulary would go unchecked and uncriticized in aimless dogpiling campaigns against individual creators.

## CONCLUSION

Reflecting on Claude Cahun, McCartney suggests “the combination or flux of selves is... transgendered, trans authored, transmediated, between image and text” (50). I began this chapter with the bundle of metaphors that is Claude Cahun’s “Cancelled Confessions,” which represents multiple authorial personae as masks which are taken up at any time. As I have continued with this study, though, I have begun to wonder why authors are understood as having multiple selves in “flux” (McCartney, 50) when showing and withholding certain aspects of a unified self is surely a common element of most of our lives. Masks are functionally obfuscating objects; they do not just allow their wearers to adopt a new identity, masks *hide* a person’s true identity from prying eyes. What hovers in the subtext of each of my case studies is the insinuation that the naturally textured state of a human being is a sign of duplicitousness, intentional obfuscation, and above all moral failing. That is, if the audience feels they have identified *any* inconsistencies in the author’s self-representations, the audience is somehow authorized to make claims that the author was essentially wicked all along.

In discussing authors on social media while accounting for their audiences, we inevitably slip from discussing who has authority over interpretation to inspecting authorial personae for inconsistencies. Writing on Cordwainer Smith borrowing his wife's name as a pseudonym, Ursula K. Le Guin suggests that as an artist's reputation builds, "The person disappears in the glare of the persona" (58). The use of the pseudonym, while useful for freeing the writer from "inner censors" "implies... a very imperative need for a mask" (60). "Glare" has two common meanings: both a blinding light and a scrutinizing, hostile gaze. The iridescence of the authorial persona may be due in part to the rotating glare of the audience. The person disappears in this glare, and so there may be an "imperative" need for a mask that serves a protective function, one which prevents the artist from internalizing the glare of the audience and protects the author's right to some level of privacy. The moralization of demasking, of the revelation that the author is in fact human, raises important questions: why shouldn't we be allowed to have something to hide? Why must anyone be asked to confess to being flawed or offer up their most intimate secrets (not confessions of wrongdoing but private personal histories)? In this way, the Romantic notion of the author as genius evolves such that these YouTubers are not asserting their own *mastery* over the text, but asserting their own readerly authority. Each YouTuber makes arguments about what information from their own biographies ought and ought not to be considered valid in the study of their work. A strong glaring light casts starker shadows. Ellis's camera's movement mimicking the stare of the audience is one instance of the viewer's shadow extending into the text. Under the glaring light of the audience's attention, these users wrest back their biographies and assert their right to write them themselves. But to do this they have to present evidence, they have to address the audience like a jury, with whom the final verdict rests.

In online gaming communities, where there is a “widespread” adoption of aliases, Geert Lovnik suggests “we find techno-medieval role-playing is as important as cryptographic software protecting its members from state intrusion... There is no true Self, only an endless series of interchangeable masks... Left without a core, the personality can engage in never-ending play” (40). Yet this multiplicity of identities may be subversive in its own right; Lovnik quotes Mark Zuckerberg’s vested interest in users divulging their true selves. For Zuckerberg, Lovnik says, “having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity;” pseudonymity and a multiplicity of identities subverts the vision power players have for the internet (41). That creators on social media can inhabit a multiplicity of perspectives, or, in other words, be inconsistent, may be a way of resisting the vision of the wealthy owners of the platforms. Having multiple distinct identities can subvert the vision and design of the corporate monopoly over online space.

Because living in contradiction might actually work to undermine wealthy elites’ hegemonic control over the internet, I am concerned about the delighted fever-pitch discussions about each of these creators reached. The motivation for the discussion seems familiar: audiences were in the process of deciding whether or not authors had done something so wrong they should be allowed platforms at all or pruned from an evolving internet canon. But because Charles, Wynn, and Ellis each said their friends and families were accosted by strangers on the internet when the tone of public discourse about the creators was at its most outraged, some questions arise which require careful consideration: who is this benefitting, especially if contradictions contribute to a healthier, more laterally organized internet? Where is the boundary between text and context? The way each of these YouTubers felt compelled or forced to disclose deeply personal information (Charles’s, Wynn’s, and Ellis’s sexual histories all come up) leads me to

wonder at what is covered by the penumbra of the viewer's shadow. Absolutely any and all biographical information about the author needs to be presented as evidence to the court in order to determine innocence or, at least, to determine that the accused creator is not solely evil.

The metaphor of the mask is invoked to help onlookers account for the inconsistencies and vicissitudes of the author's self-representations. Westbrook and Charles situate themselves in alignment with their viewership at times by appealing to their authority, and at others reminding the audience that they do not have total access to Westbrook's and Charles's psychological landscape. Wynn and Ellis situate themselves in opposition to the viewers, although not by claiming sole authority over their texts. Rather, their contentions with fan interpretations over their words are based on a lack of facticity and/or sound reasoning and their fans treating them like a metonym for oppressive systems in general.

Nobody is exactly the same, uniformly good or bad, across their entire lifetime. People may say and do things with twin or warring motivations. To say any self-representation from these people is less or more authentic is misguided. As people try to assess the importance of the author's role, they are also gauging how they should respond to the author's transgressions. We can say, for example, that Charles's behaviour at dinner with Westbrook was inappropriate. Does this warrant fifty million pairs of eyes locking onto one teenager? And for Wynn to associate with an elder trans man with problematic opinions that echo some of the more conservative allies' opinions—what is this, except for a debate about freedom of association in the trans community and how other peoples' relationships affect the reading experience? Interpersonal drama is interpreted and figured as a political tendency here, as the clash of principled versus opportunistic, community-oriented versus selfishly exploitative. YouTube cancellation videos show that being a creator can confer authority on creators to make their case as a lawyer might in

a courtroom, but ultimately the decision-making power when it comes to arranging the story, deciding upon inconsistencies and falsities—this falls to the audience.

Due to the way that people's private lives are subject to such intense public scrutiny online in service to an ethic of antipathy, and due to the ways readers can instantly communicate with authors, authors' loved ones, and authors' acquaintances, there is an imperative need to study how authorship figures within social media to understand why users latch onto authorial personae with such a vice-like grip. Social media allows for readers to send along their basest, most intuitive, unfiltered thoughts straight to the inbox of creators. Literary and media studies has failed to teach people discernment; when it matters to take the author's life and psychology into account and when it does not; when an author ought to be held to account and *how* that accountability ought to be placed. This is in part the fault of the platform creators. Negativity generates engagement, and social media platforms thrive from engagement.

When you do not have an antidotal platoon of supporters or enough money to hire staff, how do you deal with harassment? This is a question that permeates all three videos: Lindsay brings up a user who became the target of a Twitter mob for tweeting something problematic, Natalie brings up a sex worker who killed herself after a similar situation, and James brings up his brother's harassment on Twitter. The internet concentrates negativity and the platforms generate profit off of it. YouTube designates space around each video to comment, "like"<sup>7</sup> a video, and share the video on other social media platforms, thereby laying down the brickwork for a hypertextual, expanding internet mob unified by an ethic of antipathy. This putatively interactive production process seems to topple established hierarchies of authoritative authorship. Julian Stallabrass warns, though, interactivity on the internet may only provide the guise of a

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<sup>7</sup> When I began this project, YouTube also allowed users to dislike videos. The feature was removed in the spring of 2022.

radically autonomous and liberated engagement with a work while enabling users to merely “click blindly through a series of screens” (61). These types of audience-reserved spaces may be superficial, as they provide a binary decision to fill out a form or not: YouTube’s monopolistic control over the method and tone of users’ interactions is enforced by the standard web browsers and the conventions of programming used to make websites. Templates facilitate “a solipsistic view” of internet discourse, “allow for only one kind of simple, one-way link” (64) and do not capture the collective motions of internet users across platforms and time. Since so many users were caught up in misinformation, it is important to remember that much of their reactions may have been exacerbated by the existing tools Twitter, YouTube, and other platforms gave them.

To say the author’s intent does not matter, especially with respect to social media, may be to apply a neo-Romanticist notion of authority not to the authorial role but to the readerly role. Readers can, at times, fail to comprehend media, misinterpret, misread, misjudge, and then act based on those missteps. What these four case studies demonstrate is that authorship on YouTube does, in fact, matter very much to readers, creators, and to the production of videos. Hierarchies of interpretive authority over a text’s meaning are flattened at times in my exemplars. At others, accountability for any possible reception of the text is focused with precision on the creator. In some ways, these creators are made to stand in for entire systems of oppression and the tone of their audience’s reaction is reflective of that. Readerly status should not authorize one to interpret a piece of media uncharitably and then act upon that interpretation. Many of the people who partook in the discourse were unproductively rude, cruel, and sometimes wrong. One reason why old theories about authorship certainly need to be updated then is the ways readers can overwhelmingly outnumber an author in public discourse while motivated by misinterpretations.

## Chapter 2: The Author is Here: Audible and Mimetic Authorship

In 2018, Musical.ly, an app where people posted short videos of themselves lipsyncing to music, was acquired by Bytedance and merged into what is now known as TikTok. TikTok allows videos to be easily recorded, edited, and uploaded through mobile devices (its user interface is significantly pared down on desktop browsers). This, in conjunction with the platform's three-minute<sup>8</sup> runtime limit, has fostered a culture of spontaneity; users can scroll endlessly through TikTok's "For You Page" and the algorithm will deliver and feed videos to them without the user having to take the additional step of selecting a video to watch.<sup>9</sup> TikTok also lacks YouTube's ContentID system. On YouTube, users can upload copyrighted content, but the system will indiscriminately block videos from being viewed if the algorithm identifies copyrighted footage regardless of if a video actually violates copyright.<sup>10</sup> Because TikTok makes it easier for users to integrate popular media into their own, its content is intensely mimetic.

Much of the content on TikTok is organized under a single "sound." Sounds can be uploaded directly to the app without video accompaniment, and videos' audio can be automatically given its own individual URL. Often sounds are musical, but if a user creates an original sound with their voice, TikTok sorts all future videos that use that sound on a page with the original video, which then links to the user's profile. Users on TikTok do not have to build the soundscape of their video from scratch, as they can overlay popular, recognizable music on their video or pull sounds from trending videos that are native to the platform. In comparison to

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<sup>8</sup> They seem to be extending that to five minutes as of June 2022

<sup>9</sup> YouTube does have a function called autoplay that lines up another video to play after the one the viewer is currently watching is complete. When the next video comes up the page has to refresh, which creates a barrier to immediately watching something else. What is more, autoplay can be disabled through the UI.

<sup>10</sup> ContentID is often abused by corporations. Sometimes it will flag a video for using a contiguous 15 seconds or more (arbitrarily defined) even if that 15 seconds comprises less than a fraction of a percent of the rest of the video and divert ad revenue from the video to the corporation. While Fair Use and Fair Dealing laws may allow for users to transform copyrighted material, ContentID takes the extra step and assumes good faith on the part of the person declaring the copyright strike and bad faith on the part of the person receiving the strike. I have personally experienced several videos being blocked globally when they do not violate copyright.

YouTube, TikTok's design is much more expedient for creating hypertexts and pulling content directly from somewhere else to use in someone's video, because hyperlinks can be incorporated into the formal properties of TikToks, linking videos "under" a sound or linking videos together through a clickable comment featured in-video. This allows users to quickly find similar content, as TikTokers may use the sound identically to the ways other users who are linked to it.

Consequently, posting content that is nearly identical to the original text being referenced is normal and almost expected from certain users. Repetitive TikToks are not necessarily lacking in originality or distinct influence; participating in "the trend" is something which users do to announce their presence to other like-minded users and some people like seeing particular users do the trend in their idiosyncratic way. This ecosystem promotes original video production as much as it promotes highly repetitive content consumption. Users are incentivized to post quick, snappy, original videos that could easily be moulded to or linked with a variety of other users' videos. If a video goes viral and other users start to borrow that sound or copy the video, TikTok's interface will link all content that borrows that video or audio to the original user's profile, leading to an increase in views and followers on their profile. Therefore, TikTok videos tend to be, at once, highly repetitive *and* intensely idiosyncratic.

One of my interests in this chapter is with the centrality of sound on TikTok from its onomatopoeic name to the aural needlework it allows users to do with its sound feature. Even the app's name is onomatopoeic, evoking the repetitive ticking of a clock. R. Murray Schafer, in his foundational work on sound studies, coins the term schizophonic, describing "the splitting of the sounds from their original context" (88). He explains that "following the Second World War, the tape recorder made incisions into recorded material possible, any sound object could be cut out and inserted into any new context desired" (91). This incised schizophonia produces sounds with

new meaning in their surrogate contexts. Jason Camlot describes a similar phenomenon with greater emphasis on the effect such transferences have on the reception of sound. He argues “fugitive signals” are sounds “stripped from their social and material contexts” that have been “estrang[e]d... for us when we hear [them] again in our own immediate space” (3). In film studies, Michel Chion suggests sound can be “an insidious means of effective and semantic manipulation” (34). Chion looks to *acousmatic sound* in film, audible sound which has no visible source and is characterized when it “is visualized first and subsequently acousmatized, or it is acousmatic to start with and is visualized only afterward” (72). Scholarship in sound studies has provided ample language for describing sounds that are transplanted, dispossessed, or otherwise seem to come from somewhere else. There is not much work yet done, if any, on sounds and the way they influence or interface with two concepts: authorship and mimesis. I want to explore the relationship between memes and schizophonia, how signals are ripped out of their original contexts, repurposed, and circulated to the point where they become fugitives even in their own contexts. The TikTok memes I discuss in this chapter are largely produced through schizophonia: one creator’s voice is pulled from their original video and becomes an essential building block for infinitely more texts.

What I hope to demonstrate in this chapter is that understanding authorship on TikTok will require holding onto two contradictory ideas: the identity of the original author often enhances users’ engagement with TikTok’s landscape *and* memes on TikTok decenter the author such that the author is no longer the sole center of origin in the history of the meme. A TikToker’s voice may be what users initially become attached to, but it also might be the first thing to be made a fugitive signal. Users on TikTok notice when they have found the sound in its original context, and they remark on its difference from the mimetic versions they were first

familiarized with. Barthesian notions of authorship as a perpetually uncoiling creative mass without distinct origin or end are highly appropriate for describing meme culture on TikTok. Authors have little to no control over the afterlife of their voice. Memes rely on the amplification of traditional notions of authorship existing in tandem with a decentralized, unfolding creative corpus. The infrastructure for creation that TikTok provides homes in on specific individuals and converts them into scrap material to be sewn into the existing fabric of the app. People will modulate the meme and its texture will change, but the author is ever-present, albeit in a fragmented form.

## MEMES

According to Limor Shifman, Richard Dawkins coined the term “meme” in his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene* (2). Dawkins argues that small units of culture (culinary, sartorial, or linguistic) or “memes” pass along between individuals, transmitting and transforming in a process similar to genes: through mimicry and copying, the unit is passed from one individual to another until, at some point, the descendent becomes totally distinct from its ancestor (cited in Wiggins, 4). Bradley Wiggins notes that this virologic analogy “fails to grasp the ideational argumentation afforded by internet memes. The epidemiological approach serves as a false analogy for the digital understanding and usage of memes by placing the power of their spread in the memes and ignoring agency” (4). That such a slippage occurs is understandable; much of the language around memes evokes this virologic analogy. Memes reaching explosive popularity in a short period of time are considered “viral” colloquially.

Mememes’ production and circulation are distinctive in internet contexts. Limor Shifman defines internet memes as “a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance... created *with an awareness of each other*, and... circulated, imitated *and/or*

*transformed via the Internet by many users*” (7-8, emphasis Shifman’s). The key attributes of internet memes, then, are their intertextuality and their transformability; memes are memes when they reference something else and when they are copyable. Like Wiggins, Shifman emphasizes the agents involved in the spread of memes, asserting that memes do not simply move between passive individuals like a virus moves through hosts (12). Memes rely on “repackaging mechanisms” such as “mimicry and remix. Mimicry involves the practice of redoing—the re-creation of a specific text with other people and/or by other means” (20), while remixing “involves technology-based manipulation” (22). The process of copying is, therefore, generative. For Shifman, memes “reflect deep social and cultural structures” like “postmodern folklore in which shared norms and values are constructed through cultural artifacts such as photoshopped images or urban legends” (15). In short, memes are a kind of unit of the cultural commons: they are object-archives produced through human interaction lacking singular origin.

