Tagging and Identity in the Age of Social Media. A Cultural Critique

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Abstract

This thesis explores online identity through a cultural critique of tagging on social media. In particular, I discuss social media tagging in relation to historically and socially grounded labelling practices. While labelling has often been theorised as a social tool to oppress and marginalise, the technical infrastructure of social networks is contributing to the depoliticisation of identity labels and their repurposing for neoliberal self-branding. This can have empowering effects for individuals, but it also contributes to camouflage and minimise social conflicts and inequality.

In order to highlight how specific tagging practices intersect with those conflicts, I critically discuss three cultural avatars that emerge from the collective performance of online identity by social media users: the Gangsta, the Digital Nomad, and the Troll. Rather than sociological figures, these avatars are intended as aesthetic materialisations of identity models that stand for specific social and cultural values. The controversial character of those values is what I set out to discuss in my cultural critique. Ultimately, I argue for a tactical approach to tagging and labelling practices, which can be leveraged to intervene in the definition of cultural avatars and generate socially productive criticism. Potentially, such criticism could help engender new figurations with a collective focus and an emancipatory or utopian potential.

In order to draft a catalogue of tagging tactics to stimulate such critical conversations, in the last chapter I collect excerpts from a series of interviews I conducted with cultural producers (artists, theorists, activists) who tackle issues of identity and labelling from a critical perspective.

0.
Introduction: Identity Politics in the Age of Social Media

In the age of social media[1], identity has returned with a vengeance (Apprich, 2018, ix). The past decade has been punctuated by historically and politically significant events, many of which can be discussed in terms of collective identity labelling: in 2011, as a response to the financial crisis, the Occupy Wall Street movement juxtaposed the protesting "99%" against the richest "1%"; in 2016, Brexit and the election of Donald Trump shook the Western world through aggressive campaigns that involved a variety of labels (establishment VS outsiders, global VS national, working class VS racial and gender minorities); in 2017, by foregrounding the experiences of women across the media with unprecedented urgency, the #metoo movement injected the mainstream with a renewed consciousness around gender oppression and privilege. The social, cultural, political, and economic ripples of these events have reflected on social media, which have not only provided an increasingly popular space for debate about those developments, but actively contributed to the emergence of some of the identity labels driving their narratives. This was most directly the case with hashtags like #OWS, #BlackLivesMatter and #metoo, however social networks also contributed in a variety of more oblique ways to the popularisation of fuzzier forms of labelling – of which the infamous alt-right or the disparaging definition of their leftist counterpart (the so-called "Social Justice Warriors", or SJWs) are but two of the most famous examples. While some of these terms were born out of and to some extent belong to a mostly US-centric "Internet culture", the past few years have made them more global and more familiar than ever to readers of mainstream publications or web-savvy cultural influencers in Europe and beyond.

As a consequence, in recent years online cultural conversations around politics have often pivoted on distrust towards the aforementioned polarisations and juxtapositions. The spectre of ongoing "online culture wars" (Nagle, 2017) defined by a vague notion of "identity politics" has been animating debates in fields as disparate as academia and comedy, ritualistically juxtaposing a tokenised idea of "free speech" and "social justice", often for self-branding purposes. However, beyond the outrage and the inflamed tones of these culturally polarised politics, other forms of identity

[1] By "the age of social media" I refer to the period ranging from the present day reaching back to the mid-2000s, when platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were founded. The period is marked by a momentous shift towards mobile technology, greatly popularised by the launch of the first iPhone in 2007 and continuing with the expansion of the smart phone market. In terms of software, the advent of mobile applications (or "apps") also helped make Internet use more immediate and accessible. Although social media are a global phenomenon, with different dynamics and cultural nuances that depend on geographical context, my inquiry is mostly limited to Western media.

labelling that are more covertly political have been happening under the guise of everyday business.

If in the 1990s going online was often seen as a revolutionary gesture of independence (John Perry Barlow, 1996) and Internet use was more associated with hacker counterculture (Ross, 1990), the advent of mobile apps and social media has ushered in a wider and more technically-inclusive spectrum of Internet users, whose everyday engagement with the Internet is driven both by cultural background and professional need: from street-savvy YouTube rappers to Uber drivers, from remote-working "digital nomads" to AirBnB hosts, from celebrity media trolls to low-salary Amazon Mechanical Turk workers. As the ordinary "produser" (Bruns, 2007) can now aspire to "micro-celebrity" (Senft, 2008; Marwick, 2013) or even influencer status (Abidin, 2015), new models for self-branding and life-hacking offer promises of social and financial status as well as cultural relevance, rather than just technical emancipation. Since the first thrilling explorations of the "virtual", then, social media have transformed the Internet into the everyday and have, de facto, played a major role in the increasing naturalisation of the relationship between our online identities and our "IRL[2]" experience. The political implications of these cultural and socio-economic developments (for example the impact of AirBnB in terms of national sovereignty, or Uber and Deliveroo's responsibilities in terms of workers rights) have only recently started to inspire debate and regulation, and the promise of these Internet affordances remains largely surrounded by an aura of individualistic opportunity, rather than conflict.

However, the allure of this compulsory, de-politicised participation hides forms of identity labelling that, while less explicit than the aforementioned hashtag politics, are equally important. Indeed, the narcissistic atomisation ushered in by social media conceals how the very architecture of these platforms operates a more covert and reductive identity politics (Apprich, 2018), through the establishment of echo chambers and "filter bubbles" (Pariser, 2011). Metrics-driven profiles, Google searches, crowd-sourced reviews, likes, and follows stitch together deterministic and self-referential networks that, while they might fail to connect physically, wind up informing social taxonomies and user profiling for marketing and big data analytics. If the choral momentum of hashtag politics often represents a merely temporary convergence of a multitude of YOUs, rather than a collective "we" (Chun, 2016), the ideological belief in "homophily" – a popular axiom within network science, according to which similarity breeds connection – enforces the classification of users according to behaviours and preferences that hide more controversial social markers like class, race, and gender[3]. Based on the idea of "love of the same", homophily eventually valorises consensus, erases conflicts, and naturalises discrimination in order to

[2] Internet acronym for "in real life".

optimise the circulation of commodified emotion (Chun, 2018). While the age of social media promises a horizon of political emancipation through collective labels that temporarily connect atomised individuals, then, those same individuals are grouped through processes of socially and politically sensitive classification that are concealed by the seamless efficiency of social interfaces and the obscure policies of data infrastructures.

The elusive nature of social media identity thus complicates the idea of "identity politics", a formula already used in a range of different contexts and discourses. On one end of the spectrum, the term – which originally stemmed from 1970s black feminism and the belief that "the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression" (The Combahee River Collective, 1978) – has been given new relevance by Web 2.0's unprecedented potential for self-representation; on the other, the understanding of the web as a free-for-all sandbox for individual freedom leads many conservatives (or self-identifying "classical liberals") to see the need for collective labels as an outdated reminder of pre-Internet inequality. As a result, to face the current technological and cultural predicament, online identity demands a rediscovery of its social, cultural, and historical roots. Stating that we abandoned identity politics when they became most crucial, Chun (2018) therefore calls for new theories of connection, ways to queer homophily. The future, for Chun, lies in fact in the new patterns we can create together (p. 90), looking for co-relation rather than correlation (p. 85).

But how does identity politics change in the age of social media? How does one reconcile the top-down determination of filter bubbles and online advertising with the creative and emancipatory potential of resilient, far-reaching networks? What new theories of connection can help conceptualise this momentous change in mass-mediation, and how can awareness of these new identity politics be steered towards progressive, rather than anti-social goals?

In order to answer these questions, my main focus is social media tagging. Tagging has been one of the founding elements of Web 2.0, arising as an efficient

[3] An exemplary case of this, and one that will be mentioned now and then across this thesis, is the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal. Cambridge Analytica was a British political consulting firm that combined data mining, data brokerage, and data analysis with strategic communication during the electoral processes. In 2015 the company was exposed for illicitly harvesting personal data from millions of Facebook users without their consent and using them for political advertising, an operation that was enormously facilitated by Facebook's lax data policies. The news developed into a full-blown scandal only in 2018, after the Guardian detailed Cambridge Analytica's involvement in disseminating hyper-targeted pro-Brexit political ads. The scandal resulted not only in a major fall of Facebook's stock, but also in a landmark moment of public awareness in terms of online data policy and privacy.

tool for bottom-up classification as well as a catalyst for political identity labels like #OWS or #BLM. However, by tagging I do not only mean the attachment of customised keywords to content in order to categorise it or to participate in public conversations (for example using the #OccupyWallStreet hashtag on Twitter, or even #goodtimes on Instagram), but also the direct addressing of individual users (usually by adding the "@" sign before their usernames on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram), or even the attachment of geographic coordinates to pieces of online content (geo-tagging). Those practices are intuitively made available on social media interfaces and are common on their networks, but although they share the same name they are not usually regarded as part of the same cultural phenomenon. I discuss them together, more specifically in relation to identity labelling practices that, while technically enhanced by online platforms, maintain a social and historical continuity with pre-Internet days. From labelling theory to Michel Foucault, from the politics of location (Rich, 1986) to intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), various strands of scholarship have investigated how identity labels are inherently connected to power relations and social hierarchies, and in this thesis I will often discuss instances of material social media tagging alongside other significant, if less tangible, forms of labelling. While firmly anchored in processes of social and cultural classification, tagging is therefore here approached in the broadest sense possible.

By discussing tagging, my goal is to raise questions like: what does it mean to tag or be tagged on social media? Where does tagging come from, and what are its social and cultural implications? How is one instance of tagging different from another, and is there such a thing as a good or bad tagging? Ultimately: has tagging changed the relationship between online identity and power in the age of social media?

My main argument is that tagging is more than a tool for self-branding or visualising trends on social media, but a techno-cultural gesture that emerges from the combination of the technical affordances of social media platforms and the cultural milieus that determine their content – an operational form of labelling that materialises potentially fraught social relations into social networks. Significantly, I highlight how the technical efficiency of this infrastructure dangerously conceals its own political nature, and finally argue that a cultural critique of tagging practices ought to rely not on statistical figures, but socially-imaginative figurations. In this sense, I stress the collective, cultural, and stereotypical dimension of social media labelling – but also the tactical, arguing that labelling practices can also carry critical and political potential through the very performance of online identity. Tagging is thus a stepping stone between the structured ideology of labelling and the poietic power of imagination.

From a theoretical perspective, then, this thesis accepts a challenge posed by Chun (2018, xi): we need to understand the performative nature of networks. In this context, performativity can be interpreted both as an acknowledgement that users use social media to perform their online identity everyday (which gives "performance" a much more ambiguous, even contradictory quality – in other words, its stereotypical character) and that networks have identity as a product of their performance (which on the other hand suggests the possibility of a metrics-driven measurement of the efficiency of their work – the branding character). The twofold nature of performativity also complicates agency and is, as a consequence, very political: how much of our identities are determined from the top down, and how much are the result of our own self-determining creativity? Such ambiguity is inescapably related to the materiality of social media – the actual availability of data, histories, mappings and visualisation tools – which makes the form of their critique much more complicated.

In order to leverage this ambiguity to open up a conversation, rather than offer definite answers on the basis of data, this thesis also stresses the aesthetic character of tagging. More specifically, by using the term "performative" (Goffman, 1956; Butler, 1990) I refer to the gestural quality of tagging, meaning that – despite the material trail it leaves on social networks – any occurrence of the practice is bound to conditions that cannot always be tracked or explained (for example, irony). By highlighting the entanglement of tagging with other labelling practices, I shift the focus on its incommensurable qualities, treating the performance of online identity as a collective artwork of sorts, to be criticised as such. This theoretical framing makes the thesis different from other studies on social media tagging: the practice is often analysed as a convenient metric for measuring trends or map circumscribed social publics, but seldom considered "per se", as a performative occurrence of historically and culturally grounded gestures that materialise through aesthetic processes.

As a consequence, the project also addresses an issue within the humanities, noted by scholars like Alan Liu (2004, 2012) and Geert Lovink (2016, 2019): the decreasing focus on criticism in favour of data analytics and information visualisation. The choice of tagging – a structural feature for information organisation and user communication on social media, which often can be easily tracked, mapped, and visualised – as a conceptual device for cultural and aesthetic inquiry is thus a challenge and, to some extent, a provocation. I argue that, beyond the urgency of data policies, the mainstream infrastructural awareness brought by the exposure of Cambridge Analytica or fake news is also an opportunity to reiterate the importance of critical theory and the humanities, which in the last decades have often had a problematic relationship with the popular "digital" prefix. A full 20 years after Bowker and Star (1999, p. 302) suggested computer scientists should read African-American poets and radical feminists, the fraught nature of online classification has achieved

cultural momentum and the times seem to be ripe for a renegotiation of the terms of interaction between technology and culture.

After the Hacker and the Nerd of Internet lore, then, a cultural critique of tagging is useful to consider what kind of figures emerge out of this socially-exploded Internet culture, what kind of cultural ideologies they reflect, and what kind of social categories are reinforced or marginalised as a result. How can social media, as an important factor in the creation of identity labels and the promotion of new (and often conflictual) identity models, generate critical discourse about those very models, rather than hide their conflictual nature? And, as a consequence: how can social media act as a projective, emancipatory force in the construction of more socially-imaginative identities for users to identify with and channel through the everyday performance of their online identity?

In order to articulate a cultural critique of tagging, the thesis is structured in five chapters. The first provides an introduction and a conceptualisation of tagging in its various forms, but particularly in relation to identity labelling, social stereotyping, and Internet aesthetics. Highlighting the different forms of tagging and how they each participate in the naturalisation of social classification, the chapters serves to set the critical tone of the thesis and its theoretical aspirations.

The second, third, and fourth chapter constitute the core of the thesis, and collectively detail tagging as the materialisation of problematic social and cultural processes that pre-exist the Internet, but are complicated and accelerated in the age of social media. The goal of these chapters is to address practices of labelling that are somehow de-problematised or de-politicised, re-opening them to critical conversation and gesturing towards their re-politicisation or re-problematisation. Each chapter is centred on a specific cultural avatar – a broad and often contradictory figure that embodies specific aesthetic and cultural currents, while at the same time never fully coalescing into a coherent network, movement, or subject. For the scope of this project, I chose the Gangsta, the Digital Nomad, and the Troll. These figures are very diverse, and each represents a different way in which different types of tagging intersect and amplify pre-existing social or cultural issues: the implications of direct addressability on vulnerable categories, the material contribution of geo-tagging in the definition of global geographies driven by commercial trends, the naturalisation of marginalising categories for the sake of smooth informational circulation.

I chose these three avatars specifically for their contradictory character and stereotypical nature, which converge with an ambiguous relationship to both everyday politics and the Internet's disruptive informational ethos: all three represent a particular attitude towards the Internet as a tool for social mobility or personal fulfilment that, in a sense, gestures towards a utopian view of its infrastructure; at the

same time, they also contribute to conceal the persisting imbalances from which they emerge – thanks to, and not despite, their digitised standardisation. The Gangsta unlocks social mobility by giving in to social voyeurism; the Digital Nomad offers a re-imagination of work and borders that is not radical enough to be truly inclusive; the Troll celebrates humour while disqualifying social justice in the name of freedom of speech – all three are imbued with some kind of Internet ethos and, to a certain extent, refuse the persistence of (identity) politics in the age of social media.

From a scholarly perspective, each figure is dissected through the lens of a different intellectual tradition: the Gangsta is especially relevant to a social-interactionist tradition that I put in a dialogue with cultural critique; the Digital Nomad is rooted in post-structuralist thought and is here discussed in relation to speculative (geo)political theories; the Troll (the most Internet-specific of the three) is a useful wedge to speculate on the political implications of current practices of media manipulation and knowledge production.

Notably, these three denominations[4] are not intended as identity labels per se, and each of the related chapters factors in a series of collateral labels that play into the materialisation of those stereotypical figurations – a tag-cloud of sorts that broadly defines a relevant (yet not exclusive or exhaustive) imaginary. Significantly, then, cultural avatars do not coalesce merely out of data, but "evaporate" (to keep within the cloud metaphor) out of the oppressive or emancipatory charge of a range of tagging gestures with different ideological orientations. Networks may serve as the material skeleton of such figures, but they are fleshed out by heterogenous layers of cultural references and social stereotypes. The emphasis on stereotype is here important: rather than authenticity, I am exploring certain areas of culture as they become compromised, falling prey to what several scholars of social media have described as "context collapse" (Wesch, 2009; Marwick & boyd, 2010).

I use the term "avatars" because I consider these particular figures to lack the emancipatory potential of the figurations of critical theory lore: like the cyborg (Haraway, 1991) they exist between fiction and materiality, between the cultural ideals they stand for and the socio-political predicaments they arise from, but their historical grounding in problematic labelling makes them too stereotypical to be truly utopian. Instead of being the result of a propulsive process of figuration, in other words, they remain anchored to a vicious circle of ideological bias.

The bulk of my research is thus focused on critiquing those figures in relation to a range of labelling practices that contribute to establish them as part of shared cultural and social imaginaries. Since those labelling practices are technically

[4] Throughout the thesis, I highlight when I am referring specifically to a cultural avatar and not a sociological category or a label by capitalising the first letter (e.g. Gangsta instead of gangsta or "gangsta").

sustained by social media, which camouflage ideological underpinnings under the metrics of efficiency, I contribute to the conversation towards the de-naturalisation of those practices by critiquing their infrastructure. However, in order not to fall too deep into dystopian techno-determinism, in each chapter I complement my critique with a more optimistic evaluation of imaginary alternatives to the cultural avatars I discuss, which also come together through a critical approach to social media and tagging: the hip-hop technoculture of which the Gangsta is part is also channeling the Afrofuturistic and race-critical figure of the Black Nerd; the notion of Digital Nomad could potentially be expanded to include the globally dispossessed; the Troll could become a Lurker, gaining knowledge by listening in the background rather than debating agonistically. None of these associations are intended as accomplished evaluations or programmatic cultural projects – and are indeed still too fragile to offer tenable alternatives to the stereotypes they are put up against – but their inclusion is important because it gestures towards the possibility for cultural avatars to shift and contaminate each other.

In this respect, the final chapter develops the cultural focus declared at the beginning of the thesis by exploring the aesthetics of tagging from a more proactive perspective. In order to address the ways in which the practice can be leveraged to criticise de-politicised identity models and inject subversive criticality within them, the chapter integrates a theoretical discussion of tagging aesthetics with excerpts from a set of interviews with cultural producers (artists, theorists, activists). All interviewees share a critical focus on identity and labelling, which they tackle on social media in different ways, with different goals, and with different degrees of success. Their perspectives come together in a catalogue of tagging tactics that, far from being a final statement, opens up the conversation for future research and expands my individual point of view as a researcher by engaging issues of identity labelling through experiences that may be more directly invested in them.

I.
From Figures to Figurations: For a Cultural Critique of Tagging

This chapter introduces the conceptual vocabulary and theoretical framework of the thesis. It frames tagging as an everyday gesture by social media users that participates in the collective performance of identity, highlighting how the ideological orientation of this performance is intertwined with the charged quality of identity labelling. I argue this performance gives way to the materialisation of *cultural avatars*: collective identity figures that lie beyond coherent representation and can reinforce reductive social stereotypes or inspire politically critical figurations. I also propose that acknowledging the stereotypical implications of tagging may help users deploy the practice critically, in order to engender more socially-imaginative and politically inclusive cultural avatars.

Before delving into the aforementioned theoretical argument, I shall map out the main concepts I will be working with, as well as clarify my overall approach towards researching and presenting the material I examine in the following chapters.

Firstly, this is a thesis about *online identity* – meaning the mix of representations, actions, and data through which users may recognise themselves or others through the filters and infrastructures of social media. In this sense, I understand online identity as part of the "struggle for recognition" (Honneth, 1996) also discussed by Judith Butler, who highlights the importance of critique in evaluating the schemes that unequally regulate and distribute recognisability (Butler in Willig, 2012, p. 141). Honneth and Butler notably focus on recognition in relation to social valuation and political representation, and global hashtag-driven movements like #BlackLivesMatter or #metoo are perfect examples of this struggle on social media. Throughout this thesis, however, I especially discuss how being recognised in the highly aestheticised and de-politicised context of social platforms has often come to overlap with individualised practices of self-branding and/or harassment, influence and infamy.

This brings us to the second important concept within this work: *identity labelling*. In this thesis I touch upon the work of a few scholars loosely associated to the sociological school known as labelling theory (Tannenbaum, 1963; Becker, 1962; Goffman, 1956), which investigated the social othering of marginalised outsiders through labels like the "criminal", the "mentally ill", or the "homosexual". While its social-interactionist accent may seem less adaptable to a critique of social media, compared for example to a Foucauldian perspective focusing on power relations, I believe labelling theory provides some useful notions to approach tagging in particular. Most notably, the idea that social identity is constructed in part through labels, and that these labels reinforce themselves socially as they are appropriated

by those labelled. The result is a self-fulfilling prophecy, thus conveying the *stereotypical* nature of online identity. Stereotypes are useful yet oversimplified beliefs spread by the media (Lippman, 1922), but also "sets of fixed ideas and beliefs held about human groups" (Tajfel, 1963, p. 4) whose distinctive quality may also play a role in self-categorisation (Turner, 1987); it follows, then, that the dynamics of algorithmic segregation by homophily (Chun, 2018) mentioned in the introduction, along with the practices of identity labelling operated by social media users that feed into them, are also inherently stereotypical. Importantly, a label can also be a brand, and labelling on social media is often used as a practice of self-branding that is very fitting with the idea of a brand as a new media object (Lury, 2004, p. 6).

The reliance on the label as a discrete entry point – the instance of tagging – which then opens up to a more composite and contradictory range of suggested connections (based on conflicting social attributes, cultural references, and ultimately predicted behaviour[5]) is then important to step into the coalescence of *cultural avatars*. Throughout this thesis I use the term "avatar" in reference to figures rooted in a social imaginary not unlike the one theorised by Arjun Appadurai (2000), according to whom imagination is a form of work and people imagine themselves by choosing from a globally defined field of possibilities (2000, p. 31). However, rather than a cultural image, a cultural avatar is a figure relating to the actions of labelling and social classification, and thus ultimately related to identity. While cultural avatars may indeed emerge from "diasporic public spheres" (Appadurai 2000, p. 33) and I do discuss the neoliberal cooptation of social imagination as inherent to the stereotypical dynamics of online identity, I also explore the materiality of tagging as at once more deterministic and poietic. In other words, imagination through tagging is materially constrained by networks, links, and algorithms, but the practice's aesthetic potential may also allow critical reconfigurations of the imaginary towards the figurations typical of critical theory.

While this thesis does not have a methodology section, I shall also provide a short explanation of my research approach. This work was inspired by an interest in how the Internet globalises certain identity figures (comprising cultural tropes and stereotypical behaviours) by allowing the circulation of cultural elements that users select to plug their online identities into wider discourses, networks, and communities. I imagined this process as a sort of patchwork, a tag cloud of sorts, and that was my (admittedly ingenuous) first approach to tagging. After exploring

[5] The first empirical study in this direction was conducted by Katz and Braly (1933) and it involved a now famous checklist of attributes that 100 participating Princeton undergraduates had to assign to a series of groups. Although the study was important in evaluating the shared consensus on certain stereotypes, marking a shift from "race psychology" to individual attitudes towards stereotyped groups, some argued it represented a way for psychology to pass the blame on "irrational" individuals and maintain professional integrity (Samuelson, 1978, cited in Pickering, 2001).

literature about both stereotyping and the technical affordances of social media, as well as attending conferences in both sociology and media theory circles, I noticed a gap between the critical concern for stereotypes in the historical, modernist sense (the fixity of content) and concern for social media as global technical infrastructures (the fluidity of circulation). More specifically, while great attention was given to the phenomenon of hashtags, a proper contextualisation of different types of tagging as a cultural phenomenon was missing – which led me to explore tagging as a performative form of identity labelling, in its cultural and social stereotyping connotation.

Having a background in new media arts and digital culture, my inclination was to explore the topic as a cultural critic, exploring and developing a broad conceptualisation of tagging in order to use it to explore each figure. While my initial research interests were the figures that I now discuss as cultural avatars, then, tagging became a simultaneous object of focus and the tool to understand what precisely made those figures interesting to me. The development of this theoretical pivot, then, proceeded alongside the surveying of a range of material from YouTube channels, Facebook groups, Twitter accounts, and other heterogenous texts. These two processes formed a sort of feedback loop: as I mapped out the most salient issues related to each avatar, my understanding of tagging as an historically charged cultural practice became more nuanced; as I researched the historical and ideological implications of tagging, my insight into the stereotypical dynamics of labelling within the media ecologies related to each figure, with their specific taggings, became deeper. In other words, as it shall become clear in this chapter, I used a theoretical critique of tagging as a methodology to explore the culture and aesthetics of social media as technologies for social stereotyping. While sociologists and anthropologists are referenced across the thesis, the chapters that follow are based more on an exploration of cultural threads across heterogenous sources rather than sociological or anthropological insight. Finally, even though I do address the research questions listed in the introduction[6], in the tradition of critical theory a lot of them are left open-ended, or meant to lead to further debate; others, and many more, are discussed in the interviews reported in the last chapter.

Having introduced the main concepts and explained the research process, I shall proceed to outline this chapter. Firstly, I introduce tagging by providing an overview of different practices that I discuss as part of collateral cultural phenomena throughout the thesis. When it was introduced as one of the defining elements of the

[6] Again: What does it mean to tag or be tagged on social media? Where does tagging come from, and what are its social and cultural implications? How is one instance of tagging different from another, and is there such a thing as a good or bad tagging? Has tagging changed the relationship between online identity and power in the age of social media?

participatory web in the mid-2000s, tagging was hailed as a revolutionary tool for bottom-up classification of online content; in 2011, during the eventful happenings of the Occupy Wall Street movement and the so-called Arab Spring, Twitter hashtags in particular were framed as a momentous feature of online activism; now, tagging appears across a spectrum of uses and cultural forms and has become a banal practice of the everyday. Significantly, it could be argued that tagging represents the human element in social media that most intimately flirts with their algorithmic nature. For this reason, I identify it as a key site for a critical re-imagination of online identity.

Then, I frame tagging as an operational form of identity labelling that contributes to naturalise historically grounded practices of social classification, with especially fraught implications in terms of identity politics. In particular, I rely on a landmark study of the social and political connotation of classification systems by Bowker and Star (1999), highlighting the importance of everyday practice in the maintenance of classification systems, as well as the importance of a contextual reading of these systems in terms of their consequences on those marginalised social identities that are at risk of naturalisation. Taking this issue online, I refer to recent studies of Twitter hashtagging (De Kosnik & Feldman, 2019) to explore how tagging and labelling can lose their historical weight in the maelstrom of online debate.

In the following section I delve into the aesthetics of tagging, highlighting its role as a stepping stone between the structured ideology of social media classification and the poietic power of imagination. Emphasising its aesthetic quality as a performative gesture, my main argument is that tagging is more than data to be arranged in tag clouds or network maps, but a gesture that stitches together complex figurations that lie beyond representation. To do so, I contextualise the practice within the realm of relational aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2002), highlighting the need for particular figurations in order to anchor my critique and maintain its political potential. While enforcing the material constraints of information interfaces as a cultural agent of digital protocols, in fact, I argue that tagging still offers a margin of creativity and it can still be tactically used to re-politicise certain categories from within these systems, thus avoiding the naturalisation of imposed hierarchies.

Finally, I discuss tagging in relation to two notable examples from critical theory – the cyborg (Haraway, 1984) and the nomadic subject (Braidotti, 2006) – in order to introduce the three cultural avatars that will be at the core of the next chapters. I argue that re-problematising these three stereotypical figures by criticising related labelling practices might be a way to stop their naturalisation and activate the potential of collective figuration.

Expanding the Field: From Tags to Tagging

One of the main purchases of this chapter is there is more to tagging than tags. While much of the literature reviewed in this section focuses on tags – in fact, hashtags in particular – I consider tagging as a performative gesture of labelling that enacts a practice of classification. This definition encompasses a range of objects (tags, hashtags, usernames, geo-referenced pins, even stickers and emojis) and actions (bottom-up classification, addressing and naming users, establishing networks of debate and/or collaboration, self-branding, geo-charting, and even image recognition). Most of the taggings I discuss are made by users, while some of them are automatic and algorithmic; all of them, however, involve a target (e.g. a piece of content, a user) that is being classified through the attachment of another object (e.g. a tag, a piece of content the user is tagged into). The tag can be formed by a label (which in turn can refer to a category of some kind, or a brand) or, in the case of geo-tagging, a data object containing geographical coordinates.

Rather than a history of the many phenomena that are related to it, this introduction to tagging covers four main aspects of the practice, following the roughly chronological development of relevant literature: the use of *tags* to classify content, the use of *hashtags* for conversation, political participation, and self-branding, the tagging of *users*, and finally tags that emerge from *algorithms* or in collaboration with algorithms.

As a form of classification, tags are one of the defining features of social media. They were introduced in the mid-2000s by the social bookmarking site del.icio.us, which allowed users to share links and label them individually through the use of textual keywords that made them easily searchable and accessible through the website. Later adopted by Flickr, tagging became more "mainstream" in 2005, when Yahoo bought both platforms (Smith, 2005). According to Thomas Vander Wal (2007), del.icio.us was a turning point because it introduced identity — the object being tagged, but also the tagger — thus allowing for dynamic hyperlinking between pieces of content. In fact, while webmasters would previously categorise online content to make it searchable by inserting keywords in HTML code, which the website visitor would not directly see, the tags users choose to categorise the content they share on social media are more than textual references: they instantly become active links, easily clickable and dynamically organising content by linking a potentially heterogeneous constellation of items to the same word. In particular, the possibility for users to create their own tags prompted Vander Wal (2007) to coin the term "folksonomy" – a portmanteau of "folk" and "taxonomy" referring to the bottom-up organisation of information.

A few years since its implementation, Trant (2008, p. 4) provides an initial overview of the scholarly debate on tagging, highlighting and clearly defining the different elements at play: tagging is a process, folksonomy the resulting vocabulary, and social tagging the socio-technical context within which tagging takes place.

According to Trant, there are clearly many useful affordances to the feature. Among the advantages of tagging are easier information retrieval, quick navigation, and the serendipitous discovery of new content, which make folksonomies work because they have a low cognitive cost, a tight feedback loop, and users have the ability to share (Mathes, 2004). Importantly, the collective dimension of tagging and folksonomies is also in sense-making: according to Golder and Huberman (2005, cited in Trant, 2008, p. 6) tags are not only descriptive, but perform different functions. As a consequence, a collateral problem of folksonomies is the accuracy of terms and the stability of the vocabulary – an especially tricky subject in the realm of institutional knowledge (such as museum archives) where a certain level of trust is expected. In this sense, the tendency of folksonomies to stabilise around the most used terms has been seen as a sign of positive self-regulation (Shirky, 2003), coexisting with minority views and different perspectives (Weinberger, 2005). Weinberger in particular uses the tree as a metaphor for traditional taxonomic structures, linking back to those of the Swedish biologist Carl Linnaeus and the Enlightenment, and juxtaposes it to the folksonomy as a heap of leaves, a botanical metaphor that Cairns (2011, p. 3) extends to the rhizome, famously theorised by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) as a philosophical conceptualisation of bottom-up organisation and subjective emancipation.

However, within the realm of museum taxonomy, Saab (2010) is careful to take the inclusion of minority perspectives within a folksonomy as necessarily empowering. Collectively-generated tags might reflect dominant cultural schemas of the broad population, but “the assumption that collective tags represent a shared conceptualisation, interferes with discerning minority cultures, whose schemas may overlap with but are not necessarily entirely consistent with those of the dominant cultural group” (Saab, 2010, p. 3). The stabilisation along usage trends is thus not unproblematic, because it might decrease the opportunity for minority discourse to provide input. Writing from the perspective of museum scholars, Cairns (2011) and others thus advocate for a combination of folksonomies and a controlled vocabulary, a synergy often recognised to be critical to the coexistence of folksonomies and meaning.

If a shared vocabulary is one of the established advantages of folksonomies, according to Trant (2008) it is not clear how much system design influences tagging behaviour and the subsequent emergence of ontologies – which means the emergence of a shared semantics along with the vocabulary is not to be taken for

granted. As a consequence, there seems to be a distinction between tagging systems and the Semantic Web approach proposed by Tim Berners-Lee (1999) and the World Wide Web Consortium, which advocates for common data formats and exchange protocols for data to be made machine-readable, shared and reused across applications and communities. While the former rely on the collaborative creation of labels, in the latter it is experts who build the ontologies (Dix et al, 2006). Halpin (2013) notes how meaning is differently constructed in the two scenarios: the Semantic Web tries to solve the "identity crisis" (2013, p. 5) inherent to assigning meaning to a URI – a string of characters used to identify a resource known as Uniform Resource Identifier – while collaborative tagging provides a sense that is limited yet computable, a sort of digital encoding of user behaviour for a resource (2013, p. 147)[7]. Tagging thus appears to be less ambitious and more practical than the Semantic Web, a tendency it is tempting to equate to more empowering results. However, things seem to be more complicated than that: Campbell (2006, cited in Trant, 2008) reads this contrast in terms of a creative tension between an intersubjectivity defined by control (vocabularies and ontologies) and one defined by emergent semantics (tagging). Also supporting this mixed reading, Mika (2007, p. 14) writes: "Ontologies are us: inseparable from the context of the community in which they are created and used".

The above is a crucial aspect of tagging: the importance of ontologies is different depending on context, and I argue the ontological conundrum of the practice is best expressed outside knowledge institutions. Namely, in relation to identity.

In this respect, Avery Dame (2016) uses the Tumblr trans community as a compelling case study, documenting the emergence of a trans-specific folksonomy as well as the definitional conflicts within it. While trans users set themselves apart from wider public discourse through the use of specific terms, the folksonomy is unable to account for different user practices and gives them equal weight in influencing its development. As the folksonomy settles into a stable, ontological organisation through repeat use, debates over tag definition ensue. "Given the deep importance of ontological security to trans self-narrative," Dame points out, "users react strongly to contestations over meaning" (2016, p. 14). This process results in either the creation of new terminology or the policing of other users' tag usage.

This is complicated by the very openness of folksonomies to external input. Spammers, it is estimated, generate about 40% of tags in order to manipulate search

[7] Halpin also argues we can consider query terms in a search engine like the implicit tagging of a resource (2013, p. 143). This is very relevant to the argument I make in this chapter: as investigated by Noble (2018), in fact, user searches combined with proprietary search algorithms can wind up reinforcing social stereotypes by shaping search recommendations. A search for "black people" on Google, for example, is followed by a range of suggestions that echo derogatory and stereotypical representations of the group.

engines (Korner, Benz et al, 2010, cited in Cairns, 2011, p. 5) – a practice that can be seen on Instagram, perhaps the most tag-heavy and marketing-oriented of social platforms. Especially in the case of social categories where definitional stakes are high, such as the trans community, the impact of white noise or external “trolling” represents a potential obstacle in the establishment of a shared ontology to represent the values and interests of the group.

As Dame's paper shows, meaning and information organisation remain at the core of the debate on tagging. However, the importance of hashtags as drivers of real-time discourse was one of the main factors for the practice to go mainstream and reach beyond the initial platforms that deployed it.

Salazar (2017) notices how it was the growing popularity of Twitter that most helped popularise the practice around 2007, when Chris Messina first proposed to utilise the # symbol, borrowed by chat platform IRC, to group tweets according to topic. After Twitter, Facebook and Instagram also started using hashtags and thus contributed to tags assuming a much wider range of functions than just classification and description (Lee, 2018).

The fullest sanctioning of tagging as a mainstream phenomenon with unique cultural affordances came around 2011. After the highly social media-discussed revolutionary wave known as Arab Spring – which eventually led to political changes in several North African countries between 2010 and 2011, including Tunisia, Egypt, and Lybia – the media started writing about Twitter- or Facebook-revolutions, a formula reinforced and more directly represented by the global spread of the Occupy movement. This led to a range of research on Twitter hashtags in terms of organisation of political events (such as Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012; Thorson et al., 2013). Beyond Twitter, Thorson et al. (2013) in particular provide an interesting cross-platform analysis of how hashtags related to the Occupy movement were also used in YouTube videos that were shared again on Twitter, further evidence that the effect of a hashtag is driven by social and cultural, as well as technical, affordances. This aspect remains an important methodological issue as well: wondering if hashtags imported from Instagram can be analysed together with those originating from Twitter, Gray, Bounegru, and Gerlitz (2018) highlight how the grammars of data infrastructures are lively – stable in form, but can change meanings or interpretations in different publics or contexts.

Over just a few years since their introduction, the use of hashtags had become commonplace. In 2013, a Tonight Show comedy sketch that featured host Jimmy Fallon and guest Justin Timberlake conversing on a couch as if using hashtags on social media – punctuating their use of the # symbol by clapping index and middle finger of both hands together – is arguably a turning point in terms of the cultural reach of tagging. Airing on mainstream channel NBC, the sketch ridicules the banality

of the type of things one can hashtag in order to give them relevance – a perhaps sobering signal after the #OccupyWallStreet days, but one that nonetheless testifies to the inextricability of the phenomenon from the everyday.

Fittingly, the currency of "conversational tagging" (Huang, Hornton, & Efthimiadis, 2010) as a linguistic device to interact with other users in quasi-"real-time" has also become a widening area of study, with Michele Zappavigna (2015) defining the practice "searchable talk". According to Zappavigna (2015), hashtags provide "a full range of experiential and interpersonal linguistic functions at the level of lexicogrammar, as well as enacting metacommentary at the level of discourse semantic" (2015, p. 288). Tags are not only used to label content, then, but also to enact relationships. Zappavigna distinguishes between social uses of tagging – where a tag is explicitly added as social metadata, for example at the end of a sentence – and conversational ones – when the word is hashtagged within its linguistic structure (2015, pp. 274-276).

Another aspect of hashtags that has attracted a range of scholarly attention is its relationship with branding, a practice ever more crucial on social media and exemplified by the rise of the "micro-celebrity" (Senft, 2008; Marwick, 2013) and the influencer (Abidin, 2015). Both dealing with Twitter hashtags, Papacharissi (2012) and Page (2012) offer two important takes on the matter. Papacharissi (2012) describes the necessarily interconnected display of a user's online identity as a "networked performance" in need of a real or imagined audience, thus making identity inherently collective. In relation to self-branding and micro-celebrity, Page (2012) highlights instead how hashtags constitute a crucial linguistic currency on Twitter, which "enables visibility and projects potential interaction with other members" (Page, 2012, p. 184). But while celebrities and corporations can afford to individuate their identity and broadcast to their followers, monetising on sponsored campaign hashtags, regular users deploy them as a way to establish asymmetrical ambient affiliation (Zappavigna, 2014) within a wider generic category. Ultimately, the unevenly distributed frequency and individuation of hashtags is rooted in and reinforces offline asymmetries of economic power and status (Page, 2012, p. 193).

The possibility of tagging other users also plays into their own branding, and is thus worth discussing[8]. While the # is still used for classification and topics (visibly or hidden), on a number of platforms it is possible to tag users by using the @ symbol followed by their name. Unlike content tagging, user tagging does not necessarily involve any attachment of keywords: a user is not "tagged" with a tag as we would a piece of content, but their username is used itself as a tag that links their profile to a

[8] Inspired by Flickr users, the Twitter community started using the "@" sign since late 2006 (Murray, 2012), which led the platform to activate the feature officially in 2008 (Williams, 2008). Facebook followed by implementing @mentions in 2009 (Ostrow, 2009).

piece of content – for example a photo of that user, an article they might be interested in, or a meme they might relate to.

Beyond generating privacy concerns (Besmer & Richter Lipford, 2010), as researched by Birnholtz, Burke, and Steele (2017) in the context of Facebook, a friend's tagging represents an external intervention within someone's projected self-presentation, often perceived as annoyance or embarrassment. Most importantly, while arguably providing a more reliable image of said user (Litt et al, 2014, cited in Birnholtz, et al, 2017, p. 166), Facebook tagging might offer a conflicting and potentially derogatory depiction of that person. While this type of tags can and are tactically removed to contain reputational damage, this distinctive feature marks an important evolution from earlier social media and expands the role of other individuals in one's own self-presentation (2017, p. 166).

The influence of other users in someone's social media identity is even more marked on Twitter, where publicly tagging someone by mentioning their username is a common way to connect and make conversation. Unlike Facebook, Twitter does not allow the "untagging" of oneself from other people's tweets, resulting in a material addressibility (Honeycutt and Herring, 2009, cited in Page, 2012, p. 183) that allows everyone to "link up" to any user by mentioning their Twitter handle. This function can facilitate forms of trolling or online harassment, which can have exponentially heavier effects on users with a large following or, most notably, users whose social identity is defined by "intersectional" (Crenshaw, 1991) markers of gender, race, or sexual identity/orientation. If the case of trans ontologies on Tumblr shows the limits of tagging in terms of ontology, then, Twitter harassment shows the limits of networked addressability.

As tagging becomes a fixture in everyday life with social media, discussion of its technical classification potential has thus been enriched by lively debates on its complex implications in areas that range from AI and surveillance to culture.

Forms of invisible, machine-readable tagging are already happening, with the technical element trying to reach up to human expertise. Going beyond Google's use of users to help train its AI, Facebook is already applying algorithmically-generated alt tags to images posted by users, which only become visible through glitches or after installing a specific plug-in. Rahel Aima (2017) notes how the system intentionally shows only object tags with high confidence, preferring "people smiling" over the more ambiguous "happy people". However, Aima notes "the accessibility context in which the tags are deployed limits what the machines currently tell us about what they see." Sometimes, revealing the categories that inform machine learning can be quite shocking: at one point Google's Photo app famously tagged

Black people “gorillas” (Dougherty, 2015), an embarrassing hiccup that revealed what Kate Crawford (2016) has described as “artificial intelligence's white guy problem”[9].

In order to highlight the interpolation of technical and cultural factors in the organisation of content on Internet platforms, Ed Finn (2017, pp. 90-91) analyses the exceptional case of Netflix, where tagging is restricted to professional “taggers” that categorise videos according to hundreds of micro-tags and sub-genres. Finn refers to this type of collaboration within the wider idea of “culture machines,” which are “assemblages of abstractions, processes and people” (2017, p. 2). While Netflix is a proprietary culture machine, Finn points out users can build culture machines of their own by spreading collective jokes, memes and hashtags like #blm or #BlackLivesMatter (p. 193). In light of this perspective, tagging embodies a type of labelling that is meant to be machine-readable, but responding to cultural references – the audio-visual elements and narrative of a video on Netflix or YouTube, or the time-specific relevance of a hashtag in a tweet – that only a human can discern.

Beyond the promise of efficiency and empowerment, folksonomies and social tagging thus offer important angles from which to explore a variety of cultural issues, made all the more interesting because of the material quality of social media tagging itself. Tagging materialises the invisible layer between human users and algorithmic intelligence, representing then a crucial point of intersection between culture and technology, a key site – I argue – for the re-imagination of online identity. The return of identity politics described by Chun (2018) is, after all, in part defined by tagging: the ontological needs of trans Tumblr users, Twitter-enforced addressability, and unrequested collaboration in a user's self-presentation may be new in form, but are rooted in older social practices of stereotyping and classification. In the following chapters, I explore how tagging cultures and aesthetics intersect with labelling practices old and new.

Classification and its Consequences: Tagging and Infrastructure

Before I venture into exploring the aesthetics of tagging as a performative gesture, I

[9] More recently, an art project by Crawford and media artist Trevor Paglen titled “ImageNet Roulette” exposed the controversial workings of a popular image recognition algorithm by inviting users to upload their own likeness via their webcam, to see themselves categorised through a variety of labels that included controversial ones like “slut,” “rapist,” “Negroid,” and “criminal” (which had been originally generated by low-paid Amazon Mechanical Turk workers who had to manually categorise the images for the algorithm). As a result, the company eventually expunged from their database 438 human categories, along with thousands of images. Examples like this demonstrate how the labelling of the criminal or other categories as social outsiders can now be enforced by technologies like image recognition and image tagging, which carry human and historical bias despite their automated efficiency.

shall introduce it as a practice of labelling and contextualise it within the identity politics of social media. In other words, in this section I narrow the focus on those types of tagging that most closely converge with the historically charged classification of individuals and social groups. As mentioned before, while I pay particular attention to the phenomenon of tags and hashtags, I also factor in the tagging of users as an underestimated form of labelling. In so doing, I use different terms: *classification* (the act of dividing objects and individuals into groups, according to pre-defined categories), *label* (a category embedded within specific historical-political contexts, often socially charged), *identity labelling* (the act of classifying an individual as part of a social category, usually from the top down), *tag* (an operational link created on social media), *tagging* (the gesture of creating a tag). I already explained how these terms refer to materially distinct objects and actions, however in this section I focus on tagging as a form of identity labelling, a context in which these terms blur and overlap. For this reason, I frequently use the term *labelling practice* to refer to the regular use of labels within a specific context, either before social media or in relation to tagging. Rather than confusing the reader, my goal is here to highlight the critical charge and poietic potential of this conflation, which will lead to the following exploration of tagging aesthetics.

