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Of Mammies, Minstrels, and Machines: Movement-Image Automaticity and the Impossible Conditions of Black Humanity

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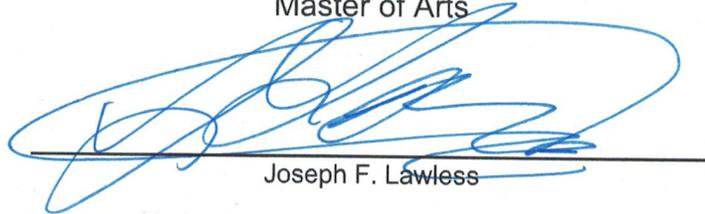
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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that the GIF, as an underexplored analytical vertex within the broader matrix of media ecologies, should be understood as a generative nodal point in the American system of racialized violence. Thought in relation to its medium specificity, the GIF's materiality, particularly its capacity for infinite looping, is critically interrogated for its potential to amplify the circuitry of dominating racialization that felicitously condition the GIF's circulation. I open my argument with focus on a subset of the GIF genre known as the reaction GIF, which, in its frequently racialized form, is situated within the interconnected genealogies of the figures of the mammy, the minstrel, and the machine. The reaction GIF is shown as a contemporary iteration of minstrel performance, known as blackface minstrelsy, that is deeply imbricated with the subordinating racialization of Black women. I demonstrate that the violent genealogies of mammy, minstrel, and machine facilitate the machinic transfiguration of Black women made into GIF content, a process of making-machine of the Black woman subject. Making-machine is the site of ontological capture the racialized reaction GIF institutes, and those Black women caught within its digital field become the inhuman iconography of the medium's motif. To substantiate this account of the racializing properties of the GIF, the text engages the GIF at the level of its mediatic specificity and through questions of affective labor and its expropriation. I contend that the mediatic properties of the GIF are central to its modulating brokerage of affect, and it is this capacity to disperse infinitely differentiated affective impulses that underpins the racialized reaction GIF's making-machine of Black women subjects.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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anchor to what friendship can mean; you are the emboldening tether that enables me to realize the aspirational possibility of an ethics of compassion, of intimate and boundless friendship. Your love for me—and your willingness to let me love you—have always been and will undoubtedly remain the luminous source of my intellectual dreams and the very possibility of my sustainment in the worlds we occupy. For this, as well as for all that I cannot adequately capture in words, I stand most gratefully in your debt.

In dedication to those whose lives we have forgone, whose lives were forcibly taken and taken from us, those whose absence we forever feel. No longer domesticated, no longer silent, this text hopes to mark the inspirational awe that is felt toward those to whom it is indebted: those who refuse to abandon their desire to disrupt the deployment of normativity, who instead seek to create the queer, the untamed, the radical signification and resignification of that which is presumed to resist all signification.

In dedication to the innumerable Black lives that should not have been lost.

CHAPTER 1

BLACK OVERKILL AND ONTOLOGICAL CAPTURE IN THE DIGITAL FIELD: EXORDIA ON THEORY AND METHOD

Ongoingly assembled and updated through a bricolage of local news coverage, official state administrative and law enforcement websites, social media reporting, and independently maintained information networks, the *Washington Post*'s "Fatal Force" was conceived in 2015 to create "a database cataloguing every fatal shooting nationwide by a police officer in the line of duty, [including] data on those who were killed and the details of the shootings."[1] The diversity of source material "Fatal Force" employs to document police lethality reflects the project's commitment to reflexively threading porosity into the boundaries of its archive. An archive is intended to establish the limits of the epistemological, that which is knowable, and it maintains those limits through iterative repudiations and disavowals, separating the proper from the improper. "Fatal Force" refuses to congeal the walls of its archival constitution by maintaining a critical self-position. This impulse to resist the archive's conventional disciplinarity and to favor unforeseeable porosity undergirds the

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[1] "Police Shootings 2016 Database," Fatal Force, *Washington Post*, accessed October 3, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings-2016/. The scope of "Fatal Force" is informed by the circumstances surrounding the 2014 murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, a decisive moment in the development of the protest movement now known as Black Lives Matter and its concomitant emphasis on police accountability for unnecessary violence across the United States. "Fatal Force" directs its archival impulse toward those shootings in which an on-duty police officer shot and killed a civilian, circumstances that, per the *Post*, "most closely parallel" those of the murder of Michael Brown. "Police Shootings 2018 Database," Fatal Force, *Washington Post*, accessed October 3, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/ national/police-shootings-2018/. An examination of this abstracting maneuver—and what this event parallelism may occlude or distort—cannot be adequately addressed here.

epistemological status "Fatal Force" ascribes to its varied archival contents. Officiated digital discourses of the state are not endowed with an *a priori* objectivity that would secure those claims as beyond the field of the political and, as a consequence, outside the field of critique. Social media reporting, for example, is not disavowed as exemplifying the peculiar and subjective, a form of knowledge thus rendered irreconcilable with the very notion of knowledge itself. Its truth-value is recognized to be concomitant with those other discursive fields with which it may be in tension.

Recognizing an immanent potential of change as constitutive of its archive's morphology enables "Fatal Force" to provide a more accurate account of on-duty police officers' application of lethal techniques than that proffered by the data collected by various federal agencies pursuant to legal mandate.[2] As the *Post* notes and administrative officials readily acknowledge, data collected by federal agencies, such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Department of Justice, suffer manifold lacunae and inconsistencies.[3] Statutory restrictions on permissible data the difficulty of sharing information across and among governmental agencies yield a disconcertingly flawed picture. Moreover, whatever data have been successfully compiled are not released for public review with any consistency—in full contravention of express legal requirement that such data are published on an

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[2] See, e.g., Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, 34 U.S.C.A § 12602(a) (West 2018) ("The Attorney General shall, through appropriate means, acquire data about the use of excessive force by law enforcement officers.")
[3] "Police Shootings 2018 Database."

annual basis.[4] Insofar as the data accumulated by "Fatal Force" is publicly

available for review and is the result of synthesizing a diverse array of source

materials, the project stands to offer a more accurate (though still incomplete)

account of the frequency with which police brutality occurs and the character of

those occurrences.

The felicitous structure of "Fatal Force" enables the articulation of

questions that might otherwise be foreclosed by sole reliance on incomplete,

government-generated reports. For example, what do the data compiled by

"Fatal Force" indicate about police brutality in the United States? Against Black

persons, more specifically?[5] According to its statistics, last updated on October 1,

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[4] See 34 U.S.C.A. § 12602(c) (West 2018) ("The Attorney General shall publish an annual summary of the data acquired under this section."). In a 2016 report released by the Congressional Research Service addressing federal efforts to collect data on public trust of law enforcement, a review of the multiple federal programs intended to collect data on misuse of force by law enforcement underscored both the infrequent satisfaction of this statutory mandate and the inability of federal agencies to effective share and synthesize data. See Nathan James et al., Congressional Research Service, R43904, *Public Trust and Law Enforcement: A Brief Discussion for Policymakers* (2016), 5–8, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R43904.pdf.

[5] A matter of political editorial intention must be noted here. Throughout the entirety of this text, I have consciously rendered "Black" in the upper case. This decision follows first from my adoption of an ethical orientation informed by the positions of Black scholars, writers, and activists. For example, journalism scholar Lori L. Tharps holds that "when speaking of a culture, ethnicity or group of people, the name [Black] should be capitalized. Black with a capital B refers to people of the African diaspora. Lowercase black is simply a color." Lori L. Tharps, "The Case for Black with a Capital B," *New York Times*, November 19, 2014. In agreement with Tharps is Black writer and cultural critic Touré, who explains the rationale behind his decision to render Black in the upper case as follows: "I have chosen to capitalize the word 'Black' and lowercase 'white' throughout this book. I believe 'Black' constitutes a group, an ethnicity equivalent to African-American, Negro, or, in terms of a sense of ethnic cohesion, Irish, Polish, or Chinese." Touré, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness? What It Means to Be Black Now* (New York: Free Press, 2011), ix. I have chosen the locutions "Black" and "non-Black" in order to center the consequences of the racialized images at the heart of this analysis. In a concordant register, Catharine MacKinnon remarks of her writing "white" in the lower case that, "under current conditions of white supremacy, ['white'] seems . . . to require no underlining as an affirmative self-identification. Capitalizing both [Black and white] would also communicate an equality that is false, and would take no side toward making the equality a true one." Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 238n12.

2018, there have been *at least* 90 instances of unarmed Black men and women

being shot and killed by on-duty police offers since January 1, 2015.[6] Many of

these murders, including those of Eric Harris, Walter Scott, and Keith L. Scott,

were captured on video, either by cellphone, body camera, or dashboard

camera, and, in the wake of their tragic deaths, these videos were disseminated

widely across social media platforms.

    As video recordings of instances of police brutality became increasingly

embedded in the circuitry of sociodigital media ecologies, they experienced a

broad diffusion, one whose velocity magnified breathlessly by exploiting the ease

of translation across social media platforms. While the omnipresent barrage of

these recordings certainly did much work to galvanize a coordinated public

response to the long history of police officers' misuse of lethal force, I would not

limit the effects of these recordings to the necessary political critique they

inspired. Nor would I circumscribe their consequence to the resurrection of

memories of trauma, violence, and subjection within those Black men and

women inadvertently exposed to the videos' contents through platforms like

Facebook or Twitter, which typically enable automatic playback of movement-

image content as a default setting.[7] These videos might also be understood, I

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[6] This figure was calculated by filtering the "Fatal Force" data available for download through two metrics: "Armed" (for which "unarmed" was selected) and "Race" (for which "B," standing for Black, was selected). The data compiled by the project is available for public download under a Creative Commons license and may be found on the *Washington Post*'s GitHub webpage, available here: https://github.com/washingtonpost/data-police-shootings.

[7] My use of "movement-image" throughout this discussion endeavors a twofold signification. First, the movement-image is that which fundamentally contrasts with a static image. Under this (admittedly reductive) schema, a photograph would be classified as a static image, while a cinematic or television scene would be regarded as a movement-image. Second, the movement-image is that which Gilles Deleuze argues is "strictly the same" as "flowing matter," such that the

would contend, as participating in a gradual transformation of contemporary temporal orders, one through which the violent system of American racialization locates a condition of its felicity.

In an ostensibly divergent register, Jonathan Crary advances an interpretation of the radical transformation of present-day temporality as indissociably linked to the internecine injunctions of global neoliberal capital. He describes the temporal fold of (post)modernity as "a time without time, a time extracted from any material or identifiable demarcations, a time without sequence or recurrence."[8] For Crary, time has become fully coextensive with the meaning of impossibility, whereby one unwittingly acquiesces to "a simulated release from the hindrances of being alive which are incompatible with circulation and exchangeability."[9] The temporality of the present is an atemporality, a not-time that admits of neither past nor present nor future, the irruption of the Real into the conscious of everyday worldmaking and the crystallized guarantor of humanity's end.

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meaning of "image" must be recognized as equivalent to the meaning of "movement." Although Deleuze never explicitly provides a succinct conceptual account of the movement-image, his descriptions of those scenes and films he takes to be formalistically organized around the movement-image genre share certain attributes: formal representations of space and time, regulation by discrete sensory-motor functions, and the presumption of teleological, progressive, linear time. Movement-images proceed from a temporal point of "origin" to a temporal point of "conclusion." They mirror modernist investments in Cartesian spatiotemporality. And, their purpose is to reflect the kinetic movement of bodies in space-time, such that it becomes exceedingly difficult to separate the movements of subject's own body from the movements depicted in the image; matter flows between these body-images and among them, without perceptible discontinuity. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 58–59.
[8] Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (New York: Verso, 2013), 29.
[9] Ibid., 104–5.

Although I am sympathetic to Crary's intended intervention, I would nevertheless note the following: Crary's description of the contemporaneous present as without time, sequence, or recurrence is, I believe, in tension with his description of the subject who lives within its temporal decree. Crary contends that the subject living in an era of neoliberal global capital—that is, the living of a certain Western subject, one who occupies a certain position within the West's myriad social worlds, a distinction not altogether clear in Crary's formulation—must (self-)dissolve into a binarized digital algorithm if she is to properly function within capital's networks of circulation and exchange. Such is the subject of the world under neoliberal capital, a subject who, so posited, represents less embodiment in its multiple specificities and more the site of inadvertent catachresis. Indeed, contrary to the sweeping conceptual thesis Crary proffers, the conditions of the unfolding present that conduct the dissolution of the *subjects* subordinated to neoliberal imperatives, as well as the *positions* occupied by those subjects who are differentially subordinated to such imperatives, must be hailed as neither uniform nor universal. An analysis of the unfolding present which proceeds from a conceptual axiomatic regarding the former as "a time without time" founders, I would argue, at the moment of its utterance. This is because there can be no univocal, singular "time" to which all subjects and worlds are bound; there is no single act of disaggregation which irreparably and monolithically dissolves "the subject" into capital's flows. Rather, what must be envisioned is an burgeoning multiplicity of temporal planes whose operations are neither fully discordant nor fully concordant. Their work is uneven, accretive,

disbanding, upending, calcifying, and proliferating, a matrix whose radial

expansion signifies the multitude of presents a subject may inhabit as well as the

ultimate impossibility of clearly demarcating between past, present, and future.

This is not to deny, however, Crary's illuminating insight into the mode of

compulsory dissolution the subject experiences upon injection into the flows of

global capital. Rather than emphasize the subject who is both singular and

universal, I would alternatively propose that what is exposed to dissolution are

the fractured subjectivities loosely constitutive of the subject as we conceive it—

those artificially conjoined, immanently fragile, and always incomplete elements

whose psychic-corporeal integration endeavors to make legible the signifying

work of the term "personhood." The subject-*qua*-person may indeed be forced to

fracture what she perceives as her composite being at the dominating will of

capital, but it does not follow that the temporal character of this submission is that

of "a time without time." Injection into the flow of capital may instead place her in

an *infinitely recurring* series of relations all differentially animated by capital's

exploitative logic. Capital's circuitry, its Nietzschean promise of an infinitely

recurring transformation and return of labor-value into product and profit and

back into alienating labor again, will not be, under such conditions, a time without

sequence or repetition. For the subject exposed to its impossible precarity, the

temporality of capital will be its temporalities, its many times and their

irreducibility to one another.

Said otherwise, we might otherwise envision the time of the

contemporaneous present simultaneously as the temporality captured by

capital's expropriation of labor, asymptotically approaching a temporal flow

outside any phenomenological experience thereof, and, pivoted toward an

instance of particularity, as the temporalities codified by the repeated refrain of

police brutality and its endless display on social media platforms. To situate

these temporal orders as overlapping fields does not require disavowing the

imperiling tendencies of structural recurrence, here exemplified by capital and by

repeating videos of the murder of Black men and women. Their overlap, insofar

as they both function through differential processes of constitutive abstraction,

can be critically mined and analytically concretized by repeatedly centering their

connections to the material violence that accompanies quotidian worldmaking.

Contra Crary, then, the possibility that time may be caught in an abstracting loop,

that this loop *may* augur the horrors of infinite repetition *without necessarily*

embracing that structural infinitude may gesture toward an imperceptibly

extending, protean ecology of power relations whose roots have taken hold in

unusual and putatively contradictory ways.[10]

  In the domain of new media, the automaticity of playback and the infinite

loop are considered characteristic of the digital-image file known as the Graphics

Interchange Format, or GIF, which, due to its surging social and cultural

popularity, is now considered "an essential part of the digital lexicon."[11] Broadly

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[10] For an interesting discussion of the relationship between the GIF and the 24/7 temporality Crary deems fundamental to contemporary capitalist cultures, as well as one that both coheres with and departs from my own thinking on Crary's provocations, see David Bering-Porter, "The Automaton in All of Us: GIFs, Cinemagraphs, and the Films of Martin Arnold," *Moving Image Review & Art Journal* 3, no. 2 (2014).

[11] Richard Yao, "The Surging Popularity of GIFs in Digital Culture," IPG Media Lab, Medium, April 5, 2018, https://medium.com/ipg-media-lab/the-enduring-popularity-of-gifs-in-digital-culture-54763d7754aa.

described, a GIF is a self-contained, animated image sequence that endlessly repeats its delimited content. The GIF, now a frequent aspect of contemporary digital talk, offers a mode of communication more rooted in the cultural and dynamically visual than conventionally textual modes. What marks the GIF as unique among varied digital-image formats is its capacity to store and transmit repeating animated sequences without depending on the usual hardware burdens associated with the transmission of video files. The content of an animated GIF is known as a "looping sequence," which, per Kate M. Miltner and Tim Highfield, has the technical capacity to display "multiple frames on repeat [stored] within the same image file without [requiring] the size (or resolution) of a video [to play]."[12] After it has been shared, either via a text-messaging application or on a social media platform, the GIF will continue its circular cinematic as long as it is within the visible interface boundaries of a user's device (e.g., an iPhone, a laptop, etc.).

The popularity of GIFs in digital communication has resulted in a variety of patterns of usage, content creation, and cultural critique—as well as patterns of violence, appropriation, and cultural denigration. An article written in August 2017 by freelance journalist and doctoral student Lauren Michele Jackson, entitled "We Need to Talk about Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs," comments on one such pattern, the disproportionate use of looping images of Black men and women as GIF content, which enables the production and permissibility of what

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[12] Kate M. Miltner and Tim Highfield, "Never Gonna GIF You Up: Analyzing the Cultural Significance of the Animated GIF," *Social Media + Society* 3, no. 3 (2017): 3.

Jackson calls "digital blackface."[13] GIFs become the mode through which caricatures of Black persons can proliferate in abundance, with the concordant dehumanization such caricatures secure obscured by the allegedly innocuous contexts of these GIFs' circulation.

GIFs and the purposes of their circulation may, at first blush, appear situated in a field of emergence vastly disparate from that of police brutality footage disseminated on social media platforms. Arguing otherwise, I would contend that these two modes of mediatic expression are not at all dissociable. Rather, the ontological violence police brutality footage indexes might be understood as conditioned by a process through which Black men and women are evacuated of any claim to a shared status of "human" and transformed into a machinic objecthood—a process subtended and reproduced by the circulation of racialized reaction GIFs. The infinite looping of Black bodies caught in the extractive cycling of the GIF mobilizes that repetition to heighten the racist production of minstrelized and mammified scenes while that same automaticity transforms the Black body into an uncanny figure, a machine that executes its program in loop and therefore cannot claim the ontological status of human.