Wiggins defines an internet meme “as a remixed, iterated message that can be rapidly diffused by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of satire, parody, critique, or other discursive activity...in order to commence, extend, counter, or influence a discourse” (11). In other words, memes cut material out of its original context, make an argument with that material, and do so with the purpose of subtly exhorting change. Wiggins asserts that “memes” ought to be labeled “enthymemes” as the word “better captures the essence of internet memes as a digital phenomenon marked not by imitation but by the capacity to propose or counter a discursive argument through visual and often also verbal interplay; the emphasis here is on those internet memes which inhere a critical component of society, politics, etc.” (1-2). Enthymemes are best known for their Aristotelean roots, although even the etymology of the term is foggy.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Rita Copeland offers two possible origins for the term: first, the word *thymos*, meaning heart, mind, spirit, desire, or soul as manifested through the passions” signifying “the seat of emotions and intuitions, where inferences,

While the exact definition of the word has long been debated, enthymemes are commonly understood to be syllogisms in which “one of the premises or the conclusion is suppressed because the audience is expected to supply the missing part from common knowledge” (Valerie J. Smith, 115). Therefore, while “meme” refers generally to any imitative, transmissible cultural unit, “enthymeme” connotes much more. The term captures both those repetitive patterns of transmission and the ways the viewer is expected to recognize the argument the meme is advancing, to appropriate the meme themselves, and to contribute their own permutation.

Discussions of particular memes’ subcultural inflections are standard, but rarely is the subject of authorship included in the scholarship around memes. Memes are often apprehended first for their spontaneity, as object-archives lacking a distinct origin, and second as a form of collective commentary. Moreover, the scholarship around memes is skewed towards *explicitly* political memes, ones that either utilize the image of politicians or forward a political argument using specific vocabulary. My concern is that the lack of any dispensation with the subject of authorship, and the inattention to memes that are not overtly political in subject matter, may be to ignore the way most memes actually register with their viewers. Wiggins is not generally opposed to inspecting the role of identity in the formal character of memes, as a meme might be playing on modes of identification. Wiggins suggests that a meme based on a character from a film, for example, exceeds the bounds of intent of the original author *of the film* (123). However, he does not deal with the possibility that the first person to create the meme might themselves have some intentions in the meme’s proliferation. In Wiggins’ reading of memes inspired by films, he talks about audience reception, intended audience, and when the meme is shared.

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judgments, and intentions are made.” There is also “the verb *enthymeisthai*, ‘to consider,’ ‘to weigh.’ This suggests the kind of judgment involved in rhetorical persuasion” (369). Overall the term’s roots are connected to the formation of thoughts.

Although Wiggins notes that identity is a crucial aspect of some meme's semiotics (a meme might find an audience based on the commentary it makes about the experience of living as a queer person in the world for example), he arbitrarily delineates the creator of the meme from the analysis of memes: "Internet memes necessitate human agency whose identity is unimportant... the individual identities of all those involved are less important than the function of agency in a social system, especially one that incorporates, perhaps even necessitates digital technologies for communication purposes" (13).

Wiggins even goes so far as to say authorship *ought* to be considered irrelevant to the study of memes:

Given the rapidity by which memes are produced, curated, shared, remixed and iterated further, etc., the author indirectly expresses a silent abstention of participation: an individual creates a... meme that is part of an ongoing or already commenced discourse. Viewing memes as texts, the identity of an author of a given meme is, or at least should, be unimportant. If we were to praise the authors of memes, we might begin to find ourselves biased toward a particular type or sub-genre of meme due simply to name recognition. (122)

There is a slippage in this argument from identifying the author of a meme to "praising" the author of a meme here which jars with Wiggins' reliance on Althusser in his analysis.

Althusserian Marxists recognize structures limiting forms of agency, and identity is so deeply entwined with these structures that to say simply recognizing identity is akin to *praise* is misapplying the framework. Cutting out the original author from the process arbitrarily incises one branch from a longer mimetic genealogy. Ignoring only the original author creates a conundrum: every person who *views* a meme is potentially someone who could author an

iteration or subgenre of the meme, and yet Wiggins is reluctant to bestow the label of “author” on any one individual. What troubles me most about this dismissal is that, as I discussed in Chapter 1, audiences can comprise groups of genuine people and bad-faith actors alike. The absence of consideration for how political landscapes might be artificially terraformed using memes (which do often obfuscate their original creators) is of grave importance to the study of political memes and how they might propel political movements particularly. Wiggins’ concerted exclusion of the subject of authorship raises many questions about the implications of memes as an agential expression and notions of identity as a whole.

I am inclined to resist formulations of meme culture which disregard the nuanced, diverse, and often conflicting operations of internet cultures. Sometimes creative anonymity is enough to embolden pernicious actors, sometimes people create bots and sock puppet accounts to spread posts—in short, sometimes knowing *who* can help us understand *why*. The identity of the meme maker may matter to viewers in practice depending on the meme itself, the community, language, subculture, or platform through which it circulates. Whether or not we would designate them the creators of the meme may even speak to the *lack* of agency that people have in the circulation of memes that are based on their image. These contingencies are important to consider when the content that the meme deals with resonates with marginalized viewers. In the case of an Instagram account called EmoBlackThot, which curated memes speaking to the experiences of Black women and was presumed to be delivered *by* a Black woman, the account’s followers were scandalized and vocalized feeling betrayed when the creator confessed he was actually a Black man who lied about his identity (Wheeler, 2019). More broadly, Lauren Michele Jackson has coined the term “digital blackface” to refer to non-Black individuals utilizing gifs and videos of Black people to express themselves (Jackson, 2017). Blackness, and especially

Black womanhood, is commodified under white supremacy in ways that manifest in meme culture. Knowing who authored a particular meme helps ascertain the complex underpinnings of those manifestations.

In another case, Pepe the Frog, a famous character created by Matt Furie that became an archetypal meme, was co-opted by the online Alt-right as a mascot for their politics. They could deflect from accusations that they were engaging in fascist dog whistling by diminishing the imagery to its mimetic origins. Pepe was co-opted by so many fascists to such an egregious extent that Furie “retired” Pepe (Bishop, 2017). This was a symbolic gesture and Pepe is still in circulation, but Furie’s role as Pepe’s original artist lent some credence to anti-fascist claims that the character had been appropriated. How audiences interpret a meme can be, but may not always be, influenced by their perception of someone involved in the production process. To question *who* initially created the meme, who initially *spread* the meme, *why*, and in what way the meme was deployed to coax individuals into ideological stances is to follow a prudent line of inquiry. Simply discarding the concept of authorship assumes the way it functions in discourse is transhistorical, uniform, and that it can be dismantled and decentered purely by ignoring it. We need to think more about how authorship might change in this context, and while much is lost from ignoring the concept altogether in our study of memes, there is much to be gained from interrogating it. TikTok memes, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, both bury the author in the text (thereby concealing any obvious mediator) and involve the author in hypermediation. Viewers are expected to recognize the author as one thread sewn into the text while simultaneously viewing the entire tapestry in all its immediacy.

## TWO PRETTY BEST FRIENDS

TikToker Jordan Scott, active under the username Jayrscottyy, posted videos never exceeding a few seconds in length reciting relatable observations about life and dating while sitting in his car. Filming in one's car with the camera level with the speaker's navel is common on TikTok in part for the sense of immediacy it affords the video. Cars' interiors contribute to the impression that the user has impromptu picked up their phone during a moment of idle time, making the TikToker's thoughts seem raw and free of obvious artifice. Scott's delivery was always extremely stiff, and his videos were generic observational jokes that are extremely



6 Scott in his car

common on meme aggregator pages. In one video, posted on October 8th, 2020 (see fig. 6), Scott said simply, “I ain’t never seen two pretty best friends. It’s always one of ‘em gotta be ugly.”

This video is not very different from his usual fare, and yet “Two Pretty Best Friends” saw unexpectedly explosive virality. Notably, most of the people partaking in sharing Scott’s

message were criticizing him and his mild misogynistic messaging: while Scott does not explicitly name women here, the language (“pretty”) is gendered. He sorts women in dyads to compare them on the basis of their appearances. Scott’s video invokes patriarchal ideas that beauty is of the utmost importance. Scott’s video could hardly be described as anything greater or more caustic than garden-variety misogynistic rhetoric, and so the astounding wave of commentary that followed his video may seem utterly perplexing to some. In fact, Scott’s video exemplified the prime combination of inane tactlessness and off-the-cuff commentary that is easily and often clipped, copied, and remixed on the internet.

Most of the videos which poked fun at Scott’s appearance were themselves referencing a meme that cropped up in the comments section of the original video, where users recreated his face out of emojis. Users wrote pineapple or soup emojis to represent his eyes in combination with the nose and mouth emoji to complete a representation of his face:



Occasionally, users would add another emoji to fill in Scott’s goatee and accent the facial structure. People could have used eyeball emojis in their recreation of Scott’s face, but using various types of food serves to better highlight the aspects of his appearance that the audience noticed first. Scott McCloud sketches the inner mechanisms of cartoons, explaining that an image which is “abstract[ed]... through cartooning” is not “eliminating details” but “focusing on specific details... By stripping down an image to its essential “meaning,” an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t” (30). Thus, photorealistic art is limited in some ways by its specificity, whereas unrealistic art styles present more pliable semiotic possibilities. In this way, TikTok users’ implementation of emojis works to abstract Scott’s appearance into a

simplified collection of images in order to communicate more complicated feelings about him. The emojis insult his appearance, evoking his facial features and his comportment, including his staring unblinkingly into his phone camera. In unconventional ways, commenters enthymimetically levied criticisms at Scott through visual media; users interpreted Scott's message in peculiar ways that were informed by what they thought of his appearance. The sense is that, if he was willing to treat women on the whole as objects for men to evaluate, then he deserves a taste of his own medicine. The comments on Scott's video became a free-for-all festival of insults accounting for all Scott's deviations from a beauty standard. Shifman writes that, when memes develop, "these videos are more similar to each other than to [the] original" (48). Videos which used these combinations of emojis were certainly more similar to each other, to different forms of the meme, and to the fugitive signal of Scott's voice than to the original video.

Core to the initial wave of memes reacting to "Two Pretty Best Friends" were videos that snipped Scott's video's "sound" for their own soundscapes, rendering his voice a fugitive signal mere minutes after the video was posted. An initial wave of videos showed users standing with their best friends, smiling, while Scott's sound played. These videos are very direct rebuttals to Scott's; they are meant to either show that Scott's assertion is self-evidently incorrect (in which case, the comments read, "I found two pretty best friends!") *or* they would include self-deprecating jokes at the expense of the people in the video (the implication being that the TikTokers lightheartedly self-identify as proof of Scott's point). But what ended up forming the comedic core of the meme was the way many TikTokers' videos played Scott's audio over their own footage to mimick his video as closely as possible using a similar camera angle, setting, and even costumes. Scott's own voice juxtaposed with these intentionally shoddy recreations of his

habitus. One user, ZoraGitt, wearing poorly applied false eyelashes, opens her eyes and mouth widely, exaggerating Scott's affect, and lipsyncs to Scott's sound. ZoraGitt distills one aspect of Scott's video down to its components such that she comments obliquely on what makes Scott's video so silly. She makes a comment about Scott's comportment and style by evoking it unnervingly. Pastiche of Scott's original video call attention to their own intentionally messy implementation (many videos show the emojis from the comments section's meme conspicuously layered over TikTokers' eyes and chins, for instance). The meme requires the viewer to be engaged with a certain degree of hypermediacy. Viewers needed to recognize the medium they were interfacing with is a video meme in order to properly immerse themselves within it.

Eventually, the meme metastasized to the point where Scott's likeness was gradually shed. The meme moved from a direct comment on Scott himself into a commentary on its own ubiquity. In one TikTok, recorded from a first person point of view on a cell phone, the cameraperson cautiously approaches a doorway to discover his friend standing in the center of the room, entranced and surrounded by pictures of Scott. The cameraman wonders aloud what is going on in the room, and the sound of Scott's voice saying, "I ain't never seen two pretty best friends" reverberates startlingly. The person in the room rushes the camera, and the video ends. This video's comedy is derived from its jarring tone. Shot cinematically as if it were clipped from an ominous scene in a horror film, the video's tone collides with the silly mildness of the meme as well as Scott's own persona. His image juxtaposes with the dark lighting, the tense first-person perspective, and the fake attacker's alarming movement to create a highly absurd result. A subgenre of "Two Pretty Best Friends" skits followed, departing even more drastically from the source material by introducing narratives and twist endings. Users began to post

seemingly candid videos of familial drama, often between parents and children, only for the parents to take the camera, turn it on themselves and say, “I ain’t never seen two pretty best friends.” TikTok’s “For You” page (FYP) does curate content based on the user’s tastes and watch habits, but it still delivers that content in a way that appears random. My FYP, for instance, features cooking videos, videos on philosophy and literature, gameplay footage, parents implementing the Montessori Method with their children, and occasionally viral videos of interpersonal disputes. “Two Pretty Best Friends” skits with twist endings subverted a genre of video on TikTok by putting up the facade of one of these other genres over a familiar meme, toying with the experience of scrolling down one’s FYP.

To discuss the formal properties of “Two Pretty Best Friends” requires taking stock of the way pieces of Scott’s identity, such as his voice and face, were distilled and abstracted into composite parts and became micro-memes. Whereas Scott’s face was made into a meme through abstraction first, his voice was pulled from its original context and made a fugitive signal to be taken up and reinterpreted by other viewers. His voice was acousmatized in literal and metaphorical ways: users no longer had to see the source of the sound to recognize the humour in it. This is not to say the “source” of the sound lost relevance. Currently, the comments under Scott’s video exclaim, “I found the original!” Not only did Scott’s identity enrich the original meme and provide raw material for it, it was the audience’s reactions to Scott’s video, their expectations that others had seen it, which constituted the enthymimetic elements of the original meme. Since these responses were also TikTok videos using Scott’s sound, users who clicked the sound would be redirected to a page which linked not only to Scott’s video, but to every other video which had used the sound. While later versions of the meme stopped incorporating Scott’s voice and image—or even evoking it—and focused instead on the meme’s preponderance, the

meme would not have reached that point without people breaking down pieces of Scott's identity and taking those fragments up in their own internet bricolage. While it would be wildly incorrect to chalk up the meme's evolution to Scott's artistic genius, ignoring the role his (literal and stylistic) voice played in the meme's production skews the picture unproductively.

## HERE COMES THE BOY

On June 30th, 2021, user *june\_banoon* (June) uploaded a TikTok that departed slightly from her usual content. Where she typically posted videos of herself trying on new dresses or reading tarot cards, this particular video was recorded from a first-person perspective and captured a cat ambling up a driveway towards the camera (see fig. 7). As the cat comes closer to the camera, June improvises a song: "Here comes the boy/hello boy/welcome/there he is/he is here." As she sings, the lyrics are stylized with emphatic emojis, erratic cases, and different fonts:

hErE cOmEs the 🌟 Boy 🌟

♥ *hello boy* ♥

🎵 welcome 🎵

THERE HE IS!!!!

!! HE IS HERE !!

June's stylized captions are evidence of her own interpretative fingerprint on the video. She guides the viewer's interpretation of the video by imposing her own visual representation of the soundscape on the video itself. Erratic capitalization in the first line, for instance, translates June's understanding of her own fluctuating pitch into written word. Each capital letter correlates with a change in notes in her song. Furthermore, "Boy" is capitalized like a proper noun and

punctuated by its own sparkle emojis, a reflection of some anglophonic internet dialects which convey affection for pets by referring to them using the proper noun “Boy” when their names are unknown. The second line, “hello boy,” is written in a cursive font, which imbues a unique affect in June’s words. They appear more affectionate, reflecting a verbal caress, matching June’s giggle while she sings the line. “Welcome” is its own line, parenthesized by music note emojis as June draws out the note, suggesting she is lingering on the word. Meanwhile, the final two lines are entirely capitalized, with the final line punctuated by emoji exclamation marks.