When it comes to approaching social categorisation systems critically, Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star (1999) provide a foundational framework that outlines how classification is always the result of and a participating force in social, cultural, and historical predicaments. Bowker and Star research several classification systems that are immediately relevant to human bodies, including the ICD (International Classification of Diseases) and race classification under apartheid in South Africa. From their case studies, as well as an exhaustive historical and theoretical analysis of classification systems in general, they extract several useful conceptual devices that are still valid, if not even more so, in the age of social media and tagging.

The most relevant notion to this section is that classification and standards are material as well as symbolic (1999, p. 39), which means they require continuous maintenance and have tangible consequences. Bowker and Star maintain the fundamental Foucauldian perspective on classification systems as forms of knowledge enacting hierarchical power, especially in that they are far from neutral: politically and socially charged agendas are often presented as purely technical and thus difficult to see, becoming more entrenched as “the layers of classification systems become enfolded into a working infrastructure” (p. 196). According to Bowker and Star, this leads to the “naturalisation” of political categories, meaning the point when members of a community forget the local nature of an object's meaning or the actions that go into maintaining and recreating its meaning (1999, p. 299). As I

explain below, this discourse is especially important as tagging and folksonomies have become a major tool for classification.

In some ways, tagging seems to respond to many of the requirements of a good classification system set by Bowker and Star. While Foucault's theories have sometimes been criticised for downplaying the role of individual agency within bureaucracy, Bowker and Star are especially interested in the sloppiness of classification systems, how they tend to be Aristotelian in principle and prototypical in practice – meaning they start by assuming binary parameters and yet wind up becoming fuzzier and fuzzier (p. 64). Stating that information is only information when there are multiple interpretations, Bowker and Star add people as active interpreters who themselves inhabit multiple contexts of use and practice (p. 291): people do not follow rules, they make their own, and they subvert formal classification schemes with informal work-arounds. A classification system, then, is a historical and political artefact that requires categorical work (pp. 285-286) and entails learning by doing, as categories are learned as part of membership in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) that can also be based on "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, cited in Bowker and Star, 1999, p. 294). In other words, someone does not need to be an essential part of a community in order to be involved in its categorical work, and sometimes categorical work happens across different communities[10].

In this respect, Bowker and Star also discuss the concept of "boundary object" (Star & Griesemer, 1989), a plastic form of information that maintains integrity in content but is interpreted differently across communities. According to the authors: "the creation and management of boundary objects is key in developing and maintaining coherence across intersecting social worlds" (1989, p. 393). Highlighting the emergence of many databases that incorporate object-oriented views of data, as opposed to the old hierarchical databases where relations between classes had to be decided once, Bowker and Star (1999) state that boundary objects are working arrangements that resolve anomalies of naturalisation without imposing such naturalisation of categories from one community or from an outside source of standardisation (1999, p. 297).

Importantly, the materiality of classification systems also implies a sort of infrastructural accountability. According to Bowker and Star, it is politically and ethically crucial to recognise the vital role of infrastructure in the "built moral environment". They write: "A key for the future is to produce flexible classifications whose users are aware of their political and organisational dimensions and which

[10] If Bowker and Star were writing the above in the 1990s, this is especially true for in the age of social media and tagging: to refer back to the example of trans ontologies discussed by Dame (2016), non-trans users can affect the taxonomy as well, which can be problematic.

explicitly retain traces of their construction." To truly learn from the past, they continue, "the past could be reordered to better reflect multiple constituencies now and then". In other words: "the only good classification is a living classification" (p. 326).

The notions of categorical work, boundary object, and living classification all resonate with tagging and folksonomies, which seem to offer practical tools to resolve many of the issues historically plaguing the categorised. The issues with tagging, however, emerge mostly as localised effects of its infrastructural seamlessness.

In this respect, Bowker and Star dedicate some attention to those categories that may suddenly capture the popular imagination and become politicised, demanding recognition or redefinition through collective action (1999, p. 64)[11]. Labels like LGBTQ, "women/people of colour", or the concept of "intersectionality" – popularised in the context of US law by Crenshaw (1991), but since at the centre of its own area of discussion and critical praxis (Collins, 2015) – have animated intellectual and political discourse for decades. There is, of course, a double-edgedness to this form of labelling: while identification with the marginalising connotation of labels may lead labelled individuals to further entrenchment outside the mainstream, the reclamation of labels has proved to be empowering on a political level. As mentioned in the previous section through the examples of trans ontologies on Tumblr or the intersectional impact of Twitter harassment, this quality has gained exceptional currency in the age of tagging and social media.

Most recently, De Kosnik and Feldman (2019) have explored the potential of Twitter hashtags in relation to recent social and political movements like #BlackLivesMatter – but also, and significantly, in terms of adversarial, "colour-blind" discourses like #AllLivesMatter. While touching upon everyday aspects of hashtag use, De Kosnik and Feldman tackle the practice in both material and cultural terms: a tag is not just a quick technical shortcut for online participation, it is an identity label that can acquire an embodied and cultural character. Twitter is thus both empowering and potentially oppressive, as it allows specific identity groups to express themselves while exposing them to the antagonism of those who believe social difference is only a memory from a pre-Internet past. Recognising the role tagging has in enforcing fraught social classification, De Kosnik and Feldman eloquently state that "race, gender, sexual orientation and nationality are among the oldest and most persistent metadata, or 'tags', assigned to and organising human relations" (2019, p. 12). If

[11] For example, they recall the 1990s march in Washington, aimed at introducing multiple racial categories in the US census and replacing the vague and to some insulting "other" category – a proposal approved only after a long struggle in 1997 under the inconspicuous name of Statistical Directive 15 – and highlight how this form of strategic essentialism was sought by activists in order to obtain resources and justice like affirmative action in the 60s and 70s (Bowker & Star, 1999, pp. 223-224).

tagging is categorical work, then, it must serve a purpose beyond the often mystifying promise of folksonomy; if tags emerge from conflict, it is worth zeroing in on what negotiations and battles they materialise – an infrastructural insight that is now all the more precious, since (as shown by the example of the Jimmy Fallon sketch described in this chapter) Bowker and Star's message has been muffled by the proliferation of tagging practices.

By adopting the technical posture of a living classification, tagging has turned classification into a performative gesture that is often devoid of the ideological weight stressed by Bowker and Star: because of its bottom-up nature, tagging manifests itself as a form of techno-cultural protocol – formatting identity in order for it to be searchable and networkable – in a way that often does not even appear as an act of classification. However, according to Bowker and Star, a category is "in between a thing and an action" (p. 285) – in the case of tagging, the culturally-negotiated tags and the tagging of a piece of content or user. Although it appears as a mere technical shortcut, or even a formatting convention at times, the effects of the practice are powerful: as soon as the @ or # sign are used to activate a tagging, a material link is created, adding up to the network that constitutes the online identity of all the users or pieces of content that are connected by it. As the very gestures of tagging instantly contributes to the materialisation of networks, the Bowker and Star quote referenced above makes a critical approach even more relevant in the age of social media. When the categorical labour of users and the labelling practices it is entangled in are depoliticised, the categories involved risk naturalisation; acknowledging the protocological (Galloway, 2004) quality of online identity, then, is not a form of fatalism: on the contrary, it is a necessary condition to re-politicise classification on social media, and such re-politicisation of labelling practices has to be grounded in both infrastructural awareness and cultural criticism.

Significantly, Bowker and Star's work does more than acknowledge the labelling practices of feminist and race-critical theories and activist movements, it shows to be deeply inspired by it. Arguing computer scientists should read African-American poets and radical feminism, because "the collective wisdom in these domains is crucial to understand the core problems of information system design" (1999, p. 302), Bowker and Star also highlight the uncomfortable presence of residual categories – intended to absorb any excess that does not fit in other, more defined categories – as an inherent aspect of classification systems[12]. This is where

[12] One of the key concepts in terms of the impact of classification on bodies is the metaphor of "torque", which Bowker and Star (1999) use to describe the "twisting of biography" within the framework of a classification system (p. 163), more specifically when "the 'time' of the body and of [its] multiple identities cannot be aligned with the 'time' of the classification system" (p. 190) – for example: being classified at birth and then re-classified when hitting adult age, as it happened in some cases during apartheid. As discussed earlier, in relation to the covert identity politics of algorithms, the

their work inspires my own take on figures and figuration: Bowker and Star praise Donna Haraway's famously hybrid category of the cyborg (1984) for defusing essentialist romanticism and techno-hype (p. 301), as well as Gloria Anzaldua's "borderland" (1987), which they define as the coexistence of two communities of practice in one person – a form of braided identity rather than code-switching (pp. 304-306). Feminism and race-critical theory, Bowker and Star argue, "offer traditions of reflective denaturalisation, of a politics of simultaneity and contradiction" (p. 308).

Since Bowker and Star's landmark contribution, a number of critical, philosophical, and artistic endeavours have stemmed from this premise. Critical approaches to informational infrastructures that span arts and science include concepts like "object-oriented feminism" (Behar, 2010), "infrastructuring as a critical feminist technoscientific practice" (Forlano, 2017), and "phantasmal media" (Harrell, 2013). Inspired by Bowker and Star, Fox Harrell's work most notably investigates the role of critical computing in the upholding of "idealised cognitive models" (ICMs) and social stereotypes. Rooted in computer science and cognitive psychology, Harrell's multi-disciplinary, tech-savvy approach has engendered pioneering projects like the DefineMe Facebook app, in which users co-define each other (through tagging, among other things), as well as more visual explorations of video game avatars. The goal of phantasmal media and critical computing is to make those interiorised models more flexible and inclusive by acting on both the conscious and unconscious. However, while interface design such as Harrell's requires significant technical know-how, the proprietary interfaces and limited technical affordances of social media make structural change hardly possible, limiting interventions at the cultural and aesthetic level. For this reason, as I tackle social media, I have decided to focus on the possibilities of tagging aesthetics. In the next section I discuss how tagging can be leveraged to contribute to more socially imaginative cultural avatars, and gesture towards collective figuration.

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missing synchronicity of time and space is also a recurring issue when considering digital identities as well. Olga Goriunova (2019) describes something akin to a "twisting of biography" in her conceptualisation of the digital subject: rather than the indexicality promised by data capture and visualisation, Goriunova posits there is rather a "distance" between a living person and their data. If Chun is looking for "co-relation" instead of "correlation" (Chun, 2018, p. 85), Goriunova chooses distance over relation, because "distance is not representational; it induces change" (Goriunova, 2019, p. 4). This gap is the reason the digital subject becomes a site of contestation that can have political urgency: "As digital subjects are constructed not only to sell products but also to imprison, medically treat, or discriminate against individuals, the non-coincidence and spatiality of the distance become urgent political matters" (2019, p. 6).

Beyond the Tag Cloud: From Figures to Figuration

Having clarified the techno-cultural context of tagging as a form of identity labelling in the age of social media, I shall now explore how its materiality can engender a cultural and political aesthetic in its own right. I articulate this argument in two movements: first, I set the premise for an aesthetic framing of social media by reconceptualising the practice of tagging in the context of "relational aesthetics" (Bourriaud, 2002); then, I build on this premise to explore Olga Goriunova's notions of "art plaforms" and "digital subject" (2011; 2019) to outline how the everyday performance of social media users engenders cultural avatars that can be critically challenged through tagging.

From a scholarly perspective, the traceability of tagging has inspired a great deal of varied research. In particular, in terms of visualisation, the availability of tag streams as RSS[13] data has enabled a number of tools, which found most prominently expression in the image of the "tag cloud" (Trant, 2008, p. 19), once ubiquitous in social media research, and the network maps inspired by Actor Network Theory (ANT), a theoretical and methodological approach to social theory developed by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, John Law, and others. However, information aesthetics has its limits. From a formal perspective, the ubiquitous enthusiasm surrounding information aesthetics a decade ago been complicated by a variety of recent cultural and technical developments: the emergence of fake news, massive use of bots, AI, trolling, memetic warfare, and in general the ambivalence inherent to Internet content (Milner & Phillips, 2017); from a political one, the urgency that characterises the cultural debate of the past few years[14] (especially in the context of identity labels) might also demand a different approach.

In relation to the first point, Alexander Galloway (2012) makes an interesting critique of information visualisation. Galloway argues all maps of the Internet, all social graphs, all word clouds look the same, and the aesthetic repercussion of this is that "no poetics is possible" in such a uniform space. For Galloway, the symbolic inefficiency inherent to information aesthetics is linked to the augmentation of algorithmic efficiency, ultimately proving that "there are some things that are unrepresentable" (pp. 85-86). In order to move beyond the visualisation of tagging as

[13] Short for Really Simple Syndication or Rich Site Summary, a technology that records all updates to a website in a standardised format, so that users can subscribe to a "feed" and receive updates directly in a program called RSS reader. It is one of the main innovations brought by the so-called Web 2.0.

[14] In this respect, for an interesting performative approach to data visualisation, based on "enactment" and focusing on the goals and targets of digital scholarship ("to what ends and for whom") see Parry (2019).

a modular element to be arranged in graphs, network maps, and tag clouds, and reinstating its imaginary (if not symbolic) efficiency, I shall consider it in relation with "relational aesthetics" (Bourriaud, 2002), a concept emerging from contemporary art criticism in the late 1990s.

Relational art stems from a tension inherent to modernity: the struggle between "a modest, rationalist conception, hailing from the 18th century, and a philosophy of spontaneity and liberation through the irrational (Dada, Surrealism, the Situationists)" (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 1). Both of these currents were opposed to the "authoritarian and utilitarian forces eager to gauge human relations and subjugate people", which eventually won and led to a general rationalisation of the production process (p. 2). Bourriaud describes the changing role of art in such a predicament: "the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist". This results in a further entanglement of art and life: "The artist dwells in the circumstances the present offers him, so as to turn the setting of his life (his links with the physical and conceptual world) into a lasting world. He catches the world on the move: he is a *tenant of culture*, to borrow Michel de Certeau's expression'" (p. 3). However, the contingency of relational art is not to the detriment of its political potential. On the contrary:

> "The possibility of a *relational* art (an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space), points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural and political goals introduced by modern art" (2002, p. 3).

If Galloway laments a blindness to the modes of production in information aesthetics, in a way Bourriaud's framing of the artistic as always embedded within the social would make it inherently political. In this respect, in reference to the materialistic character of relational aesthetics, Bourriaud defines the work of art as a social "interstice", a Marxian term describing " trading communities that elude the capitalist economic context by being removed from the law of profit" (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 5). Bourriaud makes the example of a Jens Haaning installation broadcasting funny stories in Turkish through a loudspeaker in a Copenhagen square (*Turkish Jokes*, 1994): the artwork produces a micro-community made up of immigrants brought together by collective laughter, which upsets their exile situation. In the context of an exhibition, works like this create an "arena of exchange" that proposes and represents certain "models of sociability". Significantly, for Bourriaud criticism plays a role within this system:

> "[T]his 'arena of exchange', must be judged on the basis of aesthetic criteria, in other words, by analysing the coherence of its form, and then the symbolic value of the 'world' it suggests to us, and of the image of human relations reflected by it. Within this social interstice, the artist must assume the symbolic models he shows. All representation (though contemporary art *models* more than it represents, and fits into the social fabric more than it draws inspiration therefrom) refers to values that can be transposed into society" (2002, p. 6).

Like Galloway does with network maps, Bourriaud is testing these models for symbolic value, assigning cultural criticism the task of assessing world views – through aesthetic production, rather than exchange value. The practice of the everyday (De Certeau, 1984) is thus modelled and transformed through the aesthetic power of art, rather than the scientific methods that isolate facts to synthesise models of the social.

Since the age of social media makes the social as aesthetic and material as ever, Bourriaud's relational aesthetics is a perfect angle to examine cultural production on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram[15]. In particular, it is adaptable as a fit theory of tagging as well. In fact, Bourriaud presents relational aesthetics as a theory of form, and defines form as a "lasting encounter" (p. 7). Since tagging establishes a material link and a trackable connection between users or content, it is the perfect materialisation of such an encounter. Furthermore, relational aesthetics also accounts for the heterogeneity and incommensurability of tagging practices:

> "[T]he form of Gordon Matta-Clark or Dan Graham's work can not be reduced to the 'things' those two artists 'produce'; it is not the simple secondary effects of a composition, as the formalistic aesthetic would like to advance, but the principle acting as a trajectory evolving through signs, objects, forms, gestures... The contemporary artwork's form is spreading out from its material form: it is a linking element, a principle of dynamic agglutination. An artwork is a dot on a line" (pp. 8-9).

Such a definition of the relational artwork gestures towards a network-oriented reading of art (or, in this case, tagging), but in an elusive sense. Tagging can be both a dot – a category with a searchable address – or a line – for example between users; it is indeed a linking element, a principle of "dynamic agglutination" of users

[15] While some have argued the concept of relational aesthetics may have been made less relevant within the new digital infrastructures of social media – themselves based on platforms, collaborations, and "prosumers" (Bishop, 2012) – Bourriaud's term has in fact been usefully re-contextualised within a digital environment by Rita Raley (2009) in her revisitation of tactical media, a formula originally coined by David Garcia and Geert Lovink (1997) that I discuss more in detail in the last chapter.

and content into clouds and maps. However, while digital methods of mapping and visualisation of the social online rely on data as a discrete measurement of society, the heterogeneous, incommensurable quality of the elements involved – for Bourriaud signs, objects, forms, gestures; for this thesis tags, hashtags, geo-tags, Twitter mentions, etc – points towards a different perspective. In fact, Bourriad eventually moves beyond “forms” altogether:

> “In observing contemporary artistic practices, we ought to talk of 'formations' rather than 'forms'. Unlike an object that is closed in on itself by the intervention of a style and a signature, present-day art shows that form only exists in the encounter and in the dynamic relationship enjoyed by an artistic proposition with other formations, artistic or otherwise” (2002, p. 9).

The focus here being identity, it is important to consider the implications of relational aesthetics in terms of how subjectivity itself is constructed. In this respect, apart from referencing De Certeau, Bourriaud also discusses the thought of philosopher and radical psychologist Felix Guattari. With the premise that psychoanalysis and art are both types of subjectivity production (p. 88), according to Bourriaud art “provides a plane of 'immanence', at once very organized and very 'absorbent', for the exercise of subjectivity” (p. 101). With Guattari (1992), the goal is then to “de-naturalise subjectivity” (Bourriaud, p. 88) and “conveying the human sciences and the social sciences from scientific paradigms to ethical-aesthetic paradigms” (p. 96). Moving onto the “plane of immanence” of social media, the labelling practices discussed in the previous section are then the perfect site of negotiation for such de-naturalisation.

The aesthetics we are talking about are then not merely about art to be experienced (collectively or not), but also a process of subjectivation that involves both the artists/prosumers and their audiences/followers/viewers. As a techno-cultural gesture, tagging has the power to coalesce a wide range of formations into a relational aesthetics that materialises social values by pulling together the most heterogeneous cultural elements (images, videos, users, places); the sum of these elements cannot be represented, but it indeed engenders *something*. That something, I argue, is a *cultural avatar*: a collective, contradictory, unrepresentable subject that is culturally shared and yet may or may not be politically activated. For Bourriaud, in fact, material entanglement in the socio-economic infrastructure and narratives of empowerment interact. Similarly, the lines and dots traced by tagging appear first and foremost as expressions of a productive ethos, which often masks the ideological baggage of the practice as a form of social classification. Its re-politicisation is thus not a given: it has to be achieved by identifying it as a labelling practice. In other words, to re-politicise the relational aesthetics of tagging we need some kind of figurations to outline what models we are critiquing.

To clarify this and critically conceptualise social media as an aesthetic infrastructure for the production of subjectivity, it is useful to consider Olga Goriunova's notions of “art platform” (2011) and “digital subject” (2019).

Goriunova does not specifically address mainstream websites like Facebook or Twitter, but provides a relevant conceptual framework in her definition of “art platform”: a network platform that produces art, here understood broadly as a process of creative living with networks. Art platforms are “awkward mappings between technical, aesthetic and social forces that allow us to come closer to key issues in larger cultural formations, but also discover the exceptionalities of the particular” (2011, p. 2). Crucially, while it aims at the amplification of the aesthetic force of creative practices, an art platform engages with practices that do not necessarily self-conceptualise as art (p. 7). Still, they participate in the production and amplification of new cultural currents and maybe even create new cultural figures and vectors of change (p. 10). In this sense, Goriunova explores the concept of “autocreativity”:

> “[an] autopoietic, autonomous, and 'automatic' creativity that propels aesthetic emergence in the constitution of the human, the cultural and the social, and in the process of subjectification and actualisation that are not solely locked into anthropomorphism but play out dynamically and recursively at the scales of the technical, natural, and preindividual” (2011, p. 42).

In other words, autocreativity is a machinic creativity (p. 42) – a concept that echoes the Guattari-inspired ethos of relational aesthetics.

In terms of representation, however, Goriunova argues for “a cultural theory of difference that would lead us beyond negation (à la Adorno), what is good or bad, representation and reduction, while at the same time creating ways to approach aesthetic complexity” (p. 46). According to Goriunova, we need a “more delicately nuanced account of the reciprocal constitution of the technical, organisational, political and humane” (p. 73) and also to conceptualise “the human-technical grammars protocolling how autocreativity arises, what the meanings and values of digital folklore are, and how aesthetic brilliance can come about” (p. 86). Again, the modes of production and aesthetic brilliance are here intertwined and connected by “human-technical” grammars (of which tagging, I argue, is a good example).

This possibility for “new cultural figures” and “vectors of change” is crucial to my argument and it is further explored in Goriunova's later theorisation of the “digital subject”. Highlighting the distance between lived and datafied subjects, Goriunova (2019) explains how social media complicate the relationship between fact and fiction. She emphasises that digital subjects are always “more or less than human[16]”

[16] This formula comes back in my interview with Max Dovey, in the last chapter.

(2019, p. 9) – a formulation that opens up to the possibilities of fiction. In this respect, Goriunova references Amalia Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections* (2014), a prolonged Instagram performance in which the artist impersonated a fictional character that participated in all the dynamics of social interaction required and encouraged by the platform to become a typical influencer. In her tale of personal development, delusion, and eventually redemption, Ulman inhabited a range of stereotypical female figures: the next-door girl moving to the big city, the image-obsessed go-getter pursuing fame through artificially-enhanced appearance, the detoxed mother finding her way back to self-love. For Goriunova, Ulman's fake identity (whose success lied also in its controversial character) exposed the stereotypical dynamics of identity construction through a painstaking re-enactment (2019, p. 17). Since "[d]ata regimes do not distinguish between bodies and novels, nature and culture", this type of participation taps into a key site of contestation: the question of how the real will be constructed (p. 18). In the case of Ulman, the specific performance enacted by the artist feeds back into the contradictory narratives of the female stereotypes she is channeling – an open "constellation of references" that do not amount to facts or documents (Day, 2014, p. 66, cited in Goriunova, 2019), but may nonetheless shape how the aforementioned contestation of reality is played out. Ulman's material engagement with collective stereotypes through social media may thus be exemplary of a tactical approach to networked identity, but her reliance on what we could describe as the Aspiring Female Instagram Influencer – a "cultural avatar" of peer-pressured femininity and capitalistic self-branding, unfinished and contradictory yet culturally shared and materially accessible – is necessary for her intervention on that configuration.

Goriunova's aesthetic framing of social media is not only very useful in order to renegotiate the terms of representability in the age of social media, but also a very good premise for a cultural critique of tagging. An aesthetic critique of tagging practices shall in fact not simply be grounded in the materiality and embeddedness of these practices – to do that would be akin to the network mapping criticised by Galloway for being devoid of poetics – but also anchored to some kind of "formations" (to use Bourriaud's term) or, indeed, figurations that these practices feed into.

Cultural Avatars

The point made above is very important to this thesis. While I use tagging as a conceptual device to connect users, identities, and the materialisation of collective cultural production on social media, the main critical edge of the project lies in the discussion of three figures that emerge from such production: the Digital Nomad, the Gangsta, and the Troll. By contextualising the labelling practices that contribute to

their materialisation into cultural avatars, I frame these figures as objects of debate. In so doing, I also test their potential as vehicles for either socially imaginative narratives or utopian ideas.

A figure-oriented approach is not unusual in sociology and cultural criticism, and is useful in order to connect individuals to socially recognised forms of agency, thus highlighting the collective dimension of identity construction. Sociologists have focused on figures like the hobo (Anderson, 1923) or the tourist (MacCannell, 1976) as vectors to explore certain social issues and dynamics; other figures have been associated to alternative approaches to everyday life: the flâneur has a specific way of moving across the city (Benjamin, 1999), the bricoleur a way of "making do" (De Certeau, 1984). Those figures, however, become problematic in the age of social media: the time-wasting flâneur and the eclectic bricoleur now channel the habits of clicking, remixing, and sharing – which are not necessarily critical, and in fact ultimately favour the platform monopolies we engage with daily by feeding data into them.

We are thus in need of new figures and models to critically challenge the practice of our interconnected lives. In this sense, the cyborg (Haraway, 1991) and the nomadic subject (Braidotti, 2006) work as useful examples of what a figuration might be: because of their complex and even contradictory character, they embrace a multiplicity and, as a consequence, a political charge that comes from their roots in cultural criticism. In other words, they do not only provide a set of tools, they provide a political horizon towards which to use them.

The most immediate purchase of the cyborg is its hybridity. By Haraway's definition, "A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction" (Haraway, 1984, pp. 5-6). Haraway's cyborg is thus both living being and metaphor (Hayles, 1999, p. 114), and it is the latter that gives the figure a critical advantage in comparison to the flâneur or the bricoleur, as well as a margin for utopian thought.

Another key element, and the most relevant to tagging, is the relationship between the cyborg and classification – an aspect noticed by Bowker and Star as well. From Haraway's perspective, technology is very relevant to identity and difference: what is needed, she argues, is analytical tech to make connections between related categories like race, sex, and class (in Penley and Ross, 1991, p. 11). Haraway recognises in fact the importance of a fragmented identity: the split and contradictory self is the one who can interrogate positionings and be accountable, but "'splitting' should be about heterogeneous multiplicities that are simultaneously salient and incapable of being squashed into isomorphic slots or cumulative lists" (in Penley and Ross, 1991, p. 22). In Haraway's terms: "God is self-identical, cyborg is

self-difference." Significantly, Haraway juxtaposes the cybernetic splice to the ideology of the hyphen: the latter joins polarities that maintain their own identity – human-machine, male-female, text-marginalia – while the former implies a more reflexive and transformative union (Hayles, 1999, p. 115).

As explained in the first section, the possibility for the coexistence of multiple categories at the same time, as well as the creation of new ones, is the most significant feature of tagging. While the remixing ethos of De Certeau's bricoleur inspires creativity for creativity's sake, Haraway's cyborg is then a potential catalyst for a politically conscious use of the practice; the figure's inherent multiplicity, in other words, speaks to the ontological possibilities of tagging.

The nomadic subject is also built on a kind of multiplicity, and it has an interesting relationship with materiality and fiction. In her nomadic theory, Bradotti (2011, p. 13) calls for alternative figurations to express "the kind of internally contradictory multifaceted subjects we have become". Figuration is often used to describe politically charged practices of alternative representation; however, Braidotti (1999, pp. 90-91) argues, "a conceptual persona is no metaphor, but a materially embodied stage of metamorphosis of a dominant subject towards all that the phallogocentric system does not want it to become". Referencing feminist politics of location (Rich, 1986), Braidotti reminds us that these locations are not cognitive entities, but politically informed cartographies that aim at making visible and undoing power relations (1999, pp. 90-91).

Importantly, the nomadic subject should not be taken as a new universal for the human or posthuman condition. Braidotti (2011, pp. 13-14) writes:

> "being nomadic, homeless, a migrant, an exile, a refugee, a tourist, a rape-in-war victim, an itinerant migrant, an illegal immigrant, an expatriate, a mail-order bride, a foreign caretaker of the young or the elderly of the economically developed world, a global venture financial expert, a humanitarian relief worker in the UN global system, a citizen of a country that no longer exists (Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union) – these are no metaphors, but social locations".

In a more recent paper, Braidotti (2018) explains the concept more clearly, also clarifying the aim of accurate cartographies, as well as their fictional potential:

> "The aim of an adequate cartography is to bring forth alternative figurations or conceptual personae for the kind of knowing subjects currently constructed. All figurations are localised and hence immanent to specific conditions; for example, the nomadic subjects, or the cyborg, are no mere metaphors, but material and semiotic signposts for specific geo-political and historical locations. As such, they express grounded complex singularities, not universal claims (Braidotti, 2011a). The figurations supported by cartographic accounts aim at dealing with the

> complexity of power relations. They expose the repressive structures of dominant subject-formations (potestas), but also the affirmative and transformative visions of the subject as nomadic process (potentia). In some ways a figuration is the dramatisation of processes of becoming, without referring to a normative model of subjectivity, let alone a universal one" (2018, p. 4).

This is extremely relevant to the chapter on the Digital Nomad, but also for this thesis overall. The importance of a tracing individual accounts lies in their specificity, but I would argue the dramatisation of this process of becoming opens up the potential of an exemplary performance to turn into a narration with collective potential. This is perhaps a missed opportunity in the case of Amalia Ulman's work, but the point is the interaction of a situated presence and specificity with a collective figure that gestures towards a political dimension.

Rather than to the ontological potential of tagging (its potential to define a shared reality), the politics of location Braidotti writes about are relevant to its materiality, addressability, and trackability. The capacity of tagging to stitch together users, identity labels, ideas, and geographical coordinates – all things that are expressible through the various forms of tagging mentioned in the previous section – has the potential to materialise figurations through the collective production of social media users, and re-politicise the relational aesthetics arising from it. The nomadic subjects discussed by Braidotti are after all a "relational community", an "assemblage" that involves non-human actors and technological media (2018, pp. 2-3). Again, tags and tagging: informed by "affirmative ethics" (Braidotti, 2018, pp. 2-3), the singularities expressed by social media users can thus come together in these new figurations through social media.

For the reasons mentioned so far, the three cultural avatars I discuss in the core chapters of the thesis are not to be intended as sociological categories, communities, or publics; rather than subjects and data that can be measured and classified statistically, in other words, they emerge from aesthetic expression that is distributed across a variety of heterogeneous contexts. They are also not figurations in the sense argued for by Braidotti, although their materiality gestures towards the cartographies she mentions. Rather, they are aesthetic materialisations of contradictory stereotypes that are substantiated by social media and yet entangled in pre-Internet socio-cultural issues, cultural conflicts that find a location through the labelling practices, identity performances, and desires of the people who buy into them everyday. Rather than "How do these group identities behave?", I rather wonder "How does the Gangsta relate to Donna Haraway's cyborg?" or "Is the Digital Nomad a manifestation of Rosi Braidotti's nomadic theory?".

For this reason, each of the next three essays combines a cultural avatar (which defines the field of research), a form of tagging (such as using a certain hashtag, tagging users for a certain purpose, geo-tagging), and specific issues or conflicts in which identity classification and labelling plays a role (stereotyping, materialisation of social inequalities, appropriation of identity politics from the right, etc). Every chapter also establishes a dialogue with figures and theories that pre-exist social media, as a way to provide a more accurate socio-historical context and deeper theoretical strength.

In *The @Gangsta & the Spectacle of Crime in the Age of Material Addressability* I approach the relationship between society and marginalised categories. In particular, I focus on the figure of the criminal, one of the cornerstones of the sociological school known as labelling theory. Starting from a foundational text by Frank Tannenbaum (1938), according to whom the making of the criminal is a "process of tagging" (1938, p. 19), I discuss how the ambiguous relationship between identity labelling, the figure of the gangster, and the musical genre of "gangsta rap" (now "trap" or "drill") plays out in the age of social media.

As a cultural avatar, the Gangsta emerges from an important shift in labelling practices: while Tannenbaum described tagging as a socially imposed stigma on the individual, labelled as a criminal since their arrest, social media have turned it into a tactical reclamation (or cultural appropriation) of the criminal label for self-branding. Importantly, the balance between the artistic and street life of rappers who engage with "gangsta" topics is not only more ambiguous than ever, but materially amplified by the networks that mediate their identity. Anybody can claim street credibility by fashioning themselves like a gangster on social media, also by acting tough and stirring up controversies with rival artists on Twitter or Instagram. In this sense, the direct addressability afforded by tagging, mentioning, or filming other users intersects with culture-specific practices like the rap "dissing" (insulting a rival) or the "beef" (an ongoing feud). While in certain social contexts social media confrontations have been found to accentuate gang violence (most notably in Patton, 2013, 2016), in others they are just a convenient tool for branding and even cultural appropriation. The ambiguous labelling practices inherent to the public figure of the "gangsta" rapper, combined with the imperative visibility of social media, might thus wind up reinforcing the social divide between those who can afford to exhibit an aggressive attitude in public and those who cannot.

In *The #DigitalNomad & the Global Politics of Geo-tagging* I discuss how social media labelling plays into the shifting relationship that (mostly Western) users have with work and mobility. By discussing a range of visual tropes associated with hashtags like #digitalnomad, #solotraveller, #remotework, and #4hourworkweek, as well as geo-tagging, I contextualise the Digital Nomad as a contradictory avatar of

neoliberalism, highlighting the figure's role in the definition of a depoliticised aesthetics of global work and offering a theoretical discussion of the ways in which Instagram helps spread and materialise those aesthetics.

The chapter discusses the contradictory connotations of the figure's “nomadic” status, as well as the political undertones of its relationship with both movement and labour. In terms of movement, the essay highlights the materiality of Digital Nomad aesthetics and critiques their urban politics through an exploration of geotagging. I start by discussing MacCannell's (1976) theorisation of the tourist, according to which tourism is a collective cultural production based in part on a process of social differentiation and dematerialisation, and relate these concepts to the notion of the Stack (Bratton, 2016): an “accidental megastructure” that rematerialises the social and alters the concept of sovereignty through digital platforms, universal addressability, and globalised urbanism.

In terms of labour, after highlighting how the figure of the new rich and the notion of life design (Ferriss, 2007) have inspired the definition of the Digital Nomad imaginary in non-political terms, I also put Ferriss' idea of remote work as an individual endeavour in a provocative dialogue with the reclamation of a post-work future as a utopian collectivist horizon, theorised by Srnicek and Williams (2016). Then, building on Franco “Bifo” Berardi's call for a techno-poetic platform to channel the collective subjectivation of cognitive workers (2018) and Dean's theorisation of the selfie as a communist form of communication (2017), I frame Instagram as a potential site for the re-politicisation of the Digital Nomad.

In *Trolling #SocialJustice and the Naturalisation of Social classification* I address the issue of identity labelling in relation to humour and Internet culture at large. In particular, I discuss how the far-right's appropriation of edgy Internet culture is rooted in the ambivalent identity politics of the Troll, masking ideology and social hierarchies behind an ethos of “equal opportunity offense”, logic, and an anarcho-libertarian approach to information. While focusing on the Troll, the chapter also contextualises the conflicts the figure embodies in a period of crisis of the humanities within academia.

Originating from the depths of 1990s-style Internet culture, grounded in message boards rather than social networks, trolls are a manifestation of the countercultural ethos of the early web and artistic avant-garde (Nagle, 2017). Trolls assume a temporary functional identity, expressing deliberately extreme positions in order to elicit a strong emotional response from their targets; through ambiguous labelling practices (the construction of the Social Justice Warrior as a natural enemy, the ironic shape-shifting, and the direct harassment also facilitated by the @ function on social media), the Troll thus emerges from a belief in logic over emotions, free speech over social justice, and individual achievement over collective political goals.

Apart from discussing the labelling practices mentioned above in the context of social media, the essay highlights the cultural momentum of the Troll, embodied by high-profile figures like Milo Yiannopoulos or even Donald Trump. I also consider recent cases of academic trolling as well as statements about the end of theory (Anderson, 2008) to highlight how the most critical features of the humanities may be themselves "trolled" out of academia.

Having introduced them, I shall point out a common trait of these three cultural avatars is that each represents a concealed yet ideological understanding of knowledge, as enabled by the Internet: the belief in authenticity as both a criterium of objective value and a reliable source for predictive policing (Gangsta), the faith in self-taught digital skills as an emancipatory tactic (Digital Nomad), the primacy of free speech over social justice (Troll). There are also significant differences, which inform the order in which the figures are discussed: the Gangsta explores the persistence of difference by singling out its most dramatic incarnation – the criminal, also one of the oldest targets of identity labelling and social classification; the Digital Nomad helps set the stage for a materially embedded, mobile identity that aims at being inclusive and winds up being depoliticised – which is almost allegorical of the digital condition at large; the Troll tackles the least material yet most explicitly political conflict discussed in the thesis: the relationship between identity politics – in the "levelled" and depoliticising context of Internet infrastructures – and the production of knowledge. Moving from the first to the last, the thesis gradually illustrates how, through tagging practices, social media stitches together a seamless yet insidious techno-cultural infrastructure, in which identity labelling is pervasive and yet politically neutered. The choice of the three has also in part been dictated by a self-reflective curiosity towards Western masculinity, comedic dialectics, and cultural appropriation.

II.
#gangsta #drill #trap
The @Gangsta and The Spectacle of Criminality in the Age of Material Addressability

This chapter is centred on what is perhaps the oldest form of identity labelling, or at least one that inspired early investigations of social labelling at large: the stigmatisation of the criminal. In order to address this, I discuss the figure of the Gangsta, intentionally spelled this way to highlight its connection to a hip-hop imaginary. While the genre popularly known as "gangsta rap" has been replaced by the more recent *trap* and *drill*, I use the label because it still embodies an ambivalent relationship between criminal and artist, reflecting the interaction between actual urban violence and certain strands of hip-hop culture. The accent on rap culture is not meant to suggest it is the same as gang culture – it is, however, especially relevant in the context of a discussion of social media. In terms of tagging, this chapter does not only highlight how social media have made the "gangsta" label an increasingly fluctuating signifier, but most importantly how the material addressability afforded by user tagging accelerates and amplifies surveillance and confrontational dynamics that are potentially dangerous. In this case, I argue, social media logic can work to the disadvantage of the people the genre is potentially empowering, widening the gap between those who can afford to express aggressiveness online and those who cannot.

The opening section of the chapter introduces gangsta rap and outlines the role of the Internet in the globalisation of gang culture and gang aesthetics. In contextualising the genre as a techno-culture, I highlight how its globalisation through social media (especially with the new sub-genres of trap and drill) has contributed to the flexibility of the term "gangsta", expanding it from a material urban location to an easily mediated and accessible worldwide aesthetic, defined in part by branding.

The second section explains how, despite the globalisation and aesthetisation accelerated by social media, the stigma and the local specificity of the Gangsta persist and problematically interact with the addressability enabled by social media tagging (e.g. through the "@" and geo-referencing functions). Through a review of current research literature that focuses on the Chicago-native sub-genre of drill and the role of social media in the promotion of gang culture and violence, I highlight how the banality of social media gestures interacts with dynamics of segregation and surveillance.

In the following section, I delve deeper into the labelling practices associated with the definition of the Gangsta and how they evolve with social media: the self-styled "gangsta" is no longer a criminal outcast to be reformed, but a legitimate

entrepreneur and an icon with strong pop-appeal. While the tactical switching between "gang-affiliate" and "rapper" has always been characteristic of gangsta rap and has been shown to be both propulsive and hampering a factor in the careers of early acts, this ambivalence is further complicated by social media. In this respect, I highlight how the infrastructural efficiency and inherent ambivalence of social media favour a colour-blind appropriation of gangsta rap, with the risk of a de-politicisation of the social conflicts it historically highlights.

The last part of the chapter discusses two stereotypical figures associated to hip-hop and opposed to the Gangsta, each playing into a range of identity labelling practices of othering and identification. After introducing the satirical figure of the White-and-Nerdy and linking it to the rise of social media, I review critical accounts of the nerdcore subculture, a subgenre of hip-hop catering to a nerd and predominantly white audience. In so doing, I discuss the nerd's problematic claims to intersectionality with a stereotyped black identity. Finally, I conclude by analysing hip-hop's technical-utopian character in relation to the figure of the Black Nerd, which carries technical and cultural savvy while retaining a racial consciousness. In this sense, I refer in particular to a YouTube series titled "Art Thoughtz", an art project by Jayson Musson that showcases an interesting example of relational aesthetics.

Globalising a Technoculture

"All these social networks and these computers /

*Got these n***** walking round like they some shooters"*

- Rowdy Rebel, "Computers" (2015)

As the verse above illustrates, there seems to be a perhaps counter-intuitive link between social media and the gang lifestyle. In this section I highlight how the Internet has helped globalise the cultural and aesthetic elements that make the Gangsta not only recognisable, but also replicable and ambivalent. In fact, the huge influence hip-hop has had on popular imagination all over the world is in no small part due to two elements: an unparalleled conduciveness for uncompromising content and an innovative use of technology. Below, I discuss how the diffusion of the hip-hop sub-genres of gangsta rap, trap, and drill can be discussed in terms of their relationship with media (television, Internet, and social media) and mediated criminal identity.

In terms of content, hip-hop has historically had a strong link to disenfranchised social milieus. The genre originated in the Bronx in the 1970s, during an especially harsh period, and while rap lyrics are not necessarily always as protest-

oriented as Public Enemy's iconic “Fight the Power”, its very existence as a form of expression – even in its lighter and party-oriented sub-genres – has often represented a positive response to social deprivation and gang violence. The genre has also been seen as a window into an undeniable social reality (Dyson, 1996) and an expression of what rapper Chuck D reportedly said in the 80s: rap is the “CNN that black people never had” (Gold, 1989, p. 16). In terms of technology, the connection with rap dates back to the origins of hip-hop, and the culture has always been rooted in a creative, innovative, and empowering approach to a range of tools: Houston A. Baker Jr. (1991) describes early hip-hop in terms of “raptechnology”, which comprises new practices like scratching, sampling and the use of vocal “tags” from Malcolm X and other prominent figures in African-American culture (in Penley and Ross, ed. 1991, p. 201), while Kodwo Eshun (1999) provides an Afro-Futuristic account of hip-hop as an “analogy engine” (p. 3-27) and graffiti as a “future-writing machine” (p. 3-30)[17].

While early hip-hop emerged as an alternative to gang violence and carried more overtly positive messages, gangsta rap – a sound that originated in the late 1980s, mostly in Los Angeles – controversially combined social messages with an ambiguously celebratory description of gang life. In terms of social messages, the song “Fuck tha Police!” by genre-pioneers N.W.A. famously set an antagonistic tone towards the Los Angeles Police Department, at a time when police brutality was especially vicious and just a few years before the riots that followed the acquittal of the officers who assaulted Rodney King. The association of rap’s most controversial sub-genres with crime continues to this day, and it remains a problem for the careers of many artists, even outside of the US. Despite and in part because of that, gangsta rap was also crucial in the further mainstreaming of hip-hop: the record-breaking *Straight Outta Compton* (1988) by the aforementioned N.W.A. was largely credited with commercially establishing the genre as mainstream and realising the economic potential of its shock-appeal (Watts, 1997, p. 46), while bringing the harsh conflicts of Los Angeles' black ghettos in the rooms of millions of suburban white teenagers (LaGrone, 2000, p. 120). If hip-hop was a tool for spreading the voices of a community and achieve social mobility, in fact, gangsta rap chronicled the most dangerous fringe of that community from an embedded position, often for the entertainment of the white mainstream – a contradictory yet distinctive mark that attracted many criticisms since the beginning. According to LaGrone (2000), the financial success of gangsta rappers has come with the commodification of black culture: marking a departure from the political consciousness of earlier hip-hop (p. 120), in fact, the genre has been attacked by scholars and Black Women activists for

[17] This element shall come back at the end of the chapter, in the discussion of the Black Nerd as a race-critical response to satirical appropriations of gangsta rap through the White-and-Nerdy trope.

its stereotypical depiction of African-Americans for the sake of white entertainment (Hooks, 1994; Hooks, 1995) and for contributing to a culture of misogyny (Chappell, 1995)[18]. While the term “gangsta rap” is no longer current and is now mostly associated to a certain kind of LA-inspired 1990s sound, the sub-genres called “trap” and “drill” have updated gang-adjacent imagery, grounding it in different urban contexts (Atlanta and Chicago, respectively) and globalising it with different technologies. For the purpose of this chapter, it is worth keeping in mind how each aesthetic iteration of gangsta rap has been rooted in both a very local frame of cultural reference and an increasingly global technical dimension.