Among the critiques intimated by the galvanizing political imperative "Hands Up, Don't Shoot!" is a recognition of the state's capacity for racializing discipline and the biopolitical production of concurrently docile and dangerous Black bodies. "Hands Up, Don't Shoot!" signifies the comportment of a mortal

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[13] Lauren Michele Jackson, "We Need to Talk about Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs," *Teen Vogue*, August 2, 2017, https://www.teenvogue.com/story/digital-blackface-reaction-gifs.

injunction to instantaneously detach from the coordinates of the Black bodily

frame. It unabashedly accents that submission to its injunction is a necessary,

though by no means sufficient, condition of survival for any Black person forcibly

thrust into the crosshairs of the state's violent policing apparatus. What is the

consequence of this disciplinary regime when its mandates always already

undergird an encounter with police brutality? One might consider the footage of

Keith Lamont Scott's murder, which was recorded by his wife, Rakeiya Scott,

who documented the scene with a stability of frame likely unintelligible to those

beyond the state's racializing vice grip on Black lives.[14] One might examine the

cellphone footage of the murder of North Charleston, South Carolina, resident

Walter Scott, taken by community member Feidin Santana.[15] Santana tracks the

scene coolly and slowly—even after an officer emitted a barrage of gunfire into

Scott's back. Santana's grip remains steady, almost detached; one might even

describe as *machine-like*.

The making-machine of Black men and women—as well as of persons of

color more generally, Indigenous Americans, trans persons, and numerous

others whose bodily legibility incites a cascade of violent social disqualification—

is part and parcel of the ongoing process of racialization that constitutes Black

subjects as necessary sites of violence, encouraged and effected by state and

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[14] See "Charlotte Shooting Video: Footage Shows Fatal Encounter Between Police, Keith Lamont Scott," U.S. News, NBC News, last updated September 23, 2016, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/charlotte-shooting-video-footage-shows-fatal-encounter-between-police-keith-n653426.
[15] See "Video Shows Fatal Police Shooting," *Times* Video: Race in America, *New York Times*, April 7, 2015, https://nyti.ms/1yTnTsi.

individual alike. GIFs whose intelligibility depends on the modality of digital

blackface Jackson identifies situate Black bodies in an infinite loop of affective

extraction and dehumanizing labor; the repetition of the movement-image that is

a GIF's content forces the Black body to veer toward the position of the uncanny,

of the not-human. This position of not-human is as much the enabling condition

of police brutality against unarmed Black men and women as it is the disciplinary

injunction to which Black individuals most submit their bodies if they are to

survive the exacting violence of a racializing state.

This thesis will argue that the GIF, as an underexplored analytical vertex

within the broader matrix of media ecologies, should be understood as a

generative nodal point in the American system of racialized violence. Thought of

in the terms of the medium, the GIF's specific materialities, its capacity for infinite

looping or the discourse of discretely compressed filed in which that loop is

stored, must be critically interrogated for their potential to amplify the circuitry of

dominating racialization that felicitously condition the GIF's circulation. As a site

for the exchange, modulation, and brokerage of affect, the GIF has an influential

role in the economies of affect transited through media infrastructures. The

inability to foresee the content of the GIFs to which a subject may be

inadvertently exposed suggests that, under certain conditions, the experience of

unexpectedly encountering a symbolically GIF may elicit reactions at the most

deeply bodily level. To respond to, maintain, combat, and address these bodily

excitations is to perform labor in its affective form. That affective labor is always

already performed in a context of racialization, and that this racialization may be

vertiginously magnified by a GIF's racist content, encourage an examination of the GIF's capacity to extract and expropriate the affective labor of its unwitting conscripts.

The GIF will thus be shown to underscore the relationship between the making-machine of Black bodies and the telos of American racism, the subjection of those bodies to *overkill*. In his powerful meditation on the grotesque killings of several queer youth across the United States, Stanley offers the notion of overkill to bring into signification that which would seem to defy it, the capacity of "excessive violence . . . [to push] a body beyond death."[16] Overkill is, for Stanley, an analytic necessary to understand the gruesome murders of Lauryn Paige, who was partially decapitated, and Rashawn Brazell, whose body was dissected after he was murdered, because it locates this violence of overkill "precisely not outside of, but [as] that which constitutes liberal democracy as such."[17] Overkill is the violence that affirms the non-violence of liberal democratic equality; it codes the necessity of sameness over difference and submission over resistance.

Thinking together the notion of overkill and the question of time, Stanley argues that overkill indexes, symbolically *and* materially, a "temporality of violence" altogether particular to its operation: "[The] biological time when the heart stops pushing and pulling blood, yet the killing is not finished . . . [this concurrence] suggests the aim is not simply the end of a specific life, but the

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[16] Eric Stanley, "Near Life, Queer Death: Overkill and Ontological Capture," *Social Text* 29, no. 2 (2011): 9.
[17] Ibid., 10.

ending of all [differentially marked] life."[18] This move to end all differentially

marked life establishes the vicious force of "ontological capture," a "space of

nonexistence . . . forged in the territory of inescapable violence . . . [which]

crystallizes the ontocorporeal, discursive, and material inscriptions that render

specific bodies in specific times as the place of *the nothing*."[19] It is this

reconfiguration of subjective specificity and particularity into a vast abyss of

nothing—an abyss of eternal sameness, endless repetition, a time that is not

time—that is at stake in the dissemination of GIFs produced through a logic of

digital minstrelsy.

My argument unfolds across the next three chapters. In Chapter 2, I

suggest that a deeper analytical avenue is opened by following Jackson's

observation that GIFs of Black women are often the particular focus of the digital

minstrelsy she documents. I expand her critique by locating the proliferation of

GIFs caricaturing Black women within a broader social constellation underpinned

by logics of mammification, minstrelsy and making-machine. To do so, I turn to

the varied histories of the mammy figure as they relate to the practice of

blackface performance. I then offer an extensive engagement with the question

of the constitutive relationship between the figure of the minstrel and that of the

machine.

I then turn to an analysis of the GIF as a mediatic form in Chapter 3,

sketching out paradigms common in its critical appraisal as a digital media object

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[18] Ibid., 9.
[19] Ibid., 14.

and querying their possibilities and deficiencies. I focus my own analysis of the GIF on the question of the loop, which I consider one of the fundamental aspects of the GIF's medium specificity and a key element of its constitutive work. I argue that by tracing the circulation of racialized reaction GIFs the violent logic of transforming Black subjects into machinic figurations can be rendered visible. This process, what I call *making-machine*, is one that strips them of their subjective particularity as it deploys them in an economy of racialization that operates through dehumanization.

Making-machine is the site of ontological capture the racialized reaction GIF institutes, and those Black subjects caught within its digital field become the inhuman iconography of digital media creation. To substantiate this account of the racializing properties of the GIF, I engage the image at the level of its mediatic specificity and through questions of affective labor and its expropriation. I contend that the mediatic properties of the GIF are central to its modulating brokerage of affect, and it is this capacity to disperse infinitely differentiated affective impulses that underpins the racialized reaction GIF's making-machine of Black women. The logic of making-machine is part of the core technologies of racialized exclusion and violence. Its process is both a condition for the survival of Black lives and the disciplinary technique that guarantees their exposure to material and ontological violence. Making-machine, then, is situated in irreconcilable relation to the process of making-human; the former simultaneously affirms and negates the latter.

To be certain, I am speaking about a particular context of GIF circulation in the argument I propose. Following Jackson's analytical lead, I emphasize the (de)subjectifying work done by the GIF when it is circulated in one of its most casual, putatively spontaneous scenes: that of the text-message exchange via cellphone. Moreover, I am interested in directing my argument toward the explicit relationship between the GIF, the casualness associated with its circulation, the frequency with which its content implicates digital blackface, and the fortification of white supremacist social mores. My discussion therefore narrows its interrogative scope to the scene of GIF exchange between two non-Black cellphone users—more specifically, between two white cellphone users. In the text that follows, this context—the circulation of a GIF whose content implicates racializing and violently racist caricature between two white persons—orients my analytical efforts as their backdrop. Unless stated otherwise, this is the context through which my analysis proceeds, and instances in which the racially subordinating consequences of certain GIFs' circulation are discussed take this context as their referent.

Finally, it is to the specificity of the process of making-machine that I return in Chapter 4, transposing these abstracted analytics onto the register of the concrete in my discussion of a widely circulated GIF featuring Linnethia Monique "NeNe" Leakes, a member of the cast of popular reality television show *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. Chapter 4 weaves together the historicized braids of Chapter 2 with the theoretical propositions of Chapter 3; that is, it is an

effort to carefully thread the concrete through the abstract and the abstract

through the concrete in a recursive, mutually formative mode.

Admittedly, the conclusions tentatively drawn in my consideration of one of

the most popular GIFs featuring Leakes will inevitably fail to fully account for

either the concrete or the abstract in their most robust forms. This is one

consequence of a methodological commitment to the *maintenance* of a

dialectical relation in its most taut coordinates, which refuses to submit to a

synthesis that would dissolve the vital differences between the conceptual

account of the GIF I have developed that account's distinctive relevance to (and

insufficiency for) an analysis of Leakes' coerced submission to the process of

making-machine. Instead, my hope is that this meditation on the question of

racialized reaction GIFs and the particularity of Leakes' appropriation as those

GIFs' content can be read through and against one another, pressing the

epistemological boundaries of the conceptual and the particular to their most

productive limits.

CHAPTER 2

INTERLOCKING GENEALOGIES: THE MAMMY, THE MINSTREL, THE MACHINE, AND THE PERFORMANCE OF DIGITAL BLACKFACE THROUGH THE REACTION GIF

In early August 2017, freelance journalist and doctoral student Lauren Michele Jackson published "We Need to Talk about Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs" ("Digital Blackface"), an article which critically appraises the disproportionate use (and misuse) of looping movement-images of Black men and women as GIF content.[1] Jackson perceives beyond the common refrain that "digital behavior [as frivolous as GIF exchange] exists in a deracialized vacuum" a failure to recognize the role of the hyperbolically racialized GIF in the (re)production of "digital blackface."[2] The transfiguration of nineteenth-century minstrel performance into a disembodying, byte-governed algorithm of re-racialization, digital blackface describes "various types of minstrel performance that become available in cyberspace . . . [by exploiting] the relative anonymity of online identity to embody [B]lackness."[3] Historically, minstrel performance has adopted racist caricatures and turned to histrionic, racist modes of theatrical presentation to "put society's most racist sensibilities on display and [feed] them back to audiences to intensify these [racist sentiments] and disperse them across cultures."[4]

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[1] Lauren Michele Jackson, "We Need to Talk about Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs," *Teen Vogue*, August 2, 2017, https://www.teenvogue.com/story/digital-blackface-reaction-gifs.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.

While prior histories of minstrelsy worked through material embodiment and a false logic of mimesis, digital blackface arguably operates through a more seamless and inconspicuous transformation. To assume a fictive identity through the practice of digital blackface is, as Jackson documents, a disturbingly common phenomenon. Often coincident with the assumption of this fictive, racially marked persona is an "excessive use of reaction GIFs with images of [B]lack people," which Jackson implicates as a mechanism integrated into the broader enterprise of convincing digital audiences that the online identity bears an authentic, "real-world" counterpart in the form of an individual.[5] Even in situations that do not involve the construction and maintenance of a fabricated persona, the tremendous velocity of mediatic exchange through online platforms structures a circuitry of nearly instantaneous dialectical movement between the assumption and refutation of Black identities. Equally paramount has been the integration of GIFs into text-messaging applications, which has provided users with unprecedented levels of access to such looping images and control over the contexts of their deployment.

The broad object of Jackson's analysis—the GIF—is not without its own histories, of course. Moreover, the specific materiality of the GIF, the "particularities of [its] mode of transmission, processing, and storage," are inescapably political and inseparable from histories of the image's development and deployment.[6] The social, political, and historical contexts within which new

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[5] Ibid.
[6] Jussi Parikka, *What Is Media Archaeology?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012), 36.

media forms emerge are conditioned by as well as condition, argues Jussi

Parikka, those "non-human elements which are integral to what constitutes" the

fields of modernity.[7] Necessary, then, is a brief detour into the histories of the

GIF, differentiated contexts that will better illuminate the questions Jackson

investigates and, extending her analysis, I will pose.

Known fully as the Graphics Interchange Format, the GIF was first

developed in 1987 to facilitate the compression and transmission of static images

across low-speed Internet connections. Differentiating the GIF from other

common image formats such as the TIFF (Tagged Image File Format) or the

PNG (Portable Network Graphics) has long been its capacity to display a self-

contained animated scene on potentially endless repeat.[8] Because of this

capacity for repetition, the content of animated GIFs is often referred to as a

"looping sequence." The looping sequence, enabled by the GIF's specific

technical structure, can successfully display "multiple frames on repeat [that are

stored] within the same image file without [requiring] the size (or resolution) of a

video [to play]."[9] The animated GIF can be understood, in other words, as an

image file designed to sequentially encode multiple frames that, upon their

display, would run those frames "in order to make a moving image . . . through

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[7] Ibid., 63

[8] As James Ash usefully reminds us, the GIF's technical structure enables it to display *both* static images and animated sequences; it was the GIF's capacity to display moving animation, however, that galvanized its popularity, relegating its static-image capabilities inconsequential if not fully effaced in broader social imaginaries. See James Ash, "Sensation, Networks, and the GIF: Toward an Allotropic Account of Affect," in *Networked Affect*, ed. Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen, and Michael Pettit (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 119.

[9] Kate M. Miltner and Tim Highfield, "Never Gonna GIF You Up: Analyzing the Cultural Significance of the Animated GIF," *Social Media + Society* 3, no. 3 (2017): 3.

flip-book style animation."[10] The GIF's storage capacity made it ideal for transmitting and embedding cinematic visual content, albeit of short duration, in a technological moment of comparatively limited bandwidth and underdeveloped video-editing software.[11] Unlike video files, GIFs cannot support audio transmission in addition to the looping movement-image sequence; no sound is attached to the looping scene. As a consequence, it has become common practice to append text to the bottom of GIF's image-area; this text is, more often than not, a transcription of what is said by the individuals who constitute the GIF's content.

The immediate popularity the GIF attained as a result of its utility in the late 1980s was followed by a period of intensely contrasting absence. It would not be until the mid-2000s, with the advent of websites such as MySpace, LiveJournal, and Tumblr, that the pendulum of the GIF's popularity would again swing. The individualized customizability these new Internet platforms offered users rekindled the GIF's desirability, as the image's small size, spectacular content, and ease of use were ideal complements to these platforms' ethos.[12]

The resurgence of the GIF was not simply a matter of these individuated web platforms extending a digitally hospitable hand to the image. In their reading of the GIF's shifting horizons of popularity, Kate M. Miltner and Tim Highfield suggest that the image's return to visibility was profoundly aided "by the nostalgic

[10] David Bering-Porter, "The Automaton in All of Us: GIFs, Cinemagraphs, and the Films of Martin Arnold," *Moving Image Review & Art Journal* 3, no. 2 (2014): 183.
[11] Miltner and Highfield, "Never Gonna GIF You Up," 3.
[12] Ibid.

proclivity of Internet culture groups for the banalities of the early web: dial-up modems, cheesy Web 1.0 design, and 8-bit pixilation." Articulations of the GIF as integral to the "'Internet Ugly' aesthetic beloved by early users of the Internet" and as the "file format of the Internet generation . . . our vinyl, our compact disk" encourage an interpretation of the GIF as one of the many technological junctures at which Marxism and Freudianism can be said to intersect.[13] Marx's observation that capitalism demands an endless procurement of ever-expanding volumes of resources exemplifies a kind of Oedipalized lust of a Freudian ilk; that which semiotically codes the "better" as the "new" cannot orient its teleologically progressive desire for new modes of consumption without rooting itself in the binaristic flip that codes the "worse" as the "old." The compact file size of the GIF enables it to support a variety of looping movement-images and complementary snippets of text. Although this looping sequence of mediatic information is filtered through the contextual sieve of the new—the GIF no longer inhabits MySpace or LiveJournal but iMessage, Twitter, and Facebook—it is the GIF's "primitive" design that secures the continued possibility of its image-information economy.

Considering the Critique of "Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs"

Having introduced the major thematics of Jackson's argument and provided a contextualizing history of the object of her analysis, I would like to pause here in order to recount in more exacting detail my interpretation of

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[13] Ibid.; Lance Ulanoff, "The Secret History of the GIF," Tech, Mashable, August 10, 2016, https://mashable.com/2016/08/10/history-of-the-gif/#E5kPvavEuOqU.

Jackson's argument, that is, what I understand to be the *specific* phenomena her

text exhumes and the relations shared by those phenomena. Jackson's

discussion of digital minstrelsy is, I believe, intended to address at least two

intertwined and, thus, co-emergent processes of racialization-*cum*-subordination.

The first is the assumption of a fictional online identity that congeals through its

recourse to American histories of minstrel performance writ large; to substantiate

the real-world legitimacy of such an identity, an individual—almost always, a non-

Black individual—deploys *reaction* GIFs whose content is interpreted to signify a

hyperbolic moment of racialized performance.

The reaction GIF, a subset of the GIF genre, is specifically named by

Jackson and demonstrated to be emblematic of the racializing work of which the

GIF is capable. Reaction GIFs are, like GIFs as an image category, infinitely

looping scenes; what merits the qualifier "reaction" is this subset's frequent

representation of "bodies in motion, primarily excerpted from recognizable pop

culture moments . . . [and often] used to express common ideas and emotions."[14]

Although the interpersonal intelligibility of a reaction GIF is determined at least by

the context of its transmission,[15] as well as by an individual's relative familiarity

with the cultural references through which the GIF legibly signifies,[16] the reaction

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[14] Jason Eppink, "The Reaction GIF: Moving Image as Gesture," Spring Installation Catalogue, Museum of the Moving Image, last accessed October 5, 2018, http://www.movingimage.us/exhibitions/2014/03/12/detail/the-reaction-gif-moving-image-as-gesture/.

[15] That is, the social backdrop formative of the communicative field in which the GIF is invoked, a question of whether the GIF as such, as well as the purpose of its transmission, would be recognizable in an instance of its exchange.

[16] That is, the recognition of the cultural sign the GIF heralds and differentially mimes through its deployment, such as a widely recognized scene from a popular television program or a brief clip of a known character from a film.

GIF has been consistently hailed as among the most discursively potent of the image's forms. According to Jason Eppink, the Associate Curator of Digital Media at the New York City Museum of the Moving Image, reaction GIFs are uniquely able to "communicate more nuance and concision than their verbal translations."[17] Rephrased within the register of Jackson's argument, reaction GIFs' easy modulation of verbal lexicons imbues them with a signifying flexibility and gestural potency; these images can heighten the violence of racialization and disavow their complicity with such a system in a selfsame instantaneous moment. Correspondingly, appeals to such reaction GIFs, as the logic of digital minstrelsy in its individuated form would suggest, consolidate the authenticity of the fictive identity, extinguishing suspicions of misrepresentation by marking the content of the GIF and the content of the digital identity as substantively metonymic.