Consequently, these lines read as urgent—almost frantic—and seem incongruous with the song’s otherwise saccharine affect. They picture a different emotional dimension to June’s experience as it is recorded in the video: she sings quietly, but the font and emojis show she is excited to see the Boy. Emojis<sup>12</sup> are pictographic characters, and should not be overlooked as mere accentuations to the script. Like the parodies of “Two Pretty Best Friends,” the emojis here



7 "the Boy"

<sup>12</sup> Emoji is also a romanization of the Japanese word for internet pictograms: 絵文字 (え も じ) .

abstract an element of June's song and expose a multiplicity of possible meanings. June's stylizations function like an authorial fingerprint, complexifying her style and revealing the polyvalence in an otherwise everyday, pleasant video. These are in every sense indicators of her own inner life, a point of connection for viewers who may have similar experiences, and interpretations of her music, all packaged within the video's formal elements.

"Here Comes the Boy" stands as an example of the diversity of energies which lead to a meme's conception, because unlike Scott, June became an overnight sensation on the basis of her video's sweetness and sincerity. Whereas Scott's video was a pedestrian lapse in judgment which evolved into memes as people mocked him in creative ways, "Here Comes the Boy" captured an everyday, pleasant moment, and the responses to it were largely celebratory. Initial responses to June took the form of duets, a feature that positions two or more users' TikTok videos and audios alongside and overtop each other. The format has incubated a culture, oftentimes jocular, where more users will duet a video until the original comprises a small portion of the screen compared to the majority occupied by the duets. Because the audio simply layers and the video remains distinguishable in increasingly diminutive squares, the effect can range from symphonic to cacophonous. While duets to June's video commonly featured other people's cats, what eventually gave "Here Comes the Boy" its character was the community of musicians who duetted the original video to build on June's tune by adding strings, bass, percussion, vocals, and other musical accompaniment. The effect is dazzling, considering the song's humble origins: June's voice floats sweetly along with the accompaniment, leading to a sublime and serene Impressionistic melody. The final product more closely resembles a carefully constructed composition than a serendipitous assortment of musicians. Some YouTube videos cut each of these iterations chronologically to show how June's video gradually built into several full-

fledged compositions, and the comments under such compilations demonstrate that my evaluation is not unrelated to this analysis. Comments on YouTube compilation videos of the more populous renditions of “Here Comes the Boy” describe them as “magical” and “wholesome.” Users valued the way these TikTokers came together and added their own voices onto June’s. One common complaint, which results from TikTok’s duetting feature raising the volume of newer videos over the embedded, older ones, is that June’s voice is not loud *enough*. Like “Two Pretty Best Friends,” people were invigorated by other strangers individually chiming in, joining the fun, but the original served as an anchor.

In spite of the fact that June does not actually appear in the video, her voice signals authorial presence. June’s voice is an acousmatic sound; her voice guides the videos’ narrative trajectory from off-screen. The duets of “Here Comes the Boy” complicate things further. Duetting expands on, and confuses, the framing of an original video. Duets are only possible if a TikToker has *allowed* for their videos to be duetted, but this does not drain some of the feature’s improvisational appeal. We can imagine a busker arriving at his usual corner to play only to discover an orchestra of hundreds of thousands of people has beat him there, playing along with him, and this image is not far afield of what duetting produces. The function can be disabled by the original TikToker, although many users will still capture a video using third-party software on their devices and then include a segment in their own video for context, or they will stitch the video. Stitching apes the language of needlework with its user interface<sup>13</sup> (UI), allowing users to cut out a segment of another user’s video and start their own from that point. Many users will stitch a small segment of another user’s video and use it in theirs as a cold open. Stitching, like its namesake, is more a process of linking shots together and distinguishing their different

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<sup>13</sup> UI refers to the displayed icons, symbols, etc. that the user can interact with to input commands into a system. For instance, a plus sign often allows people to “follow” another account while a heart often means “like”.

origins. It does not imbricate two videos in the same temporal moment the way that duetting does. Duetting creates black space around the borders of the video, whereas the vertical video of most TikToks usually fills the space of the phone screen. Duets both maintain the universe of the original duet and concomitantly stretch its edges. Other TikTokers can insert themselves into the narrative world of the original TikTok in their duet, and because they feature in their additive videos while June's does not, these duets redefine what is on-screen and what is off-screen. They build on the soundscape of the original, joining the acousmatic voice. That is, these duets assume and depend on June *being* there in the immaterial way that she is.

After the meme's popularity had reached its zenith, people began to parody June's song; these parodies are very distinct from the wild, erratic, and critical tone of the "Two Pretty Best Friends" TikToks. One user, wow\_its\_ian (Ian), uploaded their own cover of the song using a small acoustic guitar<sup>14</sup> which is now known as "Here Comes the BOYYYY." Ian sings extremely loudly and manipulates their voice into a shrill cartoonish rasp while breaking up the lyrics into bizarre and inconsistent rhythms. Ian added additional lyrics so that, as the song progresses, it unravels further: "hello boy, welcome, here he comes, there he is! Here comes the boy! Welcome, there he goes, here he comes, there he is, welcome boy, he's a boy!" The repetitive statements in June's song, "there he is/he is here!" are stretched to the point of absurdity in this version. The Boy's arrival does not feel momentous and cute in Ian's song. Rather the Boy's arrival has unpredictable effects on his surroundings. He is at once going, coming, and already here. Other TikTokers cut in the first three words of June's song and inserted Ian's voice shouting the word 'boy.' Some of the most popular versions of this edited audio showed cats twitching and jerking around almost to the beat of the song. These cats contrast with the quaint

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<sup>14</sup> Ian has also recently created "here come the white people" in the same voice.

elegance of “the Boy” in June’s video. What characterizes the videos accompanying “Here Comes the BOYYYY” is their eclectic camera work, particularly quick zooms and odd framing. When the cat jerks around disturbingly, the camera person will punctuate their movement with a zoom. The lighting reflects off the cat’s eyes in this cover to make the cat seem monstrous. The joke lies in the juxtaposition here: none of these cats move with the relaxed elegance of the Boy in June’s original video, and Ian’s voice is antipodal to June’s.

While iterations of “Here Comes the Boy” were, in general, less chaotic than the trajectory of “Two Pretty Best Friends,” the iterations of the former modulated the tone such that users could make self-deprecating jokes with the song. Another iteration, “Here Comes the Whore” featured mostly cats, but often was accompanied by footage of scantily clad young women using the audio to poke fun at their own wardrobes. Initially, one user had sung overtop the symphonic community duet edition of June’s song while her cat enters her room and tries to take her food: “here comes the whore/this is my fucking food whore/get away from me.” The latter half of her song evolves when her cat tries to smell the food in her bowl. Where “here comes the BOYYYY” videos tended to compile chaotic footage of cats, “Here Comes the Whore” mimicked the blocking of the original video and established an antagonistic relationship between the TikToker and their cat. Eventually, people interpreted the audio differently, with “food” coming to represent boyfriends. The cats sometimes stole other people’s boyfriends in the videos’ narratives, and so the audio imbued the video with an extra playful, comedic layer while also evoking the meme. “Here Comes the Whore” clears space for femme people to represent themselves. There is also a defiant tone here; the use of the word “whore” is reclamatory, obliquely celebrating the TikTokers’ sexualities.

Intuitively, one might dismiss the subject of authorship in analyzing “Here Comes the Boy,” because June’s persona is muted in comparison to the prescience of Scott’s in his own meme. At the same time, there is much evidence to suggest that the memes which descended from the original “Here Comes the Boy” radiated from June as a singular point of origin and similarly fragmented aspects of her identity; the duets which crested into entire symphonic versions of the song, for one thing, never entirely erased June’s voice even though it occupied a diminishing portion of each subsequent duet. Furthermore, June’s voice and filming style were central to both major subsets of the meme that I have explored in this chapter. June is what Benjamin Widiss calls “notionally at play” (4), in his study of modern and postmodern literature and media. Widiss suggests there are times when texts “solicit our participation... via our experience of characters” and “via our tracking of rhetorical and conceptual games that highlight our relationships with authors” (2). The author is one participant who might rely on the reader’s awareness of their involvement to steer textual engagement. Widiss continues, suggesting that “a canny ‘originator’ might mobilize the discursive thicket stretched between herself and her readers” (7). There are several ways that June’s authorial role is important to the meme: she is notionally at play in later iterations of “Here Comes the Boy,” especially those with tones that deviate significantly from the original. What is more, her stylizations in the original video point to her awareness of the “discursive thicket” on TikTok. If June had not stylized her video using the pictographic flourishes that she had, if the topic of her song had not been so specifically silly, audiences may not have connected with it in the same way. The fact that anyone felt like there was material in the original to repurpose into an enthymimetic form suggests the original creator had at least some degree of sensitivity to the way TikTok audiences engage with videos. Moreover, June’s voice was still a component to both remixed audios. There is something for

people to relate to here: the meme provides an opportunity for other people to introduce their own perspective, a point of relation. The direction of focus that these memes took was entirely antipodal to the way “two pretty best friends” worked. With “Two Pretty Best Friends,” Scott was inviting the audience to laugh along with him. They appropriated his voice and his image to laugh at him, mocking him. In the case of “Here Comes the Boy,” the enthymeme involved June’s voice to celebrate her video, mock themselves or a subject other than what June was doing. Of course, June does not demonstrate mastery over the iterations that followed any more than Scott, but this lack of agency in a wider creative dialogue provokes questions about how social media authorship might be defined by that very lack of control over the circulation of one’s own voice.

### **IT’S ENOUGH SLICES**

On April 27th, 2021, Anthony Fantano, a long-time YouTuber known for his music review videos, uploaded a TikTok duet of himself reacting to another TikTok wherein a person cuts a pizza into inordinately smaller slices. Utilizing the duet feature in this way, Fantano retroactively inserts himself in the narrative of the original pizza TikTok (see fig. 8). Initially, Fantano enthusiastically requests, “Oh, a fresh pie! Save me a slice!” As the TikToker in the original video cuts the pizza, Fantano becomes hyperbolically agitated, finally screaming so loudly that the microphone peaks, “It’s enough slices!” Fantano’s exaggeration highlights the silly part of the video and amplifies it: there are few consequences to cutting a pizza into tiny slices which could reasonably elicit Fantano’s reaction. In representing his reaction this way, where he and the pizza cutter exist in the same space and time, Fantano also adds some dimension to the pizza cutter’s character. Not only are they comically inept at cutting pizza, in Fantano’s duet, they seem to be mischievously antagonistic, goading Fantano to explode.

Fantano identified something comedic about an otherwise unremarkable (slightly weird) video and, through his duet, renarrativized it. His video serves as another example of the way duets enable retroactively extendable soundscapes.

“It’s Enough Slices” differs from the other memes I have discussed thus far. The meme developed not out of a collective commentary on the original, stemming instead from many TikTok users who elected to use Fantano’s audio metaphorically; commonly, TikToks will transpose the narrative trajectory of the original onto their own radically different narratives. TikTokers tend to use the audio from “It’s Enough Slices” to fill the soundscape of their original video containing text that describes an unassuming situation that quickly became unmanageable. Usually, as Fantano’s audio grows more and more frantic, text describing the TikToker’s story will appear on screen, with each escalating step in the experience accompanying Fantano’s next exclamation. A majority of TikTokers who used the sound in this way made videos about their experience with puberty, where some users either grew extremely tall or developed unusually large breasts. In these videos, the visual accompaniment to Fantano screaming the pizza is users’ bodies before a growth spurt while “slices” refers to the growth spurt itself. Puberty, like the person cutting the pizza, is overdoing it. Meanwhile, in these meme iterations, the person cutting the pizza is melted into indistinct concepts like time or human biology influencing a person’s body type in extreme ways. This is a common occurrence on TikTok, where the audio will not be



*8 Fantano duetting the pizza cutter*

taken literally and will instead symbolize a different narrative because its trajectory resembles that of other narratives.

Clearly, users need not engage with the message of Fantano's audio literally in order to appropriate it for their own purposes. Even so, some of Fantano's commentary on the meme—as well as his large online presence—enriches many users' engagement with the meme such that Fantano himself serves as one enthymimetic thread to follow. In a YouTube video, Fantano commentates on some TikToks that adapted his audio. While he expresses some surprise at how many of the videos that used the sound centered around users' puberty, he picks out several examples of unique uses of the sound. He commends one user for skillfully lipsyncing to his audio, explaining that the audio is difficult to lip sync to owing to Fantano's intonation. Towards the end of the video, he parodies his own TikTok with a surrealist feel, exclaiming, "It's enough TikToks!" Fantano is equipped to engage with the meme in a way that is both idiosyncratic and closely resembling the remixes which his video spawned. Fantano's interpretation of "It's

Enough Slices” and his own remixing of it are unique iterations of the meme with their own enthymimetic intricacies. Pointing out the isolated iterations in the wider phenomenon of the meme is not celebratory in and of itself; it enables focused analysis of the formal components of memes, and it reinforces the argument that mimetic processes are also creative processes rather than the vacuous motions of an inert postmodern cultural zeitgeist.

“It’s Enough Slices,” Fantano explains, was the lowest-effort video he had ever produced, and in spite of this it became his most popular video. Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, in their book *Remediation*, clarify the appeal of low-effort content. They suggest the titular term “remediation” to describe a trending desire in digital culture “to multiply its media and replace all traces of mediation” or “the twin logics of immediacy and hypermediacy” (5) respectively. Immediacy, in this sense, refers to a removal of all apparent mediation, the elision of the medium itself, or the pure immersion of the viewer in the medium (6). Hypermediacy, meanwhile, is Bolter and Grusin’s term for when “the viewer acknowledges she is in the presence of a medium and learns through acts of mediation or indeed learns about mediation itself” (71). In other words, Bolter and Grusin study the space between the artistic surface and the viewer, noting how that space is mediated, to what extent the viewer is expected to be aware of that mediation, and how these factors influence the message of a text. The relationship between enthymemes, which rely on the viewer’s prior knowledge of a meme and ability to understand how one iteration might advance a unique argument, and remediation is clear: enthymemes often remediate older iterations and use both hypermediacy and immediacy to make a point.

By arranging Bolter’s and Grusin’s theorization alongside Fantano’s TikTok production, we might better understand the role of the author as well as the traits which distinguish TikToks from other forms of internet video. TikToks rely on a sense of immediacy (through

compositional elements which elide evidence of mediation) and hypermediacy (by constantly referencing other TikToks both in their messaging and through a preponderance of hyperlinks to those TikToks). Fantano's authorial presence guides the viewer's experience of both the pizza cutter's video and his own, thus binding the videographic medium he uses to his perspective. Therefore, an apparent lack of effort in the production of "It's Enough Slices" builds immediacy, like the video has been delivered from the TikToker to the viewer in illusory real-time. Simultaneously, Fantano's "low-effort" production, his spur-of-the-moment reaction, and his use of the duet function contribute to hypermediacy as they call attention to the presence of the medium itself. This is not to say that the popularity of Fantano's video can be attributed solely to the way it remediates. After all, this chapter primarily attends to the traces of the text's original handler within the text itself. However, it is worth noting that remediation provides one explanation for why seemingly uncomplicated texts contain material for creative inspiration.