The popularity of rap video clips greatly facilitated the assimilation of both the sound and aesthetics of gangsta rap. Long before the Internet, in fact, TV programs like *MTV Yo! Raps* (which debuted in 1988) and movies like *Colors* (1988) or *Boyz N Tha Hood* (1991) gave a visual dimension to the music, helping to globalise not only songs and slang, but also the gang imagery that came with it (signs, tattoos, colours, etc). While the hip-hop imaginary should not be conflated with gang culture, it is undeniable gangsta rap helped popularise a certain gang imagery, which in turn has been globalised through the movement of gang themselves and the Internet. Spread by music and videos, the colours, symbols and hand signs of gangs like Bloods, Crips, Latin Kings, or Mara Salvatrucha (all of which have originated in the United States, mostly in Los Angeles) have in fact cross-pollinated with international contexts in a process a “gang glocalisation” (Van Hellemont & Densley, 2019) that sometimes takes very different forms. In terms of ethnicity, for example, the Australian versions of the Crips and Bloods are respectively of Tongan-Australian and Samoan-Australian ethnicity (White, 2008, p. 148); as for their relationship with crime, groups like the Trondheim Crips do not even technically qualify as gangs, as they have adopted the Californian aesthetics despite their restraint from criminal activities (p. 5). As described by Feixa et al (2008), "the internet has globalised gangs allowing them to become logos", and young street cultures like hip-hop are giving way to internet phenomena that are “at once medium and message” (2008, p. 74).

If gangsta rap started as a highly televisual and cinematographic phenomenon (also in terms of imagery and rapper names, like Scarface from the iconic Geto Boys), the hip-hop sub-genre of trap marked a significant transition towards Internet diffusion as a primary resource. While mainstream gangsta rap is mostly linked to Los Angeles and the West Coast sound conceived by N.W.A. producer Dr Dre, the trap sound originated in Atlanta. Initially referring to the place where drug deals are made, the term “trap” became a genre of its own in the early to mid 2000s, when the ascent of rappers like T.I. and Gucci Mane helped establish its success, and

[18] In this sense, LaGrone compares gangsta rap's appropriation of the N-word to minstrelsy, the most infamous example of commodification of black culture.

developed its own distinctive sound around its mid-2000s breakthrough – perhaps not coincidentally around the time YouTube was founded. This new wave of “raptechnology”, going back to Baker's term, enabled a shorter and shorter delay between the success of the genre's originators in the US and the ripples and derivations they inspired in countries like Italy, Spain, or even China. It is interesting to point out that while American, Spanish, or Italian video aesthetics seem not to differ too much in terms of quality, the connection to the actual “trap” and gang life seems to become more tenuous or, at the very least, ambiguous: if face tattoos – like the iconic ice cream sported by genre-pioneer Gucci Mane, whose “street credibility” is undisputed – were once exclusive to the most extreme performers, young rappers from all over the world have now appropriated them as a fashion statement signifying either a literal tribute (as in the case of Spanish trap artist Kaidy Caine, pictured in figure 2.1) or a commitment to rap as a career choice.

Fig. 2.1. Kaidy Cain sporting a replica of Gucci Mane's iconic ice-cream cone face tattoo as a tribute to the rapper.

Social media have not only accentuated the globalisation of gang imagery, but also tightened its entanglement with the performance of everyday life. While organised gangs are unlikely to use social media for recruiting or generally instrumental purposes, their use of these platforms reflects symbolic objectives instead (Pyrooz, Decker & Moule, 2015, p. 493). Notably, gang culture appears as an individualised phenomenon, in which performative individual use of networks to express gang affiliation or show off participation in gang culture is widespread and directly related to the networked individualism typical of the Internet (Décary-Hétu & Morselli, 2011,

p. 152). Gang members, in other words, associate with like-minded individuals and even play up to more established gangs by mimicking their symbols, in pure social media fashion (p. 157).

The banality of social media and its interaction with gang life is today most visible in the sub-genre of drill. Evolving from trap and taking its name from old-time gangster slang, in which it referred to the use of automatic weapons, drill originated from the highly segregated South Side of Chicago (also known as “Chi-raq” for its disproportionately high murder rate). It emerged from what music journalist David Drake (2012) describes as “a grassroots movement that had incubated in a closed, interlocking system: on the streets and through social media, in a network of clubs and parties, and amongst high schools”. Drill music was shaped by gang life and gang conflicts (Caramanica, 2012), emerging in a time of escalating violence due to a shift from historic feuding between larger gangs to smaller, hybrid groups (Guarino, 2012). After young rapper Chief Keef – who had been drawing attention to his work by uploading successful videos on YouTube while on house arrest – signed a multi-million record deal with Interscope, drill started to gain mainstream traction, eventually projecting a number of former South Side residents into a rap career and even inspiring micro-scenes overseas. Most notably, South London has witnessed the emergence of drill artists like Brixton-based group 67, who have built on the menacing, glacial atmosphere of the genre to spread the area's slang and stories to an international audience, but there are examples in other countries as well. It should be noted that, while YouTube helped trap become a global phenomenon that has since taken many different forms, sometimes even combining its originally aggressive aesthetics with more cheerful, Internet-native visual trends, at the moment the success of drill still seems to be more directly dependent on its street appeal as well as inherently linked to the platform.

As I have highlighted in this section, the gang imagery channelled by the popular mediation of gangsta rap, trap, and drill music has always been facilitated by technical developments and in particular by social media. Today, both “gangstas” and actual gangsters become enmeshed in a globalised, complex techno-culture in which musical skills and street credibility are increasingly intertwined and modulated, becoming tokens of exchange on social media. Raptechnology has thus come a long way, intertwining with world-scale platforms that retain little of its original cultural specificity, pushing standardised marketing techniques that do not necessarily benefit the original culture. I shall now delve deeper into the implications that social media and the new iterations of “gangsta” music have in terms of the performance and commodification of criminal identity. To do so, I contextualise these phenomena both in relation to early social-constructivist theories of labelling and more recent discourses on self-branding.

Material Labelling: Social Beefs and Techno-cultural Addressability

"Fam, don't @ me /
*If you're gonna chat s**t, don't @ me"*
- Jme, "Don't @ Me" (2015)

The use of labelling and tagging of criminal figures has a long history, along with the social expectations connected to such a process of classification. Most notably, the theorists associated to the sociological school known as "labelling theory" were preoccupied with the social construction of deviant figures like the Criminal, the Mentally Ill, and the Homosexual. The theory is mostly associated with the work of Edwin Lemert, Howard Becker, and Erving Goffman, and favours a social constructive lens instead of biological determinism. More specifically, it discusses the way labels and related stereotypes imposed on individuals may influence their identity and behaviour. Becker (1973, p. 9), for example, highlights how deviance is created by social groups who establish rules that turn those who break them into deviants, thus defining the labelling process as normative and collective: on one hand society uses the label to justify condemnation, on the other the labelled individual appropriates it to justify stigmatised actions.

Appropriately, especially when considering gangster identity in relation to social media, this quote from criminologist Frank Tannenbaum is very useful:

> "[T]he process of making the criminal, therefore, is a process of tagging, defining, identifying, segregating, describing, emphasising, making conscious and self-conscious; it becomes a way of stimulating, suggesting, emphasising, and evoking the very traits that are complained of" (Tannenbaum, 1963, pp. 19-20).

The moment of tagging is the moment the individual comes to the attention of the justice system or mainstream society as a delinquent, for example when they are set apart as a consequence of an arrest. According to Tannenbaum, being "tagged" as a criminal encouraged one to identify with the label and perpetuate criminal behaviour. Tannenbaum's central argument was against the labelling process itself or, in other terms, the "dramatisation of evil". According to the American criminologist, who stressed the social quality and the group dimension of crime, addressing "evil" or "abnormality" as individual qualities was a failing approach, which ought to be replaced by a group-orientated attack on attitudes and ideals (1963, p. 21)[19].

[19] Today, however, it looks like the process of tagging is alive and well in the electronic monitoring of criminal offenders: the technology was developed in the US since the 60s and became embedded into the criminal justice system in the 90s; in the UK, tagging via electronic monitoring has been promoted

As I discuss in the rest of this chapter, the Gangsta is in fact more a collective socio-cultural production than an essential quality of any one individual – and more tangibly so in the age of social media, where the labelling process multiplies in different types of tagging. As attested by the increasing popularity of tagging memes (that is images that invite viewers to "tag" friends who might relate to the image content in the comment section) tagging stitches together the social web not just in terms of collectively created tag clouds of cultural references, but people as well. While the crafting and marketing of one's online identity through various forms of labelling – we tag our photos on Instagram, participate in Twitter debates by including hashtags in our tweets, tag our friends on Facebook – happens across platforms and cultures, being "tagged" ourselves is mostly out of our control, and the media ecologies (Fuller, 2005) that conjure up the Gangsta affect those entangled in this form of labelling in specific ways. In this section I discuss the Chicago-native sub-genre of drill and how it represents a compelling demonstration of the implications of online labelling practices in relation to both urban violence and surveillance.

When UK rappers Jme and Skepta sing "don't @ me" in the song by the same title, they are annoyed about a practice that is common on Twitter: addressing someone directly by mentioning their username. While distinct from Twitter's most influential function, the hashtag, "@-ing" someone can be seen as the equivalent of tagging someone on Facebook: it's a technically-enforced call out, with the added implication that the link remains active as a part of your online persona. Before Twitter, hip-hop culture already had such practice in place: so-called "diss" tracks can be explicit or subliminal probes to elicit someone's response, or at the very least elevate a lesser known rapper's fame at the expense of a more established one — in fact, the response itself can be seen as a sanctioning of the offender. Dissing someone can result in a "beef", that is an ongoing feud with a rival (mostly another rapper) publicly displayed through either more tracks or, in the age of social media, tweets or Instagram stories. Regardless of who "wins" the beef, however, usually exposure can be beneficial to all involved.

In the context of social media, then, tagging a user with an aggressive message becomes a direct form of address that maintains local cultural connotations while being amplified by a global technical infrastructure. If "diss" tracks require a certain amount of time to write, produce, and distribute, this new immediacy and potential for virality affect both the format of the offense (from a fully crafted song to a simple Instagram story or tweet) and its scope (from word of mouth to the instant

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as an alternative to custody since the early 80s and it has taken off since the early 2000s (technical affordances include transdermal tags that continuously monitor if the subject is assuming any alcohol). Albeit the form is different from Tannenbaum's tagging, and regardless of their effectiveness, these new control technologies are tangible reminders of the individual's status as an offender.

sharing by thousands and thousands of followers). The shift has material consequences in terms of both the escalation of conflict between rivals and the potential for close surveillance by authorities, resulting in a twofold tagging process: the individual expressing a “gangsta” attitude is thus addressable both from the bottom-up (the scene spreading rumours of a particular artist being a “snitch”, for example) and from the top-down (the law looking for evidence or investigation clues in public social media records as well as videos and lyrics).

This conflict has especially and tragically materialised within the drill scene. While it probably is a matter of time before the genre loses its aesthetic and local character, drill is still largely associated to Chicago and the violence of the South Side, a geographic area that has been at the centre of some of the most cutting edge studies in terms of social media and gang violence. In this respect, Patton et al (2013, 2016) have studied the phenomenon of “internet banging” – the intersection of gang violence and social media in the South Side of Chicago – for years. The researchers define the phenomenon as comprising three key elements: promotion of gang affiliation, reporting participation in gang activity or making threats to rivals in order to gain notoriety, and sharing of information about rival gangs (2013, p. A55). Internet banging connects trolling and cyberbullying with actual violence: emboldened by a false sense of online anonymity and peer-pressured to confirm one's street credibility, Internet bangers may get arrested for boasting about committing a crime on Twitter, sometimes without having committed such crime (p. A56). Social stereotypes play a role in exercising such pressure within certain communities, while the public nature of social media creates the optimal playground to perform, perpetuate, and replicate the masculine identity left frustrated by post-Fordism and pushing young African-Americans into self-fulfilling prophecies of violence (p. A57).

Patton and the researchers also highlight the role hip-hop music and culture play in the process, tracing an evolution of the rap beef and street credibility. After Biggie and Tupac died, hip-hop musicians redefined the rap beef into a lyrical rather than physical confrontation, a seemingly positive change that had the unintended consequence of taking away hip-hop's street credibility. Social media now act as the main enforcer of authenticity, providing a social space that serves the purpose of legitimising or delegitimising an artist – whose labelling as a snitch, for example, would result in public humiliation and discrediting (p. A58). According to Patton et al (2016, p. 591), when embedded in a local ecology of violence, social media communication that is relatively anonymous and culturally nuanced, with images and videos, can escalate and trigger violence offline in neighbourhoods with high rates of gang violence.

The local significance of drill beefs is also materialised by geo-referencing functions of social media. Even without the precision of the geotagging function,

rappers may provoke each other in real time on Twitter, or by sharing video selfies in the rival's neighbourhood on Instagram or Snapchat. High-profile figures like rapper Lil Jo (Patton et al, 2013, p. A59) or gangster Twitter celebrity Gakirah Barnes were both killed after sharing their location addresses. While a traditional diss track would take some time and decoding to run its course — production, sharing, word of mouth, reception, crafting of response — a menacing tweet or Instagram comment provides instant and often public access to an individual, which sometimes prompts an immediate answer in the form of the classic video response, popular in rap beefs: "We're in your neighbourhood, where are you?". In these instances, social media interfaces enable a level of addressability that can work as a "beef" accelerator, offering a new forum to advertise risky behaviours[20].

While the social context of the South Side of Chicago has been the geographic centre of these ecologies, South London has become its closest counterpart in Europe. Researchers of Catch-22 (Irwin-Rogers & Pinkney, 2017), a UK-based association, have reported on the phenomenon in the English capital – making it clear, however, that drill videos are not the root cause of violence, but rather a catalyst and a trigger, especially when they contain incriminating or specific information about certain crimes (p. 8). Importantly, the researchers note that pressure to retaliate to an online provocation (and thus the risk of violence) is directly proportional to how big the audience is (p. 23), which makes the use of social media exponentially more problematic than a traditional diss track. Among other interesting issues raised by the researchers is the emergence of social broadcasts directly from prisons and the diffusion of "sket lists", sometimes featuring social media handles of rivals' girlfriends or sisters tagged directly into the post for the purpose of grooming (p. 26). Also in terms of labelling, the report warns against abusing the term "gang" for the youth, in fear of further stigmatisation (p. 12), and generally adopts a very critical view on the platforms offering the services and failing to adequately respond to requests of content removal (p. 34).

While extemporaneous events like provocations and reactions require a level of timing, the permanence of social media content also allows gangs to create pages to make fun of their dead "ops", in a practice similar to RIP trolling (Patton et al, 2016, p. 594), or construct entire profiles around the collection, dissemination, or commentary of gangs and their social presence. In this sense, the "Chi-raq" drill scene has engendered a whole ecology of social media accounts entirely dedicated to chronicling gang violence and rap beefs, along with their intersection, through compilations of Instagram stories, tweets and YouTube clips. While some of this content may be critical of the events depicted and the general culture of violence

[20] For example by allowing a gang member to tag himself throwing "down" a rival's sign on their turf, in some cases eliciting a very quick response (Patton et al, 2016, p. 593).

being promoted, some channels can arguably perpetuate the negative mythology of the locality by exporting it worldwide.

Other outlets are less critical and more ambiguous. The bio for a now suspended Twitter account read: “Exposing snitches and pussies. Might see your favourite rapper”. The feed featured news articles about gang violence, rap videos, and Instagram or Snapchat captures showing young men or kids, supposedly from rival gangs, threatening and running after each other. In those cases, the looming menace of being tagged as a “pussy” or, even worse, a “snitch” — or generally assaulted or humiliated by a rival — is powered by the technical affordances of a global tech company. The addressability of a “famous” rapper may carry higher stakes than a small-time, aspiring artist, but the meaning of exposure seems here twofold: on one hand the workings of the gangs are shown and thus revealed to the public, on the other some of the captures seem to suggest young aspiring gangsters see these global platforms as a quick way to achieve local fame.

In terms of content collection, another issue is the ambivalence of the content that is being posted, which posits a challenge not only because it may have consequences for innocent people, but also for the researchers and social workers who use social media as a tool for preventing violence. At the end of their paper, in fact, Patton et al (2016, p. 599) warn that a human-centred approach and a thorough assessment of the context and culture embedded in a social media communication are crucial and might be a problem when tackling the issue solely through big data – which is a controversial approach in the emergent field of predictive policing (Richardson, Schultz & Crawford, 2016).

In some cases, YouTube exposure might arguably be a reason for authorities to take gang-adjacent rappers more seriously as a criminal threat, which is consistent with the lasting enmity between the police and the genre[21]. When it comes to YouTube rappers with extreme lyrics, one of the most fitting examples in recent history is perhaps that of New York-based yet drill-influenced artist Bobby Shmurda, whose videos “Shmoney Dance” and “Hot N***a” earned him YouTube notoriety and a record deal, before he was arrested for his involvement in gang activities and eventually sentenced to 7 years in prison (Schmidt, 2016). Some of Shmurda's associates were found guilty of murder and received heavier sentences, and what strikes about Shmurda's case is that some of his co-defendants were also mentioned

[21] In the UK, specific legislation against performers with pending issues with the justice system has impacted on grime and rap concerts, leading venues to cancel shows and thus slow down the proverbial path “out of the ghetto” that so distinctively marks the Gangsta's narrative. In order to avoid this type of “tagging”, UK gangsta-rap pioneer Giggs has been quite vocal about minimising rap feuds, avoiding the sharing of incriminating material on Instagram, and encouraging a focus on music (interviewed by DJ Vlad, Giggs shut down the YouTuber's questions about prison life and prompted him to ask him more about his artistic career).

in the lyrics of his YouTube hits, which have been speculated to be worthy of being held as evidence (Womble, 2015). While using rap lyrics in court cases has been at the centre of legal debate before (Manly, 2014) the popularity that Shmurda's song achieved in such a small time takes the matter to another scale. In particular, the line "Mitch caught a body 'bout a week ago"[22], which expressively ended a verse, became so popular it turned into a meme. Another notable case is that of Takashi 69, whose association with criminal networks played a huge part in his skyrocketing success. Unlike Shmurda, however, Takashi has controversially decided to collaborate with the police and has since been labelled as perhaps the most high-profile "snitch" in the history of hip-hop (Watkins, 2019). Interestingly, Tekashi – who has so dramatically broken the street code he was claiming to be bound to – has recently received a multi-million offer from a major record label, while Shmurda – who agreed to add two years to his own sentence in exchange for reducing the sentence of one of his associates – did not. The comparison is perhaps telling of how much social media have changed the relationship between rap, gang culture, and identity labelling: as fame becomes more public and faster to come, proximity to extreme gang-adjacent situations may sometimes be too difficult to disentangle from.

The persistent, top-down identification of gangsters with their social scene, seen as criminal, is thus quite reminiscent of Tannenbaum's theory on the dramatisation of evil – except that, in the age of social media, the dramatisation is painstakingly co-produced by the ever more visual endeavours of fans, sensationalist media, and the rappers themselves.

From Social Stigma to Recursive Branding

"Gucci gang, Gucci gang, Gucci gang, Gucci gang /
Gucci gang, Gucci gang, Gucci gang (Gucci gang!)"
- Lil Pump, "Gucci Gang" (2017)

Regardless of the actual identification of a rap artist as a "gangsta" rapper, the line between fact and fiction, first-person and third-person has often been thin in rap. The infamous and highly publicised feud between West Side-icon Tupac Shakur and East Side-champion Notorious B.I.G., whose deaths helped cement a certain idea of rap in popular culture, is very representative of the fascination of the public for the actual connection between the music and the criminal environments that often inspires it. If the Gangsta is inherently linked to the "gangster" and the "criminal" in terms of imaginary, the figure's relationship to these labels can be damning, but often strategic. Most importantly, it marks a departure from previous social understandings

[22] "Catching a body" is slang for killing someone.

of the criminal.

Considering tagging in relation to hip-hop, it is evident that different forms of labelling have been a part of the culture since the very beginning, notably in graffiti[23] and even in the music itself[24]. Those forms of tagging are very different from Tannenbaum's idea of an indelible stigma on the individual, and for this reason, in the context of this chapter, it is most interesting to consider the changing relationship of identity labelling through the figure of the "gangsta", as it emerges from the homonymous sub-genre of rap. In terms of social stereotypes, labels, and expectations – mostly because of the great emphasis given on issues of credibility – gangsta rap is in fact especially fraught, and it generates a more interesting dialectic relationship with Tannenbaum's theory.

Appropriately, some scholars trace the "gangsta" back to the figure of the trickster, badman, or the legendary pimp Stagolee (Nyawalo, 2013), a figure associated with authenticity in post-slavery America. Since the beginning, however, such authenticity has also co-existed with a certain ambiguity: on one hand the reality described by the pioneering gangsta rappers reflected an existing social reality, on the other many of them were often observers rather than actual gang bangers (Chang, 2005, p. 302; Quinn, 2005, p. 56). The (re)appropriation of the "gangsta" label – embracing it in the way suggested by Tannenbaum – has thus always been part of the narrative. From early graffiti art to local micro-scenes powered by new media like YouTube, there is a symbiotic relationship between gangs and artists: music helps gangs spread their symbols and make claims, while rappers enjoy the street credibility and protection (Harkness, 2013, p. 164). Rather than fixed, gang identity is thus invoked and concealed according to the situation, in a selective, performative fashion (Garot, 2010; Harkness, 2013, p. 169). This has obvious strategic benefits: in the specific context of rapping gang bangers in Chicago, one of

[23] In the context of graffiti, one of the four founding disciplines of hip-hop, "tagging" is known as the spray painting of a writer's name or logo onto a wall. While this is commonly unrelated to gang identity, graffiti have also been a way for artists to be affiliated to a gang and thus gain respect without committing to heavier offences (Lachmann, 1988, p. 239, cited in Harkness, 2013, p. 163). In that case, tagging has more to do with the horizontal affirmation of a group over a specific territory rather than vertical social hierarchies, although gang control of a particular turf can also be seen in opposition to institutional control.

[24] In Baker's (1991, p. 201) account, for example, a "tag" is also a cultural element (like an excerpt from a Malcolm X speech) to be sampled, appropriated and distributed through a self-established media network. As suggested in the previous section, then, before the Internet tagging was already used to establish a cultural network of sorts by referencing someone's name or voice. The technical isolation of these socially and culturally situated "tags" has arguably allowed the nascent movement to be technically encoded into creative practices that have eventually globalised and inspired audiences with a less and less direct connection to the social conditions that engendered hip-hop.

the key risk-management strategies is in fact to “separate gang membership and rapping to the greatest possible extent” (Harkness, 2013, p. 170).

Such a curatorial approach to one's image is consistent with another of labelling theory's main proponents – Erving Goffman (1956), who famously uses theatre as a rhetorical device to describe the interactionist relationship between the individual and their social “audience” in everyday life. In other words, for Goffman people's social life is carried out by performing different roles for different people, selectively playing certain traits and qualities up or down depending on social need. This performance happens through the careful balancing of a carefully orchestrated “front” and a selectively hidden “backstage”. Goffman outlines the collective dimension of this “front”: while the performer follows a pre-established pattern of action or routine (fronts are selected, rather than created), the observer is encouraged to stress abstract similarities and indulge in stereotypical thinking (p. 36); the overall “performance” is in fact designed to “incorporate and exemplify officially accredited values of society” (p. 45). In this respect, Goffman writes about a “potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation and rediscovery” governed by a “working consensus” and a “division of definitional labour” (1956, pp. 20-21). In the Gangsta's case, an artist performs a realistic impersonation of a gang member, often indulging in self-stereotyping, while the audience absorbs the situated nuances of the ghetto experience.

While the Gangsta's relationship to a supposed or claimed criminal past is ambivalent, the figure's realness is materialised in its relationship with capitalism. Discussing the epochal rise of the genre, Mark Fisher (2009) in fact highlights two meanings of the word “real” in relation to hip-hop: real as uncompromising and real as reflective of the economic instability of late capitalism. According to Fisher, it was hip-hop's performance of the first that enabled its early absorption into the latter (2009, p. 10), and the relationship between gangsta rappers and branding is in fact almost as inherent to their performing persona as their ambiguous connection to crime. The example of Dr Dre, one of the pioneers of the genre with N.W.A., is here particularly fitting: at one point, while Ice Cube complained gangsta rap had become like a cartoon, Dr Dre defined it pure entertainment, arguing that murder sells more than sex (Cheevers et al, 1995, p. 18, cited in LaGrone, 2000). The profit does not need to come from the commodification of murder alone, of course, as Dre himself famously became the first hip-hop billionaire by striking a deal with Apple for the acquisition of the Beats headphones brand, whose success was highly dependent on the producer's legendary profile. Within hip-hop, branding as a tool to venture into more durable and lucrative business is of course not exclusive to gangsta rappers – many hip-hop artists have started their own collateral enterprises: a few examples are WuTang's Wu Wear, Roc-a-fella's Roca Wear, Tyler the Creator's Golf, and

Kanye West's Yeezy shoes – but the display of luxury goods and brands is a critical element in terms of labelling, and one of the main reasons the genre is dismissed as superficial by its critics. If Run DMC famously elevated the urban style of the "hood" with their iconic song "My Adidas", trap made the display of luxury consumer goods usually associated to an affluent, white customer base much more central.

This has some continuity with the aspiration to social mobility that was always present in hip-hop: if Gucci Mane – one of the godfathers of trap and one of the mainstream rappers with the most street credibility – adopts an expensive fashion brand as his own moniker, it is because of the inherent social status of the goods he has earned access to. There are, however, some caveats: it is worth highlighting, for example, that this narrative of personal success and self-branding of the "gangsta" is often tolerated only as long as it is individualised. In other words, a gang-related individual can rehabilitate themselves in the public eye through entrepreneurship[25], but the gang as a collective cannot be "re-branded". As pointed out by rapper and activist Killer Mike in an episode of his Netflix series "Trigger Warning with Killer Mike", gangs like the Crips and the Bloods cannot profit from selling gadgetry with their symbols and colours (for example a soda named "Crips-a-Cola"), unlike a white gang like the Hell's Angels, who are allowed to sell jackets on Amazon (*White Gang Privilege*, 2019).

On social media, the aesthetic celebration of brands as an example of the commodification of hip-hop culture converges with the commodification of the ghetto experience for which gangsta rap is often criticised. While the labelling of the Gangsta as criminal represents a social heritage of top-down social imposition, when it comes to clothing or consumer brands – which are actual labels – the marketing of the Gangsta identity becomes imbricated in consumerist logics that constitute a form of bottom-up tagging, which the Internet and social media have predictably and materially accentuated and accelerated into a process of recursive branding.

As argued by Van Dijk and Poell (2013), the four elements of social media logic are popularity, connectivity, programmability, and datafication. A personal brand needs to be able to drive social traffic, triggering and steering users' contributions with help from the platform's algorithms (2013, p. 5). This synergy is very important: editorial choices still count and users retain significant agency in the process of steering programmability, while popularity is also conditioned by both algorithmic and socio-economic components (2013, p. 7). While record-breaking interviews with

[25]It is the case of former gang-affiliate turned rapper and entrepreneur Nipsey Hussle, who represents a virtuous example of a brand built on street credibility and Silicon Valley-inspired enterprise. In an interview given before being tragically killed in an incident unrelated to his former gang affiliation, Hussle mentioned in fact that he was inspired by figures like Elon Musk, and among the businesses he opened in his own Los Angeles neighbourhood, there is a co-working space (Frank, 2019).

reputed publishers still count, Instagram for example gives a more direct and personal way for artists to connect to their audience in a spontaneous yet controlled fashion. Then, if we want to use Van Dijk and Poell's framework, the branding of the gangsta rapper is a layered process of building a following (popularity) by programming an engaging and "dramatic" identity (programmability) that in turn connects to wider network of users and other rappers (connectivity); the overall process is of course amplified by the proliferation of recorded interactions like fan reactions, parodies and compilations of captured Instagram Stories (datafication). The establishment of the network does not only happen through the creation of an original brand, but also by channelling other brands: on one hand we have the rapper's own brand, which often entails channelling other consumer brands (e.g. Gucci, Fendi, Louis Vuitton, Supreme, Vetements); on the other there is an appropriation of the rapper's name and image as an accessory to build third party brands (for example reaction vloggers or accounts dedicated to Instagram stories-driven gossip, who want to build their own following). This structure perfectly embodies the idea of the brand as a new media object (Lury, 2004, p. 6), a site of interactivity, with "its own (recursive) logic or performativity through which is organised a two-way, dynamic, selective and asymmetrical communication of information between producers and consumers."

Social media logic and branding are thus compatible with Erving Goffman's dramaturgical reading of public life and very conducive of the contemporary "dramatisation of evil" – an assumption of criminal credibility defined through the "stage" of YouTube videos and Instagram Stories. These media become controlled windows from which to broadcast a personal narrative, a dramatisation that is not enacted by society upon the individual, but consciously perpetuated and modulated according to a brand. Rappers use social platforms both to showcase the objects of their conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899) – expensive sneakers, watches, and chains – and to dish out disparaging (if not downright menacing) comments directed at their rivals in order to question their credibility, call out their jealousy or lower financial status, or label them as "snitches" or "fake". While for Goffman the level of credibility and theatricality already varies within conventional social environments, the globalised digital stage of social media engenders phenomena of imitation and repetition that are increasingly removed from the context, both geographically and culturally.

In the case of drill music, a famously on-the-nose example of appropriation is the YouTube hit "Drill Time" by Slim Jesus, a (then) 18-year old white rapper from Ohio who achieved social media fame by deliberately re-creating the atmosphere, aesthetics, and language of his favourite music – with the significant addition, however, of a disclaimer at the beginning that stated the guns on show were not real

(*Slim Jesus – Drill Time,* 2015). When interviewed by popular hip-hop YouTuber Dj Vlad, Slim Jesus adamantly admitted he wrote his violent lyrics because it was "cool" and not because he lived that life (*Slim Jesus: I Like Rapping About Guns, But I Don't Live That,* 2015). Even though Slim Jesus' parable inflamed and divided the public, with many making fun of him and some linking up with him in search of hype, the young rapper wound up being relatively tolerated by the scene and is currently still publishing music videos on World Star Hip-Hop, as well as sporting a 100k Instagram following.

While Slim Jesus' example comes from the American context, potentially problematic de-contextualisations – often in line with the Internet's inherent ambivalence (Milner & Phillips, 2017) – happen on a wider scale and in other social environments. Kitchiner (2013, p. 66) writes for example about the appropriative attitude of the white South African rap duo Die Antwoord, arguing they exploit the "universal appeal of gangsta rap" while only offering a stereotyped representation of black culture; Indonesia-born, LA-based Rich Brian – who achieved global fame through a viral trap hip titled "Dat $tick" in 2012 – has had to apologise for his initial nickname, "Rich Chigga" (Wang, 2016); in Italy, an increasing number of artists within the local trap and drill scene have started to routinely use the N-word in their lyrics[26].

In light of these examples, it is arguable trap's commercial savvy and adoption of a depoliticised infrastructure like social media favour the scaling up of its fame as well as a colour-blind approach, often through the language of irony and comedy (elements that I will discuss more in detail in the last section). As Gallagher (2003, p. 5) writes: "Colour-blind ideology does not ignore race: it acknowledges race while disregarding racial hierarchies by taking racially coded styles and products and reducing these symbols to commodities or experiences that whites and racial minorities can purchase and share." Slim Jesus' adamant adoption of the drill label because it was "cool" is one example of how the Internet enables this type of appropriative attitude, although his parable demonstrates how geographical and cultural notions are still important in establishing street-credibility. In terms of talent, instead, Rodriguez (2006) notes how the notion that skills are all that matters enables cultural appropriation of hip-hop by whites (p. 662) – a notion that is consistent with the metrics-centric approach of social media, as well as favoured by the ambivalence of Internet content. According to Rodriguez (2006, p. 664), in fact, "meaning cannot

[26] Roman rappers Gallagher and Traffik have repeatedly been called out on their use of the term, but have always used their partly Salvadorian origins as a justification; in the case of FSK (a trap group comprising three white performers from the Southern Italian region of Basilicata) the word is used routinely and, most worryingly, sometimes in an aggressive fashion. Considering the tense political discourse around immigration in Italy and the fact that nuanced cultural conversations about race are mostly absent from the country's mass media, the aforementioned wording is especially problematic.

be taken at face value” and interpreting hip-hop lyrics in precisely the opposite way from which they appear can be incorporated into whites' "common sense".

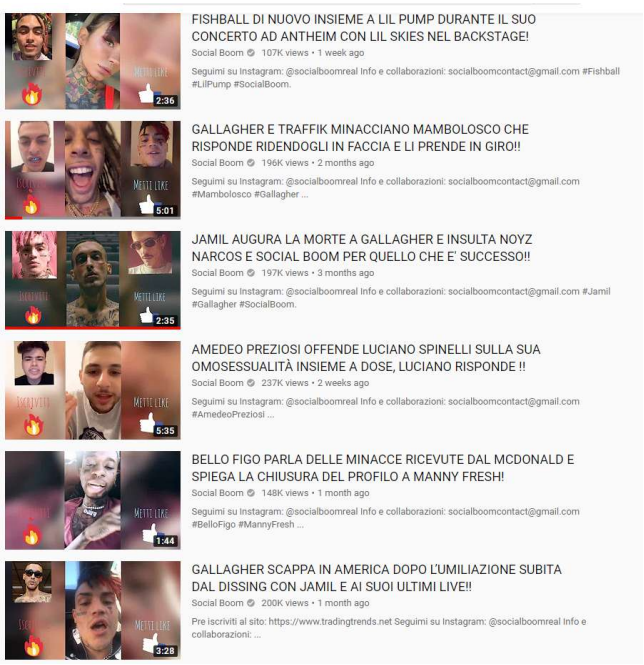

Fig. 2.2 – A screenshot from the video feed of a popular gossip channel on YouTube, often covering happenings within the trap scene.

On social media, of course, “common sense” often translates to “driving traffic”. Taking the example of the Italian trap scene on YouTube, the type of semi-staged online confrontations mentioned above have in fact become so popular that even members of rap-adjacent communities like “hypebeasts” have started participating, albeit in more overtly theatrical ways. As seen in figure 2.2, Italian rappers and YouTubers often use Instagram Stories to broadcast narratives of confrontation that are carefully compiled and distributed by fans and aspiring influencers alike; the hype built through this type of content allows trap artists to become familiar to YouTube audiences, and in some cases it allows YouTube-famous influencers to take a stab at a trap career[27].

Going back to the beginning of this section, then, Lil Pump's “Gucci Gang” is the perfect reference to take stock of the current status of the Gangsta: the song encapsulates both a brand commonly associated with a fashionable lifestyle and a reference to the gangsta imaginary of the genre; in other words, the criminal label remains – even if just as a reminder – a part of the kaleidoscopic brandscape that

[27] Two examples are hypebeast Manny Fresh, who built an ongoing “beef” with YouTube-trapper Bello Figo and eventually collaborated with him on a music video, and rapper Canesecco, whose many public online confrontations led him to start focusing more and more on YouTube and Twitch streaming rather than rapping per se.

constitutes the contemporary aesthetic of many major rap videos. Broadcasting a luxury lifestyle to fans and haters alike and exhibiting an unflinchingly cool demeanour (as exemplified by the iconic Gucci Mane ice cream tattoo), the exploded figure of the YouTube or Instagram Gangsta is, therefore, a dramatised stereotype and an aspirational figure at once, embodying authenticity and stage awareness. As outlined in this section, however, the capitalistic aspirations of this cultural avatar are far from the mythopoietic and Afro-futuristic implications of early raptechnology, shaped as they are by the individualising constraint and voyeuristic compulsions of social media. In the conclusion of this chapter, I remain within the hip-hop imaginary to highlight the emergence of more tech-savvy and race-critical practices of collective figuration.

Race-critical Stereotypes: From White-and-Nerdy to the Black Nerd

"I wanna roll with
The gangsters
But so far they all think
I'm too white 'n' nerdy"
- Weird Al Yankovic, "White and Nerdy", 2006

"*I'm a black nerd and that was illegal until 2003*"
- Donald Glover, "Weirdo", 2012

To conclude the chapter, I wish to discuss how another prominent Internet figure – the Nerd – is often juxtaposed to the Gangsta, with the result of reinforcing this racial stereotype through the "colour-blind" infrastructure of Internet humour. I shall emphasise I do not want to suggest these two figures are complementary or conjoined in a problematic either/or dichotomy, but rather highlight how the latter can (often unwittingly) naturalise the former by virtue of being defined "against" it. To clarify this counter-intuitive relationship, in this section I discuss two cultural avatars, both associated to hip-hop yet departing from the socio-cultural specifics detailed above: the White-and-Nerdy trope, named after the song by comedy rapper Weird Al Yankovic, and the Black Nerd. While the latter is not always linked to hip-hop culture and often represents an alternative imaginary to it, I connect these two types of Nerd to highlight their differences in terms of race and knowledge politics, with the goal of highlighting how the technical ethos of the Internet can be leveraged both to naturalise the Gangsta stereotype through appropriative humour or, alternatively, to reinstate the race-critical potential of raptechnology.

As emerging from several examples in pop culture and in related scholarly

research, in fact, the White-and-Nerdy rapper uses hip-hop with a colour-blind approach, as a tool to express pop-cultural knowledge and a non-raced, white-collar distress in the age of post-fordism; on the other hand, the Black Nerd preserves the specificity of racial background, using technical knowledge as an empowering tool. Both figures are thus very relevant to the depoliticisation of identity labelling in the age of social media, and I believe reflecting on their dialectic relationship constitutes an interesting contribution to current debates on online culture. Lisa Nakamura (2002, 2008) has notably written at length about "cybertyping", identity tourism, and the survival of racial stereotyping online, while Lauren Michele Jackson (2016) has discussed the appropriation of black vernacular on social media (especially in reaction GIFs) referring to this as "digital blackface"[28]. The contrast between labelling online identities in a colour-blind way to highlight the empowering quality of Internet infrastructure and the situated experience of social discrimination is thus an important critical nexus.

In terms of identity labelling, the type of humour associated to nerdy rap parodies is generally self-deprecating, and it does acknowledge race in some kind of way. Weird Al Yankovic released his song "White and Nerdy" in 2006, as a parody and celebration of nerd culture modelled on the rap hit "Ridin" by Chamillionaire and Krayzie Bone. Weird Al's lyrics heavily reference cultural artefacts and pastimes that are stereotypically white and nerdy (playing Dungeons and Dragons, being an MIT student, drinking tea instead of beer), highlighting them by contrast with hip-hop's self-confidence and swagger. Weird Al had been doing nerdy rap parodies for a while, however the song was his biggest hit, perhaps suggesting the ripeness of the time: as of the mid-2000s, in fact, white and nerdy artists rapping was becoming a big thing. In 2005 the popular sketch group The Lonely Island, probably the highest

[28] Writing specifically about comedy, Bryan J. McCann (2016) uses a similar rhetoric when writing about "proletarian blackface" as the "appropriation of black vernacular practices to articulate a predominantly white male, working-class rage against modern capitalism." To do so he dissects one of the classics of the genre: the cult comedy *Office Space* (1999), a film by Mike Judge describing the rebellion of three white-collar workers against their office routine and their unappreciative corporate employer. The film's soundtrack notably features several songs by the iconic gangsta rap group Geto Boys, which punctuate the most memorable scenes and highlight the contrast between the assertive register of hip-hop versus the sheepish submissiveness of the protagonists. McCann references both Norman Mailer's famous essay on the hipster or "white negro", who explores alternative identities by experiencing black culture, and James Baldwin's critique of it. According to Baldwin, cultural resources that are poached by the white visitor emerge "in the not-at-all metaphorical teeth of the world's determination to destroy you," (1961, p. 183, cited in McCann) while white suffering is expressed through the language of someone whose suffering is far worse. After discussing the use of gangsta rap in the movie's soundtrack to mark its most successful moments, McCann concludes that *Office Space*'s irony is ultimately symptomatic of the logic that only allows certain bodies to traverse identities (2016, p. 374).

profile parody rappers after Weird Al, had their first viral hit with the song “Lazy Sunday”, which uses an aggressive rap style to describe the banal weekend outing of two average-looking white men. At the same time, a more earnestly community-driven scene called “nerdcore” (with its own sub-genres, for example “geeksta rap”) was developing across the US and achieving wider recognition in 2008, with the release of two documentaries titled *Nerdcore Rising* and *Nerdcore For Life*. While Weird Al and The Lonely Island used the popular appeal of the genre to achieve a humorous contrast between the genre's historical connotation and their own lifestyles, the nerdcore scene represented a more collective and faceted entity, organised around a range of artists with different styles and audiences that gathered at events like the Penny Arcade Expo in 2005.

Compared to parody videos, nerdcore has slightly different implications in terms of identity labelling, the main tension being the balance of authenticity and irony.

In terms of labelling, there is a re-appropriation of stigma that is similar to the one typical of the “gangsta” label: in this sense, Braiker (2007) offers a profile of YTCracker, a nerdcore rapper with a past conviction for computer cracking – a label he appropriates in his own moniker and conflates with “cracker” as a derogatory term for white man. Somehow differently from the “gangsta” label, however, nerdcore is an “opt-in” subculture, where only self-identifying nerdcore rappers count as such (Russell, 2014, p. 163).

While the definition of nerdcore is quite clear, opinions about its satirical and appropriative attitudes still vary amongst scholars of the genre. In this respect, Braiker (2007) highlights the genre's racial component and distance from parody: along with the aforementioned nerdcore documentaries, he credits VH1's hit TV show "The (White) Rapper Show" (an “'American Idol' for would-be Eminems”) and the publishing of *Other People's Property: A Shadow History of Hip-Hop in White America* (Tanz, 2007) as signs that the concept of a white rapper is no longer a joke. Sewell (2015, p. 223) goes further back, acknowledging the raced character of nerdcore by pointing out the Beastie Boys, the first credible mainstream white hip-hop act, as one of the main influences. She also highlights how nerdcore artists do not see their music as satirical, although she concedes it can be considered as a respectful parodic doubleness, as in one text standing in relation to another (p. 228)[29] – in this sense, it should come as no surprise that legendary hip-hop personalities like Prince Paul have endorsed nerdcore rappers (p. 229). In terms of authenticity, it is then arguable a key element for nerdcore's seriousness is the fact that, unlike the infamously appropriative Vanilla Ice – who faked a ghetto upbringing and did not

[29] Sewell also highlights the LGBT-friendliness of nerdcore as opposed to the heteronormative performance of masculinity often associated to hip-hop (p. 226).

acknowledge his black producer until he got sued (Rose, 1994, p. 12) – nerd rappers write about what they know (Braiker, 2007, par. 2)[30].

Russell (2014), on the other hand, dissects the politics of appropriation within nerdcore rap more strictly, paying particular attention to the racial and parodic elements:

> "[T]he connection between nerd 'oppression' and black cultural history is a thread of cultural logic extending back to *Revenge of the Nerds*. A mythic blackness and a nerdy hyperwhiteness are placed into entangled opposition— mutually constructed as racial opposites. Nerdcore's entanglement with its strategies of appropriation and parody demonstrate the complex and often paradoxical relationship nerddom has with both itself and its imagined racial other. Hip-hop is deployed both as a political music of resistance and as a joking acknowledgment of nerdiness's implicit whiteness. Nerdcore remains serious in its parody and its inversions and its production of identity" (Russell, 2014, p. 172).

The respected Other is thus no less stereotyped than the reclaimed whiteness and masculinity failure that define the Nerd.

If these elements make the convergence of the Gangsta and the Nerd problematic in certain contexts, there are other sides to nerddom that have more continuity with black culture: it is the case, for example, of the Black Nerd. While this figure is not always associated with music, within hip-hop it does present an alternative narrative to the Gangsta stereotype; also, and perhaps more significantly, the Black Nerd embodies a bridge across cultures – the traditionally white Nerd identity and Black identity – achieved through a specific relationship with technology: socially and historically informed, but also imaginative and future-oriented. If claims of intersectionality between nerd and black oppression are to be taken with a grain of salt, then, technical innovation represents a stronger connection: as noted by multiple critics (for example Baker, 1991; Rose, 1994; Eshun, 1999), technicity and innovation were key elements of early hip-hop.

I have already referenced Baker's (1991) account of raptechnology as a key technocultural element, but Kodwo Eshun (1999) provides a more nuanced and afro-futuristic description of the genre, notably also in terms of the relationship between technology and embodiment – which is markedly different from nerdcore. In this respect, Sewell (2015) ends her paper with a quote from an interview with MC

[30] Braiker also highlights the technical skills involved in the genre, while still doubting the mainstream appeal. Remembering Rodriguez (2006)'s analysis of colour-blind ideology referenced in the previous section, though, it is useful to acknowledge the problematic nature of the skills argument; additionally, the growing worldwide social influence of the nerd-driven Californian ideology makes the "Nerd power!" chant (heard by Braiker at nerdcore gigs and echoing screams for civil rights) sound a bit sinister.

Frontalot, featured in the *Nerdcore Rising* documentary: “If I could be disembodied and just have intellectual connection with other people through typing power, wouldn’t that be utopia?” (p. 230). If some nerdcore rappers see technology as a way to intellectually connect with others and bypass the awkwardness of body language, according to Eshun (1999) there is a much more visceral link between us and our tools. “Machines don't distance you from emotions, they make you feel more intensely”, he argues, stating that the posthuman era is not about disembodiment, but “hyperembodiment” (1999, p. 2). This does not mean there is no intellectual or cognitive challenge to it: Eshun describes hip-hop as “an analogy engine in which the I is like = like = etc. This phonoextension is why hip-hop takes over space in your head. Powered by analogical chains, its syntactic prosthetics occupy your brain, take up your mind” (p. 3-27). According to Eshun hip-hop “is not a genre but an omnigenre, a conceptual approach towards sonic organisation rather than a particular sound in itself” (p. 2-14), science “is to hip-hop what mythscience is to Sun Ra”, and graffiti are a “future-writing machine” (p. 3-30). Eshun's Afro-futuristic vision of hip-hop is one entangled with technology and utopia – not unlike the Internet itself, we may add.