The second practice, which is indissociably bound to the first insofar as each is reciprocally generative of the other, is the casual deployment of GIFs, primarily through cellphone text-messaging systems, whose content is almost exclusively Black faces to communicate responsorial hyperbole—hyperbole that is indelibly constituted by and through racist tropes of minstrel performance and "our cultural propensity [to] see [B]lack people as walking hyperbole."[18] Jackson is unambiguous about her turn to this structural level of personal-impersonal practice and its requisite differentiation from atomistic events of digital minstrelsy:

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[17] Eppink, "The Reaction GIF."
[18] Jackson, "Digital Blackface in GIFs."

> If there's one thing the Internet thrives on, it's hyperbole, and the overrepresentation of [B]lack people GIFing everyone's daily crises plays up enduring perceptions and stereotypes about [B]lack express. And when [non-Black] users flock to these images, they are playacting within those stereotypes in a manner reminiscent of an unsavory American tradition. Reaction GIFs are mostly frivolous and fun. But when [B]lack people are the go-to choice for [non-Black] users to act out their most hyperbolic emotions, do reaction GIFs become "digital blackface"?[19]

As a critical hermeneutic, digital blackface does not address the thorny problematic of intention; rather, as Jackson plainly expounds, it telescopes with necessary precision the violent act of inhabiting a Black persona. It is thus no surprise that among the most popular search terms for reaction GIFs are "generic search[es] like 'funny [B]lack kid [GIF]' or '[B]lack lady [GIF].'"[20]

In a further exposure of the racializing algorithmic logic that governs GIF-hosting websites, Jackson notes that when the latter phrase—"[B]lack lady [GIF]"—is queried within the search engine available on Giphy, a popular online GIF repository, the website "offers several additional suggestions, such as 'Sassy Black Lady,' 'Angry Black Lady,' and 'Black Fat Lady' to assist users in narrowing down their search."[21] Set against the dizzying number of GIFs transmitted through online platforms daily (in 2016, for example data collected by Giphy indicated the Facebook Messenger users were sending approximately 25,000 GIFs per minute through the platform; in October of that year, Giphy announced that its catalogue exceeded 1 billion images and that it was directly serving over 100 million users daily), the relationship between Giphy's algorithmic

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[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.

encouragement, the minstrelized racialization circuited through GIF transmission, and the pernicious calcification of racist tropes is made newly visible.[22] These interconnected processes are able to fold into one another and mutually subsist through their internal differentiation and adaptation to the evolving contexts of racialization. This folding inward, however, is complemented and augmented a collective folding outward, whereby each racializing formation functions to subtend the omnipresent and socially saturating system of racial hierarchy characteristic of the United States' social order.

How, then, to think the ramifications of racialized reaction GIFs transversally, thereby bridging the structural and the capillary without diminishing or distorting either? An interesting, as well as symbolic, method can be culled by reading synthetically the propositions that respectively inaugurate and conclude Jackson's meditation. Opening her article with a remark on GIFs' undeniable presence within the social worlds of the Internet, Jackson then indexes the curious representational field that will be the subject of her critique: "But even a casual observer of GIFing would notice that, as with much of online culture, [B]lack people appear at the center of it all. Or images of [B]lack people, at

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[22] Giphy, "New on Giphy: GIF View Counts," Medium, August 28, 2017, https://medium.com/@giphy/introducing-gif-view-counts-e3ec1899e7bd; Miltner and Highfield, "Never Gonna GIF You Up," 4. Notably, of the three GIFs included in static-image form on their first page of Miltner and Highfield's article, one is of NeNe Leakes, whose iterative "GIFification" is the subject of my later discussion. The two offer the following hypothetical narration of the image's use: "Whether . . . texting a reaction GIF of NeNe Leakes from *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* . . . the GIF is a remarkably dexterous, malleable, and versatile file format that is central to digital cultures and communication." Ibid. Only the GIF of Leakes is specifically designated a "reaction GIF," with the first image of the trio not even directly described as an image (a GIF of Hillary Clinton) and the third characterized as a remixed clip.

least."[23] As she approaches the conclusion of her argument, however, the undifferentiated sociality of "online culture" is filtered through an optics of particularity, one informed by histrionic performances so often transformed into the content of reaction GIFs: "Ultimately, [B]lack people and [B]lack images are thus relied upon to perform a huge amount of emotional labor online on behalf of [non-Black] users. . . . Intertwine this proliferation of our images with the others we're as likely to see—death, looped over and over—and the Internet becomes an exhausting experience."[24] Situated in immediate dialectical relation to one another, these statements locate the racializing force of the GIF at the level of techno-material, affective precision and at the register of an epistemologically aspirational approach to totality in the form of Internet culture.[25] The GIF thus becomes a molecular instance of racializing subordination whose efficacy is conditioned by a molar social order of racism.

The purpose of Jackson's intervention is, broadly described, diagnostic and prescriptive. Recognizing the circulation of racialized reaction GIFs within larger constellations of racist economies, Jackson questions why the use of GIFs featuring Black men or women in decontextualized, caricatured representations can feel so seemingly intuitive and innocuous. Her concern is with the

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[23] Jackson, "Digital Blackface in GIFs."

[24] Ibid.

[25] The notion of an "epistemologically aspirational approach to totality" is drawn from Kevin Floyd's *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*. Floyd contends that the methodological promise of this aspirational mode is contained in its approach to the universal "from the vantage of a specific location within that web of relations [i.e., within that totalizing structure], a vantage that necessarily abstracts that totality in coloring everything it seems, but also makes possible broad understandings of social reality unavailable to other perspectives." Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 12.

expectation of emotional labor onto Black persons whose momentary expressions—expressions often captured under situations of purposeful, rather than purportedly "natural," exaggeration—are transformed into infinitely looping sequences to be parodied. This exportation swiftly recalibrates into exploitation, amplifying its already violent potentiality. By this, I mean to suggest that the reaction GIF of the Black subject is only able to perform this exported emotional labor because of a prior sociocultural logic that reads Black embodiment as assuredly viable content for racist theatricality; in turn, this hermeneutical racism performs an exportation of its own, disseminating that transformed content as irrefutable evidence of the "natural" excess and pathology of Black behavior.

Extensions of the critical possibilities opened by Jackson's text are promisingly numerous. Brief mention is made, for instance, of the hypervisibility of Black femmes and women as the content of reaction GIFs, although this observation is not further pursued. Its provocation, nevertheless, indexes the analytical potential of triangulating the imbricated processes of racialization, gender-sex materialization, and sexualization to more precisely interrogate the GIF's role in constituting the social. Another suspended reserve of critical potential arises at the conclusion of the text with Jackson's characterization of the reaction GIFs' racializing work as the extraction of Black persons' emotional labor. Jackson does not maintain, however, that the labor so siphoned is *exclusively* delimited by the emotional field. Accordingly, whether the character of this extracted labor can or should be understood in alternative and additional ways remains an unanswered question.

With this said, I would like to propose three inquiries that constructively

respond to and extend Jackson's analysis of the reaction GIF; these three

questions will orient my subsequent discussion of the constitutive braiding

between the GIF and racialization as a process of subject-formation. First, what

logic subtends the dissemination of GIFs caricaturing and dehumanizing Black

women and those GIFs' cultural omnipresence? Phrased alternatively, how can

the reaction GIF be situated within a genealogy of blackface minstrelsy,

particularly with regard to the figure of the mammy, the enslaved Black woman

whose status as subject is forcibly entangled with her willing submission to

enslaving whites? It is to this question that I will respond in the remainder of this

chapter's discussion. Second, how does the mediatic specificity of the reaction

GIF—the stylization of its content, its capacity for infinite repetition, its truncated

temporality, the ease with which it can be exchanged—aid and abet an extraction

of Black women's *affective* labor? This transition from emotion to affect enables

an analysis of the GIF's extractive operations more attuned to the psychic,

corporeal, and intersubjective violences of sexualized racialization and racialized

sexualization.[26] Third, how might this critical engagement with affective labor and

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[26] The subjectifying field intended by the locution "sexualized racialization and racialized
sexualization" draws upon Jasbir Puar's influential monograph *Terrorist Assemblages* and her
fertile methodological centering of "race and sexuality simultaneously in the reproduction of
relations of living and dying." Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer
Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 35. Her intervention, which introduces the
conceptual axiomatic undergirding the text, regards the relationship between the biopolitical—
Michel Foucault's description of the modern state's investment in cultivating and maximizing life in
its myriad unfolding forms—and the necropolitical—Achille Mbembe's corrective to Foucauldian
biopolitics that attends to the state's fostering of death and "the brutality of biopower's incitement
to life." Ibid., 33. Puar identifies a methodological deficiency characteristic of present
engagements with biopolitics: these accounts routinely foreground processes of racialization and

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the GIF's mediatic specificity illuminate the symbolic relations between the figures of the mammy, the minstrel, and the machine? That is, how does the circulation of racialized reaction GIFs work through the genealogical currents of mammification and minstrelization to conduct the making-machine of Black women? What are the consequences of and constraints imposed by this making-machine for the subject interpellated as a Black woman? What becomes of her subjective particularity, of her capacity to recognize herself (and be recognized by others) as ontologically commensurate with the status of human? These latter two inquiries will build on the analysis presented below and will be substantively engaged in the discussion's next and final chapters.

Mammification, Minstrelization, and the Racializing Epistemology of the GIF

      Endearing, gruff, cantankerous, strong, spirited, fiercely independent, unapologetic, incisively observant—the innumerable representational forms demanded of GIFs of Black women bear an uneasy resonance with many of the attributes of an iconic figure of the antebellum South, the mammy. Is there a

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sexualization as immanent to biopolitical analysis but seldom situate the two fields as reciprocally constitutive and indissociably intertwined.

    Rather than continue this pattern of mutual exclusion, Puar understands racialization and sexualization to be coextensive technologies, and, as a result, the disaggregation of "exceptional queer subjects from queer racialized populations in contemporary U.S. politics" can be mapped onto "the tension between biopolitics and necropolitics." Ibid., 35. The suffusion of her analytical optic with a concurrently operative sexual-racial regulatory script enables Puar to refuse the corresponding methodological maneuver that usually dislocates the biopolitical from the necropolitical. As Puar states, "This bio-necro collaboration conceptually acknowledges biopower's direct activity in death, while remaining bound to the optimization of life, and necropolitics' nonchalance toward death even as it seeks out killing as its primary aim." Ibid. The imbrication of biopolitics and necropolitics that Puar proposes is intrinsic to the logic of making-machine, which refuses to explicitly acknowledge the demarcation of Black bodies as imperative sites of death by proliferating the ruse that submission to the bodily inertia of machinic subjectivity will inoculate Black subjects against state and social violence.

relationship between the ascendant popularity of GIFs featuring Black women and the multiple legacies of the mammy, the latter of which, in its constitutive conductivity, might be thought as the logics of mammification?

I want to suggest that one form of this contemporary logic of mammification can be seen in the frequent exchange of reaction GIFs whose content features Black women performing decontextualized scenes of hyperbolic excess. Moreover, I contend that this logic of mammification works through and alongside proliferations of digital minstrelsy, and that both figures—that of the mammy and that of the minstrel—are generatively embedded within larger discursive formations which braid together notions of the mammy, the minstrel, and the machine. Through the durative extractions of Black women's affective labor maintained by the circulation of racialized reaction GIFs, a process of making-machine manifests, one that strips Black women of their subjective particularity by denying them the possibility of recognition within the ontological status of the human.

On the Logic of Mammification.

In her _Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory_, Kimberly Wallace-Sanders opines that "the mammy figure looms over the American imagination as a cultural influence so pervasive[ly] . . . because it both shapes and is shaped by a consciousness that is uniquely American."[27] The

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[27] Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, _Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory_ (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 9.

lexical presence of the term "mammy," Wallace-Sanders ably documents,

solidified by the mid-nineteenth century, most notably in the American South.[28]

The term's continued resonance, however, bespeaks the racializing mythos of

which the mammy has been differentially symbolic across American space-

times.[29] To better methodologically attend to the diverse histories of the mammy

figure, Wallace-Sanders develops her analysis through a meticulously reflexive

balancing of historical and contemporary interpretations of the mammy figure.

The histories of American racism and their cooperative efforts with essentializing

gender mythology are never foreclosed in the presented account. Nevertheless,

Wallace-Sanders does not deny that any effort of historical reconstruction

involves a displacement of present onto past and past onto present; she instead

seeks to understand how diversely positioned reifications of the mammy figure

have shaped American racial imaginaries both historically and in the present.

Synthesizing the myriad descriptions of the mammy figure, Wallace-

Sanders offers the following characterization as its most recognizable iteration,

an embodiment of extremity and exaggeration:

> Mammy's body is grotesquely marked by excess: she is usually extremely
> overweight, very tall, broad-shouldered; her skin is nearly black. She
> manages to be a jolly presence—she often sings or tells stories while she
> works—and a strict disciplinarian at the same time. . . . *Mammy* is often
> both her title and the only name she has ever been given. . . . Mammy
> wields considerable authority without the plantation household and

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[28] Ibid., 4. Wallace-Sanders states that the earliest documented use of the term "mammy" was in 1810 in reference to enslaved women caring for white children. By 1820, the word was "almost exclusively associated with African American women serving as wet nurses and caretakers of white children." Ibid.

[29] Wallace-Sanders laments the frequent siloing of the mammy figure into analytically inflexible categories, with the consequence of such a reductive methodological tack likely guaranteeing an inability to see "the mammy figure as a signpost pointing to concepts and ideals far beyond the stereotype." Ibid., 3.

consequently retains a measure of dubious, unreliable respect in the slave quarters; many slaves consider her untrustworthy because she allegedly identifies so completely with the culture that oppresses them.[30]

The defining psychic, corporal, and socially positional attributes Wallace-Sanders locates in depictions of the mammy figure have translated into the unfolding present in the form of a "controlling image," what Patricia Hill Collins defines as an iteratively produced ideological framing of Black women "designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of [Black women's] everyday life."[31]

For Collins, the pernicious legacy of the mammy figure is its subjectifying primacy as the "first controlling image" through which Black women are forcibly filtered and regulated.[32] It is the violently maintained tenacity of this controlling image that ensures the continued "mammification" of Black women—their de facto treatment as mammy figures by white persons and the penalizing discipline to which they are subjected should they fail to appear deferential to and nurturing of elite whites.[33] Collins' magisterial explication of the interwoven ubiquity of the mammy figure across American social, cultural, and political registers unflinchingly illustrates the figure's symbolic function in maintenance of American racism and racialization. She identifies the mammy figure as a generative nexus for the reproduction of racialized sexuality and sexualized racism, and it is by

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[30] Ibid., 5–6.
[31] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1990), 69.
[32] Ibid., 72
[33] Ibid., 73.

implicating these multiple sites of social disqualification that the mammy figure can continue to exercise its disciplinary power as a controlling image.

Following these analyses, the logic of mammification may be understood as exhibiting several different tenets, with the relentless injunction that Black women position themselves in service to non-Black persons as especially axiomatic. This logic contends that through such service and self-sacrifice (the latter of which manifests as coerced self-debasement) the mammified Black woman will experience a serene joy and satisfaction. It is necessary to note, however, that the logic of mammification is not per se coextensive with the symbolic operations of the mammy figure. Although the mammy image cannot and does not fully determine Black women's behavior, it effects an indelible *impression* on Black women's bodies, akin to what Hortense Spillers has named a "hieroglyphics of the flesh."[34]

The logic of mammification I am proposing cannot be advanced outside its own historicity; to intertwine the mammy figure with the exchange of GIFs of Black women by non-Black persons requires parsing out the genealogical histories of practices involving the performance of Blackness and, specifically, of Black womanhood.[35] To this end, the historiographical work of Micki McElya is especially valuable. In *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-*

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[34] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 67.

[35] My use of the locution "Black womanhood" is not intended to suggest that there is a unifying, overarching "form" or "essence" that connects the plural experiences of Black women across time and space. Rather, the locution endeavors to accent the *production* of such a unifying substance and its *ascription* to Black women through practices of racialization and subordination of which minstrelsy is paradigmatic. This universalizing substance is a condition for the making-machine of Black women, as I will subsequently argue.

Century America, McElya endeavors to produce an account of slavery's histories that could explain how narratives of "the slave as a faithful and loving dependent, of which the mammy was the most popular representation, [came to] drench[] American culture and politics throughout the twentieth century and persist to this day."[36] The narrative of the faithful slave achieved its revisionist efficacy through the generation of nostalgia for a romantic antebellum South that never was; the veneration of the mammy figure represented a particular technology in the production of this alternative historical account. Although the forms taken by this revisionist propaganda were varied, McElya devotes significant attention to a theatrical scene unusually common at the beginning of the twentieth century— white women engaging in "professional and amateur impersonations of enslaved [B]lack women on stages and in living rooms, whether for historical presentations, for shared amusement, to raise funds for favorite causes, or for pay."[37]

White women were arguably the nation's primary producers and consumers of the faithful slave narrative (and its concomitant mammy tropes) in the early twentieth century. These women would author textual archives of letters subsequently presented as exchanges between women and their mammies; these letters, though written exclusively by white women, depicted a sentimental intimacy whose intensity traded on a fictive bond mendaciously presented as an authentic relation between a white woman and her loving mammy. Often, the

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[36] Micki McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.
[37] Ibid., 39.

retrospective wish that these epistolary narratives expressed—notwithstanding the abundance of sublimated erotic desire for Black women's bodies dripping off their pages—was that "nothing could have been more precious to enslaved [B]lack people than their white charges."[38]

Just as these written manifestos shaped white women's nostalgic longings for a return to the false history of the faithful slave, they would be unexpectedly shaped by these women's experiences with segregation, war, and social upheaval. The primacy of textual production in the form of epistolary archives would give way to more substantively embodied performances of blackface minstrelsy, frequently in the form of racial masquerade and dialect reading. It was through the assumption of "the role of the [B]lack mammy" that a white woman was able "to reinforce her own [racial and class] status."[39] It was through simulation of the Black mammy, a simulation that was paradoxically regarded as more authentic than the fictional mammy figure on which the performance was based, that vectors of class, race, and gender could be stabilized during the tumultuous first decades of the twentieth century.