Fantano's pre-existing popularity had to have influenced the proliferation of the meme, although he claims most of his audience dislikes his TikToks. While it may not be the sole determinant to the TikTok's success, many people who viewed the meme do allude to his career as a music reviewer. The meme's enthymimetic dimensions must also encompass Fantano, not only because his voice and face are part of the meme, but also because knowledge about his career on YouTube fleshes out many viewers' experience of the meme. Some comments under Fantano's YouTube video which explains the phenomenon, as well as under the YouTube re-upload of the original video, remark about the video's placement in Fantano's career. While one need not know who Anthony Fantano is to participate in the meme, understanding who Fantano is provides another entry point for analyzing the meme itself and the context around it. Marcus Boon offers one way of understanding the many potential benefits to memes, arguing "we are

always entangled in the dynamics of mimesis” (6). Copying, he argues, is less theft and more “abundance. It is predicated on the knowledge that there are an infinite number of ways of presenting, perceiving, disassembling, and reassembling objects and selves, and that this activity is a collective one” (72-73). Original creators and copycats alike beget entirely new modes of expression, repetition and participation. The abundant and diverse reactions to the original posts show how much people can do by interpreting and building on what they have already seen. So while it makes sense that an app which primarily connects people based on how they repeat an action, phrase, or whatever would promote repetitive content, this particular meme requires us to not homogenize the content. Fantano was slightly apathetic and, at times, annoyed about the meme. The way posting the video relinquished his control over his voice raises questions about the ways this multiplying schizophonia might violate some individuals’ agency just as it opens new ways for others to express their own. Whether this immense flare of fame is good or bad, there is value in asking where an original creator is left once the internet has segmented their voice away from their being and eventually disintegrated them from the meme entirely.

## CONCLUSION

Computer science philosopher Jaron Lanier has historically been distrustful of the forms of collectivity that are cultivated on Web 2.0 platforms. His concerns are with the ways “digital culture” tends “to chop up a network of individuals so finally that you end up with a mush,” such that [programmers] start to care about the abstraction of the network more than the real people who are networked, even though the network by itself is meaningless, only the people were ever meaningful” (17). Lanier goes on to assert that “authorship—the very idea of a point of view” (47) is lost to this particular conglomeration. While I do not agree with the thrust of Lanier’s

project<sup>15</sup> (namely that the counter to Silicon Valley's pre-eminent perspectives is to hyper-individualize) I do think this "chopping up" language is useful. The fact that Web 2.0 developers see the userbase as resources to extract, mulch, and refine, not as individual agents but rather pieces and parts to use in digital agriculture seems to be reflected in the meme culture on TikTok. Scott, June, and Fantano all had their voices extracted, distorted, and instrumentalized by thousands of people. Pieces of their identities were clipped and changed such that their voices were no longer their own, but were rather fugitive schizophones voicing the feelings of massive communities. These TikTok memes offer a suggestively paradoxical model of authorship where creative capacities are distributed amongst a wider community *and* users invest a degree of importance in a singular point of origin, be that the text that inspired a meme or its creator. The original user's identity is converted into various components for video production, melted down and forged into other people's videos.

There is a problem that arises here: people are pressured to use social media at all times for all things, and they are pressured to produce at all times. The scale of the memes that stemmed from these initial videos is not proportionate to their contents. This is not to say that the reactions *ought* not to ever be disproportionate; I adore "Here Comes the Boy" and I think it is such an enjoyable meme because it is so unassuming. The video is just the kind of thing that makes internet culture beautiful sometimes. But using social media is not merely a luxurious creative and connective outlet anymore; using it is expected of us all as consumers, community members, potential employees, and more. In using social media for everyday things, we do not consent actively to becoming viral sensations for some small silliness. Yet, there is always an infinitesimal chance of one of our posts being *that* one. Having grown up using the internet, I am

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<sup>15</sup> Namely, that Web 2.0 sacrifices "Authorship... the very idea of a point of view" (47) and that the direction Web 2.0 developers were heading in 2010 resembled Maoist China (93).

wary of the dangers the present internet ecosystem poses already more than I am excited by the possibilities. The responses to Scott are particularly concerning to me because they were *mean*. More than that, they were hypocritical. Much of the reaction to Scott's video was motivated by the way it made fun of other people's appearances, and yet the backlash to his video partook in exactly that sort of bullying. Why were so many people comfortable with the scale of the reaction to Scott's silly little nothing when there are many more people posting passing thoughts online that are measurably more harmful than what Scott posted?

The fact that TikTok enables videos' audio to become fugitive signals moments after they are posted means that when we respond to that pressure to create by creating, we are essentially gambling with the right to have any say at all over what happens with our likenesses. Most users are not cultural icons with support employees, and if the use of an image has ethical ramifications, what about a culture that takes up random pedestrians' images and launches them to astronomical fame or infamy? TikTok mushes people up and encourages people to submit themselves to this pulp that others will create with. That can be very exciting and beautiful, as in cases like "It's Enough Slices" where the boundaries of the video's universe are stretched through duetting and the application of new sounds. The mechanism can also be concerning.

If we do not ask the question *who made this* when we discuss memes, we are passing over these very important ethical discussions. Of course, memes and meme culture are much more than just the original inspiration. But sometimes people do not intend for their voices and faces to be taken up in this way. The memes I have discussed in this chapter would not have existed without these users taking the building blocks nascent in Scott's content and TikTok. If the identity of the people who started the memes does not matter in our view, we ignore the ethical quandaries created by meme cultures that wrest control of a single person's image away

from them and scatter it in the internet milieu. This is a both/and situation: memes are both a gestalt of all users who have interacted with them *and* a clearly traceable network of texts that pass along between individual people.

TikTok also shows the symphonic side to production. It is not all doom and gloom. Harmonizing even in disagreement, making modifications to a thing and adding new notes—these are normal parts of internet textual production. At the same time, knowing who the original users are is mandatory for getting the most enriching viewing experience from TikToks. In the memes I have studied in this chapter, elements of the original creator’s person—their voice or their likeness—are effectively separated from them. They become one note in a song, one voice in a choir even when they did not mean to sing. Through this focus on the specific mechanisms undergirding memes, we struggle with pressing questions pertaining to the ethics of broader meme cultures in the twenty-first century: if memes do flatten traditional hierarchies of authority over textual meaning, is the fact that an entire oeuvre may be generated using a person’s likeness without that person’s knowledge or consent *preferable* to those hierarchies? One uniting detail behind each of the memes I have analyzed in this chapter is the agential vacuum they expose in platforms which enable viral meme production and spread: none of the people whose voices and appearances were incorporated into colossal phenoms had expected, intended, or conceived of their videos reaching as far as they did. None of these TikTokers consented to becoming the subject of scrutiny for millions, because digital culture works in such a way that most people participate without expecting this to be the result while anyone could be selected in an algorithmic lottery. This is more than a mildly relevant contextual detail in Scott’s case especially. While I have mostly avoided evaluations of the tone and proportion of the criticisms that Scott received, I note again that Scott’s critics were mean-spirited and delivered their

criticisms together in inconceivable quantities. Scott handled the tidal wave of responses mocking his appearance with wit in his comments section and managed to ingratiate himself to some of the swarm of haters that coalesced in his comments section. This case study unfortunately exhibits what Barthesian and Foucaultian notions of authorship could not anticipate. Social media provides a direct line of communication between every single reader and every author they ever come into contact with. Scott, Fantano, and June did not simply create internet videos, they involuntarily *became* memes by creating internet videos, and they represent but the surface of an often toxic media ecology. If media studies scholars do not ask *who* the author of any given meme may be and how their identities may have been objectified, effaced, and swept into the text by others, we leave very important discussions about the flaws in the social media landscape and the possibilities for healthier media ecologies untouched.

### **Chapter 3: Intimations of Living-Dead Authors: Immediate Collaboration and the Techno Scribal Revival**

Despite the complexities of the topic, the “death” of the author is easier to work through whilst there is some delay between textual production and reception. Most of an author’s readership cannot peek over the author’s shoulder during the writing process or stand shoulder-to-shoulder with filmmakers on set. Even with other forms of internet video, like YouTube videos or TikToks, there is always going to be some delay from the moment production begins; the YouTubers I discussed in Chapter One spent many hours scripting, shooting, and editing their videos before publishing them. TikToks have a shorter production time, but even if they are filmed within five minutes in the user’s car there is still some distance between the moment of production and the moment of viewing. Live streams (internet video broadcasts) complicate this, because the moment a streamer goes live, the viewer is immediately confronted with the author’s living body in real-time while the text is being produced. Watching a livestream, viewers may not be able to separate the author’s guiding hand from the interpretation of the text, because the stream could not go live without the streamer.

Although livestreams have existed on the internet almost since its inception, the current streaming ecosystem has largely been shaped in the image of Twitch.tv. Initially known as Justin.tv before rebranding, Twitch is known for hosting streams of people playing video games; streamers capture footage of gameplay on their PCs or games consoles, sometimes concurrently with footage of their faces. The influence of gaming culture on Twitch has made it extremely quirky, eclectic and colourful. Streamers interact in real-time with feedback their viewers provide to them through the chat, a perpetually scrolling comment box next to the stream on Twitch’s interface that is often incorporated into the stream. Twitch streams also characteristically tie paid donations and subscriptions to notifications that appear on the stream;

little animated graphics or chirpy soundbytes might fly across the screen or chime (respectively) if a viewer donates money to the streamer, subscribes to the stream, or if the stream is raided<sup>16</sup>. Twitch chat is also characterized by the presence of emotes, gifs and static images plucked from popular culture which usually reference an in-joke amongst a stream's regular viewers. Once users become extremely popular, these elements of the stream are usually toned down or turned off completely because, when the streamer's fanbase is particularly pious, these features appear in copious amounts and become extremely annoying. Cluttering the soundscape and the frame, emotes can drown out what the streamer says. Now, Twitch streams have expanded beyond gameplay to include IRL (in-real-life) streams where streamers walk around with a camera in the world, go to restaurants, hang out in parks, or explore cities. Twitch has also created a category on its website called "Just Chatting" where streamers do not have to play games and instead can sit and talk to their chats. Streams can last from hours to days, with the latter situation becoming a gimmick as people begin to marathon stream gameplay footage on Twitch. Typically, Twitch's interface will show the stream in the centermost section of the screen with the chat to the right which, depending on the overlay the streamer has chosen for their stream, may also appear in-video. In the chat, users will react to what happens on stream or converse with other chatters about things that have nothing to do with the stream. Twitch chat can also be opened to chatters indefinitely. Thus, by centering gaming and conversation as the primary content streamed on Twitch, gaming and conversation have shaped Twitch which, in turn, served as a mould for much of what streaming has become.

Besides the fleeting moment in which streams can actually be called "live," Twitch (unlike YouTube) does not automatically and permanently archive the stream VOD (video on

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<sup>16</sup> When a streamer is about to sign off, they host another individual's stream who is currently live on their page, thereby keeping their audience active on Twitch. This is called raiding.

demand) on its website. Instead, VODs disappear after two weeks. Users can create clips that are housed on Twitch itself, but usually users will download their VODs, upload them to YouTube for posterity, and they or their fans will mine the VOD footage for material to edit into entertaining clips and upload them all around the internet. Often “clipping” and editing footage of the stream takes the form of homage, where the editor is a member of the community who edits the video for other fans who are in on particular jokes. At other times, internet users will take embarrassing things about the stream or things that made them angry and “clip chimp”: they will take the streamer’s words out of context for the explicit purpose of embarrassing them. Liveness, improvisation, and ephemerality do not merely render the moment of live broadcasting precious, then; anti-fans are likely to fastidiously hoard embarrassing or incriminating footage like ammunition just in case it disappears because they know the original footage will be hard to find. Users are not breaking rules about recording streams, but they store the footage away just in case they need it and cannot access it later, which is especially useful if the streamer makes an embarrassing mistake that the user wants to make fun of them for later.

Chatters are distinctly different from commenters on TikTok and YouTube because the chat allows viewers to participate in the production of the video *while* it is being produced. While the chat may seem unorthodox, it exposes how the divide between authorship on Twitch streams and those forms which existed in manuscript cultures is actually a continuous spectrum. Mary Swan explains in her study of the creation of Anglo-Saxon literature in the 10<sup>th</sup> century that writing involved copying, revision and reworking. Identity was not the pivotal piece of information to the text, and therefore, according to Swan, this mode of textual production “frustrates” modern scholars: “Not knowing who wrote a text, or the status, occupation or gender of its author, or often where or precisely when it was written, hinders our attempts to read texts

in their geographical, social, and political contexts” (72). Anonymity may never have implied authors were entirely unimportant, though, as some scholarship suggests. Swan asserts that while modes of production at present enable “textual fixity,” a

manuscript culture... values texts which proclaim themselves as descending from other texts: authors go to some lengths to describe the processes they have used and the authors they have translated or adapted... readers of manuscripts often marked them as they used them, and sometimes wrote their own alterations and comments into them to produce a manuscript text made up of layers of reception and response. (75)

Thus, authors have always been incorporated into the process, even if individual signatures do not survive.<sup>17</sup> According to Swan, some authors in Anglo-Saxon culture “are keen to assert the validity of their texts by proving that they come from a recognized and valued source” (77). Even so, Swan concludes that “authorial identity in a manuscript culture, then, is essentially unstable and usually unfixable” (79). The modern author-function, particularly on the internet, is similarly complex and shifting; it is absolutely fixed and utterly unfixable. In fact, some of the ways that Swan describes Anglo-Saxon manuscript culture overlap with modern notions of authorship on social media specifically. Livestreams bear similarities to manuscripts, enabling the resurrection of some aspects of medieval manuscript cultures where anyone with the manuscript in hand can write in its margins.

Twitch streams complicate notions of authorship. While streams seem like unprecedented particularities of the twenty-first century, locating the authorial presence within livestreams shows that present notions of authorship are distinctly novel *and* very familiar. There are some unresolvable differences between livestreams and medieval manuscripts, of course. Twitch

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<sup>17</sup> This is not to say that marginalia are exclusively features of medieval reading practices. Readers continue to mark-up their texts in print cultures too (see Loveman, 2008). The marginalia in a manuscript, though, could be incorporated into the next version of that manuscript in ways that marginalia in a reader’s print-copy of the text might not be. Not all forms of marginalia are the same, and I am interested in marginalia that appear on texts that are still in the process of cooking.

comments are not entirely anonymous in the way annotations in a manuscript culture were. Each comment a chatter leaves is attached to their username. While often pseudonymous or totally anonymous, these usernames function as anchors in the relationship between the anonymous/pseudonymous viewer and the streamer. Streamers will recognize return viewers who are very active in the chat and reward them with shout-outs or other forms of attention. Furthermore, streamers can click the chatter's username to see their comment history in that chat or (if the chatter streams) they can see the chatter's own recent broadcasts by clicking through to their profile. Anyone writing on a medieval manuscript was not attaching their online activity to a distinct username in the way Twitch chatters do. Twitch's "manuscripts" also do not offer readers an equal amount of control over the text as they do the streamer.

At the same time, anonymity in Twitch chat works analogously to the anonymity of a medieval manuscript's marginalia, because most people do not attach their real identities to their public facing profile. For chatters who do not use their real names in their usernames or show their face on their profiles, anonymity allows them to move freely in both the real and virtual worlds uninhibited by their other identities. The chat might even be more scribal than a manuscript, because chatters can "annotate" the text *while* it is being created. The literary comparison to this would be readers scribbling on the page while the manuscript writer was still putting pen to paper. However, the streamer has sole authority to turn their specific stream on or off, to moderate who is allowed to contribute to the chat in the first place, and if there is even a chat at all, regardless of the audience's investment in the stream. Live streams recall very old literary notions of artistic creation, resurrecting manuscript cultures.

Drawing from the knowledge pool about scribal cultures equips us to identify the similarities between authorships from vastly different periods. Live streams are, in many ways,

the creation of both manuscript and marginalia in real time. The streamers that I study in this chapter each incorporate the chat or interact with the chat to great degrees in the creation of their content. I want to grapple with a few questions: in what ways does streaming expose continuities between very old and very new notions of authorship? What impact does simultaneous production and reception have on the stream's authorial fingerprint? Live streaming proffers an explanation for what it means for the author's work be live and flowing across the internet to their viewers.