Relevantly to this chapter, it is also worth noting that while the MC Frontalot statement referenced above suggests a separation between the online and physical worlds, the hyperembodiment described by Eshun is more resonant with the social media banging researched in Chicago by Patton et al (2013, 2016) and discussed earlier in this chapter. Music, technology, and society remain entangled and the utopian quality of one element cannot emancipate it from the others.

If the figure of the White-and-Nerdy and the nerdcore label represent a sort of ironic, tech-powered de-racialisation of rap, the Black Nerd reintroduces race in the production of knowledge, technology, and comedy. The figure has taken many forms within American pop culture and is grounded in different cultural elements. After the character of Lamar from the aforementioned *Revenge of the Nerds*, the goofy character of Steve Urkel from the TV show *Family Matters* is the most iconic example, although it is usually not seen as a positive depiction of the category. In the age of social media, however, online communities and YouTube personalities specifically catering to a black nerd (or “blerd”) audience are common – and the correlation between the mainstreaming of the figure and that of social media seems reasonable, considering the Internet's role as an incubator and globalising force for subcultural communities in general. The quote above by actor, comedian, and rapper Donald Glover, perhaps the most representative millennial Black Nerd public figure, suggests at least a chronological connection. In his 2012 stand-up special, *Weirdo*, Glover traces in fact a brief historical evolution of the Black Nerd: he claims that it had been “illegal” up to around 2003, but later gained a certain momentum through

public personalities like Kanye West and even Barack Obama (both ostensibly black nerds, according to Glover). The comedian also provides a definition of the Black Nerd as a black person who likes "weird and specific shit"[31].

Apart from the awkwardness related to being a nerd, the Black Nerd has an ambivalent relationship with whiteness. Comedian and tech enthusiast Baratunde Thurston (2012) mentions the uncomfortable relationship of the "Questionably Black Person" with white culture in his humorous memoir *How To Be Black*, in which the author addresses stereotypes in an attempt to re-complicate blackness (2012, p. 11). In conversation with fellow blerd and comedian W. Kamau Bell, Thurston evokes the suggestive image of a LEGO™ Negro Identity Building Set, for which he imagines a catchy ad: "Tired of being pressured by black people and others to fit their idea of blackness? Don't wear the "right" clothes? Don't listen to the "right" music? Don't commit the "right" crimes?". The set promises to liberate the buyer, granting him or her the power to be whoever they want to be while maintaining a strong sense of blackness (2012, p. 103). Kamau Bell also references the technicity of the Black Nerd identity as assembling his own version of blackness, through an eclectic mix of pop-cultural models (2012, p. 219)[32].

The definition of the Black Nerd thus happens against other black figures, but cultural taste and emancipation from stereotypes are not its only dimensions. Beyond the right to indulge in the more leisurely fringes of geeky subcultures, the recurring reference to Barack Obama as a Black Nerd, or at least a Black Nerd idol, points to another aspect of the figure: the empowering potential of knowledge, which

[31] This description is reformulated a few years later in the movie *DOPE* as "white people shit" (a category that in the movie includes Glover himself as a cultural reference). Directed by Rick Famuyiwa, the coming-of-age comedy features three young black nerds growing up in Inglewood, CA and struggling with all the things you would expect from a coming-of-age comedy — sex, bullies, money, college admission — with a refreshingly Black Nerd-twist. *DOPE* received generally positive reviews, however its use of stereotypes did attract some criticism. Bowie (2015), for example, interestingly argues the film did break lots of common stereotypes for the main characters — the main kid is a computer-savvy, 90s hip-hop-obsessed Harvard hopeful, while his friends are a Black lesbian and a Guatemalan geek — but it still juxtaposed them against a multitude of other one-dimensional black stereotypes. The author is also sceptical about the characterisation of a series of cultural elements — college, Donald Glover, the band TV on The Radio — as "white".

[32] In *Weirdo*, for example, Glover laments the widespread expectation that an African-American should care about the Blaxploitation classic *Shaft*, a movie he wouldn't mind seeing remade with Michael Cera as the lead. In the same special, the comedian also re-enacts Chris Rock's iconic bit "N****s vs. Black People", replacing the N-word with "vampires". If we are to take seriously *DOPE*'s provocation that Glover is a prototypical example of reconciliation between the Black Nerd and white culture, the replacement of such a polarising term with a whimsical one could be seen as a confirmation. However, elsewhere in the special Glover talks about the N-word extensively and his recent, critically-acclaimed series *Atlanta* (2016-) retains little of the nerdiness so explicitly claimed in his old stand-up.

implications that can be overly political.

As I have discussed in this overview, the Black Nerd is thus a figure at the crossroads of different worlds, racially located yet culturally split, and potentially empowered by technical vision. To conclude, I situate the figure within social media culture, tagging tactics, and relational aesthetics by turning to the example of Hennessy Youngman, the fictional host of “Art Thoughtz”, a web series published on YouTube by artist Jayson Musson.

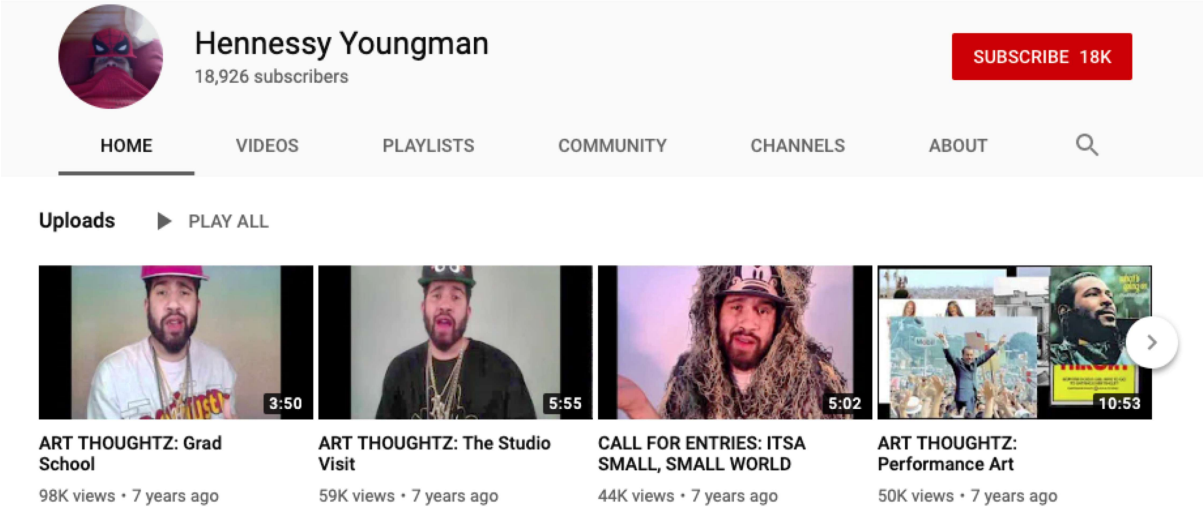

Fig. 2.3. – The Hennessy Youngman YouTube channel.

While exhibiting a stereotyped black masculinity and hip-hop jargon, the character (shown in figure 2.3) dissects several concepts related to the contemporary art world – for example post-structuralism or relational art – and his own experience as a black artist within the power structures of the art world. While not directly representing a Gangsta or a Nerd, the character openly grapples with self-stereotyping and a bridging between worlds, indulging in weird and specific talk with a satirical but seriously motivated angle.

The series was uploaded on YouTube throughout 2010 and its format and aesthetics were very typical of the platform at the time: the character played by Musson is sitting in front of a webcam, addressing his audience directly and collectively as the “Internet”. Each video is presented as a sort of informal tutorial, sharing specific knowledge about a single topic to a supposedly interested audience. In terms of labelling practices, if we were to break-down the “Art Thoughtz” formula in culturally-sensitive tags we would have the hip-hop slang, a chain, a markedly African-American accent, critical theory, and contemporary art. The machine-readable keywords for his first video, “How to Make an Art”, were instead: “hennessy

youngman, studio museum, freestyle, david hammons, art, fine art, james franco, marina abramovic, hip-hop, obama, wikileaks, money, success, opulenc...", which confirm the intentional culture clash and zeitgeist-grabbing ambition. While view count does not grant Musson's videos viral status, some of them number in the hundreds of thousands – which is substantial for an ironic art project at the time[33].

Both Rankine (2012) and Rajgopal (2013) notice how the character of Hennessy Youngman is preoccupied with the stereotypical quality of "black" art, reporting the quote: "N***** paints a flower, it becomes a slavery flower, flower de Amisdad". Leveraging the expectations of the public, letting the audience's reliance on stereotypes as a shortcut for meaning, is however also a tactical move: "The less said the better," Youngman suggests, "be ambiguous" (Rankine, 2012, pp. 34-35). The ambivalence of "Art Thoughtz" is not only due to the inherent quality of Internet content often referenced within this thesis, but it is specifically relevant to being an embodied black person within a predominantly white environment such as the art world – a dynamic associated with the Black Nerd as well.

Social media only provide a platform for this ambivalence to materialise: picking up on Bourriaud's (2002) definition of relational art as a social interstice where unexpected micro-communities can form, Rajgopal (2013, p. 6) highlights in fact how the virtual proximity enabled by YouTube facilitates the encounter with heterogeneous publics that would have otherwise had no exposure to elitist art culture. Such incongruity is embodied by the persona of Hennessy Youngman himself, tactically mixing hip-hop slang and profanities with high art criticism in order to widen his audience (p. 7). Rajgopal analyses Musson's artwork using both Bourriaud's terms and those of his main critic, Claire Bishop. While Bourriaud (2002) asserted that relational art cannot simply be judged on an aesthetic level, but needs to be evaluated at an ethico-political level, Bishop pointed out that is a contradiction within the capitalist space of the gallery, highlighting the lack of real antagonism (Rajgopal, 2013, p. 12). However, by putting two worlds in critical contact with each other and encompassing people from different socio-cultural backgrounds, Musson's videos prevent exclusion without compromising on antagonistic debate (p. 16).

Hennessy Youngman may not channel the Black Nerd directly, but it does reflect its conflictual definitional issues and problematic knowledge politics, making visible the clash between dissonant stereotypes and materialising it into a permanent reminder. This is in no small part made possible by the labelling practices afforded by

[33] It is also worth noting that, at the time, the White-and-Nerdy stereotype was all the rage online: founded in 2010, the YouTube channel Epic Rap Battles of History – a web series in which Peter Shukoff (a.k.a. Nice Peter) and Lloyd Ahlquist (a.k.a. EpicLLOYD) performed impersonated historical or pop cultural personalities and engaged in battles raps referencing their lives and deeds – was one of the most popular on the platform for some time.

the material infrastructure of social media, which only a critical intervention such as Musson's can leverage as an antagonistic, rather than purely opportunistic, endeavour. His performance thus complicates online identity and gestures towards embodied forms of knowledge that strike a productive alliance with labelling and stereotypes.

This chapter has dissected the cultural avatar of the Gangsta as it emerges on social media, paying particular attention to tagging as a form of identity labelling in which personal branding dynamics and social stigma converge. I have mentioned several examples of tagging: the top-down social stigma accounted for in early social-constructivist literature on the subject; the direct address of a rival through Twitter or Instagram stories; the self-branding of a rapper's identity with logos; the marketing of derivative YouTube content by using a rapper's name associated with controversial labels in order to drive traffic. By highlighting the problematic implications of each type of tagging, I have argued that the Gangsta is defined collectively and ambiguously, in a way that in some cases might ultimately favour calculated appropriation of subcultural imagery rather than the authentic expression of social disadvantage. In the concluding section, I discussed the co-definition of the figure of the White-and-Nerdy against the Gangsta as a problematic symptom of the cultural appropriation and colour-blind attitude embedded within social media, finally suggesting the Black Nerd as an alternative format to leverage the technical savvy and potential for collective labelling of hip-hop.

III.
#digitalnomad #solotraveller #remotework
The Digital Nomad and the Politics of Geo-tagging

In the previous chapter I discussed one of the oldest forms of identity labelling: the top-down stigma on the criminal, often with racial implications. In this chapter, I discuss social media labelling in the context of self-branding and knowledge work. I focus on the cultural avatar of the Digital Nomad to articulate a cultural critique of digital labour and the way it informs dynamics of identity construction and urban politics in a highly digitised and globalised world. The premise is that the rise of knowledge work and self-branding is one of the main reasons for the naturalisation of identity labelling practices – a contrast that makes it useful to discuss this figure right after the Gangsta.

As opposed to traditional nomads, backpackers, or tourists, a “digital nomad” is defined as an Internet-enabled remote worker, who maintains a focus on connectivity and productivity even in leisure. This chapter contextualises the Digital Nomad as a contradictory avatar of neoliberalism, highlighting the figure's role in the definition of a depoliticised aesthetics of global work and offering a theoretical discussion of the ways in which Instagram helps spread and materialise those aesthetics. Eventually, I provocatively suggest the platform may after all become the site of a critical re-imagination and re-politicisation of the Digital Nomad as a utopian avatar of post-work.

The chapter begins with an introduction to the Digital Nomad and related scholarly debates. I focus in particular on the contradictory connotations of its “nomadic” status, as well as the political undertones of its relationship with both movement and labour. I also highlight how the figure of the new rich and the notion of life design (Ferriss, 2007) have inspired the definition of the Digital Nomad imaginary in non-political terms.

The following section outlines the core argument of the chapter. First, I highlight similarities between Ferriss' idea of remote work as an individual endeavour and the reclamation of a post-work future as a utopian collectivist horizon, as theorised by Srnicek and Williams (2016). Then I build on Franco “Bifo” Berardi's call for a techno-poetic platform to channel the collective subjectivation of cognitive workers (2018) and Dean's theorisation of the selfie as a communist form of communication (2017) to frame Instagram as a potential site for the re-politicisation of the Digital Nomad.

In terms of labelling practices, I explore the materiality of Digital Nomad aesthetics and critique their urban politics through an exploration of geo-tagging. I start by discussing MacCannell's (1976) theorisation of the tourist, according to which

tourism is a collective cultural production based in part on a process of social dematerialisation, and relate these concepts to the notion of the Stack (Bratton, 2016): an “accidental megastructure” that materially alters the concept of sovereignty through digital platforms, universal addressability, and globalised urbanism. Highlighting the role of Instagram geotagging and other map-based services in the growing influence of digital nomads on cities and landscapes worldwide, I close this section by wondering what kind of politics a distributed “digital nomad nation” would entail.

The rest of the chapter is dedicated to exploring the aesthetics and materiality of digital nomadism through a reconceptualisation of relevant tagging practices on Instagram. I discuss how some of the visual tropes associated with hashtags like #digitalnomad, #solotraveller, #remotework, and #4hourworkweek can be read through a political lens that confirms the neoliberal accent of the figure. Then, I refer to a range of artistic tactics and satirical appropriations of work-related imaginaries on Instagram to suggest a similar approach may be applied to the Digital Nomad imaginary, in order to shift it towards more inclusive politics.

The chapter concludes suggesting the re-imagination of the Digital Nomad as a collective, inclusive political subject is far from likely at the moment. However, I reiterate the suggestion that a cultural and aesthetic appropriation of the figure's imaginary might help stimulate such re-politicisation.

Constructing and Critiquing the Digital Nomad

In the previous chapters I have discussed the importance of labelling practices and why it is important to be wary of their depoliticisation in the age of social media. While labelling practices have often been discussed in relation to marginalised social categories, oppression, and political struggles, I argue that social media – and especially tagging – demonstrate how the act of labelling has been put to work in a much wider spectrum of contexts, most notably the self-branding of knowledge workers. Before discussing the figure of the Digital Nomad in more detail, it is thus necessary to briefly introduce this shift.

When it comes to the technicity of identity construction, Michel Foucault's notion of “technologies of the self” (1988) is one of the most influential conceptual references. The formula emerges from Foucault's continued work on how state-mandated practices, categories and norms transform the human being into a subject. According to Foucault (1991), state power is not purely coercive, but rather acts by establishing a “regime of truth” that binds knowledge and power, compelling individuals to embody and enact state-defined parameters –with the help of the media and the education system. In Foucault, one of the ways the individual is ruled

over is by classification, and in fact some of Foucault's most renowned work is centred on the prison and on sexuality, fields in which categories assume a very material character. By compiling such institutional knowledge, the state is able to discipline those individuals by the very gesture of creating an identity for them to live by.

Gilles Deleuze (1992) built on Foucault's idea of discipline and adapted it to a globalising world in which capital was taking over the power of fading nation states, while the individual was gaining more and more technical tools for self-control. Deleuze outlines a shift from societies of discipline to societies of control, from factories to corporations – a process by which the social body is thus divided: "We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become '*dividuals,'* and masses, samples, data, markets, or '*banks"* (1992, p. 5).

This is especially apparent in biometrics, a trend most visible today in the "quantified self" movement (Wolf & Kelly, 2007): the flourishing of technological gadgets and apps for the monitoring, tracking, and counting of steps, calories, body fat, DNA history, etc. These increasingly ubiquitous interfaces render the very chemical building blocks of life into aesthetic objects that inspire collateral social activity, like the sharing of jogging routes or workout progress on social media. The informational quality of this type of data then finds social expression in the success narratives built around it, also driven by hashtags like #FitFam, #FitnessAddict, and #GetOutside. The performance of identity is thus twofold: intended as productivity – an incremental quantity, defined by public parameters – and in a theatrical sense – the mediated, staged entity famously theorised by Erving Goffman (1956).

The process described by Deleuze is also marked by the rise of the knowledge worker (Drucker, 1959). Although there is no single definition of knowledge work, such a subject is someone whose main capital is knowledge: the category includes engineers and academics alike, as well as any type of white-collar worker. The economic and social importance of knowledge work has been framed both enthusiastically and with concern: Florida (2003) enthusiastically referred to a "rise of the creative class", while Franco "Bifo" Berardi (2005) linked the struggle of "cognitive" workers to the Marxist class war by using the term "cognitariat".

From Foucault's state-sanctioned knowledge, then, there is a shift towards an atomised, marketable knowledge. Alan Liu (2004) describes how the aforementioned shift impacts the identity of the knowledge worker, fragmented into processable elements. He also addresses the knowledge worker as part of a collective subject, a universal "cultural class" that is non-essentialist, fuzzy, and scalable (2004, pp. 31-32). This modularisation of identity into equivalent blocks is a key step in the depoliticisation of categories.

Focusing on management culture and related literature, Liu highlights in fact

the impact of a process of standardisation on cultural and historical diversity. Significantly, he explores diversity management as a practice that replaces historical identity with another unreal, post-representational, simulated identity (p. 48). Using the metaphor of Internet protocols, which break down information in bits for it to travel to destination and then be reassembled, Liu explains the process of fragmentation and circulation of culture as “disassociated traits”, modular and flexible for the system's sake. Diversity is “not constructed out of men and women, but from culture-bare atoms”, while culture is “merely a modular capital of techniques, skills and talents” (2004, p. 57). It is important not to forget that, while the Foucauldian individual enacts categories defined by the state, Liu's post-Fordist knowledge workers are constantly tailoring their identities to the demands of the market, to which each individual is a brand. Self-branding is thus a key concept in the construction of neoliberal identity in a connected world: no longer exclusive to the deviant, labelling is now a reflexive routine practice in the compilation of personal profiles on social platforms, a type of categorical labour increasingly required in a widening range of professions. On LinkedIn, for example, skills are encoded into identity by tagging, and plug workers into a global network of expertise that allows them to be endorsed by other users and found by recruiters.

These practices are even more important in the context of remote work, where the distance between an individual's lived experience and their projected digital subjectivity is very much geographical. From Alvin Toffler's (1980) electronic cottage to “make money while working from home” ads, the idea of remote work has been one of the most exciting promises of the Internet. By 2019, however, the dramatic shift in work-life balance ushered in by the globalisation of ICT has brought us from the enthusiasm of the sharing economy (Lessig, 2004) to the harsh reality of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2015). Rather than a hybrid system of peer-to-peer exchanges, the current power structure is increasingly centralised, and critical accounts on the lowering work standards of the gig economy and sharing economy – championed by companies like Uber and AirBnB, as well as services like TaskRabbit and Amazon Mechanical Turk – are multiplying (e.g. Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2017; Gandini, 2016a, 2016b, Woodcock & Graham, 2019). Digital work has to rely on a global and uneven marketplace, with structural problems such as bargaining power and discrimination (Graham, Hjorth and Lehdonvirta, 2017, p. 159), while growing economic insecurity, low productivity, diminished autonomy, and worrying levels of personal debt lead to a “radical responsabilisation” of the workforce (Fleming, 2017, p. 702). In the name of human capital (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1962) and creative destruction (Schumpeter, 1942), today's workers are increasingly part of an “entreprecariat” (Lorusso, 2018) – an especially vivid portmanteau encapsulating the compulsive self-branding and the instability inherent to current labour practices.

Despite these dire conditions, the rhetorics of community, sharing, and remote work are still being sold as a quasi-utopian horizon: as AirBnB becomes a global actor in gentrification from Amsterdam (Van der Zee, 2016) to Oakland (Robinson, 2016), less expensive locations around the world become dotted with co-working and co-living spaces destined to a new class of nomadic freelancers on the look-out for authenticity and wi-fi. If the nomad was once a marginalised figure, associated to the subversion of the state (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) and feminist politics (Braidotti, 2006), a certain kind of nomadism has now ascended to élite status (Castells, 1989; Bauman, 2000). The Digital Nomad is emerging in this scenario.

The Contradictions of the (Digital) Nomad

The "digital nomad" formula was first used in the late 1990s by Makimoto and Manners (1997), but as a sociological category, a distributed patchwork of communities, and a collective cultural production the figure has only been conjured up in recent years. In this respect, Müller (2016) interrogates the sparse presence of the digital nomad in academic literature, wondering whether it can even be used as a research category or if it is indeed just a buzzword. Moving beyond recent discussions, I relate the figure to the more established concept of the nomad, notably prominent in philosophical and critical discourse since Deleuze and Guattari (1987). My goal is not only to expand the theoretical context of the debate, but also to critically highlight the potential of the Digital Nomad as an emerging part of the collective imaginary.

While there are different definitions of the digital nomad in sociological terms, technology-enabled mobility is always the common denominator. Noting its evolution from a fictional character to a social figure, Müller (2016, pp. 344-345) fittingly points out that, far from being a backpacking dropout, the digital nomad puts great value on labour and productivity as important features of lifestyle and self-actualisation. Reichenberger (2017) similarly places the figure at a crucial socio-historical juncture, in which a holistic balance to maintain freedom and self-motivation are encouraged and made increasingly necessary by the blurring of work-life balance. Richards (2015, p. 12) also highlights how both work and leisure contribute equally to self-identity and self-worth, which helps understand the relationship between the digital nomad and travel.

A digital nomad may in fact simply be someone working from a café, free from the constraints of an office. It is no longer the opposite of a settler, then, but someone seeking to plug and play in places that increasingly strive to provide the required infrastructure (Richards & Palmer, 2010, cited in Richards, 2015, p. 349): Internet access is a must, but there is a growing network of co-working and co-living spaces

that increasingly determine the digital nomad geography.

Together with professional, personal and spatial freedom, exposure to different cultures is still a potent drive towards the digital nomad lifestyle (Reichenberger, 2017, pp. 7-9), however there are significant differences in comparison to the past. Richards (2015) outlines a more fine-grained taxonomy of new global nomads, among which the backpacker is joined by the traveller, the tourist, the volunteer, the language student, the exchange student, and the intern; as well as migrants and explorers. The evolution is both theoretical and social: on one hand there is a shift from the drifter, represented for example by the writings of Bruce Chatwin in the 1960s, to the nomadic deterritorialisation of the 1980s, which are used to challenge disciplinary limits and academic hegemony (Kaplan, 1996, cited in Richards, 2015); on the other, there is the emergence of the flashpacker: a backpacker with a higher budget who benefits from the touristic enclaves established by its predecessor, now major destinations for mainstream travellers (Richards, 2015, p. 341). While the flashpacker represents the rise of nomadism as an industry (Jarvis and Peel, 2010), the global nomads of Ibiza and Goa (D'Andrea, 2007) embody a seemingly deeper commitment to culture: be it a foreign one to immerse oneself in, a new age focus on spirituality, or an artistic enclave escaping the regimes of state and market (Richards, 2015, p. 342). As for the digital nomad, Richards characterises the figure as less compelled by the need to form tribes of its own (2015, p. 343). In other words, be it because of widespread Internet access and facilitated mobility, or as a response to cyclical scarcity, digital nomads seem to be more individualistic – this does not mean there is no community aspect to the digital nomad, but as Cook (2018) notes the label may be used only temporarily.

Discussing financial status and the gig economy, Thompson (2018) outlines a clear imbalance between the cultural capital of digital nomads, who are mostly well-educated English speakers with strong passports, and their professional options (2018, p. 12). There is also an imbalance between their home countries, where living standards are declining, and the affordable destinations where digital nomads travel to – which, as a consequence, are subject to increased gentrification (p. 3).

In this sense, it is worth highlighting that the digital nomad lifestyle has been greatly inspired by the notion of new rich – a new kind of mobile, adaptable, time-savvy entrepreneur that Timothy Ferriss (2007) defines in *The 4-hour Work Week*, widely regarded as a proto-digital nomad manifesto. Ferriss' book is a guide for a new class of entrepreneurs to come, styled as a hybrid between a practical how-to for business-minded people and a personal memoir tinged with self-help, *carpe diem* ethos. While fundamentally about work, Ferriss' conceptual contribution is holistically defined as "lifestyle design", a discipline that is as useful as it is inevitable in today's globalised world. In fact, the new rich are defined by their currencies: time and

mobility (2007, p. 7). The solution to dissatisfaction and instability is thus a sort of life hacking, a way to figure out how to combine profit and fun – notably, this is achieved not by finding professional fulfilment, but by freeing time and automating income. The new rich do not want to buy stuff, they want to own a business – not having what one wants, being what one wants (p. 21). On an emotional level, the new rich strives for excitement, not happiness (p. 51) and is conscious that "eustress" – a type of stress that also makes you euphoric (p. 37) – is good.

Apart from economic instability and the association with a "tech bro" stereotype (Spinks, 2017), however, there are some downsides to the digital nomad lifestyle. Several stories, FAQs and how-tos in fact mention social skills as a necessary tool to establish oneself during prolonged travelling, with solitude being a collateral effect and often the reason long-term digital nomadism is not for everyone. Thomas (2016) paints a bittersweet portrait of influential nomad Pieter Levels, who launched websites NomadList and RemoteOK and in many ways represents the ideal success story to sanction digital nomadism as the ultimate millennial dream. In the article, Levels warns that the lifestyle is not always as it is portrayed on Instagram and describes his own struggle with depression and homesickness. Manson (2013), on his own account, admits how it is easy to fall into a kind of quiet narcissism: the new rich may be able to visit the Taj Mahal and Machu Pichu within just a few months, but they mostly do so in loneliness or in the company of acquaintances. Ultimately, Manson says that the new rich are "just as guilty of materialism" as the old rich, except "Instead of an addiction to status and possessions, we are addicted to experience and novelty" (Manson, 2013, par. 28).

When reading these accounts and taking note of the convergence of the nomad with the new rich, it is easy to see that the relative exclusivity of digital nomadism stands in stark contrast with the anti-hegemonic nature of the philosophical theories that have championed the figure of the nomad in the past. Its contradictory character, however, does not. For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), in fact, the figure of the nomad is significantly related to what the French philosophers call "the war machine", a force that is disruptive to the state. Different from the migrant, the nomad is a vector of deterritorialisation, changing the territory on its trajectory rather than reterritorialising after reaching a point from another (2010, p. 45-46). In the current predicament, given the extent to which globalisation and neoliberal capitalism have replaced state sovereignty with fluctuating market values, the radical reconfiguration of space and territory operated by nomads can thus be seen as both a sign of postmodern fluidity and hyper-capitalist instability.

The relationship between a figuration like the nomad and the socio-political context to which it applies is thus complex. As discussed in a previous chapter, Braidotti (1999) defends the specificity of philosophical figuration and its difference

from sociological inquiry, highlighting how the aim of politically informed cartographies is making visible and undoing power relations (1999, pp. 90-91). Making those relations visible is of course different from disentangling subjects from their influence, and in fact Braidotti recognises the inherently contradictory character of the nomadic: “the poly-centred, multiple and complex political economy of late postmodernity is nomadic in the sense that it promotes the fluid circulation of capital and of commodities. In this respect, it favours the proliferation of differences, but only within the strictly commercial logic of profit” (Braidotti, 2006, p. 8). For Braidotti, then, the nomadic subject is significantly bound to capitalism, but also to embodied and situated experiences that maintain its political potential – a theoretical position very much in line with the feminist concept of “politics of location” (Rich, 1987).

Decades after Deleuze and Guattari published their text on nomadology, the rise of the nomad is being discussed as the new status quo. Zygmunt Bauman (2000, p. 198) notes, for example, how the historical dismissal of nomads has turned: it is now the “besieged sedentary populations” who “refuse to accept the rules and stakes of the new 'nomadic' power game,” while the “up-and-coming global nomadic elite” looks down upon the sedentary barbarians. In terms of the nomad’s relation to identity, Castells (2009, p. 69; 356) makes a distinction between a vast majority of disenfranchised victims of the impositions of global flows, clinging onto identitarian concepts, and a small elite of “globapolitans” (half beings, half flows), who on the other hand are devoid of communal identity.

In this scenario, contemporary debate on whether the nomad is still a valuable theoretical figuration has been fierce, and Sutherland (2014) provides a synthetic overview of the discussion. Rather than challenging the relevance of the concept of becoming for feminist theory, the stated goal of Sutherland's review is to ask “whether the ontology of becoming tied to a figural posthuman is the best way to challenge structures of domination in an epoch when change, mobility, and flexibility would seem to be closer to hegemonic constructs than ideals of resistance” (p. 935). After considering several critical accounts about the risks of minimising the persistence of unequal mobility and romanticising difference, Sutherland ultimately warns against confusing the radical and the necessary, the metaphysical category of becoming with the contingencies of mobility (p. 949).

The contemporary nomad is thus a contradictory figure: at once a sociological probe into contemporary neoliberal capitalism and a conceptual figuration to explore its power structures, it represents a fitting critical device to approach the contradictions of digitised living.

Fully-Automated Luxury Nomadism: Imaginary Momentum of the Digital Nomad

Fig. 3.1 – A protest sign featuring the Cher post-work meme. Image from https://www.facebook.com/humansoflatecapitalism/

A recent meme has tweaked the chorus of a popular late-90s hit by Cher from “Do you believe in life after love?” into “Do you believe in life after work?”. Appearing on signs at demonstrations (fig. 3.1) and in academic papers alike, this ironic appropriation encapsulates two of the main concerns about work today: the disappearance of employment due to automation and the erosion of work-life balance in the desperate attempt to keep up with the competition.

Several critics have been concerned with the impact of capitalism on the imagination of the future. Mark Fisher (2009) notably focused on the idea of “capitalist realism”, which implies the “pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture” (2009, p. 9). Most optimistically, recent theoretical developments have framed the rampant tech-driven automation coming from Silicon Valley as an opportunity to revitalise an agonising left, calling for a “post-work” future (Srnicek & Williams, 2015) or even a “fully-automated luxury communism” (Bastani, 2019).

Within the current cultural climate, the Digital Nomad can be seen as a capitalist realist answer to the post-work debate. One of the key points of the new rich philosophy is in fact that, instead of waiting for retirement, the individual is expected to free up as much time as possible by automating their income streams to enjoy regular mini-retirements. These are enabled by delegating tasks in pure neoliberal fashion: when human work is necessary, a way of outsourcing it is to delegate tasks to digital workers in Asian countries, thus saving on expenses; in

terms of manufacturing, instead, selling merchandising can be streamlined by leveraging specific services offered by corporations like Amazon. Ferriss' enthusiastic call is at once inspirational and realistic, abstract and practical. While the technical methods of choice are delegation and automation, the important imaginary contribution of Ferriss' new rich lies in the aforementioned “mini-retirements”, which prefigure glimpses of a life without work – not understood as a right, but achieved after lots of smart planning and business building.

Interestingly, Ferriss' account has several points in common with another, in many ways antithetical theory: *Inventing the Future* by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (2015). If Ferriss (2007) has captured the imagination of digital nomads with a depoliticised idea of remote work and automated income, Srnicek and Williams (2015) instead provide a Leftist take on post-work, outlining a clear cultural and political goal: in order to defeat neoliberalism and reclaim hegemonic status, the left needs to aim for utopian, universal goals – that is, a post-capitalist, post-work society, to be achieved by setting smaller political goals like the full automation of the economy and Universal Basic Income (UBI). Beyond Srnicek and Williams' Leftist utopian thinking, technological automation and the decreasing of working hours are in line with the tenets of “lifestyle design” advocated for by Ferriss (2007). While Ferriss aims to leverage automation of income by outsourcing work to others, however, Srnicek and Williams argue for a state-driven, rather than corporate-driven, automation (Srnicek & Williams, 2015, p. 109). Significantly, according to Srnicek and Williams a way forward is to translate the aforementioned goals into slogans, memes, and chants: a post-work imaginary aimed at generating an image of progress that may inspire political change in the present (2015, pp. 126-127).

Less optimistic about salvaging the political left, Franco “Bifo” Berardi's most recent work on “futurability” also attempts to respond to the current capitalist realist predicament by acting on the imaginary. In particular, Berardi proposes a reprogramming of the relationship between technology and life that starts from work and the subjectivation of cognitive workers (2018, p. 79). Noticing that globalisation allows the movement of economic flows and not people, thus disconnecting the mind from the social body, Berardi calls for a new techno-poetic platform for the collaboration of cognitive workers worldwide, freeing their conscience from economic or religious dogmas (p. 156). The word “poetic” is here very important, as Berardi gives great value to aesthetics: while capitalism produces semiotic models that constrain social imagination, the content within those models can create possibilities that exceed their capitalist container. Significantly, the way out needs to come from an “ethico-aesthetic intuition” (2018, pp. 180-181).

While social media are proprietary infrastructures – and would thus ultimately be inadequate in terms of the autonomy that Bifo has always advocated for – they

have occasionally proven to be instrumental to channelling a surprising imaginary potential, occasionally informing the collective subjectivation of new identities. The main example of this is the Occupy movement: thanks to labels like “We are the 99%” and hashtags like #OWS, protesters worldwide were able to voice their opposition to the global financial system, temporarily coalescing into a collective subject.

In this sense, political philosopher and media theorist Jodi Dean (2017, pp. 6-7) goes as far as calling the selfie “a communist form of expression”, albeit appropriated by capitalism and always reflecting the repetitive logic of branding. In a text about selfies and reaction GIFs – web animations featuring emotional expressions by other people, often celebrities, which are routinely shared on social media – Dean writes: “In communicative capitalism, images of others are images of me. [...] I convey who I am by sharing a photo of someone else.” A stable identity is thus replaced by a temporary synch into plural feeling: “The face that once suggested the identity of a singular person now flows in collective expression of common feelings. Reaction GIFs work because of the affect they transmit as they move through our feeds, imitative moments in the larger heterogeneous being we experience and become.” Selfies, reaction GIFs, memes and emojis – or in general the commoning of the face – are thus tools to tap into collective feelings, perhaps even channeling them into a conflict: “trending hashtags generally point to battles, contestations over a meaning rather than its acceptance. If there wasn’t a conflict, something at stake in the circulation of the image, why bother?” (p. 8).

Given the centrality of aesthetics (and selfies) to Instagram culture, Dean's take might constitute a case for an “ethico-aesthetic” hi-jacking of the app. If Twitter was the starting point for injecting labels such as #OWS in the collective imaginary, then, could Instagram be the “techno-poetic” platform of choice for negotiating the imagination of post-work through the (re)politicisation of the Digital Nomad?

In order to address this issue, in the rest of the chapter I explore the Digital Nomad as a cultural avatar and a catalyst for collective subjectivation. In particular, I discuss the figure's relationship to the platform's affordances in terms of tagging practices: not only by highlighting how the Digital Nomad aesthetic emerges from imagery tagged with certain keywords, but also how Instagram geotagging has a material influence on the locations visited by digital nomads, which puts the figure in indirect political dialogue with forms of transnational governance. By combining an aesthetic reading of the platform with a critical theorisation of these practices, I propose a critique of digital nomadism as a collective cultural production.

The Politics of Geotagging: Digital Nomadism as a Cultural Production

Before venturing into how the Digital Nomad imaginary could possibly be renegotiated, I shall discuss how this imaginary is materially stitched together. Having introduced the importance of mobility as one of the main currencies for the digital nomad, this section explores how the globe-trotting of digital nomads and their digital trail establishes a geography that is entangled in specific cultural and touristic flows, exploring what kind of politics of location and nomadic cartographies are materialised by it.

In order to do so, I here analyse geotagging, the assignment of global positioning system (GPS) coordinates as metadata to a piece of content produced online. Through this function, an item – a photo, for example, but also a tweet or a Facebook message – can be linked to other items attached to the same location or visualised on a map. Even though the practice is by no means exclusive to travelling entrepreneurs or solo travellers, the necessary reliance on location-based apps to gain information while abroad makes the practice materially enmeshed in the collective cultural production that shapes the Digital Nomad as a cultural avatar.

Following Facebook groups like 'Digital Nomads Around The World' (more than 113,000 members as of September 2019), in fact, quickly reveals that questions within the community revolve around "where" as much as "how". Beyond exchanging practical know-how to tackle tax or visa issues, nomads are initially preoccupied with finding the perfect location to start their journey and, as a consequence, some of the most popular websites that cater to nomadic hopefuls are services involved in structuring and classifying a shared digital nomad geography. NomadList.com and HoodMaps.com, for example, reveal much not only about the geography of digital nomadism, but also about its culture, social imaginary, and even economics.

NomadList.com is centred on a listing of cities around the world, arranged by a variety of criteria. One of these is the cost of living, which is notably tailored on a certain type of living expenses. As shown in the picture below (fig. 3.2), by expanding the "cost of living" tab on any listed city, there is an explicit break-down of whose living the money is expected to cover: in Chiang Mai, for example, a local is expected to live with less than 500$ a month, an expat with 765$, and the Nomad Cost™ is 1,108$ per month[34] – a taxonomy that sheds some light on the class awareness of digital nomads.

[34] According to the website, the amount is calculated based on a typical digital nomad, staying 3 months in cheap hotels with private rooms in the centre and eating out three times a day.

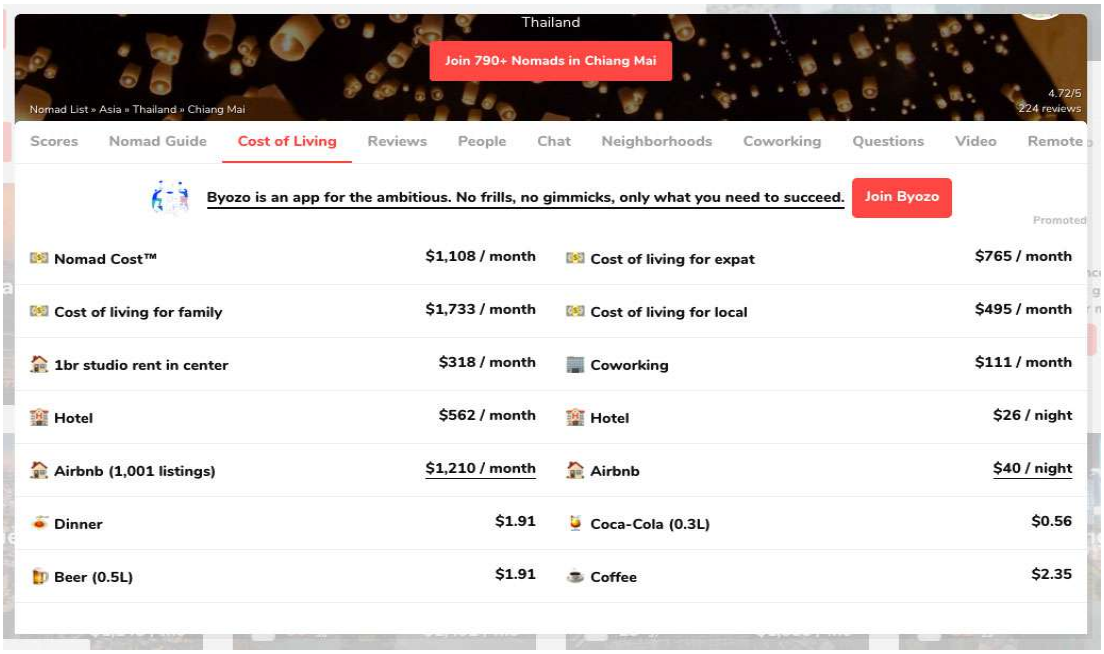

Fig. 3.2 – A screenshot from the NomadList website, taken on 01-06-2019

HoodMaps.com offers a different, culturally fuzzier type of classification (fig. 3.3). The website allows users to tag entire neighbourhoods by overlaying a polygon over a city map, naming each shape with arbitrary labels like “where hipsters go clubbing”, “tourist trap”, and so on. Interestingly, the website's interface has a fixed menu bar with “Suits”, “Rich”, “Hipsters”, “Students”, “Normies”, and “Tourists”: labels that appear driven both by economic parameters and a cultural focus.

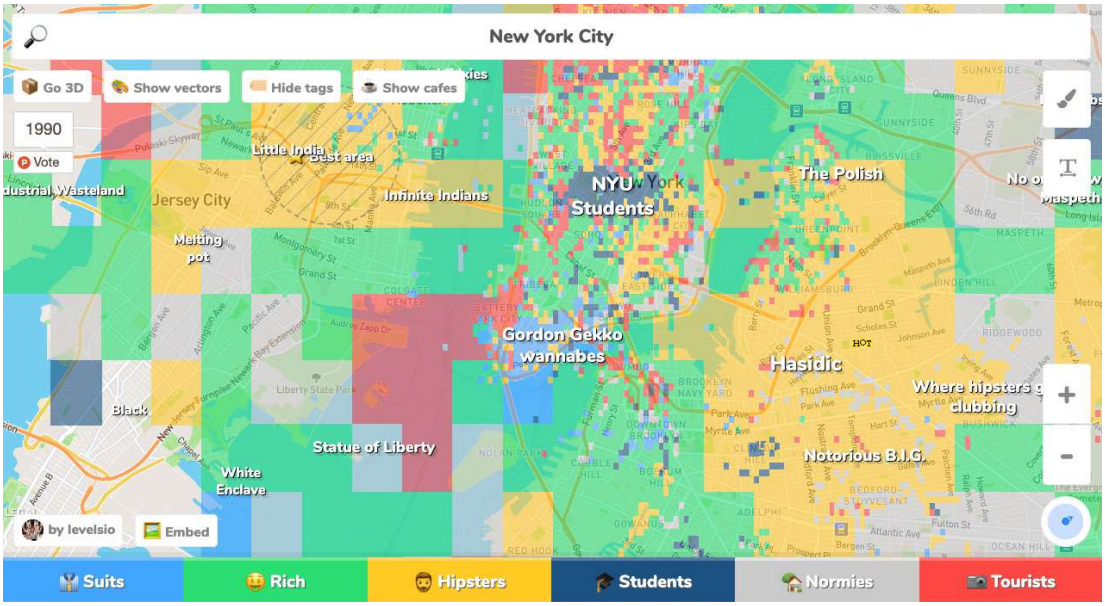

Fig. 3.3 – A screenshot from the HoodMaps website, taken on 02-06-2019

Instagram plays a role in these processes as well. In fact, the platform has been influential on travel, as well as photography: the app is a great tool for tourism professionals, promoters and travelling influencers alike, and thus also plays a role in materialising a type of geography of tourism. Miller (2017) highlights the crucial role of social media photography in driving travel decisions and trends, a fact confirmed by the launch of Lonely Planet's own Instagram-like app in 2017 (Buhr, 2017). At the time of this writing, critical accounts of digital nomad presence on Instagram are missing from scholarly discourse. While there is no evidence of direct correlation between the establishment of Instagram as a mainstream platform and the popularisation of the Digital Nomad, it is safe to say the figure has captured the imagination of an Instagram-aware public. According to Google Trends, the query "digital nomad" had been plateauing up to early 2014, but it has been rising since. By then, responding to an increasingly international user base, Instagram had already expanded to Android, Windows Phone, and had been acquired by Facebook.

To discuss why the Digital Nomad is a crucial element at the nexus of aesthetics and materiality, I situate Instagram geotagging within two critical discourses: the classic theorisation of the tourist by MacCannell (1976) and the recent conceptualisation of the "Stack" by Bratton (2016). The former is particularly relevant because it describes the touristic experience as a cultural production, detailing how tourism also entails a process of differentiation and dematerialisation of social relations. The latter, instead, is useful to highlight how technology-driven globalisation has rematerialised those relations in part through mobile interfaces like Instagram.