The figuration of Black women as always already mammies is, in effect, the evacuation of Black women's infinite subjective particularity. Its operation is intergenerational, moving through and upon the violence of slavery, segregation, discrimination, disenfranchisement, and social precarity. Dehumanizing abstraction produced the mammy figure, and, in turn, for that figure to mark the

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[38] Ibid., 57.
[39] Ibid., 64.

bodies of Black women, this process of abstraction needed to again transpire. Rachel Alicia Griffin writes of mammification in a similar vein, positing it as a technique for the construction of stereotypical narratives of Black women in contemporary contexts that, when achieved, dissolves the specificity of Black women's individual lives. Mammified representations of Black women in a purportedly post-racial social and political order, one in which Black women can ably accrue capital and widely experience the promises of liberty, are, Griffin piercingly observes, nonetheless "replete with [portrayals of] servitude, obedience, self-sacrifice, caretaking, domesticity, and an allegiance to white people and white culture."[40]

On the Question of Minstrelsy and Making-Machine.

The mammy performances McElya scrupulously archives can be productively situated within the broader genealogy of blackface minstrelsy of which the racialized reaction GIF is a contemporary iteration. Indeed, Jackson develops an isomorphic argument in her "Digital Blackface" when addressing the diffuse mobility of racialized-*cum*-racist performance through the circulation of specific reaction GIFs. The minstrelizing preoccupations of mammy performances, though formalistically different from racialized reaction GIFs and ostensibly oriented toward unrelated ends, cannot be adequately scrutinized without querying their constitutive connection to the latter—as well as the

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[40] Rachel Alicia Griffin, "Olivia Pope as Problematic and Paradoxical: A Black Feminist Critique of *Scandal*'s 'Mammification,'" in *Feminist Theory and Pop Culture*, ed. A. Trier-Bienek (Rotterdam: Sense Publishes, 2015), 36.

constitutive connection of blackface minstrelsy to the notion of the machine. The histories of American slavery and plantation economies, suggests Louis Chude-Sokei, hermetically sealed "the relationship between [B]lacks and machines and expressed [that relationship] in performance via blackface minstrelsy."[41] Because Chude-Sokei's brilliant exposition of the intertwined legacies of the blackface minstrel and the machine-robot is exceedingly illustrative of the argument I have been developing thus far, I pause here to offer a brief interpretation of his text so as to situate it in dialogue with the specificity of my own intervention.

"The Uncanny History of Minstrels and Machines, 1835–1923" ("Uncanny History"), Chude-Sokei's contribution to the anthology *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy*, endeavors to exhume the complexly intertwined histories of race, technology, Blackness, industrialization, and empire in the American modernist era. This sprawling list of analytics belies the intensive interconnections Chude-Sokei nimbly traces between them; what begins as an impossibly broad and apparently irreducible conceptual cartography is shown to be a conductive nexus of overlapping, contradictory, and interwoven social processes. Parsing this dense core into its elementary patterns, Chude-Sokei isolates two primary clusters of meaning fundamental to American modernism. The first he terms the "*machine aesthetic*, [which was] produced by and through the West's difficult and ambivalent responses to industrialization, and which would ultimately find its political and social fulfillment in an America that

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[41] Louis Chude-Sokei, "The Uncanny History of Minstrels and Machines, 1835–1923," in *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy*, ed. Stephen Johnson (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 111.

announces its global presence via the language of inevitably, the language of the new."[42] The promise of industrialization in the latter portion of the nineteenth century inaugurated new possibilities of domination over land and the American frontier—that vital American reserve of the natural. Industrialization's slow transformation of nature into industry, however, was greeted with ambivalence and frustration. These affective anxieties sublimated in the form of a heightened nostalgia for an American nature, imagined to be unadulterated and not yet foreclosed by the insatiable hunger of industry.

The incongruence of this desire for an untouched natural with industrialization's commandeering flow was symbolically transposed onto the enslaved African body, largely "because of the African slave's central function deep within those very notions of 'nature' and nostalgia."[43] The presumed intimacy of the racialized (that is, African) body with nature, as well as race's prominent role in the process of modernization and the cultural experiences of modernity, gesture toward the second cluster of meaning-making in modernity, what Chude-Sokei calls the "*African aesthetic*."[44] The contradictory plurality of the locution "African aesthetic" intends to gesture toward the multiply imposed "metonymic relationships between and among [B]lacks and their varied cultural products during and after slavery . . . [and how] these constructs ultimately manifested a complex set of relationships with [their] dialectical other:

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[42] Ibid., 110 (emphasis added).
[43] Ibid., 111.
[44] Ibid. (emphasis added).

technology, industry, [or] civilization."[45] Proper management of the anxieties

inadvertently forged in the industrial crucible required flexibility between the

categorical markers "race" and "machine," "would require strategic moments

when the two blend and pass for each other rather than function as the

antinomies they did and still do represent."[46] Chude-Sokei thus writes: "In

analyzing these two clusters and historicizing their fundamentally modern

influence on each other, what we then find in the nineteenth century are two of

the twentieth century's most distinct products facing and doubling each other: *the*

blackface minstrel and the robot."[47]

Much like the historical accounts of the mammy discussed above, Chude-

Sokei locates plantation slavery and its legacies as the source of blackface

minstrelsy and the racist popular culture it would spawn. Prior to the "birth" of

modernity, it was the plantation economy that "sealed the relationship between

[B]lacks and machines and expressed it in performance via blackface

minstrelsy."[48] The plantation's regimented disciplinarity was a structural precursor

to the formal, temporally bounded, and depersonalizing labor systems of Fordism

and Taylorism. The automation of those subsequent systems of mass production

was already visible in the plantation's aspiration toward machinic, routinized

production. It is therefore unsurprising, Chude-Sokei observes, that whites

seeking to escape industrialization's effacement of the individuated laborer would

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[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid., 112.
[47] Ibid. (emphasis added).
[48] Ibid., 114.

turn to minstrelsy performance in the form of an "always flexible and always performative 'African Aesthetic' . . . as distinct from whiteness and 'the West.'"[49] Indeed, at the turn of the twentieth century, the contested position of the Black subject as neither human nor animal but something altogether elsewhere translated as a kind of liminality. This symbolic aperture came to incorporate the idea of machinic production as indicative of a machinic body, which was, in fact, not a "body" at all. To relationally experience that body is to be forced to address its signification of the uncanny, its machinic potential to colonize the colonizing white subject through the automatism it masks as its nature.

Chude-Sokei's turn to the Freudian uncanny as "the space of epistemological uncertainty and cultural anxiety where the minstrel meets the machine" is driven by the historical transition from plantation-based economies of enslavement to increasing possibilities of Black migration and labor diversification.[50] In the context of American slavery and in the legacy of blackface minstrelsy, the uncanny inscribes the particular anxiety felt when a *thing* (the Black subject) deceptively presents itself as a *person*. During the era of plantation slavery and its (still) violent aftermath, "this slippage occurs when a designated thing dares assert itself as a person via mimicry of 'human' codes, thereby suggesting the capacity for reason, for literacy, and [for] kinship."[51] The liminal ontological position of the Black subject, agonizingly amplified by adaptive relations of domination at the turn of the twentieth century, was preserved in its

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[49] Ibid., 116.
[50] Ibid., 122.
[51] Ibid., 121

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ambiguity through recourse to blackface minstrelsy and the racialized figures it congealed. Minstrelsy persisted in the effort to maintain the Black body as a capacious, romanticized, and romanticizing sign of an antebellum past, an industrializing present, and a technologically promising future. The cultural forms that dispersed throughout the beginning decades of the twentieth century, many taken to typify the modernist moment, deeply linked to that figure of the machinic minstrel, who would remain at the core of the discursive and economic effects that are American mass media and popular culture."[52]

The purpose of my extensive, granular mapping of the discursive maneuvers made in "Uncanny History" has been in foundational anticipation of my own argument. To briefly review, my claim is that, building upon Jackson's analysis in "Digital Blackface," the circulation of reaction GIFs whose content features hyperbolic caricatures of Black women works through the genealogical currents of mammification and minstrelsy to further alienate Black women from recognition within the ontological category of the human. To justify my positioning the GIF within these genealogical legacies, I turned to the diverse histories of those two conceptual personae, the mammy and the minstrel; in so doing, I sought to historicize the *relation* of the GIF-*qua*-digital-minstrelsy to these two figures.

More pointedly, my objective was to propose that the mammy and the minstrel can be historicized in their relationship to and with the concept of the

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[52] Ibid., 129.

machine, whereby the transition of minstrelsy to digital or "technological" form was not seen as aberrant or discontinuous but rather as emerging within an internally differentiated historical field of the making-machine of Black bodies. "Uncanny History" tracks the braiding of minstrel and machine but does not address the figure of the mammy; the rich literature on the history of the mammy figure I examined, though clear in its connecting the mammy and the minstrel, did not address the figure of the machine.

Read collectively, however, these diverse accounts suggest a thick point of intersection between these three symbols, one that provocatively attests to what I will call the *making-machine of Black women*. As I will argue below, the process of making-machine is the process of desubjectification through coercive, iterative submission to automation; it is a method by which a subject, one whose embodied particularity threatens the vitality of economies of domination, is stripped of her subjectivity, that is, the very *embodied particularity* that should guarantee the recognition of her personhood. The circulation of reaction GIFs whose content depicts Black women through racist hyperbole is a constitutive mechanism of the desubjectifying process of making-machine. Through its extraction of Black women's affective labor and its integration of Black women into escapable, repetitive loops, the reaction GIF pervasively diffuses its making-machine logic. Although attempts disavow the violent racialization the GIF effects often appeal to its hyper-truncated duration, it is in fact the GIF's abridged yet endless temporality that is of peculiar importance to the dominating relation instituted by the process of making-machine.

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On the Concretized Object and the Transversal Analytic.

Within the abstracting processes of mammification, minstrelization, and making-machine I have discussed, I have proposed heuristics with which to evaluate the social relationality of GIF exchange that themselves appear to work through additional maneuvers of abstraction and reification. I note this to explicitly acknowledge the methodological problematic that manifests in consequence: The analytical movements transited by these heuristics hazard dehumanization and depersonalization in their own right.

Informing this methodological risk, as well as, I hope, justifying it, is the critical promise expressed in Kevin Floyd's syncretic exegesis of a queer Marxist hermeneutic in his *Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*. There, Floyd offers a queered reading of the Marxist method of theorizing social totalities through his injection of desire into the dialectical movement of the concrete and the abstract. Desire provides a motor for the internal differentiation of an abstract unity whose subsequent reconsolidation *resists* a return to abstraction through the proliferation of specific, concretized social relations. As a result, the "specification of concepts and objects and the specification of totality [become] inseparable."[53]

What I understand Floyd's queer reading of Marxist method to offer is a reminder of the imperative to maintain a taut dialectical relation between a

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[53] Floyd, *The Reification of Desire*, 28.

concrete object of analysis and the abstract social-relational totality to which it is

transversally connected. Bringing Floyd's insights to bear on this discussion, my

argument's theoretical foundation, situated at an abstracted, broad register, must

now be subjected to the dialectical pressure of a concrete object of analysis

against which such theoretical overtures can be evaluated. However, in the

absence of that foundation, one that is informed by the diverse histories of the

objects and concepts under scrutiny, such an analysis would fail to account for

the very abstracting processes it seeks to reveal. Insofar as the concrete object

of my analysis is the racialized reaction GIF, I turn to an example cited by

Jackson as representative of digital minstrelsy: a "GIFed" scene from the popular

reality television show *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (*RHOA*).

One of several television programs composing the *Housewives* series,

RHOA follows the lives of several affluent women (the so-called "housewives,"

though many have established, lucrative careers that seldom exist alongside the

kind of labor the term might otherwise connote) in the Atlanta area. Many

members of the cast, which has consisted almost always exclusively of Black

women, have developed notable celebrity profiles, though none is arguably more

widely known than long-term cast member Linnethia Monique "NeNe" Leakes.

Leakes rose to the heights of television celebrity due to her multi-season tenure

on *RHOA*, which remains in production. Leakes' appearances on the program

were recognizable for showcasing her no-nonsense, unapologetically confident,

and endlessly witty personality. Like other reality television programs, *RHOA* cast

members would frequently be asked to comment on the events transpiring within

their social circle in "confessional scenes." Such scenes involve a cast member appearing alone and speaking in monologue form directly into the recording camera. Edited in such a way as to imply that their content derives from the seemingly extemporaneous, candid reactions of cast members to the segment's plots, confessional scenes appeal to a sense of intimacy fictively generated by their formalistic elements. In such scenes, cast members are presented as expressing their most authentic and "unfiltered" thoughts.[54] That directors, producers, other cast members, and crew members likely surround the "confessing" individual cannot be acknowledged; instead, the confessional encourages the willful suspension of disbelief, the efficacy of which is largely secured by these scenes' frequent appearance across reality television programs and their adoption of the same formalistic elements.

Leakes' confessional scenes, known for their incisive commentary and seemingly frank observations, became Internet sensations, regularly the subject of "viral" reproduction and dissemination across social media platforms. These scenes underwent such frequent transformation into GIF content that those

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[54] Minna Aslama and Mervi Pantti suggest that the reality television genre (of which *RHOA* is an example) derives and maintains its claims to authenticity—despite myriad instances when that authenticity is unambiguously proven to be the genre's *most* manufactured product—through continuous appeals to the confessional scene, "the key attraction [of which] is the revelation of [the confessor's] 'true' emotions." Minna Aslama and Mervi Pantti, "Talking Alone: Reality TV, Emotions and Authenticity," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 9, no. 2 (2006): 168. Rather than attempt to position the confessional mode within the broader genealogy of confessional cultures, Aslama and Pantti provocatively claim that critical attention must be paid to the *form* of the confessional, which is not to be differentiated from the substance of its discourse. This methodological rerouting proves theoretically productive, with the two ultimately concluding that the confessional scenes of reality television "an arena for simultaneously expressing the emotional and making claims [in support] of the authenticity of those emotions and, in the end, of the 'reality' of the shows." Ibid.

charged with the management of *RHOA*'s branding created an account under the

show's name on Giphy, the online GIF repository. Of the many GIFs featuring

Leakes available on Giphy (a search of her stage name, "NeNe Leakes," yields

over 1,500 results on the website), I would like to mention one particular

confessional-scene-turned-GIF, created and uploaded to Giphy in November

2015. This GIF features Leakes in a confessional scene, responding to an

interaction between members of the *RHOA* cast. Leakes is seen irreverently

throwing her right hand into the air and stating, "The shade, honey. I liveee [*sic*],"

the textual transcription of which is appended to the GIF's bottom.[55] The putative

intimacy and contrived privacy of Leakes' confessional statement—functioning as

an invitation to those in the audience to join her in a joke that, by virtue of its

secret transmission, only she and they will be able to subsequently appreciate—

seemingly mimes the logic of the epistolary "mammy" archives, wherein the

production of excessive emotional attachment, itself always conditioned on the

privacy of the discursive exchange, became the guarantor of the archives'

legitimacy.

  According to Giphy, the GIF of Leakes, simply called "NeNe Leakes

Shade GIF," has been viewed almost *50 million times* since its addition to

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[55] Real Housewives of Atlanta (@rhoa), "NeNe Leakes Shade GIF," Giphy, November 3, 2015, https://giphy.com/gifs/rhoa-nene-leakes-shade-3o85xtOGdvAAafXLe8. The textual transcription of Leakes' statement includes the graphemic additions appended to the word "live." Although the GIF's webpage offers no explanation as to this textual (mis)production, it is plausible that the repetition of the "e" is intended to reflect the phonological accent in Leakes' pronunciation (that is, Leakes' extensive pronunciation of the "ve" when an intentional syllabic rupture is integrated into her pronunciation of "live"). A cursory examination of other GIFs—particularly GIFs of non-Black persons—does not suggest that this pattern of textual-phonological symmetry is commonly followed. It is thus necessary to ask whether this deliberate graphemic excess is intended to convey the very excess of behavioral hyperbole that the racialized reaction GIF indexes.

Giphy's catalogue at the end of 2015. This figure, notably, does not include the

number of times the GIF has been retrieved from Giphy and then disseminated

through unconnected platforms (e.g., if the GIF is downloaded to a personal

computer and then shared from that computer, this would not affect Giphy's

recorded number of views). The figure also does not represent the number of

times the looping sequence itself has been witnessed. This is because, as Giphy

explains, its view-counting mechanism registers a single-unit increase in views

(e.g., from one view to two views) each time a GIF is shared (rather than each

time it is shared as well as each time it completes its animated sequence). Said

otherwise, an GIF's view count is not affected by the number of times it repeats

its content by virtue of remaining within the visible boundaries of a particular

digital interface.[56] Moreover, this figure includes no internally differentiating

statistics about its use. That is to say, Giphy provides no information about the

contexts of those 50 million views, meaning that there is no effective way to

determine the sites of the image's most frequent circulation. As with any brute

quantification, the figure flattens out difference, and it cannot be assumed that

each of those views was an instance of violently subordinating racialization, an

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[56] Giphy, "New on Giphy: GIF View Counts." This is in contrast to the methodology of the loop-count feature on Vine, an application through which users can exchange recorded video content limited in duration to six seconds or less. Unlike similar vectors of popularity on social media platforms and Giphy's view-count mechanism, Maria Poulaki comments, the success of the Vine loop "does not—or at least not only—depend on spatial spread, [that is,] the number of people watching, but rather on the duration of views, that is to say on how many times a single person or end user 'endured' a loop." Maria Poulaki, "Featuring Shortness in Online Loop Cultures," *Empedocles: European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication* 5, nos. 1–2 (2015): 94. That Poulaki portrays the scene of perpetual exposure to the looping movement-image as one to be "endured" provocatively gestures toward the internal differentiation required of any phenomenological account addressing the event of collision between a GIF and a spectating subject.

instance matching the context of GIF circulation that serves as the analytical

backdrop of my analysis. It is entirely plausible and likely the case that among

those 50 million views are countless instances of Black cellphone users

marshaling the GIF to subvert its racially subordinating imagery. This form of

subversive use, effectively a caricaturing of the caricature, must not be

discounted as unrelated to the broader analytical queries my discussion

implicates. However, insofar as my objective here is to root out and expressly

identify the instances in which the circulation of GIFs featuring Leakes fortify a

white supremacist order of things, I regrettably do not attend to this vital question

of subversion.

Returning to the specific GIF of Leakes mentioned above, I would like to

briefly employ Giphy's rigid quantification formula to consider the relationship

between views and looped playbacks. The approximately three-quarters of a

second the image takes to complete a single playback, when couched in broader

temporal units, yields the following figures: in a one-minute period, the GIF

completes its looping sequence around eighty times; in slightly more than a five-

minute period, the GIF completes its looping sequence more than four hundred

times. In neither instance, however, would the number of completed loops result

in an equivalent increase in the number of "views" associated with the GIF.