Media scholars strive to vocalize these continuities between older manuscript cultures and new media. Marshall McLuhan, discussing the ways silent reading only relatively recently replaced a long-standing tradition of reading aloud, suggests in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* that "manuscript culture is conversational if only because the writer and his audience are physically related by the form of publication as performance" (84). For McLuhan, this element of manuscript culture has been intensified by electronic communication. Just as monks in monasteries would have read aloud in carrels, McLuhan notices that electronic communication reinvigorated orating (in some form) in a similar enclosure: "it is almost uncanny that the modern telephone booth should also reflect another aspect of the medieval book world..." (92). McLuhan was interested in continuous modalities from media distantly positioned in the past and that which was still finding concrete form in the present. Those conversational qualities which McLuhan identified in manuscript cultures were similarly identified in Henry Jenkins' research on fan culture. Jenkins suggests fan culture as a "participatory culture" and proposes a "conception of fans as readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture" (23). Fan culture, for Jenkins, is highly productive; to

be a fan is to be a creator in dialogue with the “official” creators and, potentially, to have greater authority over them. Although Jenkins’ work focuses on fans’ construction of “their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images” (45) in dialogue with creators, his work does not factor in the ways authorial identity might change in this context. Live streams appear to be the distillation of participatory culture, and yet the term “participatory culture” does not service us in trying to understand streaming. Streaming brings participatory culture into the domain of liveness, plucking it from a broader culture into a participatory mode. Streaming is not only founded on dialogue, but also on the liveness of the author, their living body, their presence in the present stream.

## LIVENESS

What exactly is “live” about livestreaming is tangled further by the already arbitrary definitions that we use for liveness itself. Peggy Phelan’s touchstone work on liveness is controversial because Phelan takes a hard-line presentist stance on performance: “Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than a performance” (146). This logic quickly unravels. The process of encoding information into neurons is a form of recording, and it is electrical, in a way. How could Phelan analyze performances (as she does in her book) if performance cannot be recorded? Analyzing performance from memory is, arguably, analyzing a recorded experience. Phelan’s work is complicated further in the age of social media. The act of sharing recorded performance online is often *itself* a performance, where propelling the circulation of a meme or post is an action that takes place in front of an audience of our friends and followers. Philip Auslander’s contribution to the study of liveness nuances and softens the hard, absolute lines in Phelan’s

work. Where Phelan's attempt to isolate the uniqueness of seeing an experience live and in-person leads her to forego acknowledging the ways live performance is mediated, Auslander suggests the opposite. Auslander points out that not only are traditionally "live" media (like theatre) technologically mediated, much of what appears unequivocally mediated and separate from the immediacy and presentism incubated in a theatrical setting actually is mediated:

thinking about the relationship between live and mediatized forms in terms of ontological oppositions is not especially productive. Like live performance, electronic and photographic media can be described meaningfully as partaking of the ontology of disappearance ascribed to live performance, and they can also be used to provide an experience of evanescence... I propose that, historically, the live is actually an effect of mediatization... (51)

Auslander, too, notes continuities between established and novel forms of media: "While electronic liveness is distinct in particular ways, the new mediums imbricate the old. Despite the claim... that performance's evanescence allows it to escape commodification, it is performance's very evanescence that gives it value in terms of cultural prestige" (58). This is validated now: live streams are commodified by the platforms that run them, but they are not culturally prestigious. It is worth noting that even previous attempts to untangle the knotted webs of settled premises in pre-existing ontological categorizations have become tangled by social media. Moreover, Auslander warns that unquestioningly accepting the distinction between "live" and "not-live" media may elide the relationship between mediums: "it is my contention that this ideologically engrained sense of television as a live medium makes its historical relationship to the theatre different from that of film, and enabled television to colonize liveness" (13). We think of television as "the live one" in the 20th century, but truthfully there are "live" experiences that

we have with each text. Livestreams are in some ways not too different from anything before, and we must be cautious not to over-emphasize their distinctiveness. So while we know a livestream is a livestream and not a TikTok or a YouTube video, it is important to remember that the “voice” of the audience might always factor into the creator’s mental blueprint of the work while it is being produced. Very few other mediums allow for the audience to interfere directly in the production *during* its production, and with no other medium is that interference a standard, expected characteristic of the text.

More recent scholarship has created some softer distinctions between liveness and its opposite, and even further distinguish between *types* of liveness across different mediums. Christopher Hanson, in his study of temporality in video games, suggests that liveness in video games is differentiated by its participatory mode: “Existing models of liveness help explicate the viewer’s experience, but they fail to address the experience of participants or, in the case of games, players” (19). He continues: “Liveness is a slippery concept... A face-to-face conversation is live in a way a video call using Skype is not, but this does not mean the latter is not live. Similarly, attending a soccer match and watching it from the sidelines is live in a way that is different from experiencing it live on broadcast media, such as watching it on television or listening to it on the radio” (20). Hanson identifies within games a peculiar opening for adjusting what is “live,” thinking of “games as structures that are enlivened through player interaction” (6). Geoffrey Way explains the concept of “eventness” is helpful for understanding live events. “Eventness” emphasizes both the performance and “the presence and reaction of the audience” which is critical “to distinguish them as theatrical events” (392). This smoothes out some of the complications with the concept of “liveness” and focuses more on the gathering of people, the presentism, and the interactivity. While so much of streaming does marvel at the incredible

things that happen spontaneously, I think the eventness of livestreams comes from their everyday mundanity. People tune in for serendipity's sake; viewers do want to be involved in the stream that pops off. But at the same time, people tune in every day knowing that something insane might *not* happen. It is the expectation of nothing happening that makes something happening so exciting. The virtual encounter with the author serves as justification for keeping livestreams on for hours at a time.

Owing to the newness of livestreaming, very little scholarship delves into the semiotics of the medium, but what seems to characterize popular notions of liveness in social media is the presence of another living being that the viewer can interact with. Melanie Schiller notices, "the suggested shift from "passive" consumer to "active" participant presupposes a collaborative relationship of some sort between professional authors/industry-embedded producers and the consumer base of amateurs" (98). While not explicitly dealing with public livestreams, Roger Odin notes that live Skype calls consist of single shots which "exist only in the moment in which they are created" (170). Therefore, footage streamed privately without the explicit purpose of entertainment is qualified by evanescence. From my own exposure to livestreaming in social media, there are typically three consistent features that distinguish it from broadcast television: first, the streamer and the viewer are involved in the stream at the same time with little to no delay between the point of production and the point of reception; second, the viewer can (generally) expect to interact with the stream in some way and receive some kind of feedback from the streamer or other chatters; third, the streamer's physical body either appears on camera or serves to situate the stream's point-of-view. That is, if the streamer herself is not on camera, the camera will be situated to reflect her perspective or orient the viewer in relation to her. While livestreaming can show the viewer something inanimate or something that is pre-recorded (some

streams can serve a similar function to radios by offering an uninterrupted collection of songs), the vast majority of live streaming that has shaped notions of liveness on social media is personality-centered. There are expectations that come with this kind of livestream that the viewer is making some kind of virtual contact with a real, living person on the other end of the screen. Liveness in these livestreams is defined by what “we” (the audience and the streamer) are making together.

To say there is absolutely no way the live experience is preserved through recording or replication is fallacious, but to say the live experience is not distinct is also not quite right. Liveness in livestreaming is interactive, remote, and simultaneous. Interactivity is key, not simply because so much of the landscape of streaming was influenced by Twitch’s emphasis on games. I build on more recent scholarship—while cautiously abiding by Auslander’s calls for nuance—to suggest that what characterizes liveness in live streaming is a sense of *intimacy* with the streamer, *interactivity* or the ability to influence the stream, and the *eventness of the mundane*. Ultimately, livestreams collapse what is live and what is recorded, what is spontaneous and what is prepared, what is art and what is just real life, who is the author and who is the viewer. They do not just democratize the role of the author, they at times utterly confuse it.

## POKIMANE

Imane Anys, known by her streamer pseudonym Pokimane,<sup>18</sup> is a Twitch streamer. She has reached astronomical fame playing video games, “chatting” with Twitch chat, and hanging out with her friends, all on her livestream channel. Much of her content is focused on simulating a social activity (like group gaming) and the parasocial presence that Poki crafts for her viewers.

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<sup>18</sup> Pokimane is pronounced like the video game franchise *Pokémon*. Internet users commonly mistake the pronunciation of this name as “pokey-main” when Poki’s first name is pronounced the same way as the latter half of the name of the franchise she’s punning.

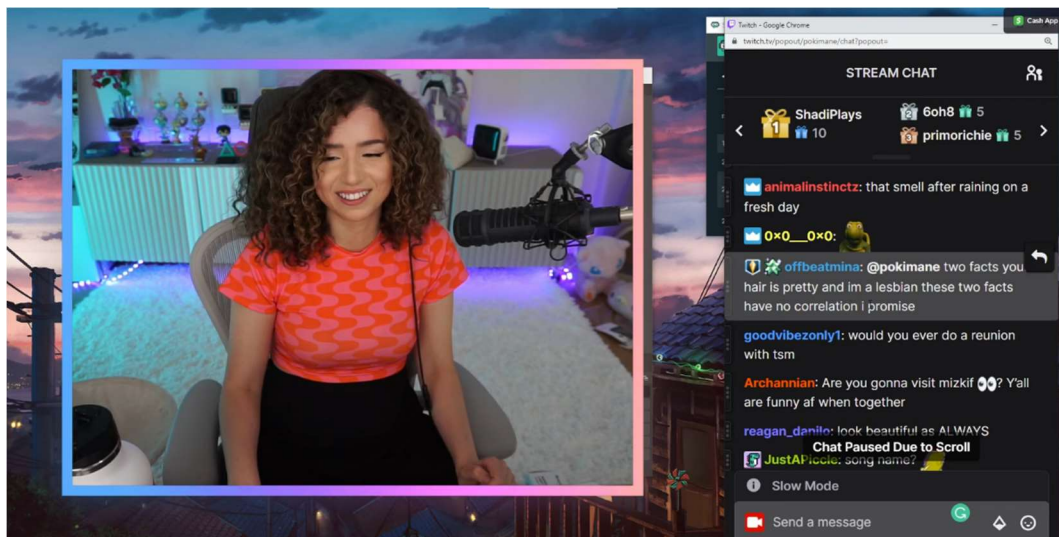
Something that characterizes parasocial relationships are moments of celebrity self-disclosure; self-disclosure can comprise anything from “humor, warmth” and personal stories, fomenting “social and informal relationships and trust” (Kim and Song, 572). Poki has been involved in many landmark streams—she was even part of a stream that involved U.S. congressional representative Alexandria Ocasio Cortez in a game of *Among Us*—but in this chapter I will focus on a few samples from Poki’s streaming history that are not renowned and within which self-disclosure and virtually social presence seem to be the point. Tuning in to random ones to mirror the average viewer’s experience is important to the study of livestreams. Most viewers do not wait for monumental streams; they check in regularly because they enjoy the virtual company of the streamer.

Pokimane’s streaming environment is arranged to evoke a feeling of social presence. In a stream from December 7th, 2021 (archived on the Pokimane VODs YouTube channel under the title “Pokimane - curly big headed baby streams video games”), an animation plays to show some activity on the stream before it officially starts. In this video, a cartoon representation of Poki gets ready, puts makeup on, tweets out that she is about to start streaming, and looks at her cat as she sits down at her desk. The camera adopts a variety of perspectives from over Poki’s shoulder to a medium shot from her webcam. The display on her monitors at her desk shows OBS (a capturing software that many streamers use to control what part of their display appears for the viewer) and the chat off on a third monitor to her left. As this animation loops, Japanese city pop<sup>19</sup> plays in the background. The animation is about 30 seconds long and loops for ten minutes before cutting away to Poki herself at her desk. This creates a continuous narrative between Poki just before going live and the stream while it is live; the way the cartoon Poki

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<sup>19</sup> A genre melding rock, disco, pop, and jazz which was popular from the late 70s to early 90s in Japan and which has seen a revival over the course of the pandemic in large part due to TikTok.

occupies and uses the space pre-stream flows into the way the real Poki exists in the space on-stream. Thus, the streaming background must appear to be a space that the streamer is currently living in rather than a designated filming space with the features of a private space. Poki's livestreaming is not depicted as an interruption to her day in this animation. Rather, the stream is a typical part of her routine. Much of the content of her streams is not "original," really. The soundscape of Poki's stream is composed of songs created by other artists. This is not a form of plagiarism, although it might be considered copyright infringement. The music links Poki's stream with that particular collection of tastes and simulates a casual, real-life listening environment. So Poki's authorial persona is not so much what she has *written*, nor is it defined by some highly original matter that has flowed from the heavens to the camera. Her persona appears to be pedestrian. Just like any of the viewers, she enjoys a particular kind of music but may not be a musician, she diverts herself with her cat when she ought to be getting ready, and ultimately, as a streamer, she appears like a deeply familiar rather than professional presence. Poki's space is arranged in such a way that feels both intimate, like a private bedroom, and like a deliberately curated set for a broadcast. The expectation is that this streaming set will help



9 a screenshot from "curly headed baby"

viewers feel close to Poki, to feel as if they are really in the room with her, and that their immediate and incessant access to her is a part of her life.

The construction of space to evoke the authorial presence for the reader's sake is incredibly complex. In *The Author's Effects*, Nicola J. Watson examines the processes involved in the creation of a writer's house museum. Writer's house museums comprise carefully collected, curated, and arranged objects (sometimes even including the remains of the author's body) within a space that was purportedly important in a famous author's life. Writer's house museums envision objects from the literary works of the author in the author's immediate space, figuring "the house as a theater of [the author's] ever-living imagination" (4). Watson argues that the writer's house museum "was precipitated by the... desire to develop intimacy with dead authors on the part of readers" (8) and now "attempts the wholesale remediation of the book, transforming it into the figure of the author" (9). There are, Watson claims, "strong and traceable continuities" between the past, present, and future desires for "immediate intimacy with the imagined body of the author... The version of the author and the reader that the writer's house museum came to realize by the second half of the nineteenth century proved to be still very much alive today" (230). What seem to be new valences in notions of authorship resonate with past ones and may be useful points for projecting future ones. Streaming evinces the continuities that Watson identifies between past urges to develop intimacies with dead authors, a sort of proto-parasociality, and the desire to know present ones, an impulse which is complicated when the author is still alive. Like the writer's house museum, the streamer's room remediates space, transforming it into a web that the author cannot be disentangled from.

The arrangement of space to facilitate a connection between audience and streamer is not restricted to physical objects; Poki frequently rearranges her overlay to emphasize her presence

alongside chatters' conversation on stream, and these arrangements construct a feeling of shared presence in the streaming space. When the stream officially begins, the camera just shows her as she talks to chat. Then, she switches the overlay so her facecam is set against her desktop background (see fig. 9). At this point, she moves the chat so it is visible in-video, occupying an almost equivalent amount of space as her facecam. She then switches to show only the footage of her over a small section of other YouTube videos as she reacts to them, interjecting commentary and occasionally moving the chat back on the display. The chat is still visible off to the side for anyone who is watching on Twitch, but this movement incorporates the chat into the video itself, moving it from paratext to annotation. During the segment where the chat is onscreen, Poki discusses body hair with her viewers. Poki explains women experience feelings of shame about their body hair and therefore should not be pressured to shave. One chatter, showing support for Poki, responds, "I'm tryna floss my teeth with her carpet," which Poki laughingly reads aloud. She disagrees with one viewer who says they take issue with a woman not shaving and also "not doing anything else" for her boyfriend. In a virtual resuscitation of medieval manuscript culture, the chat evokes scribes writing the annotations on the margins of the manuscripts. At the same time, the chat is very distinct from that culture, as it almost models what the annotation of a manuscript could look like if scribes could speak to each other in real time. This collaborative process depends on how the viewer relates to Poki, and the chat's inclusion in the stream itself playfully pokes holes in space between viewer and streamer. Part of the appeal of participating in the chat during these streams is the possibility that one's message will appear alongside Poki.