It is easy to associate the Digital Nomad with the figure of the tourist, however there are significant differences between the two – not least, the relationship with work, leisure, and authenticity. According to MacCannell (1976), the tourist expresses all the quintessentially modern eagerness to "see it all, know it all and take it all in" (1999, p. xxi), with "all" meaning "the authentic." The authentic is juxtaposed to the inherent inauthenticity of modern life, in which leisure and cultural consumption are increasingly defining life instead of work (p. 5). The tourist is thus defined as leisurely by definition, always in contemplation of work done by others. This dialectic between the tourist's own active leisure and the fetishisation of other people's work is not only fundamental to MacCannell's argument, but also relevant to my focus on aesthetics.

Cultural production is in fact another central element to MacCannell's theory of the tourist: if cultural experiences are the ultimate deposit of values in modern society (MacCannell, 1999, p. 28), these productions are something strangers can come together in, before even meeting (p. 32). It is especially so for the digital nomad: if tourists dislike tourists (MacCannell, 1999, 10), travelling entrepreneurs instead rely on digital and physical networking as vital means of support. This shift reflects on the

relationship between materiality and immateriality outlined in MacCannell's theory. The entire touristic complex is, in a sense, the dematerialisation of basic social relations (p. 85): the modern disruption of real life and the simultaneous fascination for “real life” in fact challenges and redefines categories like “truth” and “reality” (p. 91). In this sense, MacCannell's understanding of touristic experiences relies heavily on the theory of front and backstage elaborated by Goffman (1956), making the ritual sightseeing a matter of collective cultural productions that are both signs and rituals (p. 23): we are all tourists, but also tour guides, and public behaviour is itself a touristic attraction (p. 39). Tourism establishes its own layer of reality, and aesthetics play an important role in this process.

According to MacCannell, “modern society divides its industrial and aesthetic elements and reunites them on a higher social plane” (p. 70). This higher social plane is where the differentiation acquires significance through the marking and framing of sights: tourist attractions are a taxonomy of structural elements that, taken together, “constitute one of the most complex and orderly of several universal codes that constitute modern society (after language)” (1999, p. 46). The universality of this taxonomy is due not to the system's completeness, but because the logic behind it is potentially inclusive (p. 51). In fact, “sightseers have the capacity to recognise sights by transforming them into one of their markers” (p. 123). In other words, tourism works like a combination of GPS and Web 2.0's “folksonomies” (Vander Wal, 2005), the bottom-up taxonomies engendered by social media tagging: it structures everything by giving it a technically addressable identity as well as a culturally intelligible name. But while in tourism there is a detachment marked by the authentic/inauthentic divide, on social media social processes are re-materialised through both geotagging and hashtags.

In this sense, the concept of “Stack” theorised by Bratton (2016) is especially useful. If MacCannell (1976) imagines separate layers to describe the relationship between the tourist and society, Bratton (2016) conceptualises a six-layer “accidental megastructure”. Comprising Earth, Cloud, City, Address, Interface, and User, the Stack links the minerals being mined in Africa all the way up to the human swiper/tapper, through the tech-heavy cities of the globalised world, the cloud in which data is ubiquitously accessible, and an infinitely fine-grained layer of universal addressability where everything is digitally recorded and traceable. For the scope of this chapter, it is worth highlighting the importance of the address layer and the interface layer. The former is especially relevant to the differentiation and re-materialisation of social relations discussed just above, the latter is important to understand the political potential of a platform like Instagram.

The address layer is where every object – physical locations, smart devices, user identities, and so on – is recorded, identified, and potentially reached. According

to Bratton's definition, the address layer is “not only a master plane, where individuated addressees are situated, but also a medium of communication between them” (Bratton, 2016, p. 192). Bratton points out how “any thing or event must have an identity and a location in order to connect with other things or events”, making the ability to assign an address “critical to any geopolitical system” (p. 193). In fact, the addressing regime does not only imprint identity onto an existing geography of things, it overhauls the relations between what is enrolled within it, regardless of whether it is physical or virtual space (p. 194). The address layer is thus crucial to imagine the materiality of the Stack and how it connects digital and physical entities.

The interface layer (of which Instagram is part), is also relevant in geopolitical terms. This layer is constituted by “any technical-informational machine that links or delinks users and addressed entities up or down columns within the stack” (p. 220). Notably, this layer is not only a point of contact, but it also governs the conditions of exchange between the systems it connects – and thus reflects specific ideologies. According to Bratton (2016), for example, Facebook embodies “a specific prototype of cloud geopolitical future, reliant on the symbolic interactionist theory of 'presentation of self-identity'” (p. 125). For Facebook and Instagram, the archive is the primary channel of communication, the index being the medium (p. 126). The aesthetics of self-presentation and the structuring power of classification discussed previously in relation to tourism are thus at work again: in the case of Instagram geotagging, the interface layer communicates with the address layer by relying on Facebook Places, an archive that shares the markedly commercial and data-driven nature of its parent platform[35], reflecting its tendency towards acceleration and the bypassing of local governance.

Interestingly, Instagram geotagging has been found to inspire copycat photographers to take pictures of locations they found on the platform (McGinn, 2018), even leading to the touristic invasions of the most photogenic spots. Knepper (2017) writes about how tagging trends in Instagram photography can drive touristic flows to the point of prompting local authorities to logistically react to the human influx – for example by installing handrails or other security features that spoil the landscape. The phenomenon described by Knepper is akin to a tech-driven “gentrification” of nature, which exemplifies both the old-fashioned dynamics of global tourism and new geo-political shifts facilitated by technology.

The habitual use of location-based apps is even more relevant to a nomad lifestyle, and users of AirBnb, Yelp, and Google Maps all over the world rely on global coordinates to interact with local urban geographies, following a “dynamic of

[35] In this sense, it is worth noting that the app (unlike HoodMaps) does not allow the arbitrary tagging of a location with a custom label, but the user needs to choose a previously registered one from a drop-down menu.

embodied prescription" (Bratton, 2016, p. 236). Having checked-in or geotagged the right amount of "cool" places can also impact on the profile of the individual traveller, trying to match and mingle with like-minded locals. Beekmans (2011), for example, has investigated in detail a process he calls "check-in urbanism". Starting with the premise that young, tech-savvy millennials moving into gentrifying neighbourhoods are more likely to leave a data trail of their routines, Beekmans highlights the relationship between location sharing at specific spots and the urban landscape of gentrifying neighbourhoods: by mapping out the geotagging of the coolest new spots, in other words, a researcher might get a glimpse of gentrification dynamics as they happen[36].

Software and globalisation are both necessary to the digital nomad lifestyle, so the Stack is an important conceptual device in a political critique of the figure. Grounded in a new kind of US exceptionalism, albeit an infrastructural one (Bratton, 2016, p. 35), the Stack makes governance complicated: private corporations clash with sovereign nations over labour laws and data ownership regulations, extracting surplus value from users to their advantage (p. 369); global citizens thus become less the political subject of any one location, rather responding to a globally uneven urban mesh of "amalgamated infrastructures and delaminated jurisdictions" (p. 152). This "plasticity of sovereignty" actualises into a type of urbanism that is driven by the assumption that user interaction equals value generation and concerns "billions of noncitizens in temporary residencies" (p. 159). This last element is very important, as it regards the status of digital nomads as well.

In fact, I argue that the layered geo-political dimension highlighted by Bratton is crucial to the potential re-politicisation of the Digital Nomad, especially as the category becomes more economically relevant and politically self-reflexive. An example of this trend is a spin-off project of the aforementioned Digital Nomads Around the World group, called Digital Nomads Nation. With a characteristic laptop shot in the background, the project description reads: "Lets make a new country for digital nomads – We are 100K Members, if we were a nation we would be the 200th Nation by Population size." The nation's stated goal is specifically aimed at establishing some kind of governance, offering not only a "unique global identity / country" but also an entity willing to partner with sovereign nations in order to ease visa processes and generate value through knowledge exchange. While many of the website's functions make it look like yet another online community or even a

[36] It should be noted that Beekmans' focused on Foursquare, a mobile app founded in 2009 and initially focused on check-ins and location sharing, but that eventually abandoned these functions to focus entirely on local search (Hatmaker, 2014). However, the dynamic continues to exist on Instagram: in fact, the app initially relied on Foursquare API for location tagging, but started using Facebook Places since 2014.

commercial service, some of the language used relies on institutional terms like "citizens", "embassies", "mayors", and "ministries"[37]. This and other digital nomad-driven endeavours seem to respond not only to a growing market, but also to the increasing openness towards the category demonstrated by countries like Estonia, whose e-residency program[38] is probably the most notable institutional nod to nomadic entrepreneurs worldwide.

By materialising a worldwide geography of interaction, then, digital nomad websites and location-based apps contribute to the re-imagination of borders. However, who will benefit from such a re-imagination – privileged tech-savvy freelancers, temporary residents, local populations, refugees, the globally dispossessed – remains a matter of cultural and political negotiation.

The Aesthetics of Remote Work: Renegotiating the Digital Nomad Imaginary

If the physical presence of digital nomads geotagging content embodies a specific politics of location, the global Digital Nomad imaginary emerges most clearly from another labelling practice: predictably, hashtags. Quite consistently with the literature review in the previous section, on Instagram the #digitalnomad hashtag is mostly related to tags like #travel, #remotework, #entrepreneur, #workandtravel, #laptoplife, and #freelance[39], demonstrating a conflation of travel and work imagery. As an identity label, #solotraveller also appears often in relation to #digitalnomad, although more consistently attached to travel-related content.

As discussed in the previous chapter, hashtags are an important element in the definition of social media communities, especially because of the practice's role in the performance of identity and self-branding. In the context of Instagram, for example, a recent study by Baker and Walsh (2018) explores the gender stereotypes sustained by the healthy eating community through a visual analysis of common tropes associated with tags like #cleaneating and #eatclean – e.g. glamour shot, kissing pout, food, before/after, muscle presentation, and so on. Motivated by the need of approval from certain groups of reference, hashtag use blurs the line between commercial and community posting, thus contributing to the

[37] See https://www.digitalnomadsnation.org and https://app.involve.me/visadbio/digital-nomads-nation-coming-soon – last accessed on 6 February 2020.

[38] According to the official website (https://e-resident.gov.ee/) the e-residency is "a government-issued digital identity and status that provides access to Estonia's transparent digital business environment", which "allows digital entrepreneurs to manage business from anywhere, entirely online".

[39] To identify related or similar tags I used tools like hashtagify.me or apps like Hashtag Inspector on Android. If we search for tags like #remotework the #digitalnomad tag is immediately mentioned as related, while if we type #solotraveller it comes up a little later.

commodification of identity on the platform (Baker & Walsh, 2018, p. 4568).

The next paragraphs attempt a break-down of the remote work imaginary as it emerges from Digital Nomad-related hashtags and visual tropes, albeit with a different approach. It should be noted, in fact, that Instagram encourages a very liberal use of hashtags, usually appearing in long lists and thus making the use of different spellings or concepts equivalent to each other, as long as the keywords overall link into the appropriate cultural milieu. Since this habit engenders a type of aesthetics of its own, hashtags are here intended less as key identifiers of networks to point at and more as loose markers that outline a broad aesthetic and cultural imaginary of reference. In this sense, the aforementioned take on the selfie by Dean (2017) is still very useful, as it conflates tags, memes, and emojis into the category of "secondary visuality".

The Instagram presence of the Digital Nomad is heterogenous. On one hand there is content posted by users who identify, even fleetingly, with the #digitalnomad hashtag; on the other there are a range of services that target digital nomad-types as a demographic, but might not mention the formula directly[40]. In trend with the Baker and Walsh (2018) article, it is sometimes difficult to tell when content is posted by a self-branding digital nomad, a digital nomad-oriented company, or a digital nomad-sympathising user. This makes the definition of the Digital Nomad aesthetic a fuzzy, collective endeavour. Tagging oneself into this specific imaginary is a fleeting gesture, but it does materially add to the user, vocabulary, and image pool that constitute the Digital Nomad as a collective cultural production. The impersonal quality and the visual character of this gesture go hand in hand: the tagged content may be the depiction of a picturesque landscape, a co-working desk, or any other type of reference to the Digital Nomad imaginary, so the user is at once pulling themselves towards that imagery and drawing from it to assemble part of their own social media identity.

Instead of referring only to images tagged #digitalnomad, then, a collateral constellation of networked content can be ascribed to the same imaginary. In particular, I am interested in discussing #solotraveller, #remotework and #4hourworkweek, as they are especially expressive in terms of individualisation and productivity in leisure: the first through a recurring pose, the second through the "laptop shot", and the third through motivational memes.

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[40] An example is Remote Year (138,000 followers on Instagram and more than 100,000 tagged posts), a company that "facilitates travel and accommodations for people working or interested in working remotely," but does not make the call specific to digital nomads.

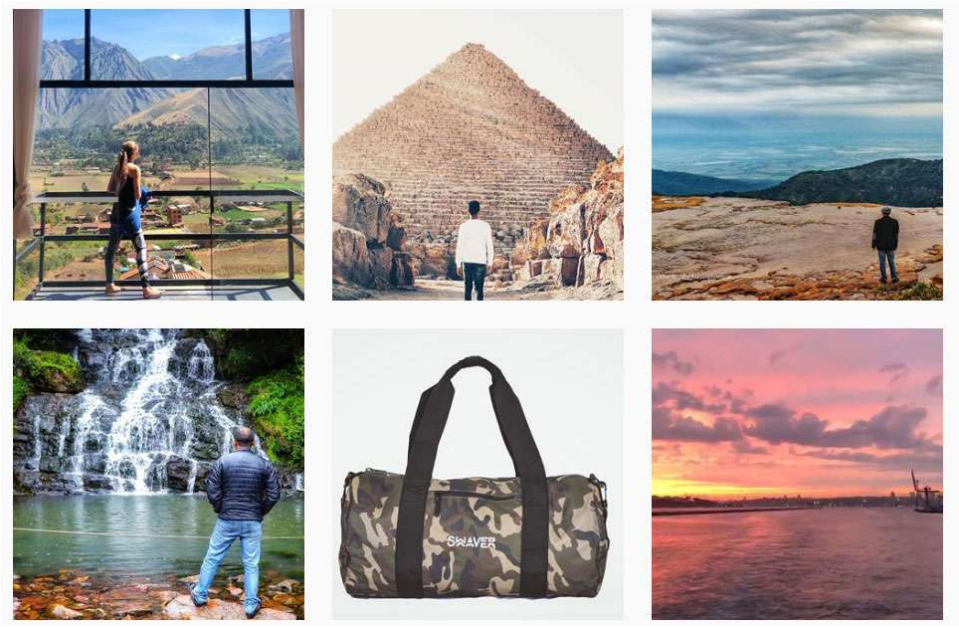

Fig. 3.4 – A screenshot of a portion of the #solotraveller feed on Instagram, taken on 29-05-2019.

The most iconic example of the #solotraveller pose is the picture of a person depicted from behind as they contemplate an exotic landscape, a hiking path, or an urban skyline from the edge of an infinity pool (fig. 3.4). The subject is notably depicted alone, however the person portraying them may or may not be tagged in the picture's description. Interestingly, while there have been critical investigations of the cultural roots behind the selfie phenomenon (e.g. Peraica, 2017), this type of portrayal – which necessarily requires the contribution of an external aid, albeit excluded from the image – may be preferable to the more intuitive self-shot format for an individual traveller. While Peraica (2017) traces the selfie back to the myth of Narcissus, framing the phenomenon in critical terms, it has to be noted that #solotraveller photos of female Instagrammers travelling in unfamiliar countries also have empowering undertones. Albeit faceless, the subject is enjoying an exclusive, personal experience that the viewer is encouraged – depending whether the image is part of a marketing campaign or a diary entry from a celebrated influencer – to literally “follow” on the platform or imitate in life. While the focus is on the person being shown, there are both a simulated privateness and an implicit, albeit obscured, collaboration being involved.

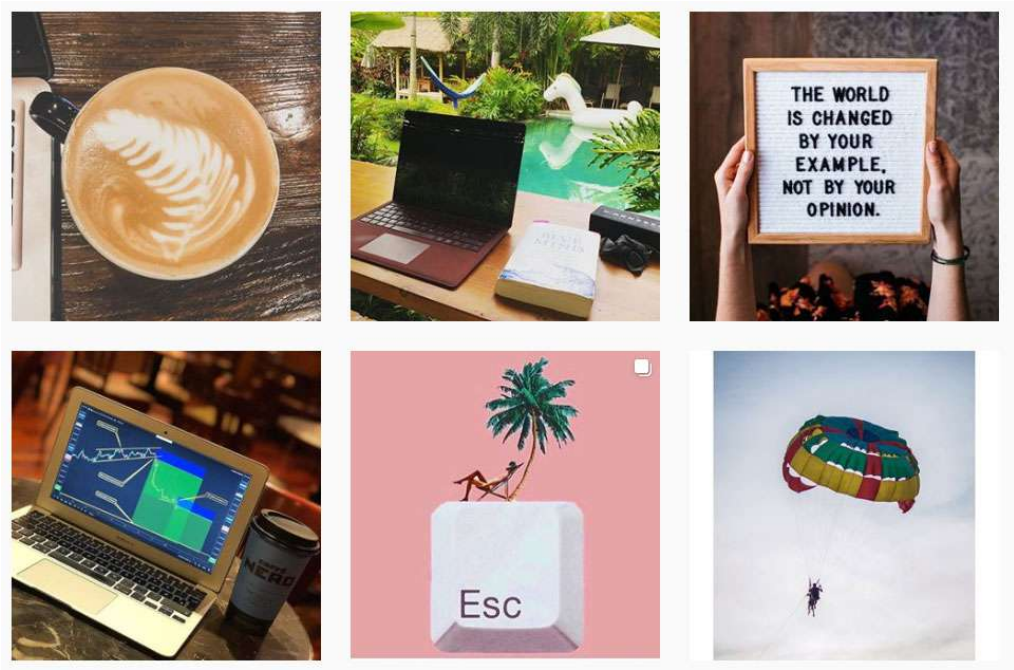

Fig. 3.5 – A screenshot of a portion of the #remotework feed on Instagram, taken on 29-05-2019.

Another recurring visual trope pertaining to the Digital Nomad imaginary is the laptop shot (fig. 3.5), a common occurrence when searching for tags like #digitalnomad or #remotework. The image always includes a laptop, usually a Mac, shown on a desk on a beach or next to a coffee cup in a trendy café, often paired with a fern that gives an exotic touch, or sometimes even held in a subject's lap as the person sits in a natural landscape. Combining productive items and a leisurely environment, this trope conjures up what is arguably the most synthetically contradictory representation of remote work as an aspirational lifestyle predicated on both freedom and constant connectedness: when the shot is from a first-person point of view, for example depicting the laptop next to a cappuccino on a wooden desk, the very aesthetics of the office space – and the relative consumption of tech gadgets and caffeine/sugar treats – are celebrated; when the subject is photographed by a third person within a picturesque frame, in a pose that may even look uncomfortable or contrived, the ethos of overwork seems to surpass the *carpe diem* spirit.

The laptop shot, especially when it includes its surroundings, also taps into the familiarity of physical co-working and co-living spaces, as well as coffee houses and AirBnBs. Chayka (2016) defines the globalised aesthetics of these new spaces of distributed work as “AirSpace”: describing the sterile, faux-artisanal style of interior design encouraged by Silicon Valley companies, Chayka points out how this kind of aesthetic gentrification is accompanying actual gentrification. In this case, then, Instagram is contributing to the globalisation of the airspace aesthetics.

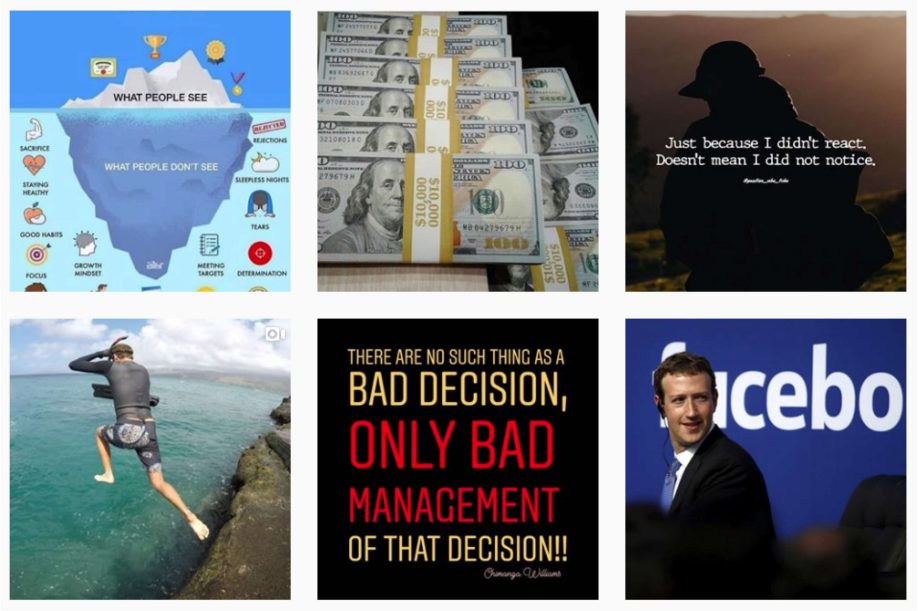

Fig. 3.6 – A screenshot of a portion of the #4hourworkweek feed on Instagram, taken on 29-05-2019.

Predictably, the #4hourworkweek imaginary is marked by motivational memes, entrepreneurial advice, and celebratory lifestyle achievement staples – stack of cash, infinity pool shot, and so on (fig. 3.6). The ironic and self-reflective commentary typical of the meme form is also common, but it mingles effortlessly with commercial advertising. There is in fact a structural contradiction that lies in the immaterial work (Lazzarato, 1996) required by Instagram and normally embraced by the digital nomad lifestyle[41], but beyond that the visual and meme-friendly nature of the medium makes it a crucial site for the diffusion of an ethos of productive leisure.

Like the selfie, these formats are popular across hashtags, communities, and platforms, however their combination with digital nomad tags helps consolidate an aesthetic that, by hiding the cumbersome nature of labour and emphasising its individualism, has muddled political undertones. Divorced from the related metrics and hashtags, the plethora of sunny beaches and wholesome breakfasts that crowd the #digitalnomad feed could be interpreted as a partial fulfilment of Bifo's wish for content to generate possibilities that exceed their capitalist container: for example, the enjoyment of a moment through a healthy experience of the body. As enmeshed as they are in Instagram's feedback-driven interface, however, they stand more as a reminder of the capitalist realist struggle to look and feel good in pursuit of a “hedonic model of health” (Fisher, 2009, p. 73).

For Fisher, who tragically took his own life in 2017, the depression epidemic caused by the unsustainable expectations of contemporary work needs to be countered by a re-politicisation of mental illnesses (2009, p. 37). In this case,

[41] A typical marketing strategy on the platform is in fact the distribution of a “free e-book” about making a living with remote work, linked in bio.

Instagram has shown to provide an unlikely form of support: despite its mainstream association to a “healthist” modes of being, aspirational memes, and unattainable standards of beauty, the platform also hosts a variety of images and stories that express frustration and dark feelings, with potentially cathartic effects. Combined with this type of content, the tangle of links around each post – both in terms of hashtags and tagged-users in the comment section – might gesture towards the solidarity advocated for by Bifo. As memers discussing issues of mental health are increasingly popular on the platform (@gothshakira, @scariest_bug_ever, and @yung_nihilist being some of the most famous), perhaps the idea of “post-work” could also, one day, evoke more than selfies at post-work drinks.

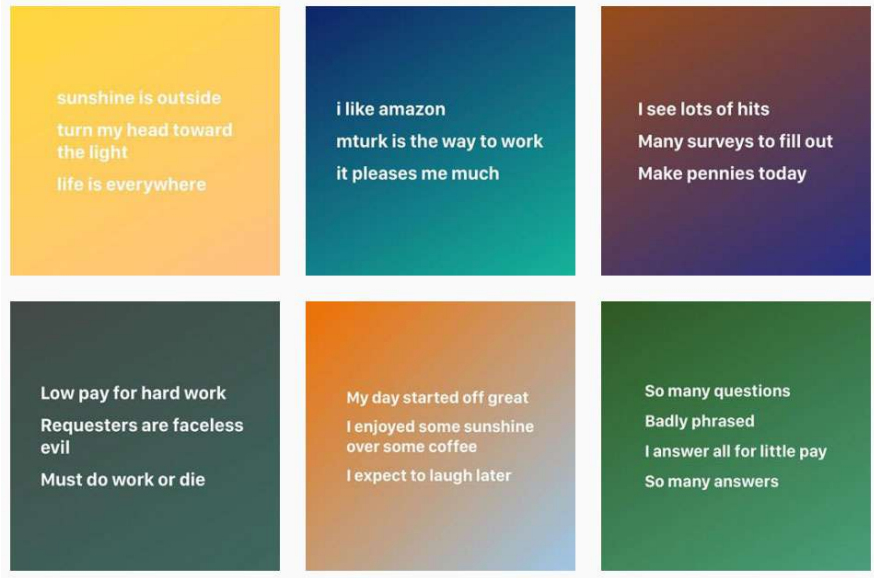

Fig. 3.7 – Some posts from the @mturkpoems Instagram account.

In this sense, and in terms of “techno-poetic” endeavours, it is useful to mention @mturkpoems, an Instagram art project that publishes haikus written by Amazon Mechanical Turk workers who are paid only a few cents a piece (fig. 3.7). The nuanced feelings of insecurity, worthlessness, or hope expressed by anonymous participants are shared with a wider audience, raising awareness of the working conditions within the gig economy while respecting individual expression. Each post is tagged #poetry, #poetsofinstagram, #poet, #poem, #gigeconomy, which places the account firmly within a poetic-critical environment. Perhaps the addition of tags like #remotework or #digitalnomad could create a productive disturbance and create some critical dialectic within the Digital Nomad imaginary, giving voice to the people to whom boring tasks are delegated to. As of this writing, parodic digital nomad or

remote-working themed accounts on Instagram seem to be almost non-existent[42], but there is room for hope.

Recent literature has in fact highlighted the political potential of Instagram aesthetics and memes. In terms of bottom-up political taxonomies, Joshua Citarella (2018) explores the ideological fluctuations of alienated teenagers through a cultural analysis of the so-called "Politigram", highlighting the radical aesthetics of Post-Left memes on the platform. In terms of top-down propaganda, a New Knowledge report (2018, p. 8) highlights instead how Instagram engagement outperformed Facebook as a tool in image-centric memetic warfare within the activities of the infamous Internet Research Agency (IRA), a Russian company engaged in online influence operations and most notably discussed in relation to the 2016 US election. Generally, then, a future aesthetic development of the Digital Nomad imaginary towards more political tropes, at least on Instagram, is not inconceivable.

Despite the argument that the social imaginary and geography that the Digital Nomad contributes to materialise still reflect neoliberal values, a potential appropriation of Instagram as a techno-poetic platform for the collective subjectivation of knowledge workers worldwide might be possible – perhaps through the creation and diffusion of fictional personas and memes to help put the nomadic imaginary of the 21st century (dominated by a Silicon Valley-inspired ethos of entrepreneurship, quasi-algorithmic body hacks, and unbridled capitalism) in dialogue with other nomadic cultures (for example, the experiences of the gig economy workers whom tasks are outsourced to, or even refugees).

As digital nomadism gains cultural momentum and the dream of remote work becomes a more and more widespread response to office alienation, precarious working conditions, and globalised #FOMO[43], in the future the Digital Nomad imaginary might have to accommodate a more diverse spectrum of desiring crowds, opening itself up to become a more inclusive utopia rather than a minority lifestyle – a mass retirement, instead of a multitude of mini-retirements. An alliance between workers rights advocates and aspiring digital nomads through the appropriation of Digital Nomad aesthetics could be the first step towards such future.

In order to reconcile its internal tensions, then, the notion of "digital nomad" could be expanded from a privileged and relatively homogenous demographic to a utopian avatar of post-work – a more inclusive figuration that enables the imagination of a future without borders and without work for all humankind.

[42] As of October 2019 there is only one and the bio says "coming soon": https://www.instagram.com/digitalnomadparody/

[43] "Fear Of Missing Out"

IV.
#troll #sjw #incel #socialjustice #freespeech #facts #truth
Trolling #SocialJustice and the Naturalisation of Social classification

The previous chapters have addressed the Gangsta and the Digital Nomad in relation to specific practices of labelling and classification, namely the branding of the criminal and the performative taxonomy of tourism. This chapter explores the figure of the Troll, framing it as a key site of definitional conflict in knowledge politics. While the other cultural avatars I examine in this thesis are useful to investigate socio-cultural conflicts that have mostly indirect implications on how knowledge is produced – be it socio-economic or geographical – I deploy the Troll as a conceptual device to tackle a very current debate: is the cultural and political polarisation enforced by social media reflective of a deeper naturalisation of social classification? And: do social media as an infrastructure facilitate or hinder the traditionally nuanced production of knowledge typical of the critical humanities?

On one hand, in line with current scholarship, I describe how the especially ambiguous cultural avatar of the Troll has been recently politicised and appropriated by a far-right imaginary; on the other, I argue the labelling practices that are encoded in trolling are inherent to the "non-political" identity politics of knowledge work, and may thus help naturalise social classification by dismissing their political character in the name of humour and freedom of speech. Finally, as shown by recent examples of academic trolling, I discuss how the aforementioned conflict reflects with particular intensity on academia, the humanities, and critical theory.

While the previous chapters centred on historically and theoretically established figures, the especially elusive character of the Troll in relation to identity demands a slightly different approach. If I juxtaposed the Gangsta and the Digital Nomad to more critical avatars (the Black Nerd and the re-politicised gig economy worker, respectively) only at the end of the related chapters, in this one the dialectic opposition between the Troll and the Social Justice Warrior (SJW) will be more central. I argue in fact that the online opposition between these two stereotypical identities materialises a conflict between freedom of speech and social justice – a conflict that arose most notably with the #GamerGate campaign, but was later hi-jacked, polarised, and catapulted into mainstream discourses by the 2016 US election. It is then also necessary to highlight from the beginning that the notions of Troll and trolling on which it builds refer to an Anglo-American context, and are thus to be taken in their specific – if globalised – qualities.

The first two sections of the chapter are thus dedicated to introducing the Troll, in order to explain how the figure came to be associated with extreme forms of public

discourse that are aimed at testing the boundaries of communication – and, in particular, the vulnerability of the "trolled". By examining related literature, I discuss the figure's evolution in terms of its relationship to anonymity, subculture, and activism – most significantly, I highlight the more recent appropriation of trolling aesthetics and trickster ethos by politicised figures on the far right, whose exploitation of the label for personal branding has been facilitated by sensationalist or gullible media, from the Hillary Clinton blog to the New York Times. I also situate the Troll within the wider infrastructural ethos of "cool" theorised by Alan Liu (2004) in relation to knowledge work: consistently with the claim, made by several scholars, that trolling enforces the categories and hierarchies of the status quo, I argue the current emphasis on free speech is masking the preservation of racist and sexist ideas under the "identity-blind" efficiency of the Internet and its promise of free-for-all personal development.

In the following section, I explore the labelling practices that characterise the contemporary Troll, highlighting how these practices make the figure a cultural avatar of the conflict between free speech and social justice. On a collective level, the most relevant labelling practice is the creation of the "Social Justice Warrior" (of "SJW") as a category representing political correctness and thus playing an important role in the definition of troll identity and values. On an individual basis, the direct addressability afforded by social media through the tagging of users is also of structural importance to trolling, as it accelerates and amplifies harassment campaigns and their consequences. I discuss both practices in relation to Milo Yiannopoulos, who was one of the key figures emerging from the infamous #GamerGate campaign and became a very fitting avatar of this new type of "alt-right"/Trump-age trolling. Not only does Yiannopoulos mark an interesting development in terms of leveraging the practice of trolling for personal branding rather than revelling in anonymity, he also embodied other significant elements of trolling: avant-garde aesthetics, cynical humour, and a display of misogyny – all of which amount to a kind of reverse identity politics that finds a loud echo across several other controversial figures that are gaining popularity through social media.

In the last section, I discuss the Troll as a way of knowing. I introduce a high-profile case of academic trolling known as the Grievance Studies Hoax to explain how the juxtaposition of feelings and facts, often explicit in acts of trolling, reflects a methodological tension between data visualisation and the notion of situated knowledges often championed in critical theory. After reflecting on the much discussed "end of theory" in the context of the digital humanities, the chapter concludes with an argument for a renewal of critical endeavours within academia, proposing a movement from the Troll towards the conceptual persona of the Lurker theorised by Goriunova (2017).

The (Ambivalent) Definition of Trolling

There has been a lot of academic research on trolling and trolls. In this thesis, I deliberately choose to discuss the figure in its most vague, stereotypical, and mainstream notion – not so much its anonymous, subcultural side, but rather its tactical appropriation as a cultural avatar of free speech and political conflict, mostly by proponents of conservative ideas. This version of the Troll emerged most vividly just before and in the wake of the Trump election, but it does have some continuity with the figure's history. This section provides an introduction to the Troll and outlines how it has evolved from a subcultural figure to a mainstream stereotype, highlighting the role of social media in its current status as a cultural avatar for predominantly right-wing values.

One of the most recurring qualities of the Troll in scholarly definitions is its shape-shifting character, so much that the focus is not so much on the "troll" as an identity but on "trolling" as a set of practices. Phillips (2015, p. 23) defines trolling as a "spectrum of behaviors", while Coleman (2014, p. 4) calls it "inhabiting identities, beliefs, and values solely for their mischievous potential." The troll is in fact often described as following the archetype of the "trickster", defying boundaries to re-erect them (Coleman, 2014, p. 32) and inventing lies to preserve the truth (Phillips, 2015, p. 9). In so doing, the figure of the troll is both a "cultural critic" and a "cultural syphon", reflecting the culture it is criticising (Milner, 2013, p. 66). The discursive and dialectic skills of the troll are also very important: according to celebrity troll weev, in fact, trolling is not about riling people up, but using rhetorics combatively in a Socratic, even scientific way (Gorman, 2019, p. 13). Despite the functional and social qualities of trolling, Tkacz (2013, p. 32) highlights how the label is used to mark certain types of discourse as purely negative as a way to exclude them, re-framing a political conflict as a character flaw. In extreme cases, this type of labelling may even escalate to incarceration and further radicalisation (Gorman, 2019, p. 197), thus echoing the "tagging" of the criminal discussed in a previous chapter.

In terms of definitional ambiguity, De Seta (2013, p. 302) is keen to highlight how academic discourse often essentialises trolling as an umbrella term for different phenomena, interpreted according to cultural parameters that privilege an Anglo-American perspective. Ultimately, De Seta argues that what matters most is not what trolling is, but "the circumstances under which users accuse others of disruptive behaviour, identify themselves as disruptors, construct behavioural archetypes and comment on these very practices" (p. 303).

While all these elements are crucial in understanding the complexity, ambivalence, and social qualities of the troll as a category, this chapter aims at discussing the Troll as a cultural avatar, highlighting its relationships with the reversal

of identity politics and the artificial juxtaposition of freedom of speech and social justice. For this reason, in this section I highlight how these two aspects have had some historical continuity.

In a landmark study on the relationship between trolling and mainstream culture, Whitney Phillips (2015) highlights the definitional blurriness of the figure from the beginning, although her ethnographic work focuses on subcultural, self-identifying trolls for methodological reasons.

By Phillips' timeline, trolling has existed online as early as 1992 and in the mid-90s it was already popular on Usenet, a worldwide distributed discussion system founded in 1980 and organised by newsgroups. Some users would leverage the anonymity afforded by the medium to impersonate others or adopt extreme positions (which they did not necessarily believe in) to inflame conversations. At the time, trolling was seen as a threat to community building, since it generated distrust and paranoia, as well as personal distress for those getting trolled (p. 6). While these interventions were often shared with other trolls for entertainment, trolling truly emerged as a subculture when users of image board 4chan – in particular those regularly posting on the /b/ section, associated with the most random and extreme content – started identifying with the term "troll" (pp. 9-20).

Along with the appropriation of the term came a whole new slang, often built on the intentional misspelling of words, overlapping layers of irony, and extreme imagery. According to Phillips, the trolls' ability to reference, recognise, and remix memes[44] (p. 22), plays an important role in fortifying their common identity. While community building through a common language is common to Internet subcultures, scholars have highlighted the often controversial quality of the memes shared by subcultural trolls: being aware of and consciously defiant of taboos is, according to Phillips, one of the constitutive elements of the troll identity (p. 38), which is not only evident in the abundant scatological or obscene content in trolling discourse, but also key to the Troll's ambivalent relationship with racism and sexism (which often feature heavily in the troll aesthetic).

Both Phillips (2015) and Milner (2013) have highlighted the controversial racial and gender politics of memes. Milner in particular writes about the ambivalent identity politics inherent to the "logic of lulz"[45] that governs troll behaviour, describing how this ironic and critical logic "often antagonises the core identity categories of race and

[44] Introduced by Richard Dawkins (1976), a meme is an idea, behaviour, or style that spreads within a culture; in the context of the Internet, Limor Shifman (2013) defines memes as "(a) a *group of digital items sharing common characteristics* of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created *with awareness of each other*; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and transformed *via the Internet by many users*" (cited in Phillips, 2015, p. 22).

[45] "Lulz" being a variation of LOL, a popular Internet acronym that stands for "laughing out loud".

gender, essentialising marginalised others. However, the logic can also be employed to 'troll' those categories themselves, at the expense of those invested in their rigid distinctions" (2013, p. 64). Milner makes the examples of Successful Black Man and Community College Negro, two meme formats that use humour to respectively subvert and reinforce racial stereotypes (pp. 71-72). While Milner suggests that memetic social hacking can be used for positive ends (Milner, 2013, p. 90), Phillips appears to be more skeptical: "The claim that lulz is equal opportunity laughter is belied by the fact that a significant percentage of this laughter is directed at people of color, especially African Americans, women, and gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (GLBTQ) people." (Phillips, 2015, p. 25).

Phillips (2015) chronicles how the twofold tension between enforcement of the status quo and subversive tactics shaped the evolution of trolling beyond its subcultural borders – an evolution that was greatly amplified by memes. Although memes are not synonymous with trolling, their increased accessibility, easy reproduction, and popularity – facilitated by websites like Know Your Meme or Meme Generator – helped bring the trolls' language and practices not only to a widespread online audience, but to marketing professionals who first started appropriating some of the ironic techniques native to the subculture (p. 139).

Another factor in the changing nature of trolling as a subculture was the shift of Anonymous, a fluctuating collective identity that stemmed from 4chan and irregularly coalesced around episodic actions – spanning across Harry Potter spoiler campaigns to anti-Scientology propaganda – from a mostly prank-oriented group to a more cause-driven, hacktivist entity. The conflation of the Occupy Movement with the iconic Guy Fawkes mask that embodies Anonymous was, according to Phillips, a turning point in the split between trolls who cared about social justice and those who wanted to preserve the nihilistic, entertainment-driven ethos of early trolling subculture (p. 150)[46].

This definitional issue is a key element of the Troll in terms of identity labelling. The label has in fact been characterised by an empty content, reflective of whatever is most offensive or triggering to the trolled victim. The importance of anonymity, in fact, is inherent to the logic of lulz. "Trolls believe that nothing should be taken seriously, and therefore regard public displays of sentimentality, political conviction, and/or ideological rigidity as a call to trolling arms," Phillips explains. "In this way, lulz functions as a pushback against any and all forms of attachment, a highly ironic stance given how attached trolls are to the pursuit of lulz." This is of course in part a defence mechanism: while trolls do not necessarily believe what they say, the

[46] The adoption of political agendas inevitably led to a natural split between so-called "lulzfags" (trolls only acting for the lulz) and "moralfags/causefags" (those with political or ethical convictions) (p. 24).

important distinction is that they get to establish they're just trolling (pp. 25-26).

As Phillips (2015) demonstrates by reporting a post on 4chan's /b/ board, the activist turn of Anonymous was met with some nostalgia for trolling's non-political past:

> "Anonymous isn't supposed to represent anything. We did stuff for lulz, for lulz only. Not because we care what happens in the world, we found shit and made it amusing to us. Old anon would be in occupy wallstreet and trolling protestors to the max, not joining them. We used to represent nothing and were feared because of that, no one knew when we would act and what we would do. Even we didn't. Look at yourselves, we are discussing about our logo and how others recognise us? We are not supposed to have this kind of shit. We are supposed to be the unknown." (Phillips, 2015, p. 150)

The post above encapsulates a type of subcultural ethos, the definition of a (non)identity of sorts that gestures towards a nostalgic golden age of nihilistic trolling.

Interestingly, the account above also outlines, if implicitly, a particular politics of information. Liu (2004) discusses a similar attitude when describing the "cool" – which, according to his definition, "is, and is not, an ethos, style, feeling, and politics of information" (p. 179). According to Liu, cool is "the code for awareness of the information interface", an ironic "awareness of awareness" that is a form of self-consciousness, but not quite an identity. In fact, cool is "too fundamental and inchoate itself to be called an identity, it is nevertheless the formative material of imagined identities promising knowledge workers some hope of alternative lives of knowledge" (pp. 183-184). In other words, much like the protagonists of the movie *Office Space* (1999), trolling can also be seen as a response to the alienation of knowledge work, the tactical reclamation of playfulness in the face of infrastructural standardisation.

Liu's unproductive knowledge worker has much to share with the Troll. On a surface level, the "cool" aesthetics of anti-design (p. 229) described by Liu are compatible with the copy-paste nature and the default fonts of memes, but on a structural level the politics of "cool" are even more relevant. First of all, according to Liu the net is ruled by a cyber-libertarian "information determinism" (p. 245) that reflects in a flawed politics, or no politics at all: individualism is juxtaposed to communitarianism, entrepreneurialism to consumerism, Americanism against globalism, the market against the gift economy (pp. 253-254). These "alternative politics" differ from those of NGOs or labour activism because they see the post-industrial as an environment through which to move and grow (p. 262) and, as a consequence, individual rights are prioritised against social justice (p. 265). This element of non-political politics, as we may call it, is essential to understanding why

the Troll stands as a powerful cultural avatar in today's knowledge-driven economy.

Overall, then, the figure emerges from tactical media practices and a specific kind of identity politics, both key elements to this thesis overall. In terms of classification, it should be highlighted that trolls are by many accounts a diverse demographic (Coleman, 2014; Gorman, 2019), however the figure has also been labelled as a sort of residual category to be excluded (Tkacz, 2013) and an agent of marginalisation itself (Phillips, 2015), which make it a vehicle for social stereotyping, often in the name of free speech. As I discuss in detail in the next sections, the political framing of this speech has been shifting overtime, pivoting on increasingly conservative values.

Trump, Hillary & the Alt-Right: The Mainstreaming of the Troll

As explained above, then, there is such a thing as a self-identifying troll. However, trolling is most importantly a “spectrum of behaviors” (p. 23). The tension between these two understandings of the figure animate much of Phillips' argument: that “trolls are born of and embedded within dominant institutions and tropes, which are every bit as damaging as the trolls’ most disruptive behaviors” (p. 12). In particular, Phillips focuses on media and how the line between trolling and routine practices of sensationalist publishing is thin, if even existent. “The primary difference is that,” Phillips argues, “for trolls, exploitation is a leisure activity. For corporate media, it’s a business strategy” (p. 8). Phillips goes further in outlining how trolling skills are especially useful in the realm of social media and marketing:

> “Not only do [trolls] put Internet technologies to expert and highly creative use, their behaviors are often in direct (if surprising) alignment with social media marketers and other corporate interests. Furthermore they are quite skilled at navigating and in fact harnessing the energies created when politics, history, and digital media collide. In short, rather than functioning as a counterpoint to 'correct' online behavior, trolls are in many ways the grimacing poster children for the socially networked world.” (Phillips, 2015, p. 8)

Beyond exemplifying efficient techniques, trolling perpetuates certain types of values. Phillips notes that the act of trolling replicates gendered notions of dominance and success, the Western rhetorical paradigm of the “adversary method”, and a sense of entitlement spurred by expansionist and colonialist ideologies, along with American values of freedom of expression (p. 8). These values have come together in the recent mainstreaming of the Troll, which culminated with the election of Donald Trump. Before tackling the current shift of public discourse about trolling towards right-wing politics, however, it is useful to discuss certain cultural dynamics that were

activated before social media and were facilitated by both the decentralisation brought by new media and the popularity of a certain type of humour.