Whether the image repeats eighty times or eight hundred times, the formula

registers an increase of one in the GIF's registered number of views, as "view" is

in fact an index of *deployment*, that is, an approximate quantification of the

instances in which the GIF is retrieved from Giphy and shared through a digital-communication platform.

In brief review, I have thus far argued that the process of mammification functions as a constitutive social logic that can readily adapt in response to the maintenance needs of historically specific economies of racism. I have also contended that blackface minstrelsy, of which the early twentieth-century "mammy" performances are a central facet, was a primary technology through which perceptions of the Black body were successfully bound to images of the machinic automaton. The synthetic alchemy that wove together the Black body and the machine functioned to absolve a white-supremacist American social order of its grievous moral failure. That is, to assert that American white-supremacist ideologies, institutions, and embodied practices cohered around the dehumanization of Black lives was to proclaim the logic of the necessarily illogical: How could the not-human ever be subject to dehumanization, be made to lose something "it" never had? Access to the very ontological category of personhood was contingent on the successful interpellation of an individual body *as* a person, of a human figure *as* figured properly human. This tautological politics of recognition coalesced with the alchemical production of the machinic Black body; the consequence of their imbrication was the convenient foreclosure of the any possible interrogation of the moral failure this political-discursive union signified.

Thinking these two arguments together alongside the GIF, I would assert that the infinitely looping movement-image of Leakes' grandiose reaction

represents a contemporary, discrete, and interlocking moment of the intersection between mammy, minstrel, and machine. The hyperbole for which Leakes is known and from which her celebrity derives becomes the means through which she is derisively caricatured in an endlessly repeating scene. Of the hundreds of GIFs whose content comprises Leakes' varied reactions to the dramatic exchanges of the *RHOA* cast, dozens have view counts in excess of *several million*. In turn, it is not implausible to imagine that Leakes' arrested dynamism, her quotidian reactions forcibly looped within an exploitative frame, her less-than-a-second of living, has been made to repeat several hundred million times. The relationship Leakes may have had (or may be abstracted to have had) with the notion of personhood prior to this "GIFing" has corroded in its wake; the hollow splicing and reproduction of her most allegedly "outrageous" moments would seem able to entertain only in the aftermath of this infinite loss. This is the characteristic form of the process of making-machine.

What remains, then, is first to interrogate the imbrication of the GIF and the process of making-machine, an enterprise situated at the register of the conceptual. Next is to weave the analytic yield of the former inquiry together with this concrete object of scrutiny, the incessantly proliferating cadre of GIFs whose content is the looping hyperbole ascribed to the persona of NeNe Leakes. This will also require a broader conceptual account of the GIF's racializing, extractive mechanics. I turn to these questions in Chapters 3 and 4.

CHAPTER 3

MEDIATIC SPECIFICITY, AFFECTIVE EXPROPRIATIONS, AND THE MAKING-MACHINE OF BLACK WOMEN: ON THE GIF'S PROMISE OF ONTOLOGICAL (IM)POSSIBILITY

What does it mean to queer the Marxist dialectical relation between the abstract and the concrete, especially as detailed in Kevin Floyd's *Reification of Desire*?[1] While I have identified the queering of this Marxist dialectic as paramount to my argument's efficacy, it is necessary to note that I understand the virtue of this method to exceed its recursive revision of the Marxist categories of abstract and concrete. To queer the dialectical relation of those two categories requires reflexivity not merely at the level of executed method; reflexivity is also demanded with equal force in determinations of method *as such*.

That is, to work through the queered Marxism Floyd envisions obliges me to adopt a position of reflexive autocritique directed toward my traversals between the registers of the conceptual and the particular as well as toward how I delineate the very coordinates of those traversals. Floyd's queered Marxism, so espoused, takes its concern at two levels—that of "method" (the dialectical movement between abstract and concrete) and that of meta-method (the iterative reimagining of the character of that dialectical movement which is informed by the diverse contexts of its employment). That is, to think the concrete is to think it informed by the abstract, and to think the abstract is to think it informed by the concrete. An analytical account endeavoring to explain how the racialized

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[1] See generally Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

reaction GIF extracts its subject's affective must therefore be foregrounded by attention to the question of mediatic specificity. To attend to the GIF's mediatic specificity is to consider its technical constitution in the contextual historicity of its deployment.

In their reflections on the materiality of new media, Steven Maras and David Sutton advocate an approach to theorizing medium specificity "not in terms of purity or as a norm, but precisely as a product of interaction between different elements in an assemblage of material processes."[2] These processes are material in both the technical and historical senses. The methodological impulse of a medium-specific analysis is a discerning sensitivity to the internally differentiated field of a medium's emergence; its attention is carefully directed to the context of a medium's production and the sites at which the medium exceeds the bounds of that enabling context.

In the discussion that follows I offer a provisional account of the GIF filtered through the optics of its mediatic specificity. I turn to questions about the GIF's looping function, representative of its style and form, to further interrogate how the GIF troubles the temporal fields in which it is circulated. Through this critical appraisal of the image's looping sequence I develop an account of the GIF's relation to the affective. I then consider the affectivity of the GIF as a question of labor—that is, as a question of *affective labor*. This theoretical exegesis will frame and orient my return in this discussion's concluding entries to

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[2] Steven Maras and David Sutton, "Medium Specificity Re-visited," *Convergence: The International Journal of New Media Technologies* 6, no. 2 (2000): 102.

the racialized reaction GIF and to the relationship between the extraction of

affective labor and the process of making-machine.

Networked Looping and Affective Repetition: Sketching a Provisional Account of the GIF

Extant literature providing a critical engagement with the relation between

the GIF and the social can be loosely taxonomized as proceeding along one of

two routes. The first cluster is broadly governed by methods reflecting a

particular derivative of cultural studies that tends to emphasize the GIF's

potential for communicative multiplicity without attendant regard to the image's

materiality and its concomitant specificity.[3] The second cluster, reflective of a

subset of media studies whose impulses include media archaeology, network

theory, and deep focus on technical specificity, privileges the particularity of the

GIF as a digital medium in its examinations. My purpose here will not be to argue

in favor of one method or the other; instead, I illuminate the potentials and

insufficiencies of each, thereby sharpening the methodological form of my own

analysis and its possibilities. Ultimately, the method I pursue cannot be classified

as either cultural studies or media studies. Moving through the overlapping and

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[3] My critique of a certain brand of cultural studies frameworks, which reads with suspicion their unproblematized embrace of unfettered choice, possibility, and opportunity, resonates with Kane Race's powerful diagnosis of the assimilation of some versions of cultural studies into a marketized, consumer-capitalist logic. In *Pleasure Consuming Medicine*, Race recalls that "cultural studies of pleasure and resistance have been criticized for providing too optimistic a celebration of [popular culture vis-à-vis consumption], in effect reproducing voluntaristic and populist accounts of liberation that sound all too suspiciously like the individualizing dreams of the market." Kane Race, *Pleasure Consuming Medicine: The Queer Politics of Drugs* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 74. It is toward this subsidiary, what Race describes as a "cultural studies of pleasure and resistance," that my critique is oriented.

conflicting domains of medium specificity, discursive formations, and theories of

the affective, I propose an account of the GIF emphasizing the relationship of its

looping form to the ossification of particular economies of affect as a way to

address the image's medium specificity as formed by and formative of its social

and historical context—including those of violent racialization. More specifically,

the form of affect I connect to the loop is that of affective labor.

A "Cultural Studies" Approach to the GIF: Decontextualization and the Question of Emancipation.

The disarticulation of the GIF from its source, so this genre of cultural

studies argument goes, radically ensures that the image's content will exceed the

boundaries of its imposed meaning. Through an excision that transcends the

boundedness of its origin, the GIF scrambles whatever semiotic stability had

cohered at the scene of its production, and generated instead is a theatre of

immanently polysemic contextual exchange. The GIF's capacity to signify

otherwise thus marks what is exemplary about its potential as a technology of

resistance. If, however, the GIF's potential for resistant signification is tied to its

deployment in situations that "exceed the boundaries" of its origin, then nearly

every instance of the image's (re)deployment—insofar as each instance of

deployment represents an event, a moment of irreducible difference—would

seemingly activate this subversive capacity. Demarcating the GIF's origin with

such molecular specificity, as these arguments implicitly do, yields a constitutive

"outside," one whose effective infinitude fetishizes any instance of GIF circulation as always already resisting a normative order.[4]

In accounts that too readily embrace the GIF as a harbinger of resistance, the relationship of the GIF's material specificity to the analysis performed is often the catalyst of logical inconsistency or obfuscating exuberance. Frequently detailed in these texts is a hermeneutical method that clearly acknowledges the GIF as a cultural text whose emergence as such is *conditioned by* its technical affordances and structural constraints. Executed, however, is an analysis that apprehends the GIF as a cultural text whose mediatic specificity is *no more than* the raw, apolitical stuff out of which the image emerges.

Stated otherwise, while these texts certainly acknowledge the constitutive tie between the GIF and its technical structure as well as the merit of remaining analytically attentive to that tie, their corresponding analyses frequently (and likely inadvertently) relegate the GIF's material specificity to an either depoliticized or pre-social (rather than co-emergent) domain. Their articulated

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[4] For examples of statements broadly representative of an uncomplicated celebration of the GIF's resistant possibilities through its capacity to exceed the signifying boundaries of the image's origin, see Kate M. Miltner and Tim Highfield, "Never Gonna GIF You Up: Analyzing the Cultural Significance of the Animated GIF," *Social Media + Society* 3, no. 3 (2017): 2 ("[M]alleability and versatility are key to the GIF's capacity for interpretive flexibility; the separation of GIFs from their original texts imbues them with multiple layers of meaning that are not universally accessible to all audiences . . . [and] provides the GIF with resistant potential: similar to double-entendre, parody, [and] other types of layered texts, GIFs can be (and often are) used to communicate hidden meanings in plain sight."); James Ash, "Sensation, Networks, and the GIF: Toward an Allotropic Account of Affect," in *Networked Affect*, ed. Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen, and Michael Petit (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 122 ("GIFs thereby demonstrate how simple forms of technology can undermine the supposed control that the cultural industries . . . have over the content they create, for GIFs work only by exceeding the context of their production."); Graig Uhlin, "Playing in the Gif(t) Economy," *Games and Culture* 9, no. 6 (2014): 526 ("The enduring potential of the GIF as a format to resist [corporatization] . . . resides in the format's low-fi technological base and corresponding aesthetic look . . . [which may work to ensure that it continues to be a channel for unofficial and user-generated cultural production . . . .").

method is ultimately displaced at the site of its execution, with the promised

attention to mediatic specificity languishing into a series of neutralized

identifications. Often masked in these identifications are presuppositions about

the facial self-sufficiency and political self-evidence of claims about the import of

a medium's materiality.[5]

Kate M. Miltner and Tim Highfield's "Never Gonna GIF You Up: Analyzing

the Cultural Significance of the Animated GIF" ("Never Gonna GIF You Up") is an

instructive example of some features of the approach just described. Much to the

credit of their sophisticated analysis, Miltner and Highfield conduct a nuanced

reading of the GIF as a pluralizing signifier vital to the ecology of digital media.

Nevertheless, their account suffers from internal dislocations caused by the

division between the method proposed and the analysis effected—that is, caused

by their promise to rigorously attend to the GIF's definitive materiality and their

ultimately unsatisfactory engagement with its medium specificity. Consider the

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[5] To be clear, my point is not to deny or repudiate the sophisticated contributions to media studies
enabled by cultural studies methods. Nor is my point that subscription to and adoption of certain
cultural studies methods must entail a facile engagement with a medium's materiality or, more
inconceivably, an express disavowal of the politics of medium materiality. Broad generalizations
of that ilk reproduce a category error whose difference is only one of degree from that generated
by inconsistent attention to questions of medium specificity. Instead, I would like to direct my
attention to what Penelope Deutscher would call the "suspended reserves" of cultural studies
methods. In *Foucault's Futures*, Deutscher proposes a hermeneutic of intratextual affirmation, a
mode reading against the constructive grains of generosity and possibility, that provocatively
marshals a text's suspended reserves, seeing in what may be even "the most unpromising
theoretical resources [the opportunity] to stimulate the emergence of new concepts." These
reserves are the sites of a text's latent potential, and to mine them is to realize that "[to] identify
the limits of theory is, indirectly, also to negotiate with the limits of one's interrogation." What
emerges from that negotiation is the product of a productive tension between theorists and critics.
Rather than mark theoretical endeavors as always already mired by lack, Deutscher espouses a
mode of textual confrontation that is less concerned with antagonism and more invested in
expanding the limits of any critical epistemology. Penelope Deutscher, *Foucault's Futures: A
Critique of Reproductive Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 5–11.

following excerpt from the article's introduction, wherein Miltner and Highfield identify the conceptual and methodological presuppositions fundamental to their argument:

> In this article, we examine the GIF as cultural text and device. . . . [The] GIF has certain technical affordances that make it highly versatile . . . thanks to a combination of [its] features, constraints, and affordances. GIFs are polysemic, largely because they are isolated snippets of larger texts. This, combined with their endless, looping repetition, allows them to relay multiple levels of meaning. . . . *In [what] follow[s], we outline and articulate the GIF's features and affordances, investigate their implications, and discuss their broader significance for digital culture and communication.*[6]

The diagnostic promise of "Never Gonna GIF You Up" is an understanding of the GIF's significance to digital culture and evolving communication mores routed through the distinct materiality of the GIF. In other words, the cultural meaning of the image format is the primary object of scrutiny, with the image's technical attributes, described by Miltner and Highfield as the GIF's "features and affordances," shedding light on that cultural meaning (and thus in service to the creation of cultural meaning). The "features and affordances" the two mention are variously held to include the image's "duration, color, and repetition," its "lack of sound or playback options," and the "versatility" of its file format.[7] The enabling circumscriptions of these "features and affordances" are, per Miltner and Highfield, critical to the most frequent applications of the GIF: "the performance of affect; the relationship between polysemy, decontextualization, and repetition; and the demonstration of cultural knowledge."[8]

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[6] Miltner and Highfield, "Never Gonna GIF You Up," 4–5 (emphasis added).
[7] Ibid., 4.
[8] Ibid.

Curiously, in their respective discussions of the GIF's most visible patterns of application, Miltner and Highfield seldom think through the image's distinctive materiality beyond its reduction to semantic content. For example, the two rightly recognize that the image's resignifying potential is a contingent byproduct of its "perpetual embedding and re-embedding" in new conversations. The capacity to move seamlessly across digital platforms, however, is claimed to "highlight the *content's* malleability," that is, the malleability of the GIF's representational prowess, rather than the malleability afforded by the medium in its singularity. This critical appraisal of the Milter and Highfield's diagnostic language may seem politically inconsequential. Indeed, it may even seem that I am arguing for a more rigid distinction between "form" and "substance." That, however, is assuredly not my purpose. I am instead arguing for a more nuanced attention to the imbricated, reciprocally generative relationship *shared* by form and substance. Rather than subsume one into the other (and thereby efface the productive tensions engendered by the meeting of form and substance), I wish to suspend form— here, approximately akin to the GIF's medium specificity—and substance—here, approximately akin to the GIF's representational content—in a taut relation that resists passage into a dialectical synthesis, making two into one and difference into sameness. When Miltner and Highfield assert that the meaning the GIF constructs is "based not just on [its] content . . . but also on the surrounding factors (*captions, messages, and the like*), which provide additional context and layers for interpretation," the GIF's materiality, what marks it as a distinctive digital medium, is diminished to the apolitical circuitry of semantic transmission.

The reduction of the image's mediatic specificity to the discursively neutral

means of content signification appears again in the text's discussion of the loop.

There, Miltner and Highfield remark that the

> looping experience of the GIF on social media can last for any number of
> iterations (full or partial), and the variable length of the loop allows it to
> create new emphasis and meaning . . . . This allows the GIF to feature a
> new, self-contained narrative, separate to the longer sequence from which
> the loop is sourced: an individual GIF can provide set-up and resolution,
> punch line and affect, or indeed play with these dynamics to continually
> deny the viewer a denouement.[9]

In their account of the GIF's loop, what may be regarded as the characteristic

hallmark of the digital image genre and the consummate particularity of its

technical affordance, the loop is exclusively rendered as a means to create and

communicate narrative. Miltner and Highfield take the force of the GIF's repetition

as the continuously accreting power of narrative display, where such repetition is

part of the GIF's meaning-making prowess—"in content *as well as form*." That

form has been reduced to content, that the materiality of the GIF is portrayed

raw, pre-discursive stuff onto which representational practices are projected,

marks the fundamental aporia of Miltner and Highfield's account.

At stake, then, in my review of the methodological bodies through which

interpretations of the GIF have been produced, is how an account of the GIF's

meaning-making capacity should proceed such that the articulated account

neither denies nor privileges substance or form, neither content nor material

specificity. How, though, to think about the making of meaning? And how should

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[9] Ibid., 6.

the meaning making be understood to congeal around certain representative practices, such as the racialized reaction GIF, a signifier somehow marked as innocuous, banal, and outside the violence of racializing discursive formations? As a provisional matter, I maintain a position that meaning must be understood as made *processually*. That is, meaning-making is a *process* which transpires within historically situated horizons that establish the limits of that process.

The relative felicity of the meaning-making process, which might be measured according to the expressive capacity of any sign or signs around which meaning is made to cohere, is, following Brian Massumi's approach to the processual, a consequence of the iterative expression of complementary *tendencies*. "The coherence of a process," Massumi suggests, "is that of tendency, feeding back on itself in such a way as to generate always another difference."[10] A tendency never expresses in isolation, however, as "the incursion of processually formative force always brings more than one tendency into incipient expression."[11] As a result, "tendencies compete with each other. One may dominate another. A given tendency may end up monopolizing the production of difference . . . [and] [m]any tendencies will fail to fully express."[12] What enables meaning to cohere through its processual making, per Massumi's exposition, is the intimate proximity of tendency and process he proposes. Repetition of tendencies may not proceed without the internal differentiation of

[10] Brian Massumi, *Ontopower: War, Powers, and the State of Perception* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 42.
[11] Ibid., 43.
[12] Ibid.

the process of which they are an element, but, even in the wake of this differentiation, the tendencies constitutive of meaning-making are driven by the social partitions they generate. Massumi gestures toward this interpretation, I would contend, in his characterization of a process' reflexive "feeding back on itself." The tendencies generative of a process—the process of meaning-making, as an example—always fold back into themselves, recuperating the integrity of the process and releasing the excess of their difference as the latent potentiality that may unravel the process itself.