Frequently, Poki facilitates moments where she can strategically forge a personal, intimate relationship with individual viewers in the chat. Viewers typically are not under the impression that they have become friends with Poki, of course, but Poki's acknowledgement of

individual chatters' writing communicates that the chatter's presence in the "community" is valued. One chatter says Poki "is [their] favourite streamer," so Poki reads the comment aloud, compliments them, and awards them VIP status in the chat. She probes the chat generally for their opinions at times too, asking in one instance how they would feel if she streamed at "a Michelin star restaurant." She has another discussion with the chat about a highschooler fan asking her to come to his prom as his date. The chat disagrees with her worries that attending would be inappropriate, urging her to accept the teen's invitation and assuring her that accompanying him could be platonic. At another point, she says that if the viewers have stuck around through all the talking she has been doing, they are "connected spiritually" and they are part of the community. Later, some chatters say other streamers share too much and that renders them vulnerable to harassment. Poki points out that streamers sharing their lives is not justification for the harassment they receive. For this reason, she discusses the possibility of finding a romantic partner and introducing them to the chat. She does not want to be harassed or have her hypothetical romantic partner harassed. In these interactions, Poki selects individual chatters to represent general sentiments in the chat and simulates a conversation with a friend whom she might consult, disagree with, or praise. Much of what the chatters are responding to is built on this dynamic, and their membership in a wider community that has a relationship with Poki the individual.

In "Pokimane  secret chill stream just playin [sic] some games just gettin some hours in y'know," streamed on January 11th, 2021, Poki does not show her face. She plays city pop in the beginning before moving on to gaming. Poki has been harassed for the few times when she has not worn make-up on stream. One image of her without makeup from 2018 even became a meme used to insult her appearance. We can reasonably guess the avatar in "secret chill stream"

works to protect her from scrutinous comments about her appearance if she does not want to wear make-up. Negative attention to Poki's appearance may also be why the differences in her appearance, like when she wears her hair naturally, are notable enough to feature in the title of her other stream. The cartoon also captures Poki's mood and so distinguishes her gameplay footage from the many other streams that could be streaming the game. Even while Poki is physically absent from the stream, these virtual evocations of her build social presence and are grounded in her personal background in the public eye.

Some streams are far outside of the typical fare that viewers might expect when tuning into Poki's channel. In another stream, "Pokimane - COOKING KOREAN FOOD ^\_^ FT. CHEF KEVIN! 🍳👨🍳👩🍳," Poki has a guest, KamjaKevin, and they cook Korean food together in a kitchen. They both wear cutesy aprons, showing multiple angles of their cooking set-up in a kitchen. This is called an IRL (in real life) stream; however, the streamer physically being present does not mean the stream is IRL. The stream is IRL when the stream is not shot from someone's computer display. There is a cardboard cutout of Gordon Ramsey behind them. They eventually have three cameras going so the viewers can see everything that is happening. This cooking stream exemplifies "eventness" in a way. It is a special stream compared to what Poki typically does on her channel. Furthermore, Poki's fans enjoy watching her interact with another personality. In one instance, Kevin accidentally drinks Poki's water glass, and acts emphatically grossed out that they shared "an indirect kiss." Poki's interactions with Kevin have sparked interest in online gossip outlets about whether or not the two are dating. Poki's relationship with this person, and the potential that some information is hidden from the audience, is exciting for viewers. Part of what attracts people to these IRL streams is the opportunity to glimpse the author in a different attitude or in a new dynamic with other people. That is, these streams are

meant to excite those members of the viewership who are immersed in the typical motions of Poki's life on-stream with a new kind of mundanity.

Not all of the attention that Poki receives in her chat is positive, as Poki has been accosted by hoards of misogynistic anti-fans for years. There is a group of critics online who argue Poki only has an audience because she is a "painted whore" with "an army of simps"<sup>20</sup> (U/Plate7777777). In these discussions, Poki is framed as a woman who shows too much of her body on stream and exploits her looks to manipulate men into giving her money. Anti-fans believe that Poki is essentially not doing authorship the right way; one Redditor suggests that there are other "female streamers" who "don't have their face cam take up half the stream" and do not have a comparably large audience in comparison to Poki. These criticisms are undoubtedly misogynistic: they imply, for one thing, that there are right and wrong forms of female authorship. Irrespective of the streams in Poki's archive like "secret chill stream" where she does not physically appear on screen, the fact that users know what her body looks like at all is framed as an indictment of her character. What is more, these criticisms are predicated on the critic sexualizing Poki, moralizing women's sexuality specifically, and then blaming Poki for these imposed moral failings. Even though Poki's content is not sexual, the mere inclusion of her body on stream is tantamount to a sexually explicit, morally reprehensible form of creation. The assumption that her body is inherently sexual elides the process of sexualization these users are engaged in. Finally, the assumption that Poki's fans only watch her stream because they aspire to having a relationship with her ignores streams like her IRL cooking stream, or even her stream discussing the possibility of disclosing her romantic relationships to her audience. This is not to say there is nothing exploitative in the relationship between streamer and audience, of course.

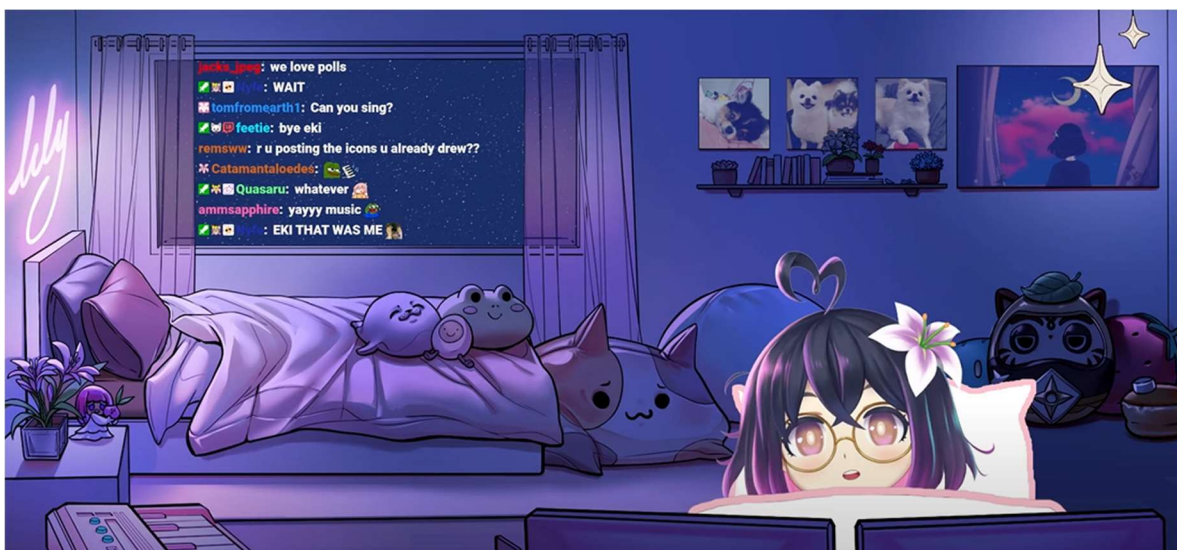
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<sup>20</sup> "Simp" is a pejorative which, in internet slang, is sometimes an acronym for "sucker idolizing mediocre pussy." The term is usually levelled at men who express any degree of admiration for a woman who the speaker dislikes.

Not only Poki's largesse, but Twitch's entire business model relies on encouraging users to pay into the parasocial relationship they have with the streamer. That is true of every streamer on the platform, not just the "painted whores." Not just Poki's fans, but Poki's critics approach her stream with her gender in mind. Poki's gender and body, even if she is just sitting in a chair, are taken up in misogynistic arguments about who is and is not deserving of the status of authorship.

## LilyPichu

LilyPichu (Lily Ki) and Pokimane formerly lived in a streamer house owned by a group of online creators known as OfflineTV (OTV). The group no longer lives in a mansion together, but it is still an official collective of streamers. Lily's stream has distinct similarities and differences from Poki's, owing in part to the diversity of genres (IRL, gaming, Just Chatting, etc.) that the two partake in. In one stream, "drawing for lilytwi, piano, and genshin," streamed on March 4th, 2022, Lily draws icons requested by her followers posts on a TWiT community. The opening waiting screen shows the livestream chat in the window of an illustration of Lily's room. This prominence of the chat before and after the stream distinguishes Lily's stream from Poki's: the chat is a part of the stream before Lily has arrived. In some Twitch communities, the



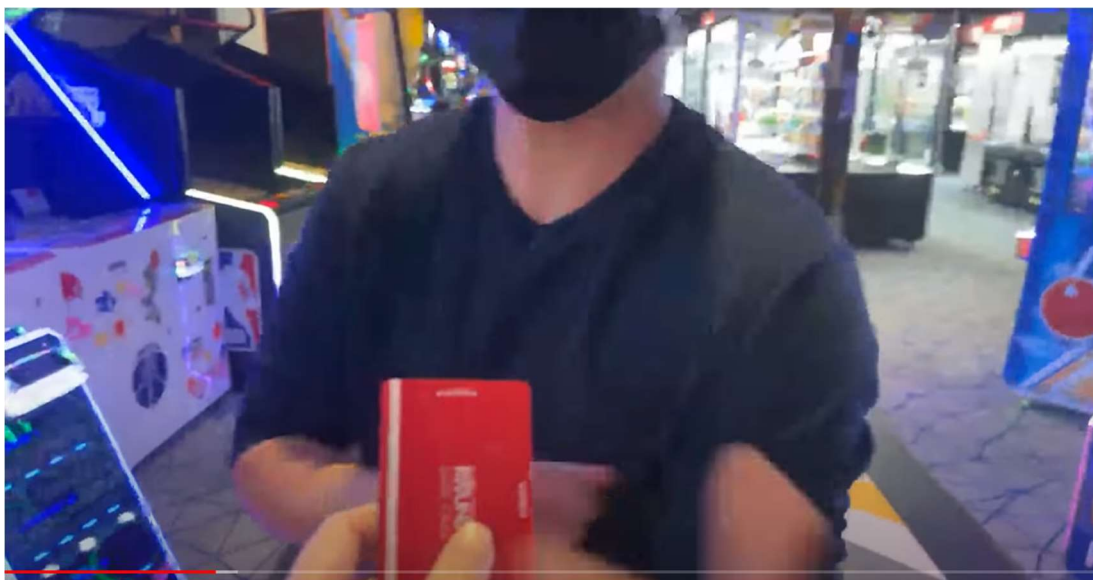
10 LilyPichu's avatar and digital set

chat is open all the time, so users can hang out with each other there like it is an online forum even when the stream is not on. Lily's stream starts and shows the chat on-screen long before Lily actually appears in the stream, and the chat remains on screen for an hour after Lily has exited the stream. Users leave greetings for Lily or chat with each other. The prominence of the chatters in this part of the stream is suitable considering the content of the stream is Lily drawing icons for her viewers. During the stream, the chat is moved to the right hand portion of the screen and thus becomes marginalia again. Where Lily's stream is similar to Poki's is in the way her living space is brought to the fore as a mixture of performance space and authentic residence. When "drawing for lilytw" begins, Lily's avatar bounces onto the screen and sits in the empty cartoon chair which the chat's window backgrounds (see fig. 10). Lily's stream creates a continuity between pre-stream and stream, between Lily's off-stream life and her on-stream life.

The flow of activity in this stream changes depending on the limitations of Lily's body, and the way the stream's visuals are organized carves out space for parts of Lily to appear on screen or be evoked on screen. While Lily draws, she does not show her face. Instead, her avatar holds a sketchbook and pencil, presumably mirroring her movements: when Lily draws or looks up from her drawing tablet, so does the avatar. Meanwhile, the stream shows the display of Lily's drawing tablet. She takes requests from viewers and draws Twitter icons for them while talking with the chat. Then, after a while, she gets tired, her hand cramps, and she switches over to playing piano. At this point, she turns on a camera that is pointed at the piano and shows her hands while she plays songs that she wrote herself, including French Impressionist music, and famous anime or video game music (such as "Merry Go Round of Life" from *Howl's Moving Castle*). Lily adjusts the overlay so the chat appears on the left hand side of the screen. The stream then consists of Lily's avatar watching character trailers for the game *Genshin Impact*

before finally playing the game herself. The last hour of the stream is just the chat appearing in the window illustration of her room. When she physically cannot do something anymore, Lily borrows from others and continues to use her voice while imbricating other content into her own.

The importance of chatters' interactions to the stream wanes when Lily's relationships take center stage. Often, Lily streams with her boyfriend and fellow member of OfflineTV, Michael Reeves. In "elden ring + cuphead | w/ michael" streamed on March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2022, the two play a difficult RPG, *Elden Ring*, and then switch to a difficult bullet hell game, *Cuphead*. When they start the game, Lily moves the facecam to the corner of the video and the chat is removed from the video. For the first half of the stream, Lily and Michael argue about whether or not they should keep fighting "the horse boss," a difficult boss encountered early in *Elden Ring*. They call each other "honey" all the time. At one point in the first few hours, Michael reads a chat message from someone and takes issue with its content. Lily chides him that the message was hidden to the rest of the audience and Michael was looking at Lily's moderator view. At the end of the stream, the chat features on a pink template with Lily's signature lily logo and the chat talks to itself for half an hour. Lily and Michael's bickering over the game and running the stream is an



11 Lily hands Michael a card from behind the camera

attraction in and of itself. The audience is made to feel they are viewing the pair's true dynamic. This objective is especially apparent in an IRL stream entitled "michael & lily go outside," streamed on February 23rd, 2022, wherein Lily and Michael go to a mall. Lily holds the camera as the pair walk around a mall, recording the stream from her first-person perspective (see fig. 11). Unlike cable TV, these streams are not available 24/7, and it is not just the experience of going through a mall in California that people are looking for. They are also seeking a glimpse into Lily and Michael's lives. Lily's audience wants to see the two of them together.

What Lily's stream in particular is suggestive of, however, is that the standard biographical form of livestreaming has real drawbacks. In fact, some viewers express frustration that certain members of Lily's community are overly interested in having Michael in her stream (U/mixmaster321). Some users say Lily is frustrated with how popular Michael has become on her stream to the point that she wonders if people are only watching her to see him. In studying women streamers, gender ought to be considered as one variable that may influence when and why a work is considered collaborative. Lily is the owner of the stream, but if some users become more invested in her relationship than in her solitary work there may be wider guiding energies at play. On the subject of Lee Krasner's work overshadowed by her relationship to Jackson Pollock, Anne M. Wagner suggests, "the painter's identity—above all, when she is a woman and *because* she is a woman—cannot be pried apart from the other roles she is customarily asked to play" (236). Nicola McCartney says collaborative works "do challenge traditional notions of authorship and serve to help shape and reimagine a more plural construction and conception of authorship, but they also demonstrate the difficulties of group work" (89). The relationships between these creators affect the creators themselves, and they

also matter to many viewers. In relationships between men and women, the involvement of a man in the creative production may draw more attention than a woman.

Like Poki, Lily's stream strays into many different genres and forms of "eventness" which hinges on the audience's familiarity with her typical patterns. Viewers received one stream where Lily and her friend dress up as maids and stream in their kitchen differently from Lily's typical gaming-related content. Viewers who watched the stream live or saw the VOD after the fact commented that the outfits and the setting are a surprising reward for regularly tuning in. In the comments section of the archived VOD on YouTube, one user writes a thank-you to Lily's friend for convincing Lily to try out the maid outfit. People may not have followed Lily because they like cooking, but they will watch her cook because they like her. In spite of the fact that part of her streaming archive includes a virtual avatar of her, and that she might break from the usual gaming related streams and stream herself going out with Michael, the maid stream is still a novelty. Streaming often weaves the audience directly into the patterns of the author's life; what is typical and what is atypical are knowable to chatters and affect the enjoyment of the stream. To understand exactly what matters to readers at the point of reception, what prompts them to participate in the chat when the stream is live and to seek the VOD out when the stream is over, Lily's authorial presence needs to be accounted for. Anti-authorialist "Death of the Author" perspectives occlude an accurate analysis of what draws viewers to a stream in the first place: a deep familiarity with the streamer's typical modes.