Already in the mid-2000s Brian C. Anderson (2005) argued talk radio and the Internet had ushered in a neo-conservative wave, reacting to what he saw as widespread liberal media bias. Anderson labelled the loosely-aggregated members of this new wave "South Park Conservatives", after the notoriously irreverent Comedy Central cartoon. Although the show's creators Matt Stone and Trey Parker have publicly described themselves as politically libertarian and have made fun of both left- and right-wing ideas (in pure trolling fashion), Anderson used South Park's rebellious attitude to frame the anti-establishment ethos of his other cases studies. In this respect, his book represents an early account of the Internet as a vehicle for the popularisation of conservative discourse, facilitated by ironic/counter-cultural attitudes and a more direct engagement with audiences. If politically non-partisan (or at least ambiguous), South Park indeed represents an interesting object of study: while rooted in the traditional medium of TV, the Comedy Central show owes much of its success to the Internet, and it has famously established and nurtured its relationship with online fans since the beginning (Johnson-Woods, 2007). Subcultural savvy and a keen awareness of Internet phenomena like memes and trolling (to which an entire plot line of the 20th season was dedicated[47]) have always been part of the cartoon's appeal.

The shift that Anderson noted within a mostly TV-centric mediascape has further developed in the age of social media, engendering phenomena and movements that are increasingly embedded in and indebted to Internet culture. In this respect, key to the current mainstreaming of trolling was the rise of the alt-right: founded by white supremacist Richard Spencer in 2010, the label has been seen as a way to rebrand the far right, giving it a less threatening and overtly racist profile. In 2016, Breitbart co-founder and executive chair Steve Bannon, who was later to become Donald Trump's Chief Strategist, described his website as a platform for the movement. While initially more exclusive to white-nationalist and white-supremacist ideas, the media exposure stretched the accepted meaning of the term alt-right to include a variety of perspectives, not all of which are equally comfortable with adopting extreme narratives. Nagle (2017, p. 19) highlights this aspect: "What we now call the alt-right is really this collection of lots of separate tendencies that grew semi-independently but which were joined under the banner of a bursting forth of

[47] The season chronicles the rise of Mr Garrison (the series' avatar for conservatism) as a vitriolic and nonsensical presidential candidate. Demonstrating awareness of the attention logics driving the Troll – and the principle that amplifying their ideas is tantamount to giving them oxygen, a point often highlighted by Phillips (2018) – Parker and Stone have declared that while the character was inspired by Trump they did not want to "service him as a character" by portraying him directly (Wilstein, 2017).

anti-PC cultural politics through the culture wars of recent years."

A key element in the popularisation of the alt-right was the use of memes as a form of propaganda. The most notable case is that of Pepe the Frog, a comic book character created by Matt Furie in 2005 and appropriated by Internet users for years, in a variety of different ways (KnowYourMeme, 2016). Since 2015, the character started to be re-fashioned and memed as an avatar for Donald Trump (who endorsed this trend by tweeting a Pepe-style portrait of himself) and eventually came to be a symbol for the alt-right and Internet neo-conservatives at large (along with the flag of Kekistan – a fictional state that functioned as a dog whistle for trolls[48]).

Fig. 4.1 – The infamous "Deplorables" meme, featuring a Pepe-Trump mash-up.

The most notable example of the efficacy of the troll aesthetic within the electoral media maelstrom was perhaps an explainer post on Hillary Clinton's blog, in which the candidate denounced an Instagram post by Donald Trump Jr featuring the so-called Deplorables Parody Poster meme. The image (fig. 4.1) features Trump and his entourage (which includes Steve Bannon and Milo Yiannopoulos, two key figures in the alt-right media constellation) along with Pepe the Frog, all photoshopped on the faces of the protagonists on the poster of the action movie *The Expendables* (2010). "Deplorables" appeared as an ironic reclamation of a term Clinton had used in an interview to describe Trump supporters[49]. In the post, Clinton – along with NBC and

[48] The work "kek" is an alternative spelling of "lol" and is known on 4chan as an insider's version of "lulz".

[49] Much in the same way, her supporters would also sometimes appropriate the term "snowflake" with which political rivals labelled them. On social media this often led to Trump supporters exhibiting a frog emoji (after Pepe) to represent their "deplorable" identity, while Clinton supporters used a snowflake emoji.

other liberal media outlets – denounced the meme for featuring the frog, identifying it as a popular White nationalist symbol. Phillips (2018) highlights the incident to demonstrate that most of the exposure to alt-right trolling propaganda came not only from liberal media, but from the Hillary Clinton blog. The intended naming and shaming was thus trollishly exploited and leveraged as free publicity, also encouraging the reclamation of the "deplorable" label as a collective identity.

As Kate Crawford (2016) aptly highlights, the mainstreaming of trolling dynamics and discourse was in fact considerably accelerated by the 2016 US presidential election:

> "Distrust and trolling is happening at the highest levels of political debate, and the lowest. The Overton Window has been widened considerably by the 2016 US presidential campaign, and not in a good way. We have heard presidential candidates speak of banning Muslims from entering the country, asking foreign powers to hack former White House officials, retweeting neo-Nazis. Trolling is a mainstream form of political discourse" (Elon University, The 2016 Survey)

Mainstream media played a big role in both the fuelling of political polarisation and the fanning of the flames. The Overton Window mentioned by Crawford represents in fact the range of ideas that are tolerated in public discourse and, indeed, it has been significantly expanded in recent years – and especially so in terms of right-wing extremism and white identity. In political terms, a good example is when Donald Trump (after being elected president) famously failed to condemn the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, which led to a clash between protesters and counter-protesters culminating in the killing of a woman, Heather D. Heyer, by a right-winger who drove a car into the crowd.

As for mainstream media, the New York Times received a lot of negative backlash for publishing a portrait piece of a white supremacist that, according to many, contributed to normalising his ideas, while Esquire provocatively published the profile a young white man as a cover story on Black History Month (it was only the first of a series of profiles, but the editorial timing was quite controversial). Within the academic world, Berkeley infamously planned a controversial Free Speech Week featuring speakers like Milo Yiannopoulos and other right-wing provocateurs, on the same ground where in the 1960s the Free Speech Movement was staging acts of civil disobedience for civil rights and against the war in Vietnam.

As discussed above through Phillips (2015), this type of controversial and sensationalist media tactics have always been difficult to separate from trolling, although they are traditionally sanctioned in society. Phillips (2018) investigates more specifically the problematic relationship between the mainstream media and trollish manipulators during and after the 2016 US presidential election:

> “The choices reporters and editors make about what to cover and how to cover it play a key part in regulating the amount of oxygen supplied to the falsehoods, antagonisms, and manipulations that threaten to overrun the contemporary media ecosystem—and, simultaneously, threaten to undermine democratic discourse more broadly. This context demands that journalists and the newsrooms that support them examine with greater scrutiny how these actors and movements endeavor to subvert journalism norms, practices, and objectives.” (Phillips, 2018, p. 2)

Phillips notes and discusses the conundrum by listing pros and cons to journalistic amplification. Most importantly, amplification risks relinquishing control of the narrative to bad actors and normalising certain discourses; on the other hand, not reporting risks giving up an opportunity to educate, reducing abuse to abstract concepts, or even inadvertently contribute to radicalisation (p. 7).

While these principles are arguably valid for pre-Internet media as well, what is new is the role of social media in bringing these media tactics and politics together on a global, geo-political level. An egregious example in this sense is the case of Joshua Ryne Goldberg, famous for creating multiple social media accounts to impersonate a variety of personas: feminist activists tweeting against free speech, white supremacists, and even Islamist terrorists that incited (and, tragically, inspired) a violent terrorist attack in Australia. Gorman (2019) details Goldberg's case in her book on trolling, however the scholar highlights how his mental health and schizophrenia played into his different personalities and trolling activities.

Fig. 4.2 – A still from Anna Dovgalyuk's manspreading video.

Another interesting example involving trolling, influencer culture, and identity politics is the case of Anna Dovgalyuk, a pro-Putin Instagrammer (Wendling, Silva, & Robinson, 2018) who does not identify as a feminist, but nonetheless uploaded a

video of herself pouring a mix of water and bleach on the crotches of men caught guilty of “manspreading” (sitting with wide open legs in public spaces) on the Saint Petersburg subway (fig. 4.2). Quickly become a viral sensation, the video was soon identified as a likely hoax and possibly even an act of “political trolling” and covert propaganda against Western values supported by the Russian government. The case is an interesting example of how practices framed as “trolling” are shifting and globalising, entering the political arena in different capacities and creating moral panics to favour radicalisation and destabilise public discourse. It is, however, just the tip of the iceberg.

From a subcultural pastime, in fact, these practices have been notoriously and widely deployed to piggy-back on the wide media exposure of election-related news, exploiting traffic for financial and political effect. Journalists and researchers have repeatedly exposed links between Russian “troll farms” (Carroll, 2017) and the organisation of both pro-Trump and pro-Hillary or Black Lives Matter demonstrations, sometimes in the same location (Bertrand, 2017), while the case of Macedonian teenagers flooding Facebook with pro-Trump fake news (Silverman & Alexander, 2016) demonstrated just how easy and financially convenient it can be to manipulate public opinion online.

As explained in the review above, the Troll has thus become harder and harder to define, to the extent that some have even discouraged using the term at all (Grey Ellis, 2019). While it is arguable that perhaps it might be wiser to write about trolling rather than “troll” as an identity, in the rest of this essay I explain how the figure has become a powerful cultural avatar precisely because of its contradictory and stereotypical character.

Labelling Practices: Trolling the SJW and Reverse Identity Politics

Having outlined the connection between the mainstreaming of the Troll and its increasingly political definition, I delve deeper into critiquing the labelling practices that define the figure in the age of social media, and how social platforms themselves materialise and amplify their effects through tagging. To begin with, I shall discuss two labels dealing with collective classification and performative identities: the controversial #GamerGate and the notion of “Social Justice Warrior” (SJW). In the rest of the section I explore trolling practices of labelling in terms of material addressability and reverse identity politics through the figure of Milo Yiannopoulos, highlighting how emphasising the conflict between social justice and freedom of speech gestures towards a de-politicisation and naturalisation of identity labelling.

The term “Gamergate” refers to a highly-discussed controversy centred on issues of sexism and misogyny in gaming culture. The controversy, driven by the

#gamergate Twitter hashtag, peaked in August 2014 with the systematic harassment – which included public exposure of personal information, as well as rape and death threats – of game developers Zoë Quinn and Brianna Wu, along with feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian. The aggressive campaign, coordinated on websites like 4chan, 8chan, Reddit, and IRC channels, started with allegations that Quinn had obtained favourable reviews for her non-conventional game Depression Quest as a result of cheating on her boyfriend with a game reviewer. While the allegations were later disputed, the debate quickly spun into a wider conflict between those promoting more inclusive themes within the industry and those seeing politics and social justice as intrusive agendas that did not belong to gaming. Some scholars (Massanari, 2017, p. 335; Nieborg & Foxman, 2018, p. 114) have noted how the incident was associated with an opposition to so-called "Social Justice Warriors", with some of the chat logs that coordinated GamerGate attacks on Quinn openly using the "SJW" acronym in a disparaging and de-humanising way (Heron, Belford & Goker, 2014, p. 24). Broadly defined, the term SJW usually refers to someone who pushes a political agenda oriented towards social justice and inclusion in situations and environments where such politics are perceived by those using the term as not appropriate or downright oppressive of freedom of speech. Given the Troll's association with not taking things seriously and suppressing emotional responses, the Social Justice Warrior can be seen as an anti-Troll by definition, or even a necessary counterpart for the coalescence of a trolling ethos. In other words, the SJW is grounded by gender- and race-based political categories that are often denied by the Troll's deliberate non-identification.

The publicity granted to the #GamerGate incidents and their protagonists was also the symptom of a cultural and imaginary momentum. Nagle (2017) describes this as no less than a culture war between a constellation of trollish, loosely-aggregated, Internet-savvy neo-conservatives (which included but was not exclusive to the alt-right) and those espousing a new type of "Tumblr-liberalism", whose main preoccupation are "gender fluidity and providing a safe space to explore other concerns like mental ill-health, physical disability, race, cultural identity and 'intersectionality'" (2017, p. 69).

Nagle's notion of "Tumblr-liberalism" provides a fitting description of what gamergaters and supporters of "alt-light" personalities (that is people loosely affiliated to the alt-right) might identify as SJW culture – a trend to which these personalities responded through video commentary and compilations on YouTube, contributing to the mainstreaming of the label. Nagle describes the dynamic as follows:

> "YouTube vloggers produced an abundance of popular commentary videos and 'SJW cringe compilations', while alt-light celebrities like Milo built careers from

> exposing the absurdities of the kind of Tumblr identity politics that had gone mainstream through listicle sites like Buzzfeed and anti-free speech safe space campus politics. Meanwhile, ironic meme-making adolescent shitposters formed a reserve army of often darkly funny chan-style image-based content producers, who could be easily summoned in moments like gamergate or whenever big figures like Milo needed backup, to swarm and harass their opposition" (Nagle, 2017, p. 45).

Nagle's account reinforces in part the SJW stereotype defined by Yiannopoulos and his associates, however her analysis of the polarisation of a conservative troll subculture and Tumblr-liberals/SJWs is useful to understand the ambivalent identity politics (Milner, 2013) of the Troll.

As mentioned earlier, while the much reviled SJWs are defined as being preoccupied with identity politics – so much so to introduce them in an area perceived as "neutral" like gaming – the Troll itself is in fact defined by its target: if the target is a cat lover, the troll will talk about murdering cats; if the target is a woman, the troll will be sexist, and so on. The construction of the SJW thus implies two specular labelling practices: on one hand the troll is labelling a target, defined around stereotypical elements (the social and political convictions outlined by Nagle), on the other it is ideologically defining itself as standing in opposition to it. However, in the trollish fashion described by Phillips (2015), the relationship is asymmetrical: the definitional labour is done mostly by the target. Once "triggered", the unwittingly defined SJW will accuse the troll of being racist, a nazi, or a white supremacist – terms whose impact is defused by the ironic mark of the Troll (as well as by the fuzzy definition of alt-right). The shield of trolling may thus provide non-anonymous sympathisers of the alt-right with an important definitional advantage, and branding oneself as someone who trolls SJWs has proven to be a convenient promotional tool for those who do not want to disclose the extent of their conservatism and want to jump on the social justice skepticism bandwagon.

In this respect, the figure of Milo Yiannopoulos is especially useful to explore how labelling practices – namely: the targeting of primarily minority individuals through harassment campaigns, the construction of the SJW as a cultural avatar of PC culture and stifling of freedom of speech, and the appropriation of trolling tactics for self-branding – transform the subcultural pastime of trolling into a cultural avatar of conservative political ideas.

During GamerGate, Yiannopoulos (then a tech journalist) emerged among those most emphatically refusing the feminist critique of gaming culture, supporting the campaign by publishing leaks from a gaming journalist mailing list that were meant to demonstrate the members' collusion with Quinn. Since then, beyond being

a writer for right-wing online magazine Breitbart, Yiannopoulos has been most famously known for his trolling antics and professed anti-feminism. Unsurprisingly, another defining moment in his career came after his scathing review of *Ghostbusters: Answer the Call* (2016), a reboot of the 1980s classic with an all-female cast that was highly criticised online for twisting the franchise to social justice ends. African-American actor Leslie Jones, who starred in the film, experienced especially harsh backlash and racist harassment on Twitter, to which Yiannopoulos gladly contributed with several tweets. Given his high-profile and repeat-transgression of the platform's policy, Twitter eventually banned him permanently for allegedly inciting the campaign. The incident sparked many to speculate on the future of the website in terms of moderation and freedom of speech, even making the hashtag #freeMilo trend for a while. Despite costing him a platform, as stated by Yiannopoulos himself, the ban turned out to be a blessing and cemented his fame as a high-profile media troll and dangerous thinker.

It should be noted that tagging played a significant role in enforcing the Troll's characteristic ambivalent identity politics in the incidents discussed above. Both the #GamerGate hashtag and the mass @-ing (harrassment via direct mention) of Leslie Jones' Twitter account illustrate how labelling practices that are routine and banal in normal social media use can have disproportionately negative effects in sensitive situations. Massanari (2017) notes this in relation to the #Gamergate (GG) movement:

> "While purportedly a reaction to a perceived lack of ethics in digital games journalism that Quinn's alleged improprieties represented, those rallying behind the hashtag have instead used this moment to engage in concentrated harassment of game developers, feminist critics, and their male allies on Twitter and other platforms. Use of GG or even @mentions of those prominently targeted by harassers (such as *Feminist Frequency*'s Anita Sarkeesian) continues to lead to further harassment of private individuals who are perceived as 'anti-GG.'" (Massanari, 2017, p. 334)

While the GG campaign was highly gendered, the one against Jones was complicated by a racial element. This type of tagging is in fact exemplary of how trolling is made both more public and more material by the addressability afforded by social media, as well as aggravated in the case of intersectional identities[50]. On Twitter, Jones was doubly exposed: as a celebrity using the platform and as an

[50] In this sense, it is worth referencing an appropriate comment on race by Jamaican-born American poet Claudia Rankine (2015), who recalls a conversation with feminist theorist Judith Butler about what it is that makes language hurtful. When Butler states that we suffer from the very condition of being addressable, Rankine reflects on her own raced hyper-visibility (Rankine, 2015).

African-American woman, and her trolling was thus rendered unbearable by the intersection of the platform's material affordances and its racist implications. Unsurprisingly, a statistical study of cyberstalking shows that online harassment is most experienced by non-white females, followed by white women, non-white men, and finally white men (Gorman, 2019, p. 80)[51].

Despite this evidence, the figure of Milo Yiannopoulos is especially emblematic of the skilful re-branding of harassers as victims, trolling identity politics against feminism and intersectionality – in his case, also exhibiting camp flamboyancy as a quasi-caricatured avatar of gay conservatives and thus leveraging historically-loaded labelling practices to his advantage. By systematically building his brand as a victim of political correctness, Yiannopoulos spread provocative anti-feminist statements like “feminism is cancer” and shielded himself from accuses of sexism and racism by parading stereotypical homosexuality (Morrissey, 2015) and sexual attraction to black men (Stein, 2016). Declaredly aiming to resuscitate the illicitness of homosexuality, Yiannopoulos built his gay-conservative brand by associating it with Donald Trump, most notably in his Gays for Trump rally and subsequent Dangerous Faggot Tour, which he took across liberal campuses in 2016, sparking several protests (Nagle, 2017, p. 50). Using his own minority status as part of his brand, Yiannopoulos arguably used the “identity politics” reviled by the alt-right against their original proponents, the left, thus labelling PC culture as the hegemonic mainstream that stifles free speech and himself as a countercultural rebel. As noted by Nagle, Yiannopoulos was the one who most benefitted from “no platforming”, that is the denial of exposure to extreme viewpoints expressed through protests and petitions against his campus appearances (Nagle, 2017, p. 50). While the goal of the protesters was to limit the normalisation of Yiannopoulos' ideas, the effect was the opposite: the more opposition he encountered, the more media coverage and the greater the normalisation, with fans re-posting his appearances and celebrating his god-like deeds in YouTube video compilations with titles like “Milo DESTROYS feminist” or “Milo OWNS SJW”. Unfortunately for Yiannopoulos, a video interview in which he made light of child abuse with a joke about his own alleged experience of molestation by a Catholic priest cost him a lucrative book deal and marked a drastic decrease in his exposure and popularity. Despite capturing the “post-fact” zeitgeist to a masterful degree, Yiannopoulos eventually capitulated by miscalculating the limits of the Overton window he helped expand.

Beyond the trope that “conservative is the new gay” (Greene, 2018) famously championed by Yiannopoulos, another issue that contributed the the GamerGate

[51] In terms of hate speech and labelling, it is also interesting to note how trolls have also reportedly leveraged Facebook's hate-speech policies to report posts in order to silence women who complain about misogyny (Gorman, 2019, p. 84).

events and Milo's success is more generally the perceived victimisation of white men, a key argument in anti-feminist discourse and especially among a constellation of online subcultures roughly referred to as the "Manosphere" and comprising a range of communities: Pick Up Artists, Red Pillers, Men Going Their Own Way, and most importantly the so-called "incels" – which stands for "involuntarily celibate". A common construct within the Manosphere is a quasi-evolutionary view of sex: women are exclusively attracted to alpha males, while the betas have to suffer and remain relegated to the "friend zone". While the Pick Up Artist community responds to this condition more pro-actively and revolves around the sharing of know-how, tricks, and how-to's to win what is often referred to as "the game", Nagle (2017) describes "incel" culture as generally more fatalistic: "These frustrated young men are first exposed to social-Darwinian thinking about attracting a mate in the name of 'game', then to the misogynist rhetoric about women's evil narcissistic nature when the gaming doesn't work." (Nagle, 2017, p. 98). Driven by libidinal frustration, the "incel" is arguably opposed to the Troll's quasi-ascetic cynicism, although steeped in the same "emotional poverty" lamented by some of the trolls interviewed by Gorman (2019)[52].

Regardless of the different labels and the extent of the actions associated with them, however, the crisis of masculinity and the diffused perception that men and boys are under attack results in what I would call a "naturalisation of the incel" that feeds into the media careers of other figures that, unlike Yiannopoulos, demonstrate a strong ideological conviction – albeit always disguised as non-political.

In this respect, it is worth mentioning the case of Jordan Peterson: a clinical psychologist and psychology professor at the University of Toronto, also author of a theory of meaning that combines scientific and religious ideas and was recently adapted into a best-selling self-help book (Peterson, 2018). While his ideas have been public for a long time, Peterson's rise to Internet fame was helped by a series of public confrontations with feminist journalists and trans activists about issues like gender inequality and pronouns, which gained him a reputation as an oppositional figure towards political correctness and SJWs. A traditionalist coming from rural Alberta, Peterson eventually familiarised with the subcultural slang of trolls, learning about Pepe the Frog and Kekistan and even admitting in an interview with influential podcaster Joe Rogan that he "figured out a way to monetise SJWs" (Jordan Peterson: "I've Found a Way To Monetize SJWs", 2018).

Peterson's Thatcherite, puritanical paternalism may be nothing new, but the Canadian psychologist is significantly riding a wave of enthusiasm about non-institutional, social media-driven forms of knowledge that often brand themselves as "dangerous" or ideologically non-conforming. Unsurprisingly, he has been included in the so-called "Intellectual Dark Web" (IDW), a loosely-aggregated constellation of

[52]The difference is that, instead of a retreat, the troll responds differently (2019, p. 195).

controversial thinkers comprising, among others, diverse personalities like new atheist Sam Harris, comedian and broadcaster Dave Rubin, former Islamist turned anti-Islamist activist Majid Nawaz, and evolutionary biologist Bret Weinstein[53]. One of the most controversial ideas explored by some members of the IDW is researching the links between race and IQ[54] (again, another de-politicised argument for the naturalisation of inequality), but it is difficult to brand all of the members under the same ideological banner[55]. The collective labelling as a "dark web" of sorts, however, emphasises the provocative and uncompromising character of the members.

The labelling practices associated with the Troll are thus manifold. Whether they are aggressive, reflective, or reflexive, they are mostly oriented towards enhancing a conflict; at the same time, however, the effects of this ambiguous identity politics is often the naturalisation of social classification. We are talking, in fact, of a different type of politics and identity. Going back to Liu (2004) and his discussion of "cool", the scholar writes of a "purely postmodern simulation of politics", comprising "retro-politics of free speech, privacy, and so on enacted on old stage sets of antigovernment and anticonsumerist protest" (p. 274). In other words, "cool" is the "protest of our contemporary 'society without politics'", a "paradoxical gesture by which the ethos of the unknown struggles to stand in the midst of knowledge work" (p. 294). In terms of knowledge production and protest, as already mentioned before, the invitation of Milo Yiannopoulos to take part in Berkeley's Free Speech Week – on grounds that are historically significant for the civil rights movement in the US – is quite exemplary of a potentially dangerous trend.

The End of Critique: Trolling the Humanities

In the previous section I highlighted how the non-political politics of "cool" (Liu, 2004) intersect with trolling and trolling-adjacent subcultures, de facto promoting an ideological naturalisation of social categories. In the conclusion of this chapter I

[53] Weinsten left his job after being involved in a heated demonstration at Evergreen College following his refusal to participate in a Day of Absence for white staff and students, which was perhaps the most discussed example of "political correctness gone wild in academia" online.

[54] The controversial text *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994) is often quoted in these contexts.

[55] In a New York Times profile, Weiss (2018) highlights the group's political heterogeneity, while admitting the expectations of their audience often leads them to focus on the left's shortcomings than the right's. Weiss also notes how difficult it is to trace a border around this intellectual constellation: a click in one direction links them to esteemed academic environments, one in the other colludes them with controversial fake news advocates like Milo Yiannopoulos, Alex Jones, or Stefan Molyneaux. While being mostly sympathetic towards these exiles of PC culture, Weiss recognises the noble aim of dialogue may lead to problematic consequences when you wind up taking certain characters seriously.

consider a case of academic trolling known as “The Grievance Studies Hoax” to discuss a current challenge to certain strands of the humanities: under the current push of their digital re-branding, how is it possible to re-establish the social importance of the humanities, and especially critical theory? I try to answer by referencing a recent paper about the “critical posthumanities” (Braidotti, 2019) and finally argue, with Goriunova (2017), that perhaps the Troll could be of inspiration for new methodologies of lurking.

Orchestrated by three academics – Helen Pluckrose, the editor of the online magazine *Areo,* James A. Lindsay, a Ph.D. in math, and Peter Boghossian, an assistant professor of philosophy at Portland State University – the hoax consisted in the creation of 20 papers that the authors submitted to journals specialised in gender studies, critical race theory, and other fields concerned with social justice and the oppression of minorities. In their official reveal, the hoaxers – all of whom identify as liberal – label these disciplines “Grievance Studies”.

The aim of the operation was to prove the aforementioned fields would allow any sort of anti-male, anti-white gibberish to be published in reputable journals, provided the authors made the necessary ideological nods. Out of the 20 papers they wrote (some of which under pseudonym, others under a real name borrowed from a sympathising accomplice), the three authors managed to get seven accepted, including a paper about social justice modelled on an excerpt from Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and a study on rape culture in dog parks. The latter was included in a feminist geography journal and eventually sparked the initial suspicion that led a journalist to unmask the hoax.

The exposure of the scam had people divided. Some observers – especially outside academia – praised the trolls for exposing the ideological bias and low academic standards within certain fringes of the humanities; others highlighted the lack of a control group – e.g. another academic discipline to test publishing standards – and the unethical exploitation of unknowing and unpaid peer-reviewers for what was ultimately a gratuitous example of academic trolling, rather than a self-reflective ethnographic study (a methodological claim made by the authors). Regardless of its quality, the hoax did get a lot of publicity and two of its authors were interviewed on the highly influential and SJW-skeptical Joe Rogan Experience, a podcast garnering millions of views and listens and often offering a platform to the IDW.

The whole affair echoed a famous precedent: a spoof paper that physicist Alan Sokal was able to publish in the postmodern cultural studies journal Social Text in 1996, and that sparked a lively intellectual debate between scientific realists and postmodernist critics known as “Science Wars”. Sokal's goal was to expose the lack of academic rigour of the publication, and among his main targets were Jacques Derrida and Bruno Latour, with whom the physicist had a very public debate on the

pages of non-academic newspapers as well. Predictably, responses to the Grievance Studies Hoax also highlighted this continuity, praising the inside joke or dismissing the predictability of the parable. For example, Greg Afiogenov (2018) discusses the tradition of academic hoaxes in terms of their authors, motivations, and reactions, referencing a paper by Schnabel (1994) arguing that, ultimately, hoaxes are meant to reinforce the orthodoxy of their target audience. From this perspective – not unlike the trolls analysed by Milner (2013) and Phillips (2015) – the hoaxers were punching down from an establishment perspective, targeting small academic institutions already struggling for funding and recognition. In this respect, at the very least, among the successes of the hoax was the labelling operation of grouping a variety of specific areas of study under the disqualifying banner of “Grievance Studies”, sanctioned by its relative historical impact in the context of academic hoaxes by virtue of sheer quantity.

Beyond its effect, another issue of debate was the main motivation behind the hoax. Importantly, like Sokal, the hoaxers repeatedly highlighted their own liberal views and the importance of the general issues addressed by “grievance studies” (racism, sexism, inequality); the core of their claim and the stated rationale of their trolling, in other words, lies in a methodological debacle. This passage of their own explainer, published on *Areo*, is quite explanatory:

> “Any scholarship that proceeds from radically skeptical assumptions about objective truth by definition does not and cannot find objective truth. Instead it promotes prejudices and opinions and calls them 'truths.' For radical constructivists, these opinions are specifically rooted a political agenda of 'Social Justice' (which we have intentionally made into a proper noun to distinguish it from the type of real social progress falling under the same name). Because of critical constructivism, which sees knowledge as a product of unjust power balances, and because of this brand of radical skepticism, which rejects objective truth, these scholars are like snake-oil salespeople who diagnose our society as being riddled with a disease only they can cure. That disease, as they see it, is endemic to any society that forwards the agency of the individual and the existence of objective (or scientifically knowable) truths” (Pluckrose, Lindsay & Boghossian, 2018).

There are many similarities between the the Grievance Studies hoax and that of Sokal: most notably, both are allegedly the work of liberals who are concerned about a certain type of intellectual discourse taking over other more balanced arguments and methodologies. There are, however, also differences: most importantly, in their scale and content. While Sokal's jab at Latour and the others addressed the right of social scientists to dispute the scientific method – it was, in this sense, parodying a perceived attack on science and was thus defensive – the scale and content of the

Grievance Studies papers present a more aggressive quality. Rather than denouncing the appropriation of scientific terms, the hoax dives much deeper into the disciplinary specificity of the fields it claimed to delegitimate, exposing their jargon to the "context collapse" (boyd, 2009) of social media and explicitly demanding a change. This other passage is illustrative in this respect:

> "As a society we should be able to rely upon research journals, scholars, and universities upholding academic, philosophical, and scientific rigor (because most academic journals do). We need to know that the hardline stand against corruptions of research taken in domains like financial and personal conflicts-of-interest will extend to political, moral, and ideological biases. Our project strongly suggests that at present we can neither rely upon nor know these things in fields that bow to or traffic in grievance studies. The reason is because grievance studies based in critical constructivism (a class of descendants of cynical postmodern philosophy and poststructuralism) have corrupted research journals. This needs to be repaired" (Pluckrose, Lindsay & Boghossian, 2018).

The Grievance Studies hoax thus implies the uselessness and even dangerousness of scholarly fields that do not hold "objective (or scientifically knowable) truths." One would think a professor of philosophy (as one of the hoaxers is) would think twice about writing such a statement, but the point I wish to highlight here is the convergence of these opinions on what an intellectual should be with the "cool" awareness discussed by Liu (2004), which is reinforced by the depoliticised infrastructure of social media. It is now appropriate to point out that one of the problems with the Grievance Studies hoax was that – with or without the intention of its authors, who were allegedly still waiting to go public at the time of their outing – the results were widely publicised well beyond the academic context, even in venues where any type of academic jargon was more likely to be ridiculed than properly contextualised – most notably the Joe Rogan podcast, where Peterson is also a frequent guest. The trolling effect was thus arguably amplified by the metrics-obsessed context of high-profile YouTube entertainment, where SJW-skeptic views are quite popular.

These key points of metrics and methodological accountability are relevant to the digital push on scholarship in general, but especially the humanities. As McCrea (2018) argues in a response to the hoax, the battle against these disciplines has already been won: programs in what we used to call "high theory" are being closed down even when popular, and academic publishing is hostage to huge corporations that run on the free labour of grad students who often have to pay for their own writings to be paywall-free (McCrea, 2018).

This debate concerns the now established and rapidly standardising field of

the Digital Humanities, which have emerged internationally in different shapes and forms. Sometimes the label refers to an augmentation of traditional humanities disciplines like art history and literature with digital tools, in order to digitise, code, and analyse specific corpora; others it is more of a humanities approach to studying the digital as an element of the everyday. The varied and layered internal debates within this hybrid and fast-changing field are too complex to be covered at length here, but it should suffice to point out two recurring elements, dealing with methodology and motivation, respectively: firstly the notions of post-criticism and the "end of theory", and subsequently the tension between data analysis, interpretation, and politics.

The crisis of critical theory comes from both within and without academia. On the outside, the idea of an "end of theory" was notably announced by Wired editor Chris Anderson (2008), who argued the Google model – collect all possible data first, see what stands out, possibly draw conclusions later – is more effective than any scientific model. This is a key passage from the article:

> "This is a world where massive amounts of data and applied mathematics replace every other tool that might be brought to bear. Out with every theory of human behavior, from linguistics to sociology. Forget taxonomy, ontology, and psychology. Who knows why people do what they do? The point is they do it, and we can track and measure it with unprecedented fidelity. With enough data, the numbers speak for themselves" (2008, par. 7).

A decade ago, then, the zeitgeist seemed to suggest data collection was tantamount to an automatic harvest of "facts" one could distill reality out of, letting the data deluge suggest the direction of evolution. While this idea of algorithmic omniscience has been disputed over and over in recent years (e.g. in O'Neil, 2016; Crawford, 2016), Anderson had a point about theory having to grapple with the datafied elephant in the room.

In terms of post-critique and specifically the humanities, in fact, a few years earlier even the aforementioned Latour (2004) had famously written that theory and poststructuralism were no longer fit for a contemporary world where debunking had been co-opted by science-denying conspiracy theorists, and that – like the military – theory needed to upgrade its arsenal to deal with the challenges to come[56]. In this

[56] Far more nuanced than the gratuitous dismissals of postmodernism that are common today, Latour's scepticism followed a career that was itself largely dedicated to dismantling the idea of scientific "truths" as universal or distilled in environments untouched by social and political conditions. The stated goal of his essay was a realist move from matters of fact to matters of concern, an idea that strongly resonates with the current media climate, where terms like "alternative facts" and "post-truth" have become commonplace. Latour's critique followed 9-11 and it was rather a reaction to French philosophers like Jean Baudrillard – who wrote that the Twin Towers destroyed themselves under their

respect, when it comes to studying the social through Internet and social media, Latour's realist turn has been very influential on the digital humanities: Latour (2005) and "actor-network theory" (ANT) have in fact inspired the development of a range of digital methods (Rogers, 2013), which leverage the openness of APIs (Application Programming Interfaces) to allow scholars to access a range of data (links, tags, metadata, etc) that can be visualised and mapped to discuss certain social and political issues[57].

In at least one respect, Latour was right: as discussed in the previous section about Milo Yiannopoulos, claims that we live in a post-fact world and the use of identity politics are now often used at the expenses of the very categories that Marxism and poststructuralism were seeking to help. A return to factuality is, however, seemingly impossible: according to Marres (2018), for example, social media have already made it impossible to "get our facts back", and the current emphasis on fact-checking and debunking apps risks to bring us back to a dangerous "demarcationism" between "knowledge" and "anti-knowledge" (2018, p. 425), "evidence-loving liberals" and "lie-condoning conservatives" (p. 432).

On the other hand, claims of empiricism and factuality are also appropriated by tech-enabled preacher figures whose programmatic exposure of ideology comes with its own ideological baggage: Peterson and the IDW, in fact, benefit both from their self-referential cultural bubbles (reinforced by algorithmic recommendation systems that engender an architecture of "post-truth" polarities) and from a rhetoric of factuality, empiricism, and almost transcendental appetite for "truth". Targeting "grievance studies", "cultural marxists", or "SJW"s for trusting feelings over facts and ignoring the self-evident, naturalised roots of inequality is thus also another form of "demarcationism" of which the aforementioned hoax is a prime example.

Predictably, the complicated relationship with the digital outlined above is most problematic in terms of critical theory and the nuanced tools that for a long time have been the main asset of the humanities. While the rise of data analytics urges critical theorists to reinvent themselves as data analysts, in fact, several scholars have expressed scepticism about the increasing influence of algorithms and the scientific method in the critical humanities (e.g. Liu, 2004, 2012; Hayles, 2012; Lovink, 2016).

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own weight, undermined by nihilism inherent to capitalism itself (Latour, 2004, p. 228) – and its scepticism expressed a frustration with the dogmatism that in his view had captured critique.

[57] In relation to the subject of this chapter, digital methods have also been used to tackle and visualise networks of fake news or conservative memes (e.g. in Bounegru et. al, 2018; Tuters & Hagen, 2018), effectively framing and discussing issues of trolling. In the case of Bounegru et al (2018), data was used to highlight how networks of users concerned with fact-checking can be mostly disconnected from those who share fake news, thus rendering the fact-checking ineffective. Mapping data, in other words, is not always about constructing a "truth".

Liu (2012) in particular acknowledges that the field of the digital humanities has gained unprecedented recognition – not only in terms of funding, but more tellingly in terms of methodology. Liu refers to an ongoing debate between the proponents of a close reading of cultural data and those preferring a distant reading: the former was once carried out manually and painstakingly on texts, an operation that has been increasingly helped by new technologies that are more and more capable of coding content and visualising trends through algorithmically-generated graphs and charts; the latter, favoured by the post-'68, poststructural turn, is more preoccupied with the wider societal implications of the examined content, rather than its formal patterns. Liu (2012, p. 495) contends the argument could finally be resolved, if the digital humanities turned away from mere execution and assumed leadership in the humanities; at the moment, however, digital humanists have the practical tools and data, but lack the ability to "move seamlessly between text analysis and cultural analysis". Because "digital materials on the scale of corpora, databases, distributed repositories, and so on—specialties of the digital humanities—are ipso facto cultural phenomena," digital humanists "will need to show that thinking critically about metadata, for instance, scales into thinking critically about the power, finance, and other governance protocols of the world" (2012, p. 495). The discerning expertise to make such a leap is the specialised humanities knowledge that, at the moment, is seen as less authoritative than scientific or STEM knowledge. Liu thus appeals for the digital humanities to leverage its new influence to advocate for the humanities at large, outside of academia: "Only by creating a methodological infrastructure in which culturally aware technology complements technologically aware cultural criticism can the digital humanities more effectively serve humanists by augmenting their ability to engage today's global-scale cultural issues" (2012, p. 502).

Other takes on the digital humanities are far more pessimistic and present a highly politicised perspective, framing the field and the systematic adoption of data-driven tools as an ideological neoliberal imposition. Allington, Brouillette and Golumbia (2016) state:

> "Digital Humanities has often tended to be anti-interpretive, especially when interpretation is understood as a political activity. Digital Humanities instead aims to archive materials, produce data, and develop software, while bracketing off the work of interpretation to a later moment or leaving it to other scholars — or abandoning it altogether for those who argue that we ought to become 'postcritical'" (2016, par. 9).

This has obvious implications in terms of what is understood as political: Allington, Brouillette and Golumbia write that the digital humanities do not stand in opposition to

“the 'traditional' scholarly world, with its hierarchies and glorified experts and close reading of works read by only a precious few people”, but rather to “*the insistence that academic work should be critical*, and that there is, after all, no work and no way to be in the world that is not political.”

While the account reported above fails to account for the variety of endeavours that are grouped – for a range of reasons – under the “digital humanities” umbrella, the emphasis on politics is useful in this context.

The importance of interpretation – who collects, interprets, and acts upon the “facts” – is a key element of contention in the age of Big Data. According to Florian Cramer (2018, p. 24), data companies have turned analysis into analytics, which have become increasingly speculative. With Drucker (2011), Cramer argues in fact that data is also qualitative (p. 24) and that the situated nature of the viewer in respect to the objects and experiences to be interpreted is a crucial element that should not be factored out of algorithmic cultures. As a consequence, Cramer zeroes-in on the subject: wondering if post-structuralist “antitheologies” of the subject may have contributed to creating new theologies of the system, Cramer argues for a de-romanticisation of identity. It is no longer about metaphysical versus ontological thinking, but rather criticism versus positivism (p. 44). In other words, subjectivity is relative rather absolute (p. 45), and needs to be defined as agency, decisions, and politics – the denial of which would be a fascistic form of post-humanism. This is a call for the *humanistic* in the digital humanities, and it is easy to see the relevance of Cramer's call within the metrics- and association-driven algorithms of YouTube – where anti-postmodern, anti-political views such as those popularised by Jordan Peterson are all the rage.

Faced by the challenging conditions outlined above, what the critical humanities are experiencing is then no less than an identity crisis. The way out, however, might be towards more critique and more identity, rather than less.

As discussed in a previous chapter, subjectivity and politics are key to the critical humanities framework proposed by Rosi Braidotti. In a recent paper about the critical posthumanities, Braidotti (2019) states the core theoretical innovation in the humanities has emerged from interdisciplinary and often radical practices centred on studying the perspectives of certain categories:

> “Women’s, gay and lesbian, gender, feminist and queer studies; race, post-colonial and subaltern studies, alongside cultural studies, film, television and media studies; are the prototypes of the radical epistemologies that have voiced the situated knowledges of the dialectical and structural ‘others’ of humanistic ‘Man’” (2019, p. 8).

Now, a second generation of “studies” is emerging, also facilitated by new media, which has proliferated into sub-sections and meta-fields. Not only “posthuman/inhuman/non-human studies; posthuman disability, fat, sleep, fashion, celebrity, success and diet studies; critical plants studies, etc”, but also “software, internet, game, algorithmic and critical code studies and more” (p. 10). While the “Grievance Studies” hoax ridiculed the proliferation of specific identity-oriented studies, Braidotti sees in the situated knowledge they generate the true potential of humanistic critique, which is significantly political:

> “The political starts with de-acceleration, through the composition of transversal subject assemblages that actualise the unrealised or virtual potential of what Deleuze calls ‘a missing people’. In the old language: de-accelerate and contribute to the collective construction of social horizons of hope” (p. 11).

This is a direct response to Latour's post-critical turn:

> “Latour dismissed the critical task of epistemology, in favour of the flat ontological equality of actors, which results in the very problematic move to reject the need for any theorisation of subjectivity, thus undoing the possibility of a political project altogether” (p. 12).

Like Cramer, then, Braidotti sees the necessity of subjectivity and the political. Defining the “critical posthumanities”, she situates them within the academic infrastructure governing the humanities themselves:

> “Innovative and threatening in equal measure, the phenomenon of what I call the critical posthumanities represents both an alternative to the neoliberal governance of academic knowledge, dominated by quantitative data and control, and a re-negotiation of its terms” (p. 13).

Braidotti also credits pioneering postcolonial approaches to the Internet – like that of Lisa Nakamura, whom I already mentioned in this thesis – to highlight how the digital humanities are an especially critical site for the aforementioned re-negotiation: not only do they provide the most comprehensive platform to re-think transnational spaces and context (an issue already mentioned in the chapter on the Digital Nomad), but “the field is co-extensive with corporate and institutional interests that make it indispensable for economic growth and the war on terror” (p. 20).

In terms of both subjectivity and methodology, however, the most appropriate response to the trollish threat to the humanities and their critical reclamation is perhaps the figure of the lurker, a conceptual persona that Goriunova (2017) uses to explore the politics of knowledge in data culture.

Known as someone who observes online activity without actively participating in it, the lurker has also been associated to listening as a valid form of participation

(Crawford, 2011) and, for Goriunova, it constitutes at once a conceptual persona and a methodology of sorts. While the lurker's knowledge is affective and aesthetic (p. 3917), private, and not fully constative nor performative (p. 3923), the continuity between the lurker and data analytics (of which it is a precursor) is important. Goriunova writes: “recognising how data analytics takes on the mode of knowing previously explored by lurkers is one way of reclaiming the space of imagination and action in relation to data and software” (p. 3918).

Beyond this premise, the figure also resonates with the hybrid scholarly perspective I adopt in this thesis: rather than a critic, the lurker is related to the cyborg (Haraway, 1984) and is more akin to a sage or even a troll (p. 3926). In terms of its practical purchase, Goriunova discusses the methodology of the lurker as being “not fully of public value or service” and entailing “a certain subjectification of the lurker and the art, practice, and poiesis of lurking”. Lurkers, therefore, are “scholars not only of content, but of frameworks, formats, data types, algorithms, affordances, and technocultural limitations”.

To engage in the critique of online environments is thus an act of self-reflective critique as well. This does not mean that lurkers do not give anything back: they develop a “technical intuition”, a “scholarly ability to foresee and analytically ground technocultural phenomena arising from and conditioned by specific media ecologies” (p. 3925). While not making general or objective claims, lurkers still rely on “good-enough local generalisations that readily obtain universal status.” Goriunova asks: “What kind of governance is formed through stitching these knowledges together? Can we unstitch and recast our own data condition? How is the lurker’s cutting of the plane of immanence translated into new techniques of governance?” In order to answer the question, to trace and undo such systems, Goriunova calls for “new forms of lurking” (p. 3920).

Inheriting the elusive identity and techno-cultural savvy of the Troll, the Lurker can perhaps be seen as an alternative mode of knowledge, more focused on listening rather than broadcasting mischievous “facts” to elicit a response in an aggressive fashion; yet, still having an impact – albeit using data in a more situated and playful way rather than claiming scientific objectivity. In the face of the never-so-public delegitimation of the critical humanities through academic trolling and institutional restructuring, lurking could become the digitally *humane* response to compulsive data-grabbing and prescriptive model-building – and this by repurposing the Troll's shape-shifting, reflective non-identity to (for once) decelerate discourse, instead of accelerate it.