Massumi's understanding of the reflexivity of tendencies to reconstitute the processes from which they emerge—and to which they are threatening—may be most clearly stated thus: "What gives consistency to the process is the tendential direction in which the formations possessed of it move together, across their tensions. Here, it becomes unity . . . a singular abstraction that exerts an attractive force."[13] It is, as Massumi eloquently narrates, the *tendency of the social order's tendencies* to asymptotically press toward the continue coherence of the hegemonic formations out of which they emerge and into which they feed.

For this reason, the meaning made upon the GIF's deployment cannot be facilely regarded as an inevitably assured, formalistically variable expression of resistance to the normative order. Rather, the potential meanings generated during the GIF's circulation are always inflected by the tendential logics that

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[13] Ibid., 214.

suffuse and seep from the social. Economies of racializing subordination, for example, are both prior to and formative of the very scene of the image's exchange. To blithely embrace the GIF as the quintessential technology of resistance is to disavow the violent social formations organizing the forces propelling the exchange of certain images in certain contexts. It is to approaches more rooted in media studies, a discipline that integrates multiple theoretical traditions through which it investigates objects' medium specificity in the age of new media, that I now turn.

A "Media Studies" Approach to the GIF: Medium Specificity, Technical Structure, and the Turn to Affect.

Among the contributions to the 2015 anthology *Networked Affect* is James Ash's "Sensation, Networks, and the GIF: Toward an Allotropic Account of Affect" ("Allotropic Account"), a meditation on the GIF thought through the optics of medium specificity and affect. I offer "Allotropic Account" as illustrative of the second cluster of approaches mobilized in critical appraisals of the GIF as a digital media object and a distinctive mode of communication. Such approaches recognize the analytical merit of considering an object's medium specificity, though their forwarding of the mediatic object often obscures the particular contexts of its use as well as the particular social positions of the object's subject-users.

Ash endeavors in "Allotropic Account" to effect a departure from conventional perceptions of the GIF as "a mindless form of disaffection" by

foregrounding instead the image's capacity to "actively amplify the potential for affect through [its] technical structure."[14] "[T]o understand the type of affect a media object generates," Ash explains, "one needs to pay detailed attention to its material specificity."[15] With regard to the GIF, the image's efficacious generation of affect is fundamentally "related to its particular properties and capacities as an object, as well as to its content, because its particularities as a file type frame and organize the types of [affects] transmitted within it."[16] The scope of Ash's intervention is consciously circumscribed by his attention to the image's mediatic materiality, which, in an endnote, Ash recognizes as seemingly detachable from inquiries into the GIF's representational content and contextual deployment. Ash there remarks that "[w]hile the content of a GIF as well as its cultural context are key components in [its] affective response, the focus of [the] essay is on the GIF's technical attributes."[17]

The theoretical overture undergirding Ash's examination of the GIF's affective potentialities is his revision of Gilles Deleuze's notion of allotropy through the interrelated optics of sensation and affect. Ash sketches the contours of his theoretical remediation thus:

> [S]ensation can be understood as the rhythmic organization of organic and inorganic forces along with the transmission of these forces. Affects can be understood as the encounter of those organized forces with other bodies, an encounter which in turn shapes what these bodies are and the sensations they can generate. Sensations are constantly being reorganized through events of affective encounter, which in turn generate new sensations, and thus new contexts for the occurrence of affective

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[14] Ash, "Sensations, Network, and the GIF," 122.
[15] Ibid., 120.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid., 132n1.

encounters. . . . I define allotropy as the process through which a force is modulated and expresses itself as a sensation or an affect, and vice versa, depending on its encounters with other objects within a digital network.[18]

Following Ash's conceptual fashioning, sensations describe the multiply differentiating transmissions of forces whose organization and application enable them to cross into bodily perceptibility. When those forces transit between *organic bodies*, rather than between an inorganic digital object and an organic body or among multiple inorganic digital objects, they frequently collide, and these collisions are conduits for the production of affect. Deftly suturing together sensation and affect with the GIF as his needled thread, Ash maintains that "GIFs organize sensation in order to modulate affects and that these modulations are shaped by the technical specificity of the file types and networks through which GIFs travel."[19]

Admittedly, it is not entirely clear what Ash intends to conceptually circumscribe within the domain of affect (references to affect as bodily impression and to affect as emotional response are both present in the text, but no clarification is further provided) or how his parsed reading of Deleuze's notions of sensation, affect, and allotropy can prove politically generative in contexts beyond that of his own intervention. Ash's critical discussion of the GIF's distinctive materiality, nevertheless, is richly illuminating, as it thinks the image's short temporal duration, limited color palette, and capacity for infinite repetition as centrally constitutive of the GIF's affective conduction. Because my argument

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[18] Ibid., 123–24.
[19] Ibid., 125.

emphasizes the GIF's abrupt temporality and looping capacity, I briefly consider Ash's reflections on each.

Ash attributes to the GIF's short duration a crucial significance to its conduction of sensations then modulated into affects. As I have mentioned, a GIF's animation time is generally short, lasting for a few seconds before looping back to the first frame of its content. The endless repetition of content, he posits, enables viewers to direct their attention to forces beyond those organizing the GIF's truncated narrative display. Thus, contrary to the conclusion drawn by Miltner and Highfield (and by the "cultural studies" cluster more broadly), Ash claims that attention to "how the GIF communicates sensation and generates affect . . . suggests that its power to amuse or excite *cannot* entirely be reduced to the arbitrary narrative that [a viewer] may apply to the images themselves."[20]

This refusal of narrative submission is, for Ash, an enabling and politically promising consequence of the GIF's technical limitations, which require that the image's file size remains small. Problematically, however, his diagnostic appraisal of the GIF's contracted temporality imputes a presupposed abstracted universality to the image's content, such that the GIF's technical limitations will inevitably produce an experientially selfsame encounter among viewers. Ash opines that the technical limitations on the image's file size "mean that in *all* GIFs the action shown is necessarily removed from a broader context that would give the viewer clues about its original source . . . [explaining why] one of the first

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[20] Ibid., 126.

questions often asked about a successful or popular GIF is, 'Where did it come

from?'"[21] Setting aside whether inquiries about origins are actually among the

"first questions" asked about a widely circulated GIF (Ash offers no justification or

citation in support of his observation), Lauren Michele Jackson's incisive

repudiation of racialized reaction GIFs and digital blackface, discussed in her

"We Need to Talk about Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs" ("Digital Blackface"),

is *premised* on the existence of a mutually intelligible racially subordinating

politics of recognition.[22] In the scenes Jackson critiques, it is altogether unlikely

that the exchange of a hyperbolically racializing GIF is followed by an inquiry into

its textual origin, as that question is *always already answered* by that racializing

politics of recognition. The origin of the GIF, the transformation of a scene into a

compressed file that maniacally repeats each and every second that it is visible,

as well as the very impulse to excise that series of frames from its originating

source, is an immanently operative racism, a mobile configuration of dominating

relations that secures the intelligibility of the GIF's racialized caricature even if its

"originating" text is unknown.

 Ash's "Allotropic Affect" is beset by a similar analytic deficiency in its

discussion of the GIF's capacity to automatically loop its content. Opining that the

image's looping nature "leaves [its] 'before' and 'after' . . . tantalizingly beyond . .

. reach," Ash derivatively reasons that unless viewers are able to "find the source

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[21] Ibid. (emphasis added).
[22] See generally Lauren Michele Jackson, "We Need to Talk about Digital Blackface in Reaction
GIFs," *Teen Vogue*, August 2, 2017, https://www.teenvogue.com/story/digital-blackface-reaction-
gifs. For my discussion of Jackson's text and the mapping of her argument I propose, see
Chapter 2.

material from which the GIF was drawn, [they] can only guess at what goes on in the full clip."[23] The immanence of the curiosity felt by those who encounter a GIF but cannot identify its origin appears as inherent for Ash as the GIF's irreducibility to narrativization. Moreover, this internally latent curiosity is inevitably "amplified by the contextual clues that may be partially visible at the beginning or end of a loop. . . . [But, with] no simply way of stopping [it], one can only concentrate and try to catch sight of a recognizable object."[24] The incomprehensibility Ash postulates as the overwhelming nature of the encounter between GIF and viewer, haphazardly extensive in its reach, yields the observation that "one cannot be sure of the particular emotional response that might arise in any single viewer's body when watching an animated GIF before [that response] actually takes place."[25]

From the presumed incomprehensibility of the GIF's content to that content's constant production as an object fully demarcated from the viewing subject, an undeniable motif of objectification runs through Ash's meditation on the GIF's capacity for repetition. Indeed, Ash seemingly locates the hypnotic allure of the loop in a dialectic of Hegelian recognition, the pleasure of which is

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[23] Ash, "Sensations, Network, and the GIF," 129.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., 130. In a curious final gesture, Ash concludes his substantive analysis with a statement whose juxtaposition to the preceding discussion offers a noticeable contrast. After variably arguing that the affects potentially conducted by a GIF's circulation resist predetermination, Ash closes the text's main body with the "fact that popular GIFs proliferate and become [I]nternet memes suggests that while the affects they generate are not assured, the organization of sensation can and does produce equivalent affects in multiple viewers." Ibid. Ash provides no further explanation on the point, though the rhetoric of uncertainty and chance that tonally orients the utterance suggests one reason why its implications are not pursued. I return to this statement in my subsequent discussion and speculate there on this peculiar addition.

derived from the foreclosure of synthetic resolution. The viewing subject can only

"try to catch sight of a recognizable object," a process already embedded within a

horizon saturated by a potential for failure.[26] Even if the GIF's content is of the

humanly embodied other, that the image is circulated for subjects to view

indelibly marks its content as object. After all, what necessarily precludes the

viewer from accurately guessing—or properly recognizing—the "before" and

"after" of the spliced GIF? Do GIFs containing footage of police brutality against

Black persons not follow a disturbingly murderous script, one whose "before" and

"after" could be succinctly narrated by any individual who has been made

intimately conscious of state violence? For those already acquainted with the

repetitive cycle of state brutality, inadvertent exposure to a GIF of racist violence

may not incite the pleasure of narrative determination. Curiosity is not the affect

amplified by a "'before' and 'after' . . . tantalizingly beyond" reach in this

instance.[27] Amplified instead is the hollowed horror that follows from the

mundane saturation of the social worlds the subject occupies with endless

promises of necropolitical adjudication.

Although the insights born of Ash's commitment to medium-specific

analysis are undoubtedly valuable, they suffer from severely inadequate attention

to the *specificity of the social*. To cultivate an analysis of the GIF resistant to the

proposition that the image encourages "a mindless form of disaffection" cannot

proceed in the absence of the social contexts in which the GIF purportedly

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[26] Ibid., 129.
[27] Ibid.

evacuates the subject of its critical faculties. Accordingly, insofar as the exclusive focus of Ash's intervention was on the GIF's technical particularities—that is, *not* on "the content of [the] GIF as well as its cultural context"—it remains mired in the register of the abstract, unable to attend to the political urgencies of localized subjects and their worlds.[28]

Necessary, then, is an approach to critically appraising the GIF's role in the (re)production of the digital-social that transits between the registers of the conceptual and the concrete. Such an approach must recognize that the GIF's distinct materiality should be thought alongside the particularity of its representational content across different contexts; its movements must go between registers of abstraction and specificity without presuming or requiring their synthesis. I attempt below to formulate a provisional account of the GIF informed by the methodological precepts I have just described. In turning to the GIF's hallmark novelty, its infinite looping, I sketch a more robust account of the affective that develops through its constitutive tie to the repeating GIF and to the economies of racial subordination the GIF often implicates. Said otherwise, my analysis will emphasize the image format's characteristic looping as the vantage from which a critical analysis of the GIF can felicitously move between the registers of media and cultural studies without succumbing to the deficiencies of either.

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[28] Ibid., 132n1.

Looping into the Perpetual Present: The Process of Making-Machine as the GIF's Temporal Order.

What accounts for the uncanny spectacularity of the looping GIF? My very formulation of the question immediately registers an implacable knot approximated by this corresponding inquiry: Does the attribution of spectacularity to the GIF's uncanny mode of repetition obscure the perverse banality with which the image is regarded? Or, might it be prudent to arrest the impulse to categorization altogether, thereby enabling the GIF's potentiality as both spectacle and banality? If I appear to sidestep an interrogation of the experienced character of the GIF's loop, it is only because what constitutes that experience is contingency, a constellation of virtuals whose actualization is determined by the multiple, antagonistic, and irreducibly dissimilar forces that pressurize the social. That is, whether the GIF is a site of spectacularity, banality, or an internally differentiating admixture of the two is governed by the contextual process of meaning-making. In much of the contemporary United States context, the conditions of late capitalism have aggressively hybridized the spectacular and the banal, simulating a lust for an endlessly progressive future whose habituation nevertheless remains frustratingly elusive.

The loop of the GIF, I would argue, capitulates to a similar logic. The GIF appears to submit itself to that compulsory temporality of linear progression only to dislodge itself from that compulsive linearity through the loop. The loop is the cut which paradoxically returns the GIF to its inaugurating moment at the juncture of a future present. This return to the origin should not, however, suggest that the

loop is merely an illusion of movement. The image's recursive spiraling within the

relentless injunctions of progressive capitalistic futurity signals the recuperation

of a certain tendential logic within the process of meaning-making. The GIF's

capacity for temporal artifice is fundamental to its dispersion as an object

differentially and simultaneously situated as spectacular and banal. Such is the

condition of possibility for digital minstrelsy through the racialized reaction GIF—

the "momentary" adoption of looping scenes of racist caricature as a technique of

extensive self-constitution, one that does not demand acknowledging the grossly

violent moral failures on which the technique's felicity depends.

What I am proposing about the loop's meaning-making work is that its

transformations of the social are indissociably connected to its reconfigurations of

the temporal. By virtue of its mediatic particularity, the GIF's animation is

programmed to move "forward" only to move "back." Its endless return to the

origin contrasts sharply with the subject-viewer's inability to return to that prior

temporal juncture, that moment when the GIF was first encountered and began

its continuous play. This heterochronic temporality occupied by the GIF and the

subject viewer functions, per film theorist David Bering-Porter, as a "process of

structuring the 'now' to maintain this 'now' in perpetuity, and thus to mitigate the

shifting conditions that open up the possibility of risk in the future."[29] In his

examination of the work of experimental filmmaker Martin Arnold, Bering-Porter

discerns "something important, symptomatic, and unique about the temporality of

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[29] David Bering-Porter, "The Automaton in All of Us: GIFs, Cinemagraphs, and the Films of Martin Arnold," *Moving Image Review & Art Journal* 3, no. 2 (2014): 185.

our time" in Arnold's hallmark techniques of exaggerated closeup, time compression, and scene repetition.[30] Arnold's found-footage films recursively fold into a choreography of intensive looping, a structural form of the movement-image "now ubiquitous in contemporary digital culture" and paradigmatically exemplified by the GIF.[31] The GIF's repetition ostensibly collapses "the past and the future into a perpetual, chronic present," and this reiterative collapse, "a strategy for eschewing change altogether in favor of maintaining the conditions of the status quo," encodes a promissory pleasure through its transitory flouting of capital's imminent self-destruction.[32]

The two methodological clusters visible in GIF studies I earlier described, one informed by cultural studies and one by media studies, maintain divergent positions on the relationship between the GIF and narrative. The cultural studies approach holds that the GIF's circumscribed form transformed it into a self-contained narrative, one that its viewers would attempt to understand by situating it within the linear teleological progression of narrative form. The media studies approach, in contradistinction, eschews the GIF's reduction to an arbitrary narrative imposed by its viewers, arguing instead that the image's non-narratological elements, its incorporeal forces organizing sensation and affect, are the content from which meaning is derived. Although these two hermeneutics yield visibly disparate conclusions, there exists an epistemological motif that is threaded between them and which indicates, albeit implicitly, the substance of

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[30] Ibid., 184.
[31] Ibid., 183.
[32] Ibid., 185.

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their shared frame: both methods situate their determinations of the GIF's

capacity to be teleologically narrativized in the near equivalent of a contextual

vacuum. That is to say, both approaches emphasize the subject-viewer's

experience with the GIF as a singularity, one that is influenced by the

particularities of a social context but not subject to the tendential logics of that

context. It is for this reason that Ash can assert in "Allotropic Affect" that "one

cannot be sure of the particular emotional response that might arise in any single

viewer's body when watching an animated GIF" and then immediately

acknowledge that the "fact that popular GIFs proliferate . . . suggests that while

they affects they generate are not assured, the organization of sensation can and

does produce equivalent affects in multiple viewers."[33] Ash's recognition that

organized sensations can produce equivalent affects in different viewers does

not smooth over that claim's incongruence with his prior statement, namely that

there can be no certainty as to the affective response a GIF incites. What

enables these claims to coexist as mutually intelligible and reinforcing is the

misleading presupposition that the relationship between narrative and GIF is

restricted to the subject-viewer's experience of comprehending the GIF's content.

     My argument here is twofold. First, I am suggesting that the consequence

of the GIF's looping capacity should be understood neither as resisting

narrativization nor as succumbing to narrativization. To pursue either alternative

is to restrict the relationship of narrative to the GIF to the isolated content the GIF

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[33] Ash, "Sensations, Network, and the GIF," 130.

displays, which fundamentally obscures the *broader social processes*, or "social narratives," implicated by the GIF's content. These broader social processes cohere through the convergence of certain tendential logics of meaning-making, logics that exceed the context of any singular GIF but saturate its potential for meaning and the possible sites of its deployment. Second, I am proposing that the interrogative scope of an analysis of the GIF's receptivity to narrativization vis-à-vis the former's looping capacity be expanded and multiplied. Such an examination of the content a GIF communicates must be positioned in a mutual dialogue with the social and the specific.

Accordingly, when Anna McCarthy contends in her "Visual Pleasure and GIFs" that, "as loops, GIFs always start *in medias res*," her discussion of that "certain desire to understand what's going on [which] keeps us looking . . . to comprehend [a GIF's] subject matter" principally misconstrues the nature of that desire.[34] McCarthy envisions the desire to comprehend the GIF as a desire to make sense of the image's "narrative" in ostensible isolation from the broader social narratives, or social processes, that delimit the horizons of the meaning-making process. I am not suggesting that the GIF's contents be read to efface their specificity; nor am I suggesting that the GIF's specificity be aggressively foregrounded in its capacity to make meaning. Instead, I am suggesting that the subject-viewer who endeavors to "make sense" of an encountered GIF does so in a manner that transcends the image's explicit narratological contents. Just as

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[34] Anna McCarthy, "Visual Pleasure and GIFs," in *Compact Cinematics: The Moving Image in the Age of Bit-Sized Media*, ed. Pepita Hesselberth and Maria Poulaki (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 116.

the GIF's loop positions its cycling *in medias res*, the subject-viewer's encounter

with the GIF transpires at the level of a macrologically *in medias res*—it occurs in

the midst of deeply influential and orienting social formations, including, in the

context of American sociality, economies of subordinating racialization.