Lily's streams exemplify the indeterminacy of streaming, or the way in which perspective (and therefore audience) is oftentimes lost in the stream. Bolter and Grusin say they "wish to highlight from the past...that what resonates with the twin preoccupations of contemporary media: the transparent presentation of the real and the enjoyment of the opacity of media

themselves” (21). Bolter and Grusin suggest that “digital graphics erases the subject algorithmically through the mathematics of perspective and shading embodied in the program” (28). The idea that the subject is erased by digital graphics is important to livestreams, “because streaming video on the Web is relatively cheap, we can now afford to monitor quotidian events more closely than ever...” (204). Bolter and Grusin may not have anticipated from their vantage point in 1999 that streaming would be used for more than static cameras pointing at unpeopled landscape shots, but even this analysis raises questions such as: how is the “quotidian” determined without knowing from whose perspective the camera is situated within? In Lily’s IRL stream with her partner, the stream is clearly situated in her own point-of-view. Meanwhile, the stream where only her virtual avatar appears fully complicates the stream’s perspective. Owing to the way these streams afford the audience some shared space with the streamer, there is a disorienting argument to be made that the stream is situated in the audience’s self-reflexive perspective. The stream reflects multiple perspectives: the streamer’s, as she looks at feedback from the chat, and the chat, as they respond to the streamer. In this case, the stream is more of a video forum and the speakers within it are both audience and creator at all times. Lily’s drawing streams, her virtual avatar, and gaming streams generally on Twitch do not erase point of view, they proliferate it. Behind this metaphysical complexity, Lily’s living, physical presence is used as a perspectival stand-in for the stream. The way the chat is enabled to share space with Lily on stream, the camera angles for IRL streams which mirror her perspective, and even streams where the chat is simply invited to watch Lily’s relationship dynamics with her partner, render Lily the page upon which thousands of anonymous contributors may scrawl.

## CONTRAPPOINTS LIVE

While Contra's primary area of work is in scripted YouTube video production, streaming has been an orbital element of her career since 2016. She has historically had a troubled relationship with streaming. Four years ago, Contra only streamed for her Patreon supporters and did not keep her streams up for the public record because she did not want people to be able to scrutinize everything she said (U/Contrapoints). After the "Canceling" video, she has changed things and now she leaves the streams on her channel. Presently, she posts videos of herself playing piano and gaming, often while drunk and usually while invoking memes about gamer girls. Contra herself did not build her reputation around video games, so the content of her streaming platform is largely distinct because it is so differentiated from her YouTube channel. Contra's streaming channel is not a feature, it is a place for her to play, to post unscripted content that she likes and does not have to polish.

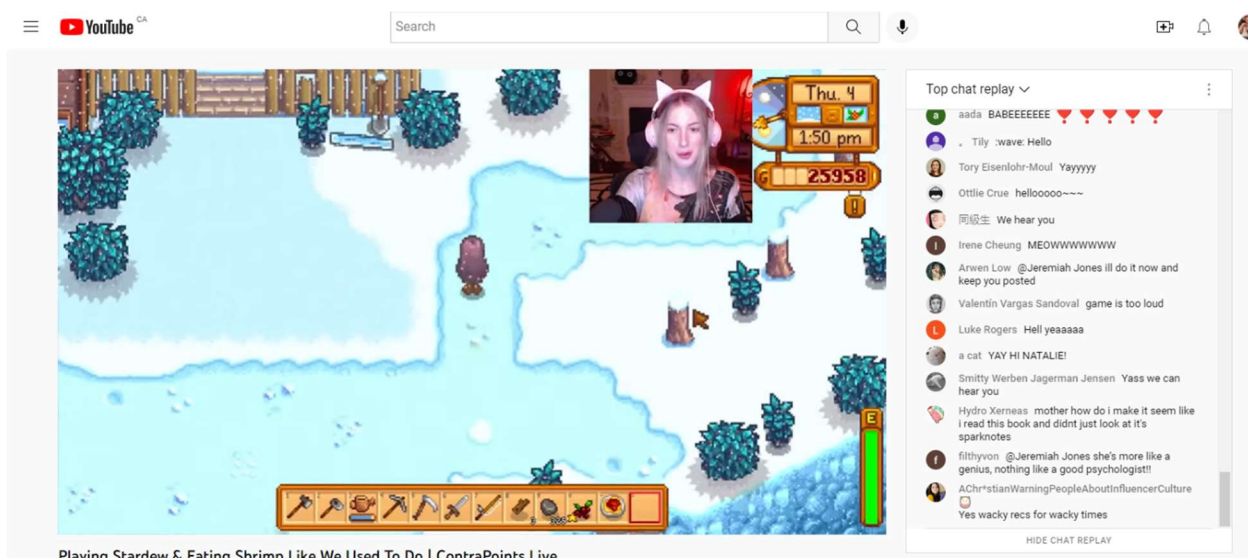
Of the three streamers I have chosen to discuss in this chapter, ContrapointsLive is the only one who streams exclusively on YouTube. YouTube's streaming system is slightly different than Twitch's: while it does feature a similar live chat function, archived versions of the stream also allow users who are watching retroactively to leave comments on the YouTube video. These are not to be confused with the chat proper, but it is worth noting that while standard practice on YouTube streaming is still characterized by its ephemerality, the general streaming milieu lacks Twitch's visual pizzazz. Contra's streaming background mirrors this stylistic disparity between platforms: not only is Contra's stream austere in the digital realm (she does not play opening animations before her stream begins), her background is also not as elaborate as the sets she uses for YouTube. She uses a coloured lamp and casts red, purple, or blue lights across her background. Among other props, her background features a winding bookshelf, a fireplace holding a trophy and a googly-eyed stuffed animal resting on its mantle, a shelf with a giant

purple light, a rug with an abstract design, and a vase on a table. Contra herself is usually dressed in street clothes, unlike most of her catalog. In some ways, the set still evokes the typical Contrapoints style with lurid lighting and an anachronistic mix of abstract groovy designs and the art nouveau set pieces. Where Poki and Lily primarily use YouTube to promote their streaming operations on Twitch, Contra uses her streams as an outlet to be silly and occasionally raise some money for charity.

Contra's fans refer to her by her real name and her pseudonym in the chat. I will refer to her by her pseudonymous nickname throughout this chapter for two reasons: I refer to the other streamers in this chapter by their pseudonyms, and I think it is appropriate for the way I refer to her in this thesis to reflect the way she is talked about in the digital realm Contra is situated within. In his article discussing authorship in the context of the blogosphere, Amardeep Singh explains, "Blogging pseudonyms are generally not fleeting aliases but fixed public identities, which are strongly associated with a particular author's style and ethos... The prevalence of pseudonymity in blogging suggests that "authorship" may be at once more influential and more indisposible than ever before" (21). Streamers are typically referred to by their online pseudonyms in online spaces unless their username incorporates their real name in a specific way. Despite the ways the medium seems to encourage close intimacy between streamer and viewer, this practice of calling streamers by their usernames is more common in streaming than many other social media video platforms. Streamers face a constant influx of feedback, similarly to the way Singh says "bloggers who adhere to the culture's preference for authorial accountability do regularly contend with direct criticism and disagreement from their peers in ways that are otherwise quite rare elsewhere in both academia and the established media" (32). This is a little different on streams, where plagiarism or yinking other content is not morally

wrong. In some ways it goes without saying that this is not the users' content, but at the same time they do not always say *whose* content it is. I think the use of pseudonyms reflects some of the expectations audiences have towards streamers: people will refer to streamers with casual pseudonymous nick-names because the format is perceived as more casual and improvisational.

Partially due to YouTube's streaming interface, Contra's chat does not appear in the video proper. Even if a streamer does not incorporate the chat into their overlay, the chat is still attached to the video itself on YouTube. In this sense, the chat is more in line with what Gerard Genette calls a paratext, a "threshold" to the text (2) or a textual accessory that prepares the reader to engage with the text itself. New viewers can discern the tone of the stream even if they drop in midway through it by checking the chat first for a sample of viewers' feelings and conversation with the streamer. The chat works very much like digital marginalia. Viewers can compare their own interpretations of the stream with the ones others have shared. Contra plays *Valley* in a stream entitled "Playing Stardew & Eating Shrimp Like We Used To Do | ContraPoints Live," streamed initially on December 17, 2021 (see fig. 12). In this stream, Contra talks about cannibalism and veganism, joking that she is treading into territory that could get her



12 Contra's stream and its live chat replay embedded in YouTube

canceled. The discussion eventually becomes an in-joke in the chat, as Natalie and the chatters refer to cannibalism as “the c-word.” This stream lays bare the emotional and temporal distance Natalie has put between herself and the cancellation incident of 2019. While viewers can certainly appreciate the joke simply by watching the stream, the tone of the joke is easier to decipher when consulting the chat.

Contra uses her streaming persona not only to experiment with dicier humour than her scripted content allows for; the streaming format lends itself well to live errors and corrections. In a stream entitled, “Birthday Stream: Playing Resident Evil Til It's Too Scary, Then Playing Stardew | ContraPoints Live,” from October 20th, 2021, Contra streams herself arguing with the chat and playing *Resident Evil 7*. She starts off with a full screen view of her face. She has some technical difficulties in the beginning with her display. Part of the way into the stream, she starts asking the chat for input on what “we” should do next, but then stops herself: “Why am I asking the chat? It’s not my job to say—ask what we’re doing, it’s my job to say what we’re doing.” In jest, Contra takes control over the stream and discounts the authority of the audience, but there is something subversive about the joke. Teresa Senft, in her study of camgirls in the ‘90s and early ‘00s, explains that viewers’ interests in the stream take “an ethical turn: rather than speculating on who a web personality “really is,” viewers tend to debate the personality’s obligations to those who made her what she is” (25-26). In conjunction with Contra’s history with cancellation, joking about the superfluousness of the audience’s input works to undermine typical streamer-audience dynamics. Contra also talks about not enjoying being famous during this stream. Unrehearsed technical difficulties and an evolving dynamic with her audience are specific to Contra’s streaming formula. Making mistakes, changing her mind, and engaging in conversation on-camera characterize liveness in live streaming. Viewers who watch live are expecting

mundanity and the unrehearsed and unrestrained interaction with the streamer that pre-recorded content does not always afford.

While the chat does not figure in Contra's stream to the same extent it does in Lily's, interactions between the streamer and chatters are still central. In "🎃 Resident Evil 7: The Straight Lifestyle 🎃 | ContraPoints LivePlays," streamed on October 31st, 2021, Contra continues to make the jokes that she starts in the birthday stream. Particularly, she reframes the player character's dynamic with some horrific characters from the horror action game *Resident Evil Village* by humorously sexualizing their relationship. She frequently calls monsters "mommy" or "daddy," which is a popular meme online right now when users see characters they are attracted to. She also creates an in-joke where she, the player, poses as a reporter in the game *Amnesia* who intends to "report this to the liberals." These jokes are echoed in the chat, which Contra then responds to as part of a loop of playful creation. T.L. Taylor, in *Watch me Play: Twitch and the Rise of the Game Live Streaming*, emphasizes such participation and relationality in streaming and recognizes that both the streamers and the audience *do* something, arguing "for conceptualizing play as transformative work, and as such, posing challenges to how we think about participation and ownership in a digital age" (239). In this way, playing together is a form of authorship. Users input a constant flow of writing to energize the streamer and equip them with content and prompts to build upon. In a way, YouTube's version of the chat is less like marginalia that the streamer will occasionally incorporate into their video than it is like what Watson calls "pious graffiti" (217) that touring readers have left in writer's house museums for centuries. The fact that users can watch the chat replay regardless of whether or not the streamer incorporates the chat in their stream's video captures an experience closer to the organic one of watching the stream live on YouTube. Such a feature allows for "the production of readerly

community across time” (218) or a way for future viewers to feel connected to the production process even when they miss the live broadcast. De-emphasizing the chat within the video of the stream itself does undermine some connections between streaming culture and manuscript culture of course; whereas in a manuscript culture, anyone annotating a manuscript effectively has equivalent control over it to the previous writer/s, chatters watching a livestream do not have equivalent control over the organization of the stream layout nor the stream’s overarching narrative. Yet there is an undeniably collaborative element to streaming that depends on the viewership contributing (writing and money) to the development of the stream. The chat is both a literary creation from the viewership and a running list of notes for the streamer to build on, and the dynamic between chat and creator suggests authorship in streaming arises through simultaneous, collaborative, and unedited interactions between streamer and viewer.

Contra’s stream is not built on integrating the chat into the patterns of her life to the same extent as Poki’s or Lily’s. Contra streams very infrequently and often emphasizes through her speech or dress (like her cat ear headphones) that she is not especially talented at gaming. However, Contra’s stream is also a space for her to explore a less guarded form of creation. She allows for viewers to see her in a less composed, careful, and more unscripted state and interact with her throughout. This is not so much “Natalie Wynn” on stream as the stream is “Contra’s stream.” Contra’s authorship is derived from the renewed perspective her stream affords her viewers, and creative production depends on interactions between her and her audience.

## CONCLUSION

Generalizations are difficult to make with regards to authorship in the context of streaming, because statements on the subject will vary in their accuracy within a single streamer’s library, let alone the entire shifting, infinite, unfolding corpus of the internet. I

anticipate that most formal studies of streaming will overlook the samples like those I have elected for study in this chapter, because they are not the most influential streams the authors have ever done. The more internet studies are integrated into the humanities, the more scholarship is going to be inclined to organize famous, influential, or remarkable texts into something resembling a canon. This can lead to short term memory, amnesia about the essence of streaming as the evocation of a shared presence with the author. In highlighting continuities between these unremarkable streams and older forms of media, what streaming alerts us to is the ways a text can cause a slippage between the space the streamer resides in and the space the reader resides in, in spite of immense distance (spatially, though not always temporally) between the two.

One unifying gesture in the performances of all three streamers I have studied here demonstrates the value in approaching streaming and authorship through the streamer herself: each of these personalities, at some point in most of their streams, leaves their empty chair in the frame. Poki gets up out of her chair early in her chatting and reacting stream, leaving her empty chair behind. Lily gets out of her chair at multiple points while gaming with Michael, and in her solo stream, her avatar is animated to walk off when she does, leaving behind a digital representation of the chair. Contra consistently gets up to take pee breaks when she streams. The virtual body of the streamer haunts the stream even when they are gone, as the empty chair reminds the viewer that the stream's content will resume when its occupant is sat in it again. In my interview with Nicola Watson, she suggests that the importance of the writer's chair in house museums is that it supplies "a negative space" within which "the reader's body slips along" (Warne, Hung and Krahm, 2022, 41:27-41:31). Benedetti suggests that rather than the author being seated "tyrannically" upon a throne as Barthes argues, "through an irony of fate... it is

precisely [the] reader, placed on the throne in lieu of the author, who freezes the author into an image. The “birth of the reader” is not simply the positive phenomenon hailed by Barthes. The reader’s gaze paralyzes and petrifies...” (54). Live streams show that much of creative production on social media depends on live interactions between living streamers and readers of the present. This is not to say there is never a “throne” or a hierarchy of authority on stream (truly lateral production may not be possible), but the stream itself is crafted through the present participation of both viewers *and* streamer. There is a clear distinction between readers and producers in this case that is distinct from the problematic notions of authors as original geniuses. To say authorship is irrelevant here, though, may be to miss entirely *why* the viewer would sit down and watch a stream at all. After all, what is the stream without the promise of the streamer returning to her chair?