V.
#art #performance #stereotype #tagging #tactics #aesthetics
Tagging Aesthetics

The previous chapters have addressed the way tagging practices enable users to participate in the production and perpetuation of cultural avatars that emerge from social media aesthetics and reflect wider social and cultural issues. Since the first part of the thesis has focused on the problematic de-politicisation of identity labelling, I shall conclude with a critical response to this issue, starting from questions like: If social media materialise the convergence of the aesthetic and the social, shall we then look for aesthetic approaches to re-politicise their infrastructure? What kinds of new identity politics can reinstate the socially critical and emancipatory character of the movements that led the battle for civil rights and free speech, before free speech became a cry for channeling a repressed white male narrative? Is it possible to tweak avatars of cultural conflicts into inclusive figurations, perhaps by appropriating labelling practices in creative ways?

I try to answer these questions and the ones formulated at the beginning of this thesis by interrogating other voices, beyond the partially reflective interests of the core essays. After a brief theoretical contextualisation that situates my inquiry within existing scholarship on political art and digital aesthetics – most notably through the concepts of tactical media (Garcia & Lovink, 1997) and the relational aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2002) already discussed in earlier chapters – this last chapter offers an overview of several tactical approaches to tagging, drawing from a series of interviews I conducted with artists, theorists, and activists who use labelling in critical ways.

While their outputs are very diverse – trollish Instagram accounts, new hashtags against old hashtags, performative approaches to machine learning, using marketing techniques for social justice, etc – all my interviewees share a playful and/or tactical approach to online identity, in order to highlight its political and stereotypical qualities. Through these interviews, the chapter provides a range of empirical accounts of tactical labelling practices that challenge or re-politicise certain cultural avatars, provoking a conversation about the societal impact of social media. Ultimately, the examples are meant to work as a catalogue for a tactical approach to critical social media labelling.

There are a few reasons for including the interviews. Firstly, any study of social media tagging is complicated by the inherent ambivalence of the Internet, an aspect recently highlighted by Ryan Milner and Whitney Phillips (2017). The scholars,

who have an expertise in the study of trolling, point out how the different layers of irony that pervade online expression make it almost impossible to determine whether certain items of content come from sincerity or are rather the result of ironic appropriation. The only way to engage online expression online is thus to work with ambivalence, not against it, and make ethical assessments on a case-by-case basis. "What can be gleaned", Milner and Phillips argue, "is the impact of folkloric expression: what groups are helped, what groups are harmed, and most importantly what voices are empowered to speak as a result" (2017, p. 56). The resulting image, what emerges from the exchange – for example, Milo Yiannopoulos and the alt-right becoming empowered at the expense of feminists and "social justice warriors" – is then what is worth critiquing.

With this premise, it is important for me to maintain a level of self-awareness as a critic. The cultural environments I have chosen to explore are close to my own interests and help maintain a reflexive focus on my self-positionality as a researcher (or lurker); they also reveal my own ambivalent fascination with the violence depicted by gangsta rappers, the global meanderings of the digital nomads, and the often anti-social humour of trolls. It is not, however, my own culture I am critiquing – which makes reflexivity even more important.

While I do frame the issues at stake in the previous chapters from theoretical and even political standpoints, I also acknowledge the limitations of my interpretive claims and the specificity of my authorial voice. Drawing from the experience of interviewees to clarify certain issues or open them to further critique is thus aimed to provide a more ethical approach. Their perspectives may situate them in closer proximity to issues of identity like oppression or cultural appropriation, which might make them more fit than me to enact the politics of location introduced by Rich (1987) and discussed by Braidotti (2012). By opening the theory to their interventions, I make sure it is a living endeavour, rather than a stand-alone statement. In so doing, the final interviews act as a correcting factor to my own arguments: even though they do not necessarily address the same cultural avatars I write about, their tagging tactics inform the critical considerations I make in the other chapters.

As a consequence, in selecting the cultural producers to interview I also factor in what Milner and Phillips (2017, p. 14) call "ethics of amplification". As amplification in digitally mediated spaces carries potential for immediate, persistent and searchable harm that is different from what happens in embodied spaces (p. 54), the critical perspectives I address in my interviews are already selected for their constructive contribution – at the very least, in terms of productive dialogue.

Tactics of Online Identity

In their exploration of classification systems, Bowker and Star (1999) stress the need for a new science linking traditional social science with information science, providing a new set of metaphors and drawing from the best empirical studies of work-arounds, information use, and mundane tools (p. 31). The goal is not only to make infrastructure visible, but recognising the depths of the interdependence of technological networks and standards and the real work of politics and knowledge production (p. 34). As introduced before, the approach of this thesis emphasises the cultural and aesthetic quality of tagging (it has no aspirations in terms of scientific authority), but after the previous theoretical chapters the goal is here to develop a survey of tagging "work-arounds" that make the infrastructure of social media more visible or perceivable.

The progressive aesthetisation of all lived experience has been a seductive object of discussion and theorisation for quite some time, long before social media: from Dada to Situationism, from Michel De Certeau's tactical practice of the everyday (1984) to Nicholas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics (2002). De Certeau and Bourriaud in particular resonate with the current predicament: coming from the social and venturing into the artistic, the former saw the performance of the everyday as an "art of the weak", a clever use of time that evaded the logics of the productive regime. From the artistic into the social, the latter suggested that art can help envision new societal models, without the macro-utopian ambition for large-scale change typical of Modernism. Both have inspired critical responses – for example Bishop's (2004) writing on the impossibility of true antagonism within the gallery environment, already discussed in the chapter on tagging – and new conceptualisations. In this respect, I wish to focus in particular on the notion of tactical media, introduced by Garcia and Lovink (1997) and updated by Raley (2009).

The idea of "tactics" was notably inspired by a landmark theorisation of the practice of everyday life by Michel De Certeau (1984). While Goffman (1956) has been most influential for suggesting how artfully constructed identity may be, De Certeau framed an artistic attitude towards life as a way to resist the homologating push of technocracy. In so doing, he informed the more politically minded among social media theorists, those arguing for a more imaginative response to the status quo. One of the reasons for that is De Certeau provides a useful corrective to Michel Foucault in pointing to the importance of individual articulation of cultural appropriations (Hayles, 1999, p. 197) – in other words, De Certeau restores a level of agency, and even *joie de vivre*, for the individual in post-industrial society.

In his theory, De Certeau (1984) outlines a universe of technocratic transparency, a society of experts and power rhetorics in which work and leisure

reinforce each other. They do so through cultural techniques that “camouflage economic reproduction with the function of surprise ('the event'), of truth ('information'), or communication ('promotion')” (p. 29). This status quo is tactically challenged by a “critical return of the ordinary” embodied by a range of banal yet subversive work-arounds, “artistic tricks” like creative driving that bends traffic rules in Naples, or songs that show glimpses of utopia outside the mere analysis of facts (pp. 13-16). While the strategies adopted by those in power are grounded in a logic of spatial domination, the tactics deployed by the people are instead a clever use of time (p. xix), creative ways to hijack productivity that De Certeau also calls “art of the weak” (p. 36).

Significantly, according to De Certeau, these artful popular tactics – like the economy of “gift”, the aesthetics of “tricks”, and the ethics of “tenacity” – turn the order of things to their own end without hope that it will change (p. 26). This is not to say nothing is at stake: the value of the imaginary landscape lies in its resistance to reduction, which has a corrective and therapeutic value (p. 41).

The value of the imaginary, however, has changed since De Certeau first published his writings. The notions of creativity and productivity have become dramatically more pervasive, especially in the context of social media, making the whimsical yet another part of the immaterial commodities generated by users for the benefit of the companies that own the network. Social media amplify the conditions that inspired the French sociologist's theory, making it more relevant than ever, but at the same time create a material living environment where the ephemerality of tactics may not be as effective. For this reason, I argue, it becomes all the more necessary to recuperate and re-conceptualise them, starting from the figure of the bricoleur.

De Certeau uses the example of the bricoleur to highlight a creative response to the regime of productivity. In challenging the assumption that “consumption is only passive and initiative only takes place in technical laboratories”, De Certau points to the false dichotomy between producers and consumers, beyond which we may be able to “discover creative activity where it had been denied it exists” (p. 167). In the present day, however, most activity is marketed as creative and potentially valuable, especially on social media, and that is why De Certeau's bricoleur – now a remixer (Campanelli, 2008) – may now carry less emancipatory potential than the French sociologist first envisioned. The remixing of content is now a routine practice online, but the immediate quantification of shares and likes on a post immediately captures and classifies this ephemeral and playful creation, assigning it a metric value.

The same could be said about the practice of the *perruque* (using work time for personal activities), as a way to escape the productive logic of post-Fordist work (De Certeau, 1984, p. 25): the endless scrolling and procrastinating on social media that has become a staple diet of the office slacker is also timed, priced, and sold to

advertisers, thus helping platforms like Facebook or YouTube to maintain their monopoly position in the market.

The above is not meant to suggest De Certeau's tactical frame is no longer useful. In fact, the opposite is true: since Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube remain firmly on top in their monopolistic positions within social media, it is now more important than ever to reinstate the subversive potential of the practice of everyday life we carry on those platforms. Through constant mediation, De Certeau's “art of the weak” has definitely gotten more artistic, but it does not mean it has gotten weaker as well. Along with new figures, we need a new awareness of the possibilities of mediation. In this sense, it is useful to consider the concept of tactical media.

Before the advent of social media, Garcia and Lovink (1997) were the first theorists to leverage De Certeau's tactical frame in the contemporary media-rich context, which they did in a short manifesto. Their approach is markedly political: tactical media are not meant to report events, but actively participate and take a stance. They are also media of crisis, criticism, and opposition, which is “both the source of their power, ('anger is an energy': John Lydon), and also their limitation” (par. 3). Identifying tactical media use with identity figures from the get go, Garcia and Lovink list the typical heroes involved with this type of media: “the activist, Nomadic media warriors, the prankster, the hacker, the street rapper, the camcorder kamikaze” (par. 3). In other words: “happy negatives, always in search of an enemy." These heroes are easily mocked by the Right, blamed for their political correctness and generally their “outmoded humanism” (par. 3). Garcia and Lovink admit “the identity politics, media critiques and theories of representation that became the foundation of much Western tactical media are themselves in crisis” (par. 3); however the slipperiness of these issues does not make them redundant. Ultimately, Garcia and Lovink argue it is still important to have an antidote to “newly emerging forms of technocratic scientism which under the banner of post-humanism tend to restrict discussions of human use and social reception" (par. 5). The text was written in the 1990s, but with social media, and in particular with the newfound mainstream appeal of Internet subcultures, this perspective gains new currency: not only for the pervasiveness of the technical, mediated dimension that these platforms have created, but also (as I discussed in detail in the chapter dedicated to the Troll) because of the renovated need for an “outdated humanism” that seems to be under constant attack.

Applying De Certeau's tactical frame of mind to social networks is not without its problems. Lovink partially turns away from tactical media around the same time platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are founded, writing with Rossiter (2005) that they corroborate post-Fordist short-termism and are thus benignly tolerated by the system (Raley, 2009, p. 28). However, in a later monograph on

tactical media, Rita Raley (2009) revitalises the concept and enriches its aesthetic dimension.

Raley's stated interests lie in “articulating the aesthetic strategies of artist-activist producing persuasive games, information visualisation, and hybrid forms of academic criticism” (2009, p. 5), maintaining the time-specific focus of tactics as virtuoso performances rather than leaving an extrinsic product behind. Raley also revisits the linguistic structure already present in the original theory by De Certeau[58]: tactical media intervene and disrupt a dominant semiotic regime, engendering a temporary situation in which critical thinking becomes possible (p. 6). This applies to media criticism as well: tactical academic criticism, Raley (2009) argues, uses abstraction to create a provisionally stable descriptive category and establish a non-essential commonality between distributed art practices. Abstraction, in other words, “forges a set of tactical links that do not collapse the differences among different project, practices and investments” (pp. 13-14).

The statement above quite accurately describes my approach to tagging and labelling practices: by making tagging heterogeneous and thus immeasurable, I am also making it much stronger as a theoretical device. While not dealing with social media directly, Raley's work is important in the context of this thesis also because it relates tactical media to relational aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2002): as a relational gesture, tagging is an especially effective concept to frame the media interventions that I discuss in this chapter.

The artists, theorists and activists interviewed in this series, then, have been chosen because they work on the border between aesthetics, politics, and classification. They use hashtags, memes and algorithms in ways that critically expose the stereotypical logic of self-branding and networking, suggesting new formats or ridiculing old ones, piggy-backing on algorithms or rejecting them. Interviewees have not been selected because of their influence – in fact, in some

[58] It is worth noting De Certeau (1984) also analyses the tactical quality of theory itself, in particular by discussing work by Foucault and Bourdieu. For example, one characteristic that De Certeau notes is that habitus, in order to explain society in relation to structures, must remain unverifiable, invisible; plausibility, in other words, seems to be a sufficient achievement for his work, at least according to De Certeau. In other words, the unmeasurability of habitus makes it a stronger concept rather than scientifically weaker and incapable of delivering tangible evidence. Such slipperiness, in the case of theory, thus seems to be a virtue for De Certeau. This becomes more apparent when De Certeau discusses the artistic sphere: Foucault and Bourdieu’s procedures and tactics in general “form a field of operations within which the production of theory also takes place” (1984, p. 78). Should we not, De Certeau continues, recognise the scientific legitimacy of narrativity, and that a theory of narration is indissociable from a theory of practices, as its condition as well as its production? The two authors, then, are like artists who craft theoretical concepts: Foucault himself, according to De Certeau, owes his effectiveness primarily to the art of speaking/thinking/operating, rather than erudition – a type of theorist that is like a dancer disguised as an archivist (pp. 79-80).

cases their relatively marginal status is one of the reasons they need to use tagging as a tactical tool to establish a brand, a network, or an audience. Rather, I became interested in their practices for their relevance to identity labelling issues and cultural avatars. While they do not necessarily provide definite solutions to the issues they are concerned with, these cultural producers make those issues visible in order to stimulate public debate.

Jacopo Calonaci, Jenya Kenner, and Marguerite Kalhor, for example, tackle popular online identity models in a performative fashion, by enacting stereotypes and tweaking them in a playful and disorienting way. J. C., albeit acting from within a corporate environment, orchestrates a similar operation by consciously building a branded character to embody a politically progressive cultural avatar. The ANON collective, instead, tackle identity politics and the revitalisation of a leftist imaginary by coining the #AltWoke and #BlackPopMatters hashtags, political tools with tactical goals and some unpredictable implications. With a background in journalism combined with technical expertise, artists Simon Boas and Kris Blackmore gather public data from the Internet and social media, assembling collective identity avatars to encourage discussion on themes like crime, privacy, and toxic masculinity. Media artist Max Dovey explores cultural stereotypes and machinic intelligence through technically sophisticated art performances that always involve a live audience. Finally, Helena Suárez Val explores the politics of (geo)location through a feminist lens[59].

Performing New Formats

The past three chapters have critically analysed the labelling practices involved in the conjuring up of the Gangsta, the Digital Nomad, and the Troll. Since at the core of this dissertation is the argument that cultural avatars emerge from the collective performance of a kind of relational aesthetics that plays out on social media, it follows that the most immediate strategy in terms of tagging tactics is the hijacking of popular identity models that are then critically tampered with. In this section I discuss three examples of different approaches to social media tagging as a reaction to a stereotypical imaginary.

[59] All the quotes appearing in this chapter come from in-depth interviews I conducted between March 2018 and July 2019, via Skype, email, or in person. Some names have been changed to protect the responder's privacy.

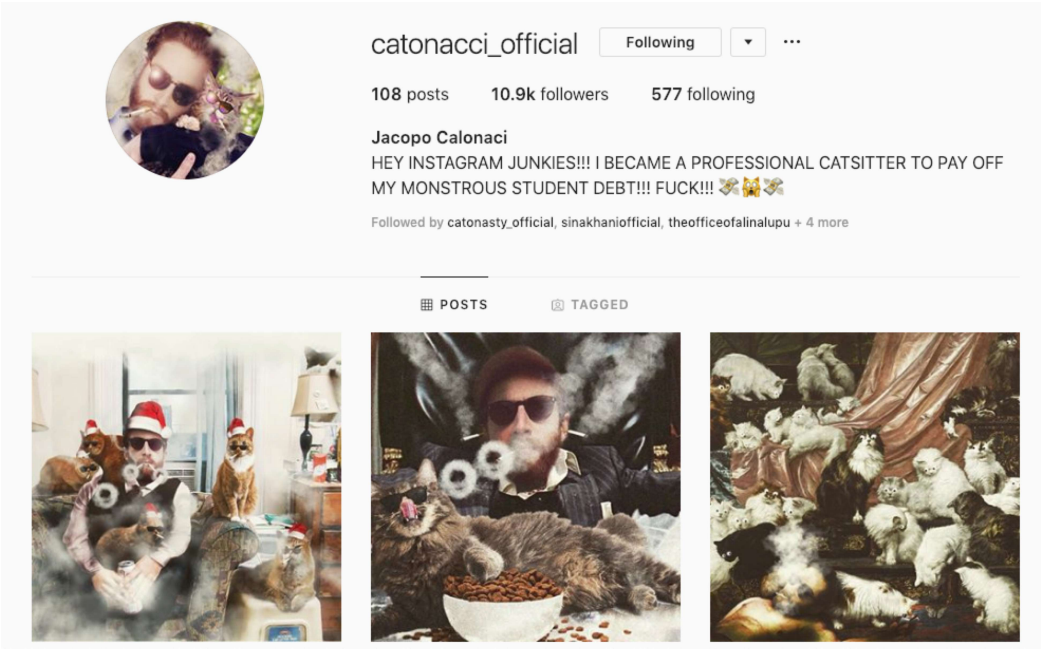


Fig. 5.1 – The @catonacci_official Instagram page.

Artist Jacopo Calonaci started posting on Instagram relatively recently, fascinated by influencer culture. The character he performs in his @calonaci_official account started as a former Marlboro model, now forced to be a cat sitter to pay his student debt (fig. 5.1). All the photos on Calonaci's feed depict him wearing sunglasses and smoking one or more cigarettes at a time, caressing, holding or staring at a cat. Sunglasses and cigarettes are also photoshopped on the cat's face, while clouds of smoke are added all around the pair.

While Calonaci maintains the posture of a self-assured male individual – the old-fashioned template of masculinity of the Marlboro man – the figure of the cat injects layers of irony, ambiguity and even vulnerability. Ultimately, the contemporary figure of the recent graduate, forced into precarious work and financially pressured by debt, is put in stark contrast with the trope of the cat picture, typical click-bait on social media. I interviewed Calonaci on the project's background, his goals, and his tactical use of tags like #catlife and #catstagram (fig. 5.2).

> “There’s tons of these shitty cat accounts, people captioning photos like 'give me food, human', and so on. There’s that, and there’s actually living as a precarious worker. I even created an account on Pawshake, a cat sitting platform, but they blocked me because there were too many pictures where I had sunglasses and I was smoking a cigarette. I tried to open another one, but they blocked me again. There’s other sites as well, and to be honest I would have tried cat sitting, if anything to get access to more cats.”

While cat sitting is not his actual job, managing his own microcelebrity is quite laborious.

> “You do need a photographer, because cats rarely sit still. I’ve been gaining some following, however, I’m at 10k and running. Most are shitty cat accounts, those with five pictures of an angry cat who didn’t want to be there in the first place – you just like all five and they follow you. It’s a lot easier as a system, the cat works. Another strategy is bulk-following and unfollowing, but it becomes draining. By now I’ve ruined my Instagram feed, it’s all cats. Even if I have those 200 friends who post interesting content, I clicked on so many cats that’s the only thing the algorithm gives me anymore.”

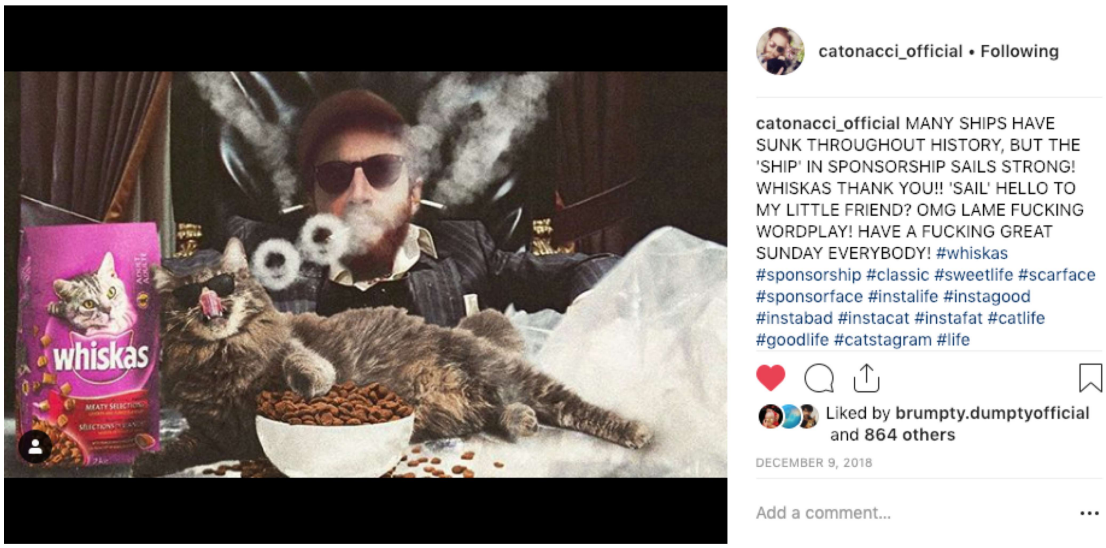


Fig. 5.2 – An example of @catonacci_official fishing for likes by using a brand name and lots of tags.

Calonaci has a mixed attitude towards his struggle for celebrity.

> “On one hand it's real, I want to understand how many followers I can get. In less than two years I got to 10k, it's slowly growing. I wonder what it would be like, had I started four years ago. Let's say my goal is getting to at least 100,000. Maybe in the future, if the economy gets better, I may even buy some. Also, the more you have the easier it becomes, people follow you more, it becomes exponential. Of course, at some point I'll attempt some kind of kamikaze gesture – treating the cats bad, grabbing their tail, choking them, stopping to feed them, throwing them in the water... Just to see if these followers are even paying attention or they just click because there are cats.”

Calonaci's character has morphed overtime. He's now testing a different style in his captions, which he considers mildly therapeutic.

> “It’s like a caps lock therapy: 'WHY OF WHY IS LIFE SO FUCKING GENIUS'. So there is this crazy guy who is completely elated by existence. Like you say, a declining former Marlboro model. He used to be on a horse smoking like John Wayne and now he has to dish out cat food on the streets of Amsterdam.”

The caps lock elation taps into the superficial enthusiasm often found in Instagram content.

> “My girlfriend is from Hong Kong. When I met her she had 4000 followers, but she knows people who have 100,000 and maybe are completely miserable in real life, because this image doesn’t match their online persona. It’s a fictional collage of a person’s state... There is this narcissism that brings this fake *joie de vivre*. It’s a way to compete. Maybe there are also people who are sick and use Instagram like Prozac. Which is what I’m also doing, with the caps lock. 'WHY IS LIFE SO GENIUS, COULD THE LORD PLEASE...' I noticed it makes me feel good, a little. Seriously, why is life so genius? Because life actually is genius. It does help a bit.”

Calonaci's reluctant performance of an aspiring influencer, if a slightly odd one, thus intersects his personal life in terms of economic ambitions and mental health. While not yet able to tap into the financial benefits of the growing influencer industry, the artist acknowledges enacting a tactical identity has a somewhat therapeutic value. Calonaci's work is then an example of a tongue-in-cheek alliance with the neoliberal avatar of the Instagram Model, ambivalently pushing its positive attitude into overdrive for both amusement and stress relief.

When it comes to models, however, the issue of fashion and public presentation in celebrity culture has a much bigger impact on women. The first notable Instagram artist known as such, Amalia Ulman, managed to trick the art world and the platform's audience alike by embodying an aspirational individual who started their mediated journey by posting selfies with fancy clothes and ended it by getting pregnant and undergoing a detox period. Ulman's performance was subtle and nuanced, gaining her a position within the art world, but the impersonation of a fame-obsessed individual is a more widespread practice. The Instagram parody account @jenyakenner (fig. 5.3) addresses participation in celebrity-driven fashion trends by performing a deadpan fashionista on the platform and engaging in a relentless use of tags, along with the creation of new ones. In one of the earlier pictures posted on the account Jenya is comedically wrapped as a Christmas present, but as the project developed and the follow count rose she started adopting a more traditional aesthetic and narrative. While every picture is carefully

accompanied by a range of tags, the collateral blog delves more explicitly in the critical aspects of the persona, fleshing out the arguments while maintaining a level of tongue-in-cheekness. A PhD student with an unrelated academic focus, Jen started the Instagram project as a way to participate critically and reflexively.

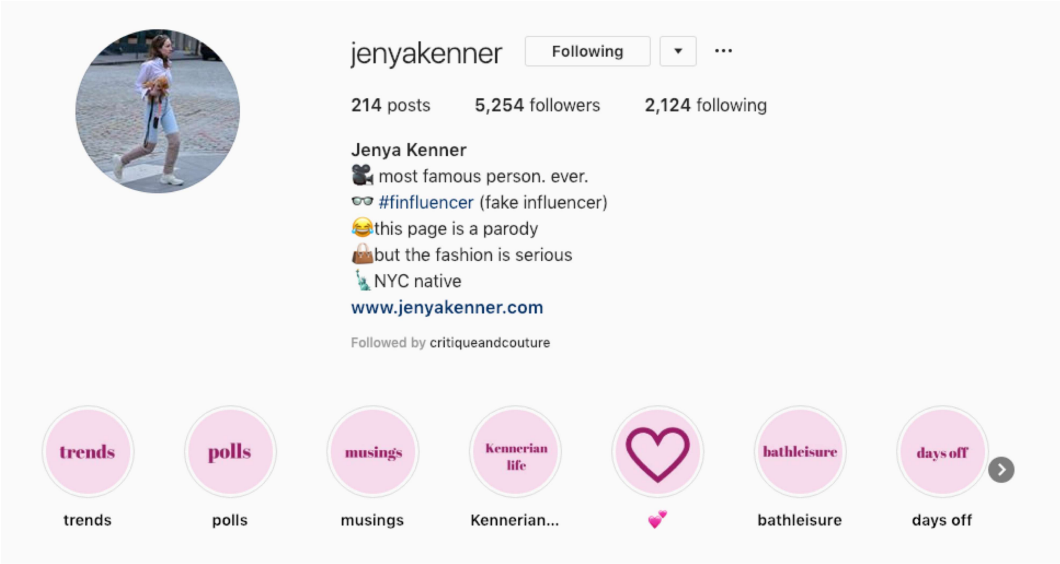


Fig. 5.3 – @jenyakenner's very curated Instagram homepage.

> “Before the character existed, I had an Instagram account called @critiqueandcouture where I sought to denaturalise the visual tropes and (almost ideological) sentiments prevalent in fashion advertisements. I quickly decided that my critique would be more successful and less of a bummer if I tried to grapple with structural issues—duh!—rather than target individuals. The character was a way of exploring the culture of fashion, celebrities, and influencers by embodying it myself. Best case scenario, by being the subject of my own critique, others are inspired to be critical and don’t feel personally attacked.”

Jen's critique is a response to issues that are often associated to the culture of public presentation enabled and reinforced by Instagram, and she has a clear idea about the alternative values that matter to her.

> If I had to summarise what I’m critical of, it would be a specific version of a market-inflected view of the self, which is dominant in every subculture I might be considered part of: microinfluencers, influencers, celebrities. On the Instagram market, the currency is (of course) likes, comments, followers, engagement rates, and so on. Succeeding by these metrics means conforming to the wishes of your followers, and—if you monetise your Instagram—becoming beneficiaries of corporations. And boom, just like that, you’re a product! It’s not just on Instagram that people view themselves increasingly in economic terms. This is catastrophic

to me because—and I really believe this—the more our values are tied to monetary value, the less we can possibly care about the only things we can use to get us out of this mess: political action, art, humanistic inquiry, and the rest.

Having clear critical arguments may get in the way of performing a fashion-troll. While the aesthetics of the latter definitely come across more strongly on the platform, Jen's collateral blog explores issues like the responsibilities of celebrities in body image discourse in more detail. Maintaining the balance is something she struggles with constantly.

"Jenya is incredibly privileged, to the point of total obliviousness. She is also—as often comes with this privilege—well educated. So the range of things she could plausibly think is very wide, and I have fun with that. I legitimately agree with some of the points she makes, despite the absurd manner in which I wrote them. I do think the discourse on "body shaming" is totally overspent on powerful people with normative bodies, who just do not face comparable challenges to people with non-normative bodies. Being a celebrity bullied on the internet is awful, but it is immaterial compared with enduring physical abuse, being denied proper medical care, dealing with prejudiced employers, and so on."

There is of course a level of absurdist exaggeration, which Jenya indulges in for satirical purposes.

"More often, maybe, Jenya says stuff that is downright insane that serves as social commentary. For instance, she is concerned with making sure "commoners" don't adopt celebrity trends without making adjustments; there are certain things that only "famouses" can pull off. This is a dangerous sentiment which almost everyone is familiar with; similar things are said in the context of non-normative bodies. But in the abstract, it's insane! The coolness of clothing is dependent on the social status of its wearer?! I think it is fascinating that, in some sense, how powerful you are—or how "normal" you appear—dictates the degree to which you are socially allowed to defy the norm. That is a totally mundane observation, which fascinates me endlessly."

In terms of participation, trends have been driving Jenya's aesthetic choices and formats in order to achieve a larger following. While earlier posts were more varied, the account has stabilised around the "full figure of a girl walking with an urban background" trope, popular on the platform.

"That is the main way I find myself constrained by the Instamarket, which is in large part due to the type of followers I've targeted and amassed. So, the transition reflects my following of what was essentially a monetary incentive to conform! I'm

currently experimenting with how much I am able to diverge from the norm, and in what ways. And that is, I think, the main thing I think about when putting outfits together."

Tagging is of course a major tool for "commoners" and aspiring celebrities like Jenya to tap into a shared narrative. Users looking to share their style often use hashtags like #ootd ("outfit of the day"), which give easy access to a huge network of content. Indulging in these mainstream tags can be useful, but – on Instagram in particular – deploying a wider range is more productive.

"I recently learned a secret to tagging, which only a few people know: like everything else, tags are a market. If you hashtag #ootd, which boasts tens of millions of pictures, you're competing against all of the most successful influencers and their photos. In my case, if I use a lesser-used variant of #ootd – e.g. #outfitoftoday or #ootdinspo – your pictures will be featured more widely. At the number of likes I average, I have a much better chance of making it to the "top" page on those hashtags. When I noticed this, my views from hashtags increased by more than 1000%. I also try to use comedy hashtags, because in some sense that is a better approximation of what I'm doing… jury is still out. But, again, you *have* to think of Instagram in market-saturated terms in order to succeed (with respect to market-metrics)."

Fig. 5.4 – An example of @jenyakenner's hashtags.

Jenya also introduced a couple hashtags of her own: #bathleisure and #waterambassador (fig. 5.4). These tags are meant as a comment on current celebrity trends and de facto participate in very banal platform dynamics, but at the

same time gesture towards a materialist critique of labour and common resources like water within the rarefied cultural environment of celebrity worship.

> “#BathLeisure started as a sideways critique of the fluffy, pastel aesthetic that totally dominates the influencer subsection of Instagram. In celebrity fashion—especially a year ago (when I started) but still today—I constantly see silhouettes and fabric patterns that are indistinguishable from pajamas, bathrobes, and other leisure-wear. To me, it was like, 'How funny that as the workday is lengthening we’re more obsessed with the fashioned performance of leisure while of course the real thing is a pipe dream.' So rather than say this outright, Jenya “invented” #bathleisure and called out those who had stolen her invention. #WaterAmbassador was also a tag for a trend that already existed: water companies, especially Fiji and Evian, literally pay influencers to pose with water bottles. So I was trying to highlight the absurdity of this – of 'influencing' a natural resource – just by making explicit the fact that yes, this does happen!”

Fig. 5.5 – Jenya's change.org campaign.

Jenya's critique extends to the Instagram algorithm, to the point that she started a Change.org petition (fig. 5.5) against the platform's unpopular meddling with users' feeds. While Instagram's decision of moving from a chronology to a popularity-driven feed has had lots of criticism, Jenya's parodic take appropriates the 1% rhetoric of Occupy Wall Street: while likes are somehow “gradually decreasing” for regular users, celebrities are getting more “like-rich”. For this reason, she incited her followers to react in a liberating protest so that “likes flow freely and plentifully” for everyone.

> "I have noticed that my photos that perform the best (in terms of the metrics Instagram gives: views, likes, saves, etc.) are not the funniest or most visually striking, but they're always those where I'm wearing an outfit people like. I think this is because Instagram weighs heavily when people "save" a picture, and for the most part people only save fashion pictures when they want to recreate an outfit. It's not the same with funny posts; no one says, "that was funny, I'm going to save it to laugh again later." Maybe I'm just not funny. But I'm inclined to think this all makes sense, because Instagram is at bottom a commercial platform. Updates to the Instagram algorithm have made it harder for influencers to be "discovered" without buying ads, because guess who benefits from ad sales! As a consumer or producer, Instagram ads have never worked for me."

It is interesting to notice that, while performing a satirical take on individual lifestyle choices, Jen's materialist critique is more concerned with tackling structural aspects rather than consumer choices.

> "If I had to say, the goal of my project is to determine to what extent it is possible to partake in the culture of fashion without strengthening the structures of global capitalism, or to partake in a way that does minimal damage. So I'm wondering: if conspicuous consumption is here to stay, can we do something good, or at least not *that* bad, with it? Sometimes I tell myself that there's hope to be found in what is a huge cultural blind spot regarding fashion and power. The visual language encoded in fashion is effectively unexplored by its powerful users, who are (hopefully) made vulnerable to any dissenters actively reflecting on the same visual codes! But then I'm like, 'that's nonsense.'"

This sense of rebellious acceptance is inherent to the tactical aspect of the performance of everyday life outlined by De Certeau, but the reluctance to participate in the metrics regime and hyperactive pace of social media takes different forms.

Marguerite Kalhor's work also uses established social media tropes to explore the performative dimension of online experience, often driven by anxiety and expectations. She has tackled the selfie, the beauty tutorial, the food review and, more recently, video game reviews with a conspiratorial twist. Unlike Calonaci and Jenya, Kalhor does not often deploy tagging as a direct tactical tool, but rather uses visual tags like emojis to play with stereotypes. In the Blazeit series (fig. 5.7), for example, she and a network of friends share Snapchat images with each other, using the time-stamp and emoji features of the app to create collages that embody California weed culture (best represented by the "4:20" trope, conventionally known as slang for "weed time").

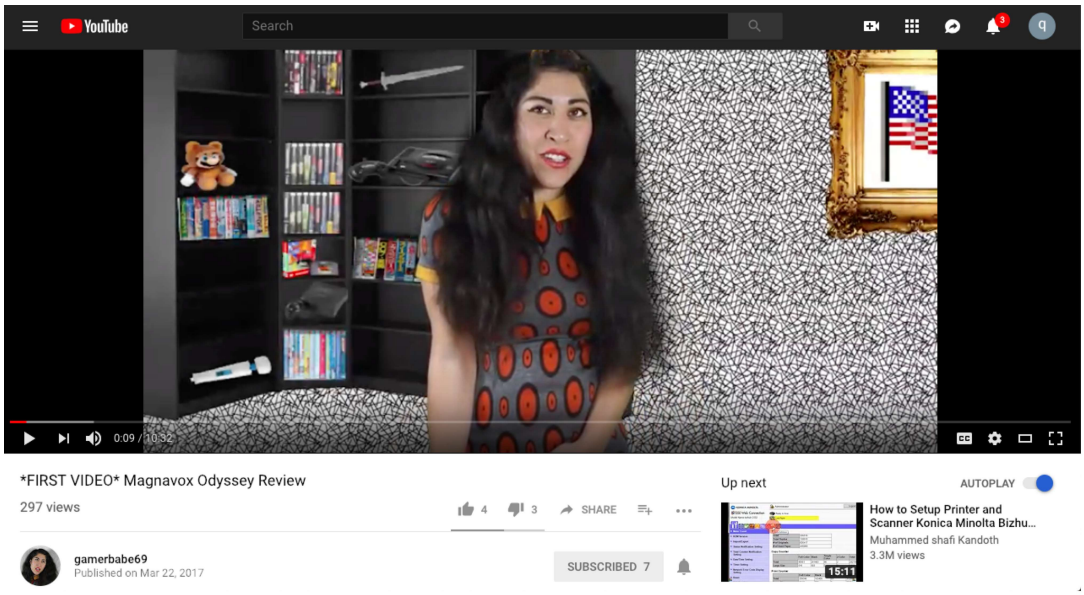


Fig. 5.6 – A still from the GamerBabe69 video.

> “A couple people in my friend circle are straight-edge, so they are kind of mocking this California weed culture. But it's also to try and keep one theme going within these small constraints. The thing about Snapchat is that you can only time-stamp it at that specific time, so we had to drop whatever we were doing and send it.”

While discourse about social media is often focused on images and their immateriality, presence is an important aspect of Kalhor's work. Her beauty tutorials – in which she used the chroma key effect to create a distorting effect on her face as she was putting on make-up – were streamed live on Facebook.

> “Beauty tutorials teach you how to use make-up, but there is no true way of using it in my opinion. Those videos are just kind of abstractions of those tutorials. There is a lot of critique of selfie as gender feminine and about the male gaze, a woman controls the focus of the camera, the silent image read as passivity and compliance. And silent, because the image is silent. I think that's why I didn't include sound in it – but also it's possible I just didn't' want to pick up the droning sound of my computer.”

Kalhor tackles gender in another work of hers: a semi-abstract YouTube video in which she mixes game reviews with Internet conspiracy theories. She later shared the video on reddit.com/gaming to troll “gamer bros” (fig. 5.6). The choice of Reddit in a project dealing with gaming and gender is not casual: the platform was in fact very central in the development of the Gamergate controversy in 2014. As expected, the reaction to Kalhor's character on Reddit was not warm.

> “I have this account called GamerBabe69. I only did one video, but I wanna make more because there's lot of games I wanna make conspiracy theories about. After

> I shared it on Reddit everybody was convinced it wasn't satire and it was real. [They said] I was a dumbass and I don't know anything. But the whole thing was like critiquing game bros."

In her work on the food review format, Kalhor posted a series of snack reviews. They vary in terms of spontaneity, rhythm and how staged they appear, but most videos are under two minutes – a constraint the artist deemed necessary and that leads to some interesting comedic timing.

> "I only had three rules to those videos. One: I had to try something I had never tried before. Two: the videos had to be under two minutes. Three: I had to say the first things that came to my mind. So I was racing against the clock and kind of grabbing in the dark. I was interested in the fact that there is no way to describe what taste is, especially on camera, and everyone's taste buds are different anyway, so reviewing food is completely pointless to me. It's only there for entertainment purposes."

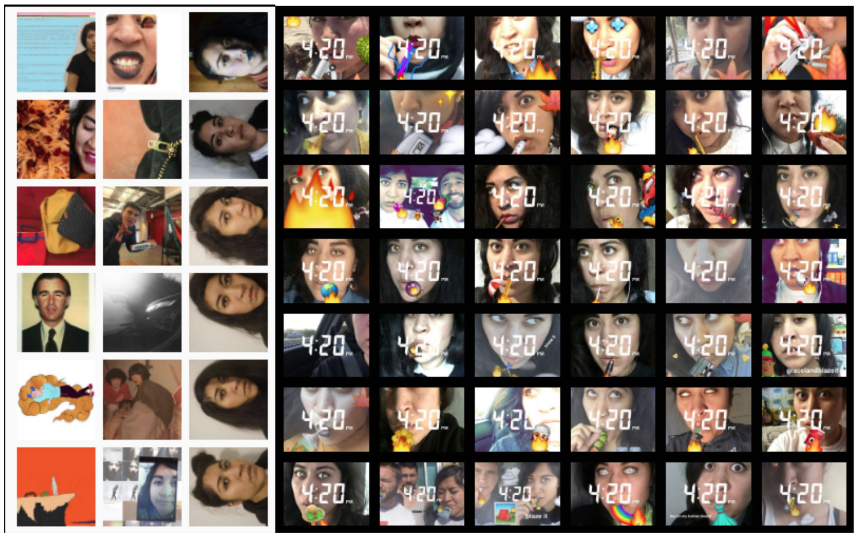


Fig. 5.7 – Some of Kalhor's experiments with the selfie format.

In terms of entertainment, Kalhor's videos are striking because they are alternately deadpan or unusually spontaneous, avoiding the well-crafted performative presence of usual youtubers.

> "They are all emulating weird TV personalities, so I kinda wanted to show other ways to put out information. You don't have to be this manic TV personality."

Kalhor's seemingly reluctant participation in collective stereotyping is part of her poetic.

> “I think I'm just projecting that attitude onto the performance. I'm obviously doing it because I want to, but I guess I do it reluctantly. And it's a totally good reason, I'm sure a lot of people's reasoning about using social media is like 'I might as well...'”

In terms of tagging, Kalhor did play with a bit of branding connections in her food reviews.

> “People came to me, though I didn’t really expect much. I tagged the videos 'food', 'food review', and whatever product I was testing, so all these food review channels started following me and commenting. And each of them has their own little schtick. It's the same if you have an art account on Instagram or you comment on a museum page, the bots will flood your profile and add you for a couple days, then unfollow you if you don't follow them back. The ones posting those one emoji comments... It's really weird, I don't get it.”

Kalhor has not really targeted brands directly, but she reckons it could be interesting.

> “Trolling brands with semi-NSFW stuff may be an interesting experiment, since at this time people have eerie brand loyalties and associate with brands on, for example, Twitter. Access to a brand on a social network almost humanises it. Kinda muddles the 'corporations aren’t people' stuff.”

Compared to Calonaci's and Jenya's work, then, Kalhor's relies less on a consistent branding strategy and is much more focused on timing, presence, and intimacy. The artist's shape-shifting practice might be more marginal within her media ecologies and cultural milieus of reference, then, but it is more critical in the sense that it pushes stereotypical narratives into dead-ends, staging failure after failure in subversive opposition to the metrics-driven regime of social media attention.

Infiltrating Subcultures

What Calonaci, Jenya, and Kalhor do from an artistic perspective is also a more structured practice adopted by the media industry. If labelling is a social gesture and labels are collective social identities, the issue of branding should also be factored in. Brands are also, quite literally, labels themselves, and in this day and age they also contribute to the construction of a social identity (Arvidsson, 2006). As discussed in previous chapters, this is materially enhanced by social media.

A very interesting example of media companies engaging with Internet subcultures in a creative and tactical way is a YouTube show titled “Pimp My Clout”, hosted by Hypeboi. The main referent of the show is the so-called “hypebeast” community, an international street fashion subculture revolving around the worship of iconic brands like Supreme, Yeezy, Vetements, and Off White, as well as the rappers

who popularise them. Hypebeasts are known for queuing up to spend substantial amounts of money on the most exclusive items of clothing, which are often only worn in photos to be posted on Instagram or social media. While the subculture relies heavily on conspicuous consumption reselling the most hyped items for monetary gain, each episode of “Pimp My Clout” consists in a DIY tutorial explaining how to save money by recreating the most iconic pieces of clothing at home, using materials like paint, tape, and stencils. The format provides a humorous and informed critique of hypebeast culture, channelled especially by the character of Hypeboi himself. The host is, in fact, a fictional character carefully orchestrated by writer and producer J. C. and embodied by post-punk drummer P. W.

> “We're a new media start-up that is trying to figure out what is really happening and what attracts big audiences. We have a lot of data analysts and they were telling us that videos by our competitors and user-generated content were really popular, so there was this push to try and find hosts for our existing formats. And I think that is the golden ticket always. All these media companies are kind of chasing the dragon of what these individuals at home, who are non-professionals, are getting success with.”

Before creating a personality, J. C. had to find a public.

> “I was trying to find an audience first and work backwards from there, find the people who are the most logged-on and make a demigod for them, basically. That was my strategy.”

With a limited budget, finding an established influencer proved harder than expected, so J. C. decided to create one. P.W. proved to be the perfect fit, not least because his pre-existing friendship with J. C. granted a certain level of availability and control over the character. While the writer provides the lines, however, the host's own body and personality play into Hypeboi's character and contribute to its counter-stereotypical aspect.

> “The Latino community is super under-represented in mainstream media. You see mostly African-American or Caucasian hosts and there were no other shows, at least in my company, that had a Hispanic character as the frontrunner. Plus, in LA it made a lot of sense. P. is Cuban and Native American, but also I chose him because his appearance is so ethnically ambiguous that it creates a lot of conversation, and also anybody can look at him and relate to him. A lot of people comment and try and guess his ethnicity, if he’s Mexican, if he’s Native... Another accidental advantage is that since comments drive algorithms the ambiguity creates a lot of buzz. I also wanted kids to see him and think 'I look different from

the people of my school, but I can relate to you'. It's a 'Los Angeles every man' kind of look."