I would like to dwell a bit longer on the trope of "desire" McCarthy

associates with making meaning of a GIF's contents, a process primarily enabled

by the image's endless cycling of its content. McCarthy suggests that the

hypnotic pleasure the subject-viewer derives from transforming a GIF's contents

into an intelligible communiqué is a consequence of the GIF capturing "that

moment . . . when a difficult task is made easy, and not just made to *look* easy."[35]

Soliciting the pleasure McCarthy diagnoses is the endlessly repeating, elegant

execution of the laboring act, the bodily gesture, the sensual pose, each

suggesting to the subject-viewer that self-perfection is attainable and amenable

to reproduction. The relationship between pleasure and comprehension is clear

and decidedly co-emergent as the subject-viewer examines the GIF, but the

nature of the catalyst innervating the subject-viewer to make sense of the GIF's

content—that "certain desire"—remains nebulous.

Quoted earlier in part, McCarthy's full address of this innervating desire to

comprehend is as follows: "GIFs exude . . . *to-be-looked-at-ness*. In part this is

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[35] Ibid., 120. Ash also appears to argue in favor of the existence of this catalyzing desire to which McCarthy refers in his discussion of the GIF's endless repetition. His suggestion that the GIF's looping nature generates a sense of "before" and "after" in which the subject-viewer becomes libidinally invested equally resonates with McCarthy's characterization of an encounter with the GIF as *in medias res*. For Ash, this desire is couched in a rhetoric of curiosity, but the strong implication that this curiosity represents an object that the subject-viewer seeks to satisfy encourages its location in the same conceptual register as McCarthy's notion. See Ash, "Sensation, Networks, and the GIF," 129.

because, as loops, GIFs always start *in medias res*, so a certain desire to understand what's going on keeps us looking."[36] My purpose in reintroducing this excerpt is not to fault McCarthy for leaving a determination of the nature of this desire open. Desire eludes precise definition, and to develop a full account of its nature is beyond both the scope of McCarthy's intervention and the scope of my own. Despite this, desire functions as a clear conceptual signifier for the force-relation McCarthy intends to describe, and the relationship between desire, pleasure, and comprehension McCarthy develops vis-à-vis the GIF proffers an illuminating counterpoint to the argument I have been developing. McCarthy remarks toward her argument's conclusion that it is "worth stopping for a moment and asking what, exactly, makes these [GIFs featuring scenes of automation and perfected labor] *satisfying*."[37] Responding to her meditative inquiry, McCarthy advances an understanding of such GIFs' pleasuring capacities as having "something to do with *the spectacle of immediate mastery*."[38] In this sense, the pleasure afforded by GIFs is "in line with all capitalist visual culture: it makes a story from the contradictions inherent in the system."[39]

How might McCarthy's yoking of visual pleasure to the GIF's spectacular display of mastery be reread through the alternative conceptual account of the GIF and its looping characteristic I have proposed? What would be made of the relationship between mastery, spectacle, the GIF, the durative present, and

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[36] McCarthy, "Visual Pleasure and GIFs," 116 (emphasis in original).
[37] Ibid., 120 (emphasis in original).
[38] Ibid. (emphasis added).
[39] Ibid.

hegemonic social narratives? The GIF's capacity for meaning-making is, I have suggested, intimately bound to its reconfiguration of contemporary temporalities. That is, the GIF offers a comforting illusion of the present in durative perpetuity, an illusion that actively contests the turbulence of American sociality and its concomitant violences. This promise of the present's endless return, perhaps even of a return to a prior present, one not yet adulterated by the dynamic vicissitudes of the social, is iteratively recuperated and reinstantiated by the GIF's repetition.

If the pleasure generated by exposure to the GIF's repetition can be more broadly understood as the pleasure of making meaning at the level of ordering social narratives, it stands to reason that the "desire" to understand what the GIF *can* communicate is *also* a desire to ensure the calcification of what it has been enabled to predominantly communicate—those tendential logics constitutive of a romanticized, nostalgic sociality structured around racialized hierarchy. Thought in terms of the racialized reaction GIF, the pleasure transited by digital blackface is the pleasure of an instance of mutual identification. This is the pleasurable identification shared by the sender and the recipient of the hyperbolically racist reaction GIF: their mutual identification of a promise, however ephemeral, of the return of an American social order no longer "disturbed" by the "crisis" of anti-racist efforts, a social order in which the momentary adoption of Black personhood does not challenge but in fact vigorously reinforces systems of racial subordination and racialized violence. This is the promise of the racialized reaction GIF. Moreover, it is through these GIFs' circulation that this promise

78

remains disturbingly plausible, as their exchange fortifies the violent process of the *making-machine* of Black subjects.

The process of making-machine, instituted by the GIF's continuous replay of scenes of racist caricature and hyperbolic violence, is the ascription of machinic automation to Black bodies. When images of Black persons are transformed into GIF content, their bodies are forcibly conscripted to the cycle of infinite representational repeat; the originating site of the GIF's content becomes less vital to the meaning-making process than the congruence of that content with racially subordinating social narratives. Digital minstrelsy does not therefore depend exclusively on the desire to narrativize the scenes displayed. Instead, its condition of felicity is its resonance with prior tendential logics undergirding economies of violent racialization and its fortification of those logics through the deployment of similar GIFs in similar contexts. That so much of the literature assessing the GIF as a digital and social object thinks it alongside the figure of the automaton should engender on surprise, even when the interconnected histories of the machine, the minstrel, and the mammy have been amply chronicled. Conceptually accounts of the GIF unproblematically invoke the figure of the automaton because their analyses proceed at the level of abstraction. The GIF to which these accounts refer is one whose content is so totalized as to not be content at all, and the spectating subject they envision at the scene of encounter with the image is a monolithic universal, an undoubtedly empty signifier.

The constitutive interrelation of the looping GIF and the process of making-machine, it should be noted, extends its overriding influence beyond the instance of interpersonal digital communication. At a site of dispersed digital communication, an example of which would be a social media platform, GIFs are programmed to display their content in a considerably different manner than most other animated image formats. On platforms like Twitter and Facebook, similar in this instance to the codified programs of cellphone text-message applications, the default setting for GIFs that appear on a user's timeline is to auto-play, and it is frequently unclear how users can change this setting when not on a mobile device. When this predetermined preference for movement-image auto-play intersects with recordings of police brutality disseminated on social media platforms, the transformation of that footage into GIFs—the usual intent of which is to incite public response to these unjustified killings—inadvertently creates a grotesque pageant of endlessly looping, homicidally racist theatre in which social media users are differentially subjected to the process of making-machine.

The diffusion of police-brutality GIFs has the paradoxical effect of articulating a demand for social redress as it ossifies the machinic representation of unjustly murdered Black men and women. Said otherwise, the social conditions these disseminated GIFs address—the precarity forced upon Black lives by a state that justifies its violence through implicit recourse to the notion that Blackness is incongruent with the ontological recognition of an individual's personhood—are partially fortified by the Black persons' endless exposure to their content. GIFs of police brutality serve as a horrifying reminder of the

80

traumas of racist violence through which Black subjects have been inaugurated into the social. Monica Torres, a New York-based journalist, recalled her first experience of unexpected exposure to police brutality footage on Twitter in the wake of the fatal police shooting of seventeen-year-old Lacquan McDonald:

> The default for [GIFs] on Twitter is to autoplay, and many users do not opt out. I was among them. There was no warning that I was about to see something graphic and disturbing, as there was on the cable networks that were also showing the video. The [GIF] of McDonald's death was instead indiscriminately injected in between my banal tweets about Thanksgiving prep. Unmoored from even minimal context, the [GIF] felt cheap and tawdry, with each loop replay increasing some engagement metric, while righteously confronting nothing.[40]

Torres here identifies what McCarthy calls the "fugitive temporality" in which the GIF emerges. McCarthy argues that GIF's temporal habitat (or, more accurately, habitats) is resolutely paradoxical: "On the one hand, we encounter them [i.e., GIFs,] in the miniaturized durationality of the looped fragment. On the other, we encounter them unexpectedly, in the indeterminate *durée* that is the flow of social media."[41] The GIF agonizingly highlights the simultaneous uncertainty and perpetuity of present. Fashioned to operate in a continuous state of renewal through repetition, the GIF is certain to reset and restage the performance of its content—unless, of course it is displaced from the interface on which it materialized. In addition, one cannot help but pause at the lexical formation of "fugitive temporality." As a linguistic marker, "fugitive" saw its greatest use in the periods immediately preceding, during, and after the Civil

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[40] Monica Torres, "Instant Replay," *Real Life Magazine*, November 22, 2016, http://www.reallifemag.com/instant-replay/.
[41] McCarthy, "Visual Pleasure and GIFs," 114 (emphasis in original).

War, when the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 marked one of the many grotesque heights of American racism and the dehumanizing violence of the plantation economy. That the racialized reaction GIF may exist in a "fugitive" temporality, a time out of joint with the proper, implies the necessity of its domestication. This domestication is the violence directed toward those Black bodies conscripted to the GIF's infinite loop; the traces of this violence are the machinic transfiguration of Black bodies, that process of making-machine whose dehumanizing imperative follows in the violent silhouette of the "fugitive slave."[42]

Whether by consciously scrolling through the history of a text-message exchange or by accidentally reloading the newsfeed on a social media platform, the spectating subject always brooks the possibility that some action will remove the GIF from its visual field. There is no promise that a GIF encountered once will be encountered again when, for example, a newsfeed is reloaded. Then again, there is no assurance that the repeated scene of McDonald's murder will not unexpectedly resurface when reviewing conversations with intimate relations, a horror shared with the hope of reducing the trauma that its reappearance again incites. And, when a GIF does resurface, its equivalent appearance may be

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[42] Grégoire Chamayou meticulously traces the multiple genealogies of seeking out fugitive lines for extermination in his *Manhunts: A Philosophical History*, wherein the titular practice, the "manhunt" is understood as the transformation of human bodies into objects of prey for those able to so subject them. Turning to the figure of the fugitive slave as the object of the manhunt, Chamayou writes, "Fugitive slaves, who could be killed with impunity, thus took the place of wolf-men in ancient law, but in the framework of a different juridical rationality: they were chattels, objects of ownership, and as such could be killed at the command of their legitimate owner." Grégoire Chamayou, *Manhunts: A Philosophical History*, trans. Steven Rendall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 64. The reduction of Black bodies to the objects of a "legitimate owner" is a material practice of which the racialized reaction GIF is an heir as much as it is a figuration of the nostalgic "past" to which the GIF promises a (re)turn in the present.

misleading; the structural signature of the file format, after all, "is the malleability of its contents, [its] easy transmigration from one platform to another, or from one user to another."[43]

This language of malleability and seamless transmigration echoes Michel Foucault's novel theorization of power relations in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. There, Foucault avers that power must be understood "as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system . . . [as] exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations."[44] That relations of power have no inherent, first-order form and no governing metaphysical substance marks them as contextually adaptive and always conductive; they crystallize in figurations as explicit as the state apparatus and as seemingly ephemeral as the GIF. Indeed, that the GIF can travel so swiftly, can move between digital ecologies with such ease, marks it as a relay point of Foucauldian power, one that transforms as necessary and works not through its spectacular singularity but through its insidious banality.[45]

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[43] McCarthy, "Visual Pleasure and GIFs," 114.

[44] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 92–94.

[45] This Foucauldian reading of the racialized reaction GIF as a conductive node in the contemporary grid of power relations accords with Tara McPherson's notion of the "lenticular logic," which she describes as "a covert racial logic . . . a logic of the fragment or the chunk, a way of seeing the world as discrete modules or nodes, a mode that suppresses relation and context." Tara McPherson, "Why are the Digital Humanities so White? or Thinking the Histories of Race and Computation," in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 144.

The Affect of the GIF: Notes on the Affective Labor of Looping.

Toward a Provisional Account of Affect. I have thus far claimed that the

racialized reaction GIF draws its meaning through the implication of diffuse social

narratives, particularly those subtended by economies of racial subordination. I

have suggested that, through its looping animation, the GIF mobilizes the

intuitive availability of these social orders' tendential logics, an argument I framed

through an alternative reading of the GIF's relationship with temporality and

narrativization. What my account has not provided, however, is an examination of

how the circulation of racialized reaction GIFs works on, through, and alongside

the embodied subjects facilitating that exchange, as well as how those subjects

engage the meaning-making process through GIF circulation. Without an

understanding of how bodies and GIFs mutually interrogate and generate each

other's intelligibility, my argument will prove unable to adequately address the

material specificity of the encounter between GIFs and their subject-viewers. To

address this lacuna, I turn to the affective, augmenting my discussion's scope by

forwarding how GIFs and bodies interface through the manufacture,

transmission, and diminishment of affective resonances.

It is useful to begin by returning to Monica Torres' powerful meditation on

the traumatic imbrication of the GIF and the scene of police brutality. Recounting

her jarringly visceral reaction to realizing that Laquan McDonald's murder had

been spliced and transformed into a GIF, Torres writes:

> In its [GIF] form, the disturbing video of [McDonald's] death had
> become a puppet show, and McDonald a marionette, made to rise and
> fall, ridden with bullets 16 times, then 32, then 48, and on and on. Unlike a

video clip, which is buffered by a lead-up and at least has an end point, a [GIF] isolates the most traumatic moments and continues replaying them indefinitely, without warning and without your permission.

To be marked in this way in American culture—to be looped in a [GIF], to be put on display as "animated" at the behest of audiences—is [to] be racialized, othered . . . . For [B]lack bodies, being "animated"—a condition that [GIFs], by nature of their form, automatically impose—already marks you as other. . . . On an infinite loop in [GIFs], this hyperanimation reenacts the spectacle [of racialization] for our consumption, puppets made to rise and fall. . . . In looping, the larger context is cropped out and we are left with only the most inflammatory, *most affecting* moment.[46]

I have excerpted a significant portion of Torres' commentary because she is

relentlessly acute in her recognition that the GIF generates the specificity of its

meaning by drawing upon the lingering intensities and inevitable excesses that

accumulate between, beside, and across the temporal registers it implicates.

With each loop, Torres provocatively claims, "the heartbeat [of the GIF] gets

louder and we get closer to believing the [GIF] is alive."[47] How, then, to think the

pulse of the GIF, its im-pulse, that is, how its animating pulse leaves an

impression on the bodies that encounter it, leading to their own sensed

impulsions? Embedded within the idea that the GIF leaves an impression on the

bodies it encounters is an intimation of excess or surplus. That the GIF leaves a

bodily trace in its wake suggests that the force-relations constitutive of that

encounter could not be fully recuperated by the social. I do not mean to suggest,

to be clear, that in its exceeding recuperation this remainder becomes an

autonomous substance acting "outside" the social. I would maintain quite the

opposite: this remainder institutes the GIF's production of affect, the circulation of

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[46] Torres, "Instant Replay" (emphasis added).
[47] Ibid.

which partially shapes Black subjectivity according to the logic of making-machine.

I am interesting in thinking together the GIF and affect through a conductive hermeneutic attendant to relations of intensity that produce a quality of excess, of surplus, of something "more than" what an encounter was otherwise expected to generate. Intensities are akin to forces, to force-relations, where "force" is not synonymous with forcible but gestures toward "an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation *as well as* the passage (and the duration of passage) of . . . intensities."[48] In a dynamic, unfolding field of vectors, flights, and vibrations, affect reveals itself "as a gradient of bodily capacity—a supple incrementalism of ever-modulating force-relations—that rises and falls not only along various rhythms and modalities of encounter but also through the troughs and sieves of sensibility."[49] Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg emphasize one of the fundamental insights of theorizing bodily-becoming through affect as follows: "[T]he capacity of a body is never defined by a body alone but is always aided and abetted by, and dovetails with, the field or context of its force-relations."[50]

Because the brokerage of affect always implicates the body's contextual, circulatory capacities, turning to affect as a theoretical interlocutor chances a more radical exhumation of "how bodies or objects may produce or experience

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[48] Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, "An Inventory of Shimmers," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 1 (emphasis in original).
[49] Ibid., 2.
[50] Ibid., 3.

intensity as they *pass from one state to another* . . . [within] complex networks of people and machines and assemblages of interaction and cohabitation."[51] Implied by this statement, which opens the first chapter of the 2015 anthology *Networked Affect*, is the possibility of seeing what was otherwise rendered unseeable through attention to the affective. That is, what may be realized by the careful tracing of affective circulations is an account of the transitions of bodies and objects—of bodies into objects, of objects into bodies, where "object" references a constructed category that is the result of an objectifying process. Precipitated by the shuttling of affective intensities as well as generative of those intensities, these changes track are emblematic of the torqueing of Black subjectivity effected by the process of making-machine. The intimate connection of the GIF as techno-affective site and the contingency of the subject is highlighted by Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska, who astutely state, "It is not simply the case that 'we'—that is, autonomously existing humans—live in a complex technological environment that we can manage, control, and use. Rather, we are—physically and hence ontologically—part of that technological environment, and it makes no more sense to talk of *us* using *it*, than it does of *it* using *us*."[52]

Accordingly, to think the affective is to think the contingency of relationality and becoming. The idea of affect, which is not reducible to emotion, to feeling, or

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[51] Susanna Paasonen, Ken Hillis, and Michael Petit, "Introduction: Networks of Transmission: Intensity, Sensation, Value," in *Networked Affect*, ed. Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen, and Michael Petit (Cambrdige, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 1–2.
[52] Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska, *Life after New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 13 (emphasis in original).

to physical impingement, involves an investigation of the transitional as well as of the circuitry through which transitions are channeled. I do not propose a notion of affect that can operate as a preexisting, self-contained heuristic. Nor is affect a sieve through which an object of scrutiny may be filtered in order to reach some theoretically consonant end. To think through the affective is to propose a methodological posture that is sensitive to the ephemera of experience, the transmission of sensations that elude conscious perception, and the accretion of forces that fortify the tendential logics of the social. Ultimately, then, to conceptualize with and through affect is to open one's analysis to an emergent critical mode, as the constitutive resonances of the affective materialize in tandem with the object under investigation.