Streaming, as a medium almost entirely of the twenty-first century, reveals the importance of studying continuities between past and present. The continuities between medieval manuscripts (which most likely would not have shown each annotation next to the name of the person who wrote it) and Twitch chat are not seamless but they are there. Arguably, the main link between the two is anonymity: most of these Twitch users are anonymous or pseudonymous. Anonymity itself connotes a spectrum of states, some specific to the internet and some predating its creation. Nancy Baym considers anonymity a potentially duplicitous guise: “one of the most exciting elements of New Media is that they allow us to communicate personally within what used to be prohibitively large groups. This blurs the boundary between mass and interpersonal communication in ways that disrupt both... but confusion about the availability and scale of messages has also led to unplanned broadcast what was meant to be private” (4-5). She explains that “people are not sure whether or not they can *trust* other people to be who they claim to be.

This is the central problem of anonymity” (37, emphasis Baym’s). What enables trust on social media is the development of social presence: “social presence is a psychological phenomenon regarding how interactants perceive one another, not a feature of a medium. However, the perception of social presence [is] attributed to the nonverbal cues enabled or disabled by mediation” (59). Gabriella Coleman, in her monumental expose on the amorphous hacker collective Anonymous, explains that users who take up the Guy Fawkes mask and identify as part of Anonymous become “morally slippery entities” (35), taking on the role of a trickster. Coleman’s description of Anonymous suits analysis of Twitch chat in particular, because thousands of viewers are often rhetorically and functionally collapsed into a single entity—the Chat, a single capricious, at times fiercely loyal and at others aggressively antagonistic voice.

Virginia Woolf, in her uncompleted chapter exploring anonymity, laments Anon as a lost, almost prelapsarian form of authorship, declaring, “It was the printing press that finally was to kill Anon. But it was the press also that preserved him” (384). It seems to me that chalking up the disappearance of any anonymous forms of authorship are premature. In some ways, chatters’ anonymity in livestreams resurrects the idyllic form Woolf imagines. Woolf views anonymity as a pure distillation of writing itself, as a break between the author and the text which liberates the latter from the confines of the author’s identity: “The beauty is in the statement, not in the suggestion... the world is seen without comment; did the writer know what beauty he makes us see?” The language by itself is so pure that no bias could infiltrate its communication. The chatters’ presence on stream is almost pure writing. While saying that the hypertextual, metadata-laden world of Twitch accounts is exactly like Anon is incorrect, it is true that most people will engage with other chatters with the same degree of anonymity as readers might have engaged with Anon. Streams resurrect long extinct or dormant notions of authorship, in part.

Throughout this chapter, I have aimed to emphasize the often contradictory forms of authorship at play in single streams. As well, I have tried to show that streaming involves forms of authorship that are deeply evocative of long-established forms, but not identical. I take cues from Griffin as he argues “anonymity is not an exclusive characteristic of oral or manuscript culture, but continues for several centuries to be a dominant form, perhaps the norm, of print culture as well... For anonymity was not always a form of ethical, or religious, or socially imposed self-effacement, but had commercial uses as well” (891). McCartney finds in her interview with artist<sup>21</sup> Bob and Roberta Smith that, “Pseudonyms have allowed a little more flexibility in ‘telling the truth’... when I’ve stuck my own experience into my art, it’s meant I haven’t had to stick to the absolute truth” (191). Livestream authorship ought to be understood as complex and polysemous rather than monolithic because authorship has historically been complex and polysemous. All the evanescent minutiae of human life are content in streams, anything one does can be content, and this allows for so many different forms of deviating from the absolute truth. In a way, the chat’s pure reactivity to the content of the stream is a form of truth-telling, a way to “include other people’s experience” in the stream. Chatters’ usernames confer more identifiability on the chatters than perhaps medieval manuscript marginalia ever did its writers, and online anonymity may be duplicitous in that it enables pernicious actors. At the same time, pseudonymity and anonymity may free up chatters to explore a version of themselves that they otherwise cannot in the physical world.

In my experience as a young twenty-something, my elders are prone to describing social media as merely evincing a vapid, fatuous obsession with identity. As nuanced as streaming is, I do not want to sound purely optimistic about the dynamics between streamers and viewers:

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<sup>21</sup> Bob and Roberta Smith is one person.

authorship in livestreams is not uncomplicatedly liberating. As I discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, collective collaboration online can cross boundaries and create unhealthy ecosystems. With livestreaming perhaps more than any other internet video medium, we need to be mindful of the ways the medium might normalize unhealthy forms of collective collaboration. To understand social media as insipid, youthful narcissistic expressions is to ignore the flashes of positivity and to underestimate the problems social media poses to users. Regarding collectivistic creation in the twenty-first century, McCartney says,

Collectivism can be seen as both critical of and an adaptation to neoliberal institutions of authorship—the contemporary art group might sometimes appear to act in a similar way to the larger corporations, museums and galleries by having shared spaces, designated roles, coherent branding and a manifesto. But if institutions... largely operate in a capitalist, hierarchical manner with VIP or members' areas and corporate sponsorship, how do we conceive of earlier collectives... set up to operate with a more democratic model of authorship? (59)

Users are passive employees without pay. Ian Bogost calls the constant flow of user-generated content “Hyperemployment” or a tacit agreement “to work unpaid jobs for all these companies” (49). Bogost later argues that we do get something back in the form of the apps themselves. I do not agree with this idea, partly because social media platforms are essential communications infrastructure and access to them is less a luxury than it is a necessity. Furthermore, if the platforms and the mediums they foster depend on the employment of the userbase, is there any argument that the platform holders are getting more out of the exchange? There is the question of what these streams would be without the profit motive or the flow of revenue from viewer to

streamer. Streaming has turned watching other people into a creative production, and streaming shows that social media has turned every aspect of living into a commodifiable performance.

### **CONCLUSION: Who hung the fucking blue curtains?**

When I began writing this thesis, I was uncertain about the way authorship functions on social media. Beginning this project with Barthes and Foucault borders on the cliché, but I knew the poststructuralists' work would be both requisite and insufficient. Those ideas which I did carry forward were important: Barthes rightly pointed out that the role of the reader is much more significant than an entirely producer-centric metaphysic allows and that there are capitalist energies to dominant notions of authorship. Foucault, too, saw that the role of the author is operationalized by various discourses. Because these thinkers are the most well-known on the subject of authorship, most substantial studies of authorship in the past three decades have built their analysis off of reckoning with these theses' greatest shortcomings. Particularly, neither Barthes nor Foucault acknowledged that notions of authorship are not monolithic. What is more, both thinkers posited the elision of the author as an unequivocal positive, a premise which goes unexamined in both their theses. In building off of these two thinkers, I have realized two things: first, the birth and proliferation of the reader can (and has) coincided with the proliferation of producers with vivid, distinct personae rather than the death of authors. Secondly, visions of readerly autonomy defined by the complete release of the text from the author are not always emancipatory in practice.

Social media has both fostered, and been incubated within, a period in history where more people are producing and consuming media than ever before. What is more, social media is predicated on the assumption that its users are attempting to represent some part of their identities to their followers. The mediums that social media users have at their disposal are

therefore optimized for abstracting and representing pieces of a person's identity in the formal components of the text. This is a time when authors have not been forgotten, rather they are pivotal to the formal properties of social media. The abundance of authors (and readers) with an extremely empowered reader base has problematic aspects as much as it has exciting elements. In my first chapter, I studied the difficulties that arise for authors when viewers come to their texts in bad faith with no reservations about harassing them on social media. Authors do not just accentuate their presence and voices through the formal components of their cancellation videos, their readers expect these accentuations. Viewers watch cancellation videos looking for a confessional element from the user. In my second chapter, I noticed that even in mimetic video formats on TikTok where the original author's identity dissipates into the wider body of the meme authors are important. Their identities are fragmented and repurposed into memes, and engagement with the original memes is augmented by knowledge of the original author. Meanwhile, as I discussed in my third chapter, livestreams show that authorship is both important to and influenced by the live interactions between viewers and streamers.

I have learned that social media reveals the textured and sometimes contradictory notions of authorship that can co-exist in one text (let alone share a historical moment). I also began my project suspecting that historical continuities may be obviously present and deeply important to the study of authorship. As I discussed in chapter 1, there are compelling connections to be drawn between the work of YouTubers, like Contrapoints, and long-standing artistic mediums (such as Dadaist photography and traditional theatre). Similarly, as I discussed in chapter 2, there are many similarities between notions of authorship as expressed through TikTok memes and established work on meme theory and sound studies. These continuities reach as far back as the 12<sup>th</sup> century, where notions of authorship in manuscript cultures resonate in the culture around

authors and viewers in the context of livestreaming, as I discussed in chapter 3. Ultimately, scholarship around social media yields massive fruits when drawing on the vast body of work in humanistic disciplines. Doing so helps identify authorship's polysemy across time, and helps to identify different possibilities for the future of authorship based on its historical variation.

My research has not even scratched the surface of the pool of media wherein the study of authorship could yield ripe fruits. While I have nodded to the influence of racism on authorial presence and audience interaction within internet texts, my case studies are by and large white (with the exception of Scott, Ian, Lily, and Poki), North American, and English-speaking. Future scholarship will benefit from not only a focused study of race and authorship in social media, but also by exploring the role of authorship in other regions outside the anglosphere where intersections of race and power may differ. This is especially important as many users (Black and queer users especially) report their content being suppressed by certain platforms' algorithms. As such, the extent to which certain users appear in their content at all and discuss their identities openly may depend on the way they negotiate with the prejudices baked into the platforms' architecture and the culture on these platforms as a whole.

There is also much to expand on here vis a vis the ways users' creativity is often inhibited by exploitative practices on the part of the corporations which own the platforms. YouTube has a long and storied history of withholding money from creators either because it has falsely flagged content as inappropriate or because some other entity has exploited YouTube's content ID system to steal revenue from YouTubers that they can never get back. TikTok famously pays even its most successful users a pittance for creating the content that draws users to its site. Twitch is known for stripping streamers of their ability to make money on the site forever if they violate the site's ambiguous terms of service. Some of those violations can range from justified

(some users might create a space that is actively unsafe for marginalized people) to simply showing too much skin as a woman. There is a very concerning relationship between one's ability to create content on these sites at all and the threat a user might pose to a site's ability to generate revenue. The struggles users have navigating these waters, and the uneven support the platforms provide to wealthy corporations, does influence the content that winds up on the platforms. For one thing, users may create content which explicitly walks the audience through the struggles they have in trying to create while abiding by the rules of the private company that owns the platform. For another, though, these struggles that users have with these platforms revolve around authorial rights to profit off of the work they have produced. Definitions of authorship ought not be defined through purely a capitalist lens, but we also have to consider how ignoring the topic in a capitalist system puts users in a position where the corporations they are battling with for rights over their work are unchecked.

Twitter has backgrounded my case studies as the place where controversy erupts and inspires the need for cancellation videos, as a place for users to network across platforms with followings they had curated elsewhere, and as a place for users to find out that their favourite streamer is live. In the very late stages of writing this thesis, just as I began to draft this concluding section, "the curtains were fucking blue" came back into prominence on my timeline. Jahkara Smith, an American YouTuber-turned-actor, tweeted a clip entitled "I have finally built my case against *The Catcher in the Rye*," from a video paywalled on her Patreon account on August 19, 2022 (see fig. 13). The clip, which was obviously a teaser of Smith's attempt at a light-hearted non-serious critique of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, is mostly comprised of Smith taking pot shots at the character of Holden as he tries to have a conversation with a sex worker. Among other things, Smith says the character "has no social skills," is an "incel," a

“colonizer,” and is a “school shooter in the making.” Smith’s video is her attempt to comedically editorialize her reading experience. Functioning as a sort of taster for Smith’s Patreon account, the video received an unusual level of attention. In a matter of days, it gained over one million views, and a vocal majority of the responses to that video were negative. I understate the scale of the response that Smith received.

I concede that Smith’s video was anti-intellectual at worst; her jokes do not land with me, and partly due to the review format she uses, her video clip seems to treat Salinger’s text purely as a form of entertainment. The idea that Holden Caulfield is an unlikable character and, therefore, that the text is bad, is a limiting one that frustrates me on the best of days. I also concede that facetiousness does not absolve the speaker of criticisms. However, the tweets responding to Smith were not proportionate to the effect of the video itself and, in some ways, they do not seem to even be about the video. Often, users attribute arguments to Smith that she never made, put her video in conversation with texts she never referenced, or suggest her video is symbolic of a wider anti-intellectualism in popular literary criticism based on an influence that



*13:Smith's video on Twitter*

she does not have. One user (see fig. 14) claimed in a Quote Tweet that “this is what decades of anti-intellectual ‘maybe the curtains are just blue’ literary criticism has done to us.” Smith never references the meme in the clip, nor does she reference Salinger by name in the clip, and yet this user connects Smith’s video to the authorialist attitudes in “The curtains were fucking blue.” Other users invest in authorialism, claiming in Quote Tweets, “the author didn’t intend for you to think Holden was a good person.” These references to the author, as well as “the curtains” meme, lead me to think Smith’s clip reminded people of other conversations they had been frustrated by to the point that Smith’s video symbolized those wider problems for them. In a way, these replies and Quote Tweets show that while users were directly addressing Smith



14: a popular quote tweet responding to Smith’s video

herself (in that their use of second person pronouns was targeted at her and their tweets were in direct response to hers) these comments had nothing to do with Smith at all. Smith’s video provides a face, voice, and designated space for people to voice their frustrations about not only her video, but other sentiments like it. Whether or not Smith’s points are valid is irrelevant. What matters is that she serves as a symbol of anti-intellectualism for many users, and her video the proving ground upon which many feel they can finally dispense with that form of criticism. By simply making this video, Smith is framed by Twitter users as both the intellectual author of a

strain of thought they disagree with and the primary correspondent they can contact in this particular moment to voice their complaints and rebuttals.

I had never heard of Smith before she appeared on my timeline in others' snide quote tweets. So I wonder: had users thought about what *her* authorial intent was, what her position in the world was, would some of them have held back from sending another comment her way? There was little evidence that Smith's video was sparking a wave of similar thinking and the amount of jokes in her clip suggest that she was not aiming for a critical discussion. As was her right, as almost everyone else with a Twitter account does, Smith posted her opinion to the website. I do not mean to diminish Smith, but she really is just another person online with no measurable impact on the discourse. Yet the responses to her video treat her like an influential point in a strain of anti-intellectual rhetoric and like the teleological outcome of the attitude in "the curtains were fucking blue." Really, if Smith does not have compelling reasons for disliking Salinger's book, who cares? I wonder about what would have changed in people's responses to Smith if they considered her intent and impact partly because of the way so many of the responses are only tangentially related. The replies which introduce the subject of authorial intent—of the ways Salinger *intended* for Holden Caulfield to seem like an unreliable narrator—assume that Smith does not know that. It is entirely plausible that Smith is fully aware of the novel's formal character and still dislikes it because Caulfield is dislikable. Very few users extended the charity to Smith that they implore her to extend to Salinger, and I believe this is due in part to the fact that she is a woman of colour. Finally, even after thousands of people had already responded to Smith, why were there still more eager users who felt their particular iteration of the same reply was important enough to contribute to the pile-on? Internet users are

very quick to ignore when women are trying to joke around, and they are even more so inclined to overstate the harm done when a racialized person says something off-hand.

Through my own time on the internet, I have learned to deal with the extremely frustrating phenomenon that many users will make judgments about my posts based on something I have not said. When I receive comments which almost deliberately misunderstand me, I feel powerless and worried. What will happen if these users' fictions about me proliferate beyond my corner of the internet? As much as I feel fulfillment from being creative and connecting with others online, there is always some anxiety in the back of my mind that I will become the next internet clown—the person who people are convinced is too silly to be taken seriously. While I often receive positive comments on my videos, I also receive comments that are clearly misogynistic, mean, or otherwise seem to forget that there is a person on the other side of the commenter's screen with feelings. Positive interactions with people online, and the relationships I have formed with people who have enjoyed the things I make online, have inspired me to create more and have affected the shape of the content I produce. My own experiences are fractions of those of the users I have studied in this thesis, but they lead me to believe that discussing authorship in the context of social media is important. At the very least, questioning who the author of any given text is might remind us that they are human.

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