Affect and Its Labor. The relationship between the GIF, affect, and the process of making-machine is one of extraction. To be forcibly conscripted into the GIF's infinite looping is to perform simultaneously the heights of affected animacy and the troughs of machinic automaticity. The racialized logics that govern the selection of reaction GIFs seek out those representations of Black subjects that embody hyperbole and codify that excessive "more than" characteristic of affective intensities. When the racialized reaction GIF is circulated in an interpersonal exchange, the setting to which Jackson devotes the latter half of her argument in "Digital Blackface," its purpose is to performatively generate that remainder which exceeds the social's recuperative efforts, that is, an affective intensity. The nature of this intensity is drawn by the "more than" of the GIF's racist caricature. The momentary adoption of the hyperbolic Black

persona represented in the racialized reaction GIF is the momentary charging of the body through the historical circuitry of minstrelsy and its racially subordinating effects. In the impression it leaves on the body, the affective dimension of digital minstrelsy experientially materializes the possible promise of a return to that romantic past of brutally enforced racial hierarchy (a nostalgic (re)turn that solidifies the intensification of a sadistically anti-Black unfolding present).

But, what enables the conduction of this charge? What ensures that this remainder which marks the body etches into it a commitment to economies of racialized violence and their constitutive, tendential logics? It is in response to these questions that I offer a formulation of the process of making-machine through the optic of affective labor. Making-machine involves not just the perversion of a politics of recognition that refuses the commensurability of Black subjectivity and the ontological category of personhood. Making-machine also speaks to the extraction of Black subjects' affective labor when they are transformed into GIF content. The conscription of Black bodies into the automatic repetition of the GIF is technology of discipline that extracts their affective labor to subtend the violent economies implicated by the circulation of racialized reaction GIFs. It is this extraction of affective labor that capacitates the charged possibility of digital minstrelsy and the adoption of Blackness through its subjection. Making-machine therefore involves two coeval processes: a politics of recognition that transforms the Black subject into a machinic entity as well as an extraction of that subject's affective labor to undergird the dialectic of recognition described above.

Arguably the most influential conception of affective labor is that of

Michael Hardt, which maintains that the rise of labor's affective valence has been

contemporaneous with the ascendance of capitalist service economies. What

typifies current capitalist paradigms, Hardt contends, is the centripetally

integrating forces of knowledge production, information systems, and

communication modalities. Service provision has its seat at the core of Western

late capitalist models, with labor associated with the industrial archetype of the

factory outsourced to "developing" nations. Unsurprisingly, the dominance of

service-driven economies in Western nations has resulted in the conspicuous

absence of manufactured material goods, once regarded as the capitalistic

products par excellence, originating from those economies. Because the

provision of services through market exchange generates no material, durable

commodity form, Hardt continues, "we might define the labor involved in this

production as *immaterial labor*—that is, labor that produces an immaterial good,

such as a service, knowledge, or communication."[53]

The production of services involves various modes of immaterial labor, the

synthetic motif of which is the intangible character of the commodities such labor

produces. Hardt goes on to propose a tripartite taxonomy of immaterial labor: its

first form involves the informationalization of industrial production; its second

form involves the manipulation of creative drives toward the development of

symbolic representations; and its third form involves "the *affective labor* of human

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[53] Michael Hardt, "Affective Labor," *Boundary 2*, vol. 26, no. 2 (1999): 94 (emphasis in original).

contact and interaction."[54] Anticipating an objection to the idea of immaterial

labor's affective face, Hardt expressly notes that this labor is indeed immaterial,

"even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible:

a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—*even a sense of*

connectedness or community."[55] Essential to this third derivative of immaterial

labor, Hardt explains, is its "creation and manipulation of affects. Such affective

production, exchange, and communication is generally associated with human

contact, with the actual presence of another, but that contact can be either actual

or virtual."[56] In the final portion of his text, Hardt switches registers to devote

further attention to his notion of affective labor, the potential of which is marked

as coextensive with the field of Foucauldian biopower, "the power of the creation

of life . . . [and] the production of collective subjectivities, sociality, and society

itself."[57] The biopolitical production of conditions fostering life and enabling death

at the localized level is routed through the circuitry of affective labor, and for this

reason Hardt deems affective labor to be ontologically generative.

Hardt's narrative of the amplification of affective labor in contemporary

capitalist production is not without its tensions. Perhaps most glaring is his

argument's risky entanglement with the production of monolithic conceptual

frames, rendering a notion like "affective labor" concurrently too comprehensive

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[54] Ibid., 95 (emphasis in original). While Hardt initially offers a bifurcated taxonomy of immaterial labor, he later divides the first form into two, thus creating the tripartite classification he identifies toward the text's conclusion.
[55] Ibid., 96 (emphasis added).
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid., 98.

and too abstracted. While this is likely the consequence of the text's reliance on a historical teleology that weds technological advancement and social progression, I nonetheless find Hardt's commentary to be importantly instructive to my own analysis. Hardt's identification of the virtual as a generative site of affective labor is especially germane to this discussion, as is his provocation that affective labor produces subjectivity, society, and life.

Expanding on Hardt's reflections, I would suggest that the virtual possibilities of affective labor, particularly when it is socially commodified and capacitated to exceed the rigid boundaries of capitalist enterprise, are central to the meaning-making "work" of the racialized reaction GIF. Hardt underscores that virtually habituated services are as conductive of affective sensations as service labor performed in the "actual" presence of the consumer. Implicit in this statement, I contend, is the potential to shift focus from the recipient of affective labor's production to that labor's producer. That is to say, insofar as an individual need not be present in the "actual" to produce commodifiable affects, an individual's virtual presence can generate affects even when that virtuality is conjured in the form of a simulacrum.

Affective labor, as Hardt acknowledges, is no less subject to the exploitative logics of capital than labor producing a material, durable commodity. The racialized reaction GIF is able to successfully operate through the charged circuitry of affective circulation because it continuously produces and extracts the affective labor of the subject forcibly conscripted into its endless recursivity. The GIF's loop, then, should be understood to do more than merely reset the scene

92

for another cycle; the loop is the linchpin of this iterative cycle of affective

production and violent expropriation. With every cycle of its content, the

racialized reaction GIF primes the virtual mechanisms of affective production. As

that intensity moves among the image's recipients, the extraction of the displayed

Black subject's affective labor fortifies the tendential logics of subordinating

racialization as this intensive force-relation traverses from the register of the

interpersonal to the macrologically social. Through this traversal, the Black body

is manufactured as a machinic entity, something less than human and therefore

unrecognizable within the ontological category of personhood. At the same time,

the Black subject transformed into GIF content is made to stand in for all Black

subjects, hyperbolically animated for deployment in the caricaturing racism of

digital blackface. The extraction of the Black subject's affective labor further

undergirds this perverse dialectic of recognition, enjoining Black subjectivities to

diametrically represent the most extreme displays of (in)human animacy and, in

reciprocal necessity, the very impossibility of Black humanity. This is the process

of making-machine. It is to this process in the context of the Leakes GIF that I

turn in the concluding chapter to expand upon the making-machine hermeneutic

and to consider its concrete interventions on Black subjectivities.

CHAPTER 4

**THE AFFECTIVE MAMMIFICATION AND LOOPING MINSTRELIZATION OF REACTION GIFS:
A QUESTION OF BLACK HUMANITY IN THE DIGITAL OBJECT**

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, the second volume of their *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari develop the idea of the refrain as a conceptual apparatus through which to further augment their theories of social becoming. Deleuze and Guattari understand the refrain as a "prism, a crystal of space-time . . . [acting] upon that which surrounds it, sound or light, extracting from it various vibrations, or decompositions, projections, or transformations."[1] Its function is catalytic, "not only to increase the speed of the exchanges and reactions in that which surrounds it, but also *to assure indirect interactions between elements devoid of so-called natural affinity*, and thereby to form organized masses."[2] It is in the refrain's nature to become "concentrated by elimination in a very short moment, as though moving from the extremes to a center, or, on the contrary, to develop by additions, from a center to the extremes."[3] The refrain spreads outward from the putatively singular spatiotemporal site of its invocation, in a gesture that exceeds the limits of formal space (i.e., what is presumed to be constrained by interpersonal communication) and linear, progressive time (i.e., what is presumed to be the relationship between past, present, and future). It is not time, then, that governs the refrain;

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[1] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 1987), 348.
[2] Ibid. (emphasis added).
[3] Ibid., 349

"rather, the refrain is the *a priori* form of time, which in each case fabricates different times."[4]

The endless cyclicality of the GIF, the quintessential feature of the file format and a principal explanation for the format's return to popularity, inscribes the GIF as one potentiality within Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the refrain.[5] For them, the refrain represents a form of repetition that facilitates the feeding back of affective channels onto themselves, enabling their multiplication and rhizomatic dispersion and thereby remaining resistant to the dominance of any exclusively linguistic model of semiotic meaning. To be attentive to the refrain is not to propose (although it is also not to unilaterally proscribe) that the lacunae in signifying systems are "empty" only insofar as they have not been filled by linguistic meaning in the primary instance. Rather, attention to the refrain emphasizes that there are modalities of becoming that language does not and cannot adequately represent or encompass. It is to consider the excess that escapes language, a form of which is affect.

GIFs perform both more and less than what they ostensibly represent. A GIF will never fully signify within the limiting logic of signifier and signified because they operate through the refrain—that is, through the loop—and this operative mode situates it in obtuse relation to conventional systems of meaning making. This is, as some scholars have argued, the condition of the GIF's

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[4] Ibid.
[5] Alexander Cho's discussion of the relationship between the repeating GIF and the refrain represents an elegant analysis that is exceptionally germane to this discussion. See Alexander Cho, "Queer Reverb: Tumblr, Affect, Time," in *Networked Affect*, ed. Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen, and Michael Pettit (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

liberatory possibility. As I have suggested, disproportionate, if not exclusive, emphasis has been focused on the GIF's emancipatory potential in much of the extant literature. One purpose of my discussion has been to challenge the uncomplicated embrace of this emancipatory logic.

What has been at stake in this project, on one level, has been the development of a theoretical hermeneutic sufficiently able to attend to the problematic of the racialized reaction GIF as a form digital blackface. More pointedly, I was interested in expanding upon Lauren Michele Jackson's provocation in her article, "Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs," that anti-Black racist caricatures, particularly those used to communicate hyperbolic emotion, constantly turned to images of Black women and femmes.[6] In my attempt to develop that hermeneutic, I turned to the figures of the mammy, the minstrel, and the machine. I sought out their histories to construct a provisional genealogy of digital blackface in the terms of this project. This genealogy was one that would historicize the figures of the mammy, the minstrel, and the machine by placing them in the contextual specificity across space-times; at the same time, it would exhume their figural continuities which have proven perniciously able to keep them in a state of racially subordinating duress. I proposed the idea of making-machine as a reflexive heuristic to further interrogate how the racialized reaction GIF functioned as a contemporary manifestation of the converged, intertwined histories of the mammy, minstrel, and machine. I then turned to the GIF itself,

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[6] Lauren Michele Jackson, "We Need to Talk about Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs," *Teen Vogue*, August 2, 2017, https://www.teenvogue.com/story/digital-blackface-reaction-gifs.

with an eye toward examining the object through the optics of medium specificity

and temporality. I contended that a consequence of the image's endless

cyclicality was the production of an affective intensity that charged the process of

racializing subordination effected by the circulation of racialized reaction GIFs.

Making-machine, I argued, was the bimodal process through which a making of

Black subjectivity as incommensurate with the ontological category of

personhood was achieved. It contemporaneously engendered movement through

a politics of recognition that transformed the Black subject into a machinic, less-

than-human entity while extracting that Black subject's affective labor through

GIF performance to provide a motor for that dialectic of recognition.

Said more broadly, however, what has been at stake in this project is

thinking the character of a methodology capable of resisting a certain act of

violence recursively foundational to American sociality. This is the act of violence

that radically dislocates Blackness from an ontology of personhood; one mode

through which this act is iteratively executed is the process of making-machine

subtended by racialized reaction GIFs. To conclude, then, I would like to turn

these provisional methodological gestures toward an object cited earlier, the GIF

of *Real Housewives of Atlanta* (*RHOA*) cast member and star Linnethia Monique

"NeNe" Leakes.[7] This GIF, which bears the title "Nene Leakes Shade GIF,"

contains an image of Leakes tossing her hand into the air and remarking upon

her enjoyment of what was likely a scene of her costars throwing subtle but

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[7] Real Housewives of Atlanta (@rhoa), "NeNe Leakes Shade GIF," Giphy, November 3, 2015,
https://giphy.com/gifs/rhoa-nene-leakes-shade-3o85xtOGdvAAafXLe8.

unapologetic jabs at one another. Shared almost 50 million times, a figure that in all probability grossly underestimates the number of times the image has circulated, this GIF of Leakes typifies what Jackson acknowledged in her analysis: "Extreme joy, annoyance, anger and occasions for drama and gossip are a magnet for images of [B]lack people, especially [B]lack femmes."[8] But, what kind of affective labor is Leakes performing here? What are its consequences? How does this preceding discussion, which dialectically moved previously abstract inquiries into the register of the concrete, afford an understanding of these questions?

If thought about in emergent contextual relation with the GIF, affective labor becomes conceptually bound to the image's stylized display and mode of circulation. That is, the affective labor performed by a GIF—by the aforementioned GIF of Leakes, for example—is performed according to a process by which certain temporally bracketed scenes are selected for transformation into looping sequences. The selection of these scenes, in this case, a scene excised from an episode of *RHOA*, is not necessarily a function of whatever quantum of affective intensity the scene is *presumed* to generate. Rather, a complex, emergent, and multivalent process, influenced by factors such as the moment's recognized popularity as represented in forms other than the GIF, the scene's relevance to the themes and motifs of its original forum, and the scene's relative intelligibility if rendered into GIF format, might result in the

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[8] Jackson, "Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs."

selection of certain scenes to be transformed into GIFs. Nonetheless, attention

must be directed at what kind of affective labor the images *already available* for

circulation can perform, and with nearly 50 million individual instances of

exchange, the "NeNe Leakes Shade GIF" taps into a site of tendential logics

powerfully resonant with American sociality.

That Leakes is among the most known and successful members of the

broader *Housewives* brand is apparent, and her popularity is in no doubt related

to her particular method of representing celebrity. If the boisterousness of

Leakes' disposition, one of the traits for which is she known, might possibly be

regarded as a performance of excess oriented toward stabilizing the tenuous

circumstances of reality-television celebrity, what does this mean for the

reproduction and dissemination of scenes of that *conscious* excess at a rate that

approaches 50 million instances thereof? My point here is first to identify certain

tendential logics of American sociality related to the racialized reaction GIF,

which, in this instance, might include: the uncertainty of capitalistic gain through

the ephemeral platform of reality-television celebrity; Leakes' performance of

aggrandized emotional responses to staged dramaturgy of "reality" television; the

necessity of performing such aggrandized and hyperbolic responses if Leakes is

to continue to secure her position on the show's cast; as well the adoption of

those responses via digital blackface GIFs by non-Black persons to "naturalize"

Blackness as such GIFs represent it. Second, it is to interrogate how these

tendential logics come to fold into one another and thereby stabilize the social

economies to which they are integral, including those of subordinating racialization.

Leakes' professional labor, itself dependent on the intelligible performance of hyperbolic affect, becomes doubly affective in her transformation into GIF content; the complex negotiation with racialization and its attendant violences in which Leakes is forced to engage becomes a durative conflict of submission to racialization, contestation of its terms, and the digital spread and flattening of that complex process. Through her virtual presence, one that spans multiple networks and digital media forms, Leakes becomes a celebrity icon but also undergoes an evacuating process of iconography. That is, she is made representative of a certain "essence" of personhood, but in her coerced submission to the iconographic modes of digital reproduction, the portion of that constituted "essence" that may have been recognizable as commensurate with the ontological category of personhood is placed under a profoundly hydraulic pressure. With each loop of Leakes casually throwing her hand into the air, the "NeNe Leakes Shade GIF" further impresses the iconographic process of making-machine. Reading the racialized reaction GIF in this way, it should come as no surprise that so many discussions of the image invoke the idea of the automaton—while too few recognize the imbricated histories of the machine and the Black body.

In her cultural history of the mammy figure, Kimberly Wallace-Sanders states that the lexical marker "mammy" was understood as both the title *and* the name of an otherwise anonymous Black woman. The work of "mammy" was both

to singularize and universalize Black women, effacing and subsuming their differences under its avariciously capacious sign. Moreover, if "mammy" was every Black woman, she was also, as a necessary correlative, *no Black woman*; "mammy" existed, rather paradoxically, only because she did not and count not exist under the conceptual ontology "mammy" signified. Leakes is not the only Black woman whose bodily form has been commodified for GIF circulation. Indeed, she is one of many. However, if Wallace-Sanders' statement is taken at its most literal level, certain questions become available. Under the frenzied reproduction of GIFs featuring Black women, a frenzy submitted to the logics of mammification and minstrelization, can any of these women be recognized as having a singular name, a singular subjectivity, a difference that is irreducible without losing the propriety of its claim to access the ontological category of personhood? How is Leakes recognized? Or, rather, does her recognizability depend on her not being recognizable at all?

At the beginning of this discussion, I gestured toward the cellphone footage recorded during some of the most recent episodes of racially motivated police brutality in the United States. The footage I referenced had been taken by community members, frequently by people of color, some of whom had intimate relationships with those who were murdered. I noted that the steadiness of the footage, when read against the intensely violent horrors it was documenting, almost eluded belief. The steadiness was almost machinic, and it could not help but incite the dread of the uncanny, the sense that what is being witnessed must be *but also* cannot be a scene of interpersonal interaction. Such footage speaks

to the process of making-machine effected by the circulation of racialized reaction GIFs. Making-machine involves the contested submission of dynamic becoming to inert being; it requires disavowing recognizable life for the adoption of a simulacrum of near death. Black subjects' self-production as machinic is a necessary, but, as is abundantly apparent, insufficient means to survive the brutality of the state as well as the racist violence that is foundational to the character of American sociality. Making-machine might be properly understood as approaching a paradoxical impasse of Black subjectivity, whereby submission to this bodily inertia effects the very reading of Black bodies as inhuman and thus unrecognizable within the ontological category of personhood.

Within a liberal political context, ideas of broad representation are usually hailed as profound markers of social progress and inclusion. To be represented (without querying *how* the subject is represented) is the benchmark of liberal political efficacy. My efforts here have been to complicate such a narrative, to query how a seemingly innocuous digital object like the GIF can perform all the violence suggested of it and far more. This text has also been an exercise in the development of a reflexive digital ethics. To think about which GIF to send in an instance of digital communication may not be enough. To query the algorithms of their availability, the structures conditioning their possibility, the sense of intuitive justification that precedes their use—these are the ethical objectives this project has hoped to kindle. As NeNe Leakes remarks in the GIF propelling this discussion, I have hoped that this text walks alongside other solidaristic efforts to inaugurate a political and social context in which Black women indeed can live.

102

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