While Hypeboi's laid back attitude and slang captivated a cult following on YouTube and Instagram, the format started to be noticed in more "mainstream" hypebeast circles.

"Hypebeast Magazine – on hypebeast.com, where they publish a lot of serious articles about new items that are dropping or what rappers are wearing – reached out to us and asked if we can cross-post our content. We're reaching a lot of more earnest hypebeasts, instead of people who are on board with the joke about the culture. So I think there's mixed reviews there. We got people writing 'This is so trash, why wouldn't people buy the real thing', or 'This is so funny, it's kind of punk that he's not buying it'. So I think the more we get press exposure and get exposed to real hypebeasts in the wild, the more legitimacy and the more people will catch on with it. At the moment we've given a cult following a language to share with each other. They call it a meme sometimes... 'Is Hypeboi a popular meme at your school?', I see that."

According to his creator, Hypeboi's satirical attitude does not prevent the character from being celebratory as well.

"What makes him approachable to people from the hypebeast community and makes them not feel targeted in a negative way is how much Hypeboi expresses admiration for the items and the hypebeast icons – rappers like Lil Yachty, Lil Uzi Vert, and Lil Pump. Hypeboi is doing all this crafting to get where they are. So he likes the same things and the same people they like, but he just goes a different route. I think they know we're making fun of the designers, I think the important delineation is we're not making fun of our viewers. I think they would be accepting of him because he has credibility from learning about the culture to entertain them. It would be impossible for him to have not absorbed it."

However, the show and its host maintain a subversive intent, also revolving around the identity performed by P. W.

"I guess the stereotype of the hypebeast is interchangeable with a fuckboy, a guy who would maybe post 'Fuck taking this girl out on a date, I'm buying Yeezy's'. Also the main subversive feature of Hypeboi's, I would say, is he's a male feminist. Which is super counter-intuitive in this culture. All you hear about their idols is they get headlines about abusing women, they get involved in these sex scandals with underage women and so on, so I set out to create the kind of hypebeast I want to see in the world. These people are always trying to find someone to worship, so I

wanted to create the option of someone who's a good guy, who would be like 'respect your mom', cares about women, values individuality over spending money to get a look."

Hypeboi's attitude towards money is also subversive.

"Hypebeast is all about how much you can spend and he's all about how little you can spend, being economical, and kinda making it seem like you're actually less cool if you spend all that money, like your product might be authentic but you're not authentic. I think Hypeboi has so much confidence in everything that he does that the swagger comes from him, and even if his clothes are obviously painted on he shines anyway."

Hypeboi's role as a host is thus also to promote more egalitarian gender roles, and not only to provide a practical tutorial to be able to participate in a brand's worship.

His relationship with branding is, however, the most interesting aspect in terms of labelling. Hypeboi is not only referring to the "hypebeast" subculture, but he's referencing a whole constellation of actual fashion labels and brands, with which the show has an interesting, double-edged relationship.

"First off, I never got a single cease and desist, and I got more than 30 Hypeboi videos online. And I think that's because it is free publicity, but also the attitude is inherently celebratory of these brands. We give a lot of background on them, we list the original retail price, we list all product specs. In essence it is a bootlegging tutorial, so there needs to be a certain level of commentary in every episode for it to be legal. Also the products need to look a certain level of shitty, so that it's legally, obviously a joke and not passing. We never show where to get the logo from – we show the sise specs sometimes, but it's always estimated or common knowledge, something you can Google."

There is still, however, a level of criticism.

"We also make a lot of commentary on where these logos and trademarks originate from, who are they ripping off. Supreme for instance is ripping off the famous female graphic designer Barbara Kruger, who initially made the red box logo with the Futura medium italic. It's not rocket science, anybody with a computer can figure it out. We talk about the legal history of Supreme a little bit, where are people getting inspiration from. Shoes that look similar from shoes from the past and are suddenly worth so much money. I think also writing commentary helps us get away with it, staying on the good side of brands... we're breaking it down into a recipe almost: what goes into this hoodie that makes it cost this

much? Makes people start thinking about it. So if it's just a plain hoodie and so on, it doesn't cost anywhere close the tagline. It's like 'I love being trolled by brands', basically. It's a conversation."

As mentioned in the opening of this chapter, Hypeboi's character does not take the construction of a label for granted, but exposes its inner dynamics to open the conversation to critical depth. As a fictional character, Hypeboi thus embodies an avatar that stands for a more critical, financially-conscious, and gender-progressive branding culture.

Memetic Representation

The identities discussed above are individual performances that tap into wider cultural discourse, but collective identities are the most crucial to tap into the political potential of social networks. In the chapter on tagging I mentioned how #OccupyWallStreet was an example of collective performance that had political goals (albeit not clear ones), something that captured the imagination of the media and the attention of scholars alike. In this section, I delve into the aesthetic aspect of such memetic politics by addressing the issue of identity politics and leftist memes, pressing issues since the election of Trump. In this sense, "representation" is here intended as both a political and imaginary element.

The issue of minority representation and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) have become more and more mainstream on a widening range of media. However, in the wake of the US 2016 election, many pointed at Hillary Clinton's reliance on minority vote as a weak point compared to Bernie Sanders' focus on the working class as a whole. Interestingly, this perceived split between an identity politics Left and a materialist, class-oriented Left has been widely discussed alongside matters of Internet culture. One of the key labels emerging from the cultural discourse about identity politics and social media has been the term "woke", used to describe someone who is aware of intersectionality, cultural appropriation, and generally social justice themes. While the term has arguably come to exemplify a commendable goal, it has also been criticised for its trendy and reductive connotation.

It is in this cultural context that the #AltWoke project was born, from the efforts of a heterogenous collective called ANON that comprises theorists, activists, artists, and sex workers. Most notably, the collective published a complex manifesto that addresses the memetic difficulties of the Left and argues for an accelerationist attitude towards the cultural warfare against the alt-right. The manifesto combines a taste for complex philosophical issues (around economic systems, automation, and AI) with a strong emphasis on the power of pop culture, especially African-American.

However, the collective's attitude towards intersectionality is critical of certain popular discourse. In the companion to their manifesto, ANON write: “if you think intersectionality is a numbers game, then you are doing identity politics wrong” (ANON, 2017b). They clarified that position and other issues in a Skype interview.

> “At the time it was written because we were seeing various strands of the Left looking towards literal representation on TV and stuff as political ends, and they thought: 'This is it!'. Prior to the manifesto, all throughout New York there was this ad campaign by Calvin Klein, called #inmycalvins. It had lots of young Internet celebrities – trans, people of color, etc. It had statements like 'I break binaries', next to this hashtag #inmycalvins. This is meaningful for small kids or people who don't have someone to look up to that looks like them, but it has to be deeper than that. You need to have people who are explicitly anti-capitalist, it's not enough to have certain people there.”

The skepticism towards this type of hashtag politics also drove ANON to create #AltWoke and #BlackPopMatters. Consistently with their attitude, they have an ambivalent relationship with them.

> “In terms of tagging there is this idea that the Left can't meme, which is mostly true. Another thing would be: can the Right hashtag? The difference between a meme and a hashtag is that a meme will change from person to person to person. This simulacra, this degraded, jarring image, the quality of the jpg will change overtime and become unrecognisable from its source. With the hashtag there is something more permament to it. It has the communicability you have in taxonomy, something resonant like #metoo for example. The meaning remains the same across people who use it – not sure if it moves away from ontology, but it is certainly a vector of the narrative. Another advantage is it's trackable – how many people are in dialogue with it, how many people are engaging with it, you can establish some metrics. In a certain sense we critique this hashtag culture, but we embrace and recognise its memetic power. A hashtag is a grammatical meme. It's able to communicate and link between different subjects. In a way it is a hashtag against hashtags.”

ANON thus recognise the affordances of tagging and try to leverage its memetic potential. However, there are significant obstacles in establishing a common political meaning on social media. While the collective communicates and receives support from some of the cultural figures mentioned in the AltWoke Manifesto – which range from David Harvey to musician Holly Herndon – they've also come across their own hashtag associated to dissonant discourses.

> “What's interesting is this woman, Katie Halper, she started using the term, but she did it incorrectly and without knowing what the proper attribution was. She was using #AltWoke as a way to demonise mainstream democrats. She has since stopped using it, but people are still using it in that sense too. But we see that as positive, because the way we use it now is so open-ended too, and the way they use it is not. They attach it to liberal democrats, but the hashtag is just arbitrarily placed. So are they describing liberal democrats as alt-woke, or are they contributing to our critique of liberal democrats? We tried to justify it in our head that when its open-ended like that it helps our stated goals with respect to #AltWoke in the way that we use it. We would like other people to contribute to it outside of us, that certainly helps.”

As a label, #AltWoke is meant as a catalyst for a range of tactical practices, represented by a general “accelerationist” attitude: using the infrastructure against itself – or, as Galloway would say, pushing protocol into overdrive. I asked ANON what that entails in terms of the practice of the everyday on social media.

> “On a personal, everyday level, what kind of framing would be an alt-woke methodology? Definitely something political in response to the tactics that we describe in the manifesto, equal parts humor, equal parts fear. We don't really want to lay out a plan, we don't know what will happen. Some of us are immigrants, some of us are sex workers, we don't want to take a big risk like that. Individual topics that we discussed are selling products to the right, new topics for tactical survival, a scamming network, a 501 organisation, a foundation allocating resources – acknowledging what capitalism is, using what capitalism is, for a goal that ultimately works against capital.”

The reliance on capitalism as a sustaining system seems to be a necessary alternative to the Left's infrastructural weakness.

> “That's the drawback of the Left, there is no infrastructural power to it. The best that we have, at least in America, is rich liberal democrats that make the right choice. Hillary Clinton was framed as the lesser of two evils, but Bernie Sanders was the lesser of two evils. They are not infrastructural options. Someone is going to have to compete with Silicon Valley.”

In this sense, ANON is on the same page of Srnicek and Williams (2015), who argue for a reclamation of hegemonic status. However, while Silicon Valley has the most “infrastructural power”, the Right seems to have the liveliest cultural energy, at least in terms of Internet-savvy politics.

> “The alt-right is a reaction to liberalism, capital, and the local failures of those projects. The disenfranchised middle class, the working class... Richard Spencer and Paul Guthrie invented the term in 2007 and Nick Land released the Dark Enlightenment in 2012, after the first 4 years of the Obama administration. That was their Trump moment, they are reacting to that. A lot of us went to a very theory-heavy school, and at the time very activist-based. We all felt uncomfortable with their approach to these ideas. There is something undeniably entertaining, exciting and libidinal, energetic about these aesthetics. It's always very entertaining and interesting to observe. Now it's no longer just something you watch.”

ANON's fascination with aesthetics and energy also concerns the drafting of theories that are both fit to represent the contemporary predicament and capture the imagination. Former Cyber-Culture Research Unit scholar, Right Accelerationist theorist, and theory-fiction pioneer Nick Land is among the main referents in this sense. Land's most influential concept is that of “hyperstition” (Land, 2011), describing the injection of particular ideas that spread through culture in a way similar to Dawkins' memes, but igniting more apocalyptic cycles of change. Along with his imaginative, hybrid style – indebted to Deleuze and Guattari – Land is notable for inspiring conservative thinkers like Trump advisor Steven Bannon and the infamous alt-right.

> “To Nick Land's credit, what he's always been good at doing is he was able to surround himself with young people, because he understands where traditional thought kind of falls short. Really the closest thing to that energetic, libidinal, attractive thing that Marxism had was Slavoj Žižek, but he is again... he pales in comparison to Nick Land. The imagery is his skill, while the Left is very dull. If you wanna go back to the 1800 and talk about Marx it probably sounds like sci-fi. It sounds strange now. I believe that most people who read Nick Land don't even understand what they read.”

The libidinal, countercultural appeal of accelerationist thought fits well with social media and their memetic potential. ANON explain quite well what they mean by accelerationist versus decelerationist media.

> “Something like Tumblr... anything that is visual based is good social media. Media like Twitter or Facebook are decelerationist because there are rules, but there are no rules on Snapchat as far as we know. Only if people are committing a crime, if you're not snapchatting a murder you are fine. People who do sex work rely on Snapchat for income. Instagram and Tumblr as well. It is accelerationist in that you can promote things really quickly and there are few restrictions and limitations.

> Unlike Facebook, which is highly bureaucratic. It is accelerationist insofar as it locks you in this weird Pavlovian feedback, where once you're on it it becomes impossible to leave, your neurology is changed by that interaction. Facebook is very neoreactionary."

ANON's accelerationist focus is thus a way to critically assess the ideological and tactical purchase of social media platforms, making a type of infrastructural critique similar to what Bratton does in the Stack, but with a much stronger focus on disenfranchised identities and radical politics, which is embodied by their hashtags. At times contradictory and decidedly utopian, the AltWoke Manifesto and ANON's hashtag work gesture towards a Leftist problematisation of social networks that is both materialist and identity-focused.

Materialising Accountability

As discussed in earlier chapters, labelling as a form of social stigma is a crucial concept in early theories of identity construction. Social media do play a role in that, thus providing a chance to materialise complex issues that require public debate. Artist Simon Boas has been working on the themes of accountability, consent, and privacy for several years, sometimes touching upon stereotype and identity as well.

Working with fellow artist and art director Kris Blackmore as Midgray, Boas has created a definition generator of the word "terrorist" that sources mentions across a range of media to expose the vagueness and contradictory character of the term.

> "Growing up in the Bush years, some friends of ours had to face charges because the FBI was acting on animal activists as well as terrorism. All these different definition of terrorist were going around at the time. The whole project was also about the Muslim ban, xenophobia... So we took a bunch of those definitions to create an absurdist definition of terrorist, which clearly doesn't mean anything anymore."

Boas started tackling accountability and privacy in the *Voyeuroboros* project. He harvested the profile pictures of all the users following and liking pictures on a mugshot website's Facebook page. Then, he printed and stacked the photos to be displayed in a gallery, where the visitors picking them up and looking at them are also captured on camera as they take part in the voyeurism chain.

> "There's a lot of mugshot websites, which are pretty uniquely American I think. Even if you're not convicted you get your picture taken and, as I understand it, it briefly appears on a public database – even if you get it expunged later. People make these bots, scrape the data, upload it, and make ads around them. In many

cases they extort people for money, they want people to pay them to remove the mugshot. They often don't. Some states are making it illegal, but it's a slow process."

Boas' work targets the same issue as Paolo Cirio's *Obscurity* (2016), which displays millions of mugshot photos from such websites, removes all the data, and blurs the faces. The initiative also started a movement for the right to remove personal information from search engines.

"I was very interested in that project, but I kind of wanted to do something that has more consequence for people. I'm interested in this idea of anonymity on the Internet, the fact that if nothing is ever tied to what you say then there's no repercussion for saying or doing anything online."

If mugshot websites entangle the individuals pictured in a network of supposed criminals, the project captures the page's followers as voyeurs, exposing them in a similarly vague category. If being arrested for any type of charge is deemed enough to be included in the former category, the banal gesture of liking a page is enough to enter the latter.

"What I learned the first time I showed it, is you have these layers: the police database, the mugshot site, Facebook, and finally the gallery. The gallery is a very specific middle, upper-middle class group of people, people on Facebook tend to appear socio-economically a little lower than that, and the people arrested are lower than them. So it's a comment on what's a gross practice, but also a comment on how we separate ourselves from these practices, saying 'Oh, that's gross,' while there's lots of disgusting things we do, too. So we should think about all these things and how they work together in a system."

Fig. 5.8 – Installation view of *Yes in Disguise* (2016) by Midgray.

Boas and Blackmore's most layered effort is, however, their ongoing research on sexual consent in male US culture, as reflected in online dating profiles. The project is especially timely in the wake of the #metoo movement, a cultural catalyst that does not directly inform the project but is nonetheless part of the same social awakening.

The initial phase of the project was titled *Yes In Disguise* (fig. 5.8) and stemmed from the question: "Does no always mean no?", which users of the popular dating site OkCupid often answer as part of their profile creation. One of the answers offered by the platform is in fact "A No is occasionally really a Yes in disguise". The artists scraped profile data from a series of OkCupid users who selected the answer along with other problematic ones, reaching a certain "misogyny score", and then printed the information on a series of cards featuring name, picture, and a quote from the profile.

> "I had a whole list of questions on those cards and if they answered at least five of them the way we were looking for, then it would save the whole profile as text and then we would make the card. There was a kind of misogyny score, it had to break five positive matches to question-answer pairs from a pool I had made of OkCupid questions about gender, equality, sex, etc."

The project pushes some boundaries, also in terms of privacy, but Boas stands by the decision to offer that kind of representation as a way to promote dialogue about the issue.

> "That was a conscious decision. It is in many cases entirely unfair to the individuals behind it. In Europe it got kinda weird, like 'You're clearly violating their privacy.' Here people are more used to it because there is much more of a neoliberal approach to privacy. The fact that I was working with people who were saying horrible stuff about women, or people who were in many cases laughing on the misfortune of other people online, you kind of get a pass on it. At least with the groups I was working on this with. I'm not entirely comfortable with that, but I keep doing this because it's interesting."

Another interesting aspect of the project is that, beyond the call-out factor, it addresses misogyny as a systemic problem.

> "There are some people who don't necessarily fit the textbook definition of misogyny, but just have some very regressive views. Which is what the work is about too, that's got to be talked about. Misogyny is not just one thing, it's internalised and it's a cultural issue and we're failing ourselves for not talking about it at the right time, especially with young men. Just because you are not a rapist or

you don’t hit someone or you don’t say those horrible things, it doesn’t mean you're not exercising misogyny.”

Boas also considers the very design of the OkCupid questionnaire as worthy of critique.

> “It's not very carefully done. The ‘no means no’ one... there's three answers for ‘not always’ and one answer for ‘always’. Whoever wrote that thinks it's a reflection of the culture... but it's also creating the world. Why not shift it towards three versions of yes, with more nuances? The spread of those four answers is interesting.”

As an artist and a former journalist, Boas does feel a responsibility in terms of contributing to the conversation, but feels the platforms are also to be held accountable.

> “My view is those providing the service have all the power there, they respond to certain things and they shape the culture and the world and they could do a lot better, they should be doing a bit more. I haven't had a situation so far that anybody whose likeness I have captured has been hurt. That has been a bit by design, I'm reasonably certain that those people are not coming to our show for example. My ideal is that all of us should talk about this.”

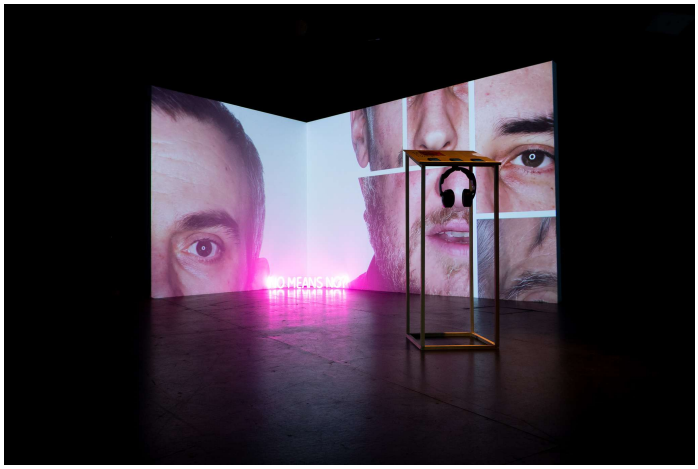


Fig. 5.9 – Installation view of *No in Disguise* (2018) by Midgray.

That is why he and Blackmore have been digging deeper in the new iteration of their research. Their most recent work, *No in Disguise* (fig. 5.9), is more aesthetically and discursively nuanced. After narrowing down relevant users, Blackmore would approach them about their opinions through the app’s chat system.

> “I used a lot of the same codes, but instead of having five questions I only used two, the ‘no means no’ one and ‘is someone ever obligated to have sex with you’ one, because they're very direct. But instead of downloading the data it would

return usernames of people to talk to. She would approach them and ask them: ‘Can I talk to you for a moment? Why do you think that?’ And people said things like ‘you can't force someone, but if you are in a marriage or a relationship you have total permission.’ That reveals a whole set of problems as well, but it reveals more about the nuances that are happening there, and having the one answer for ‘no means no always’ and three that say ‘not always’. Everyone who talked to us we kept totally anonymous, that's a big contrast with the cards. The idea there is there's a lot more of those people in that stuff. The point is not the individuals.”

That reflects in terms of gallery display as well. The work is in fact presented as an installation, centred on a video collage that portrays a composite male face, made of randomised features from an array of male faces. The result is a collective yet anonymised subject embodying male culture – a very effective visual rendition of a cultural avatar.

“It’s not about wanting people to say ‘this person thinks this’. There's a whole part of US male culture that thinks this way. Don’t worry about the identity of that person, beyond the fact that they're masculine-presenting on that dating site. So that's not about individual identity, as opposed to the first one which was about calling someone out. The second project is about using the same tools to have a broader conversation.”

The project also involved Blackmore’s presence as a woman asking those questions to men, which added a performative and human dimension to it. The subjects depicted in the video details, who were a new set of people from the artists’ circle of acquaintances who read the answers of the interviewees aloud, also gave some input when asked by Boas how they related to the content they were reading. That contributes to spinning the conversation into a wider cycle.

Boas notes there is a tactical dimension to his and Blackmore’s work.

“That issue within the privacy discourse, that's an exercise in taking all the tools that we created for that application and use them to do things they were not doing otherwise. The work that Kris and I do is pretty much targeting advertising techniques and using them to try and do some social good. Kris works in advertising, I worked in online news, social media news, all we do is just pretty much make things that are cheap to make and people will watch so they can put ads around them. So how can two people use these tactics, developed by huge corporations, to try and do something that is at least beneficial to them. That's the guiding principle: repurpose those tools to have conversations.”

The statement mentioned above is exemplary of the ethos behind my own research project: using social media to re-politicise its infrastructure and open it to a critical conversation about its societal implications.

(Machine) Learning Stereotypes

Social media tagging is not only something we do in order to promote our content or participate in a public debate: it is baked in the very logic of machine learning. When we tag we train algorithms, we form stereotypes that contribute to artificial intelligence. From Google's controversial misreading of black people as gorillas to Facebook's automatic image-tagging algorithm, the visual and the cultural are clumsily converging in ways that increasingly demand a renegotiation of the relationship between humans and machines. Scholars have been paying more and more attention to this issue: as mentioned in earlier chapters, Finn (2017) writes about culture machines – assemblages of abstractions, processes and people – and highlights the importance of an experimental humanities approach to the critical analysis of algorithms, while Chun (2016, 2018) highlights the need for a rediscovery of history and identity politics within the realm of big data and pattern recognition.

Max Dovey has been doing just that: working with stereotypes, tags, and algorithms in live settings, the UK-based artist has tried to define the “hipster” stereotype algorithmically, find out what makes a person male or female in a computer's eyes, and highlight the human labour necessary for machine learning. I spoke to him about his main focus as an artist and how tagging and labelling play into his own creative practices.

> “I try and raise awareness about the cracks of concern where technological acceleration is faster than our capability to evaluate the system in a social or political way – the gap between anticipation of technology and its eventual arrival and disruption. For example, trying to see how technology actually feels, what is the bodily experience of an algorithmic policy or a crypto mining rig. I work with physical performances and live scenarios, getting people together off screen to encounter algorithmic or non-physical agents in order to examine them and reflect on them critically.”

Fig. 5.10 – The entrance to Dovey's *Hipster Bar* (2015).

Dovey's works *How to Be More or Less Human* (2015) and *A Hipster Bar* (2015) tackle stereotypes and how algorithms interpret them. The former deals with the individual struggle of the human body to enter a dialogue with software. Both pieces relates to what Ed Finn discusses as culture machines and algorithmic imagination, but the artist is skeptical about using the term “imagination” in regard to artificial intelligence.

> “I'm not sure about the word “imagination” in the context of algorithms. I think there is a lot of spectacular hype given towards these machine dreams, with people commentating they think this is the visual aesthetic of machines dreaming, but when people say “machinic imagination” I immediately think about the trial and error training used in machine learning (specifically neural networks). I wouldn't necessarily categorise the processes implied in that as “imagination”, but rather brute force determination.”

The role of humans in the algorithm training process is crucial to Dovey's poetic. In *A Hipster Bar* (fig. 5.10) the main clash is between the definition of a stereotype like “hipster” and the way an algorithm creates its own idea of such a deeply cultural construct.

> “The premise was to choose a cultural stereotype that I thought would be impossible to train an algorithm to recognise. I thought, slightly naively, that my own definition of 'hipster' – a term used to describe anyone you didn't really like – was universal because people would often use it in a negative way. I didn't perceive the visual characteristics or that there was a visual cultural stereotype.

> Then I got to scraping Instagram and I accumulated a dataset by downloading all images that contained the hashtag '#hipster'. I used the hashtag as a search term to navigate myself through an enormous amount of hipster imagery on social media, but unfortunately there were a lot of pictures of dogs, avocados, and coffee cups."

The issue led Dovey to have some methodological doubts.

> "I did not want to bring my subjective interpretation into the process of accumulating training data for the hipster recognition algorithm, however, whenever I showed other people the training data for their thoughts and feedback, people would always have very differing views on who or what counted or could be classified as 'hipster'. Everyone had their own subjective bias, so in the end I just went back to letting the data decide and not filtering or moderating it too much: as long as the image had a face and was posted using the #hipster tag it entered the initial training sample. I wanted it to be like that, to show how tagging can congregate these stereotypes, but as the project has gone on I have had to do some interventions and curate the dataset slightly – mainly to keep the data based on the original instagram images, because everytime I install the piece somewhere I submit those images back into the data libraries. I would say approximately 80-85% of the sample came from Instagram through automatic web scraping scripts, but then I had to manually add some advertising stuff like clothing brands and fashion items. I occasionally go through and make sure they are still full of human faces, but I don't spend too much time debating who is or who isn't a hipster, as the algorithm has already decided and individual opinion is by far too subjective."

The hybridity of the sample is only one issue. Another big problem is the very definition of a "hipster" against something that is not a "hipster". This has a level of cultural specificity: not only it usually takes a hipster to know a hipster, but the word has slightly different connotations depending on context.

> "The main problem was I also needed a visual database of non-hipsters to compare every photo to, in order for the image recognition type 2 classifier to work effectively. To work out what it is you have to know what it's not, so to recognise a hipster you need to have a sense of what a 'non hipster' looks like. I had to have a folder of non-hipsters, and that was the really difficult part. Stuff tagged #nonhipster on Instagram was in fact, in my opinion, much more hipster than the stuff under #hipster. The latter felt a lot more relevant, because people in the West ironically subvert the term by tagging content as #nonhipster, which then yields much better results in a strange way. #Hipster has a more global reach, with more

Chinese and Asian and Eastern interpretations of the stereotype that were new to me."

This factor also contributes to making the algorithmic rendition of a cultural stereotype a failing endeavour.

"Again, that goes back to my naivety, not knowing what the visual characteristics of the term were. Since 2016 I more or less updated the software three times, with new images every time. Now it's kind of supervised learning: once I save all the metadata from everybody that comes to the bar I have the images saved and added to one of the two folders, according to the choice the algorithm has made. Occasionally I give some moderation, going through the data to make sure they're still in order. But then I feel uncomfortable because I become the judge, which is not the initial intention of the work and the more I can keep the algorithm a reinforcement of online classification the better. Otherwise you might as well have a human bouncer deciding who is a hipster and who is admitted into the bar."

Fig. 5.11 – An image from *Hot to Be More of Less Human* (2015).

In *How to Be More or Less Human* (fig. 5.11) Dovey submitted his own body to algorithmic judgement and, quite literally, tagging.

"In *How to be More or Less Human* the audience are present and see me perform with this image-recognition software that is image-tagging me, while I'm trying to conform to the software's stereotypes about what it's been trained to recognise as either male or female. They watch a human performer struggling to be fitted within the confines of an image recognition tag. The piece shows how the tag and classification itself are predetermined, but they can also be tricked and fooled by

> doing simple things like removing a tie or carrying a briefcase – simply giving these decoy objects to the webcam for the dataset to be fooled into saying something which is not true, in order to highlight software bias. I feel that the audience experiences the wider social critique when I finally remove my clothes and assume a very vulnerable position, the desperate position of a performer who wants to be recognised as 100% man. Perhaps there is always that urge to be easily classified, easily searchable, Googlable, page-ranked, so we can be tracked and traced and sorted – and remembered, essentially."

Human-software relationships are also complicated by repeated interaction, which made the critique of the process increasingly difficult for Dovey. The more he performed, the more the algorithm learned the specifics of his body and fed them back into the software.

> "This process is an unintentional side effect of performing with machine learning algorithms. While highlighting a critical concern about algorithmic bias and performing this concern over and over again, you essentially contribute to developing and accidentally training AI algorithms. I was originally doing that with a commercial image tagging software service and was fascinated with how the software (in)correctly identified gender. After repeatedly doing the performance, in which my gender is interpreted by image recognition software until it mistakes my naked body as woman and female, my body became ingrained into the database. I had not considered that, since the images I was taking were being sent to the software company via their web API, copies of those images would become training data for other image recognition applications. So now the performance does not exist anymore, but the software has upgraded to version 2 and now it recognises my body as male. That is also why I moved to different topics. In the performance it got harder and harder to show the software's mistakes, to the point where I wound up contorsioning my body to strange positions in a way that wasn't interesting or insightful for an audience. With version 1 I was exposing the software, but as the show went on the algorithm had a lot more control, it was getting more familiar with my body, so the punchline of the piece – which was incorrectness – was getting lost. So I ended up just looking really, really silly. It's good when you have a whole audience highlighting that. So the work helped improve the algorithm to recognise nude male bodies, played a role in helping by defining the tags, introducing the tags, developing and enforcing those tags – which is also interesting in terms of labour.

Work is another recurring theme within Dovey's work. In the game show *HITs (Human Intelligence Tasks),* the artist addresses the issue of free labour, which is

often brought up when discussing the relationship between proprietary platforms providing a “free” service to their users and the role of such users in the accumulation of “free” data and computing power. Dovey tackles the topic in his characteristically performative way.

> “In that show the audience compete against each other and two teams try and make an image recognition algorithm in one hour. We go through the human labour involved with accumulating the data, categorising the data, and then essentially building an image-recognition application. We started off with this narrative from the Flickr community, when the platform introduced auto-tagging. It's in the game show, we present it in the beginning. Basically, Flickr got sold to Yahoo! and the only way Yahoo! saw any monetisation of this platform was to start using those images as training data for image recognition algorithms to sell later on. There was a huge debate in the community about the feature, with users really lashing out at the mods because they hated auto-tagging so much and it was making all these mistakes. But Flickr continued to use auto-tagging because they needed the software to improve, so the users could only correct it. Basically they turned their users into cognitive labourers in exchange for a free platform, and some people even made that argument in the comments saying things like: 'We get the service for free, so what's the problem if we are just making a few corrections'. It's a very interesting swindle, how the web 2.0 companies of the last 10 years have had to manoeuvre into something more profitable, while ads were being centralised by Google and other competing platforms had to go to AI. So we wanted to perform this labour in a show, with people doing it in a fun way, but also highlighting something that happens and is not particularly picked up on. There's a few rounds: the first is downloading images from Flickr, the second is doing a sentence to describe them, with the audience typing very quickly against the clock, and then the third round is for the developers to look at the sentences and work from there. It's a bit like Exquisite Corpses, the Surrealist game.”

The combination of a live, physical interaction with issues pertaining digital environments is a key element within Dovey's poetic.

> “There is a very personal reason why I always use performance and focus on experience design. It's mainly because my preferred mode of art practice is live, experiential art. Using it to explore critical concerns in technology and culture can sometimes be a bit of a cheap trick, if you're just highlighting the physicality, taking the fish out of water by printing out the datasets to point out the difference between the material and the immaterial. We try to avoid that. The main thing for me is the interpersonal relations, which become quite absurd. If you were denied

> access to a website for any reason, you would simply just move on and that automated rejection wouldn't have been witnessed by anybody. But when you create a space where these decisions can be experienced with a collective audience – again, the Hipster Bar, with other people already in it – it suddenly makes the algorithmic decision-making of non-human agents more public, and these decisions are involved in other areas of life as well. I think it's interesting to bring an audience together around those interactions to study them and see it's a bit silly. Even the practice of live coding, for example, people going to an algo-rave – they have different motivations, but they are experiencing the process of working with machinic culture in a live setting. It's a lot more productive and enigmatic than just making more online content. I'm still a firm believer in the power and potential of meatspace relationships. I think most people would agree too. That's where I try to situate the art."

As with Boas and Blackmore, Dovey's work does not tackle social network activity directly, but spins everyday processes that happen online into a wider conversation that tackles not only the power structures overarching user activity, but the very social compulsion to share and belong.

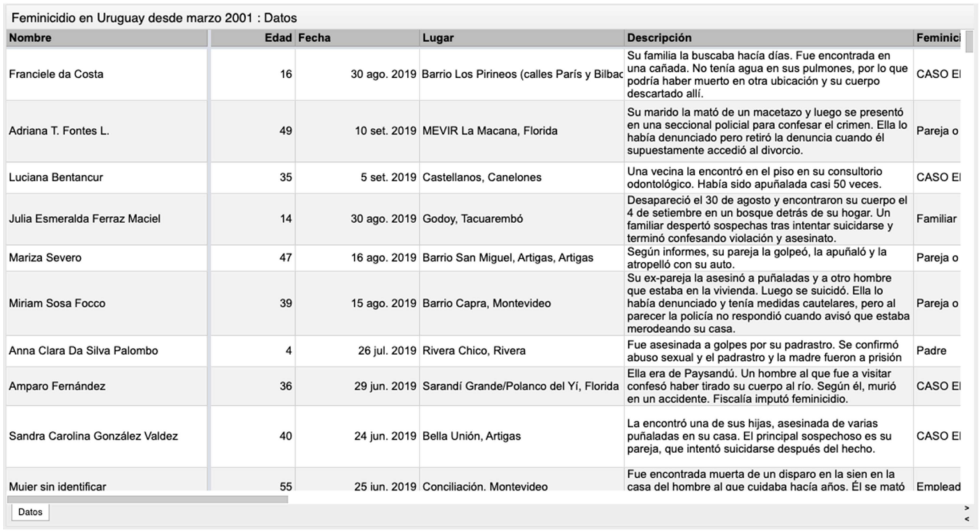
Feminist Politics of (Geo)Location

The chapter about the Digital Nomad dissected the practice of geo-tagging, asking what kind of politics of location might be enacted through it. In particular, I discussed the notion of Stack (Bratton, 2015), a brilliant conceptual visualisation of how software scrambles the concept of sovereignty worldwide. Here, I wish to understand how geo-tagging relates to the "politics of location" introduced by poet and essayist Adrienne Rich in the 1980s and referring to the situatedness of female experience. The anti-universalist claim made by Rich – one can only speak from and for their own perspective and experience – has since become hugely influential on feminist, postmodern, and postcolonial theory, and has notably been adopted by Rosi Braidotti in her discussion of nomadic subjects and nomadic theory.

It is specifically because our experiences have become more interconnected and hyper-represented than ever, I believe, that it is useful to put these two differing perspectives in a productive dialogue with each other. For this reason, I have talked about how the practice of geo-tagging can become extremely fraught with feminist activist and academic Helena Suárez Val, who is doing a PhD at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Methodologies at Warwick University. Helena's research stems from her own mapping of feminicides – intentional killings of females because they are females – in her native Uruguay, an endeavour rooted in her background as both an

activist and a programmer. By using geotagging to invest a location of the urgency that only the situated lives – and deaths – of victims of feminicide can give it, Helena is stitching together the Stack and the politics of location introduced by Rich. While not an artistic project per se, her exploration of geotagging also touches upon the political potential of aesthetics, among many other things.

> “What I'm looking at right now are different spreadsheets that are used by governments or activists to record cases of “feminicide” – homicides of women where there are gender-related aspects. There are other names for the category, and that's where the mess starts: sometimes it's “feminicide”, others “femicide”, sometimes “feminicidal violence”... Governments still talk about domestic violence or gender-related violence, as well. There are different categories and characteristics, but they also overlap and interact in complicated ways. Especially in Latin-America, “feminicide” and “femicide” are used indistinctly, often with a slash as well (“femicide/feminicide”), which creates the mess. The mess is also in the data itself: how you record the data, what you record, what you call those things you are recording... I'm looking at those things in terms of classification, but also in terms of ontology as well – what entities and properties emerge from these datasets. And trying to see if these categories and properties in the datasets actually correspond to the categories that these datasets claim to represent.”



Feminicidio en Uruguay desde marzo 2001 : Datos

Nombre	Edad	Fecha	Lugar	Descripción	Feminici
Franciele da Costa	16	30 ago. 2019	Barrio Los Pirineos (calles París y Bilbac	Su familia la buscaba hacía días. Fue encontrada en una cañada. No tenía agua en sus pulmones, por lo que podría haber muerto en otra ubicación y su cuerpo descartado allí.	CASO El
Adriana T. Fontes L.	49	10 set. 2019	MEVIR La Macana, Florida	Su marido la mató de un macetazo y luego se presentó en una seccional policial para confesar el crimen. Ella lo había denunciado pero retiró la denuncia cuando él supuestamente accedió al divorcio.	Pareja o
Luciana Bentancur	35	5 set. 2019	Castellanos, Canelones	Una vecina la encontró en el piso en su consultorio odontológico. Había sido apuñalada casi 50 veces.	CASO El
Julia Esmeralda Ferraz Maciel	14	30 ago. 2019	Godoy, Tacuarembó	Desapareció el 30 de agosto y encontraron su cuerpo el 4 de setiembre en un bosque detrás de su hogar. Un familiar despertó sospechas tras intentar suicidarse y terminó confesando violación y asesinato.	Familiar
Mariza Severo	47	16 ago. 2019	Barrio San Miguel, Artigas, Artigas	Según informes, su pareja la golpeó, la apuñaló y la atropelló con su auto.	Pareja o
Miriam Sosa Focco	39	15 ago. 2019	Barrio Capra, Montevideo	Su ex-pareja la asesinó a puñaladas y a otro hombre que estaba en la vivienda. Luego se suicidó. Ella lo había denunciado y tenía medidas cautelares, pero al parecer la policía no respondió cuando avisó que estaba merodeando su casa.	Pareja o
Anna Clara Da Silva Palombo	4	26 jul. 2019	Rivera Chico, Rivera	Fue asesinada a golpes por su padrastro. Se confirmó abuso sexual y el padrastro y la madre fueron a prisión	Padre
Amparo Fernández	36	29 jun. 2019	Sarandí Grande/Polanco del Yí, Florida	Ella era de Paysandú. Un hombre al que fue a visitar confesó haber tirado su cuerpo al río. Según él, murió en un accidente. Fiscalía imputó feminicidio.	CASO El
Sandra Carolina González Valdez	40	24 jun. 2019	Bella Unión, Artigas	La encontró una de sus hijas, asesinada de varias puñaladas en su casa. El principal sospechoso es su pareja, que intentó suicidarse después del hecho.	CASO El
Mujer sin identificar	55	25 jun. 2019	Conciliación. Montevideo	Fue encontrada muerta de un disparo en la sien en la casa del hombre al que cuidaba hacía años. Él se mató	Emplead

Datos

Fig. 5.12 – An example of the spreadsheets the Feminicidio Uruguay geo-tags are based upon.

Apart from the categorical organisation of the data that Helena is analysing (fig. 5.12), the formatting of the output as open data and the related politics are also important.

> “The government dataset was published as open data earlier this year and it refers only to 2018. I am also looking at my own records as an activist, which include data from 2001 to today – it's not really open data, but the motivation to start this project also came after an invitation by WikiData to put data in there and make it open. By that I mean making it reusable, accessible... and one of the requirements is that there is a description of the dataset, metadata that makes people understand what the dataset is about. Open data is also a political movement, it has to do with transparency and accountability. You enter a different world.”

Helena is an activist first and an academic second, and this background informs her practice in meaningful ways, especially in terms of motivation; she is also a programmer, though, which in turn affected her research in terms of know-how, encouraging her to adopt a tactical approach to geo-tagging (fig. 5.13).

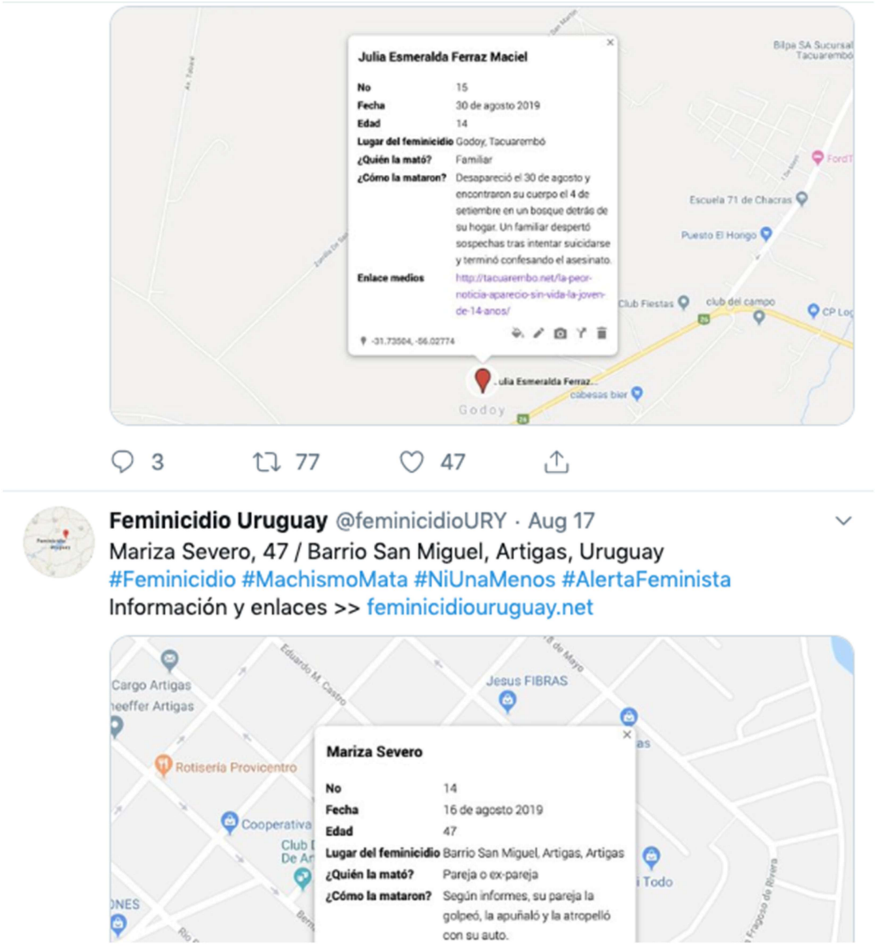


Fig. 5.13 – Feminicidio Uruguay's Twitter feed, showing both geo-tagged content and hashtags.

> “The activist definitely came first. I did not enter into higher education until I was 40. I was a programmer, and in my 20s I started working with NGOs, but my main involvement with feminist movements was when I came back to Uruguay in 2012. Then I got super-involved, and one of the things I started doing was mapping

these cases of feminicides as part of a collective work with other activists. After a couple of years I decided that I wanted to think about it, so I started studying it. It emerged out of a need to create a communicative object that would be more visual, more interesting than a spreadsheet – that is what we originally had. We were coming out on the streets of Montevideo every time a woman was killed and the spreadsheet was only a part of our other activities. We wanted to have a visual representation of the cases and that's how I started making the maps. It also started because of my own existing skill-set as a web developer: I had done some courses on data journalism and I knew how to use Google Maps and make infographics and so on. Because of the need and these skills, the map format came about. I also decided to come back to the UK – it's curious, because I'm also trying to establish a distance from my work. I still continue to do it, but I'm not as involved, I do it remotely."

In more scholarly terms, the element of cartography is especially fraught in Latin America and its relationship with feminism is thus especially interesting (fig. 5.14).

"I developed an answer after I started doing it. I did not want to make a map because it was a map, I wanted something visual. Somebody could say I could have made a graph, or a timeline. I knew Google Maps and I had taken this class, so I knew how to do it. Nothing is ever as simple as that, though, and in retrospect I've been thinking a lot about it. I've analysed other data collection projects by feminist activist on specifically gender-related murders and what I found in all these years of Googling different initiatives, is that most of the activist data representations from Latin America seem to end up being maps, whereas a lot of the activist representations from other places are different – it's more difficult to find maps, it's usually blogs or databases. I think there is a strong relationship with the map in Latin America: the whole notion of the map was invented with colonialism, and the so-called discovery of this new continent that was mapped and called America. So this idea of the map and colonialism and the territory are very, very important in the landscape of feminist activism in that continent in particular. For example, if we're talking about the body as a territory – if you say that to a feminist in Latin America they are immediately with you, you don't have to explain what you mean. And then you have the uses of the map as an activist form in Latin America, the emblematic upside-down map of South America created by the Uruguayan painter Joaquìn Torres Garcia. The simple answer is I knew how to do it, but also I am constructed as a feminist Latin American activist through all of these other linkages and interactions between the idea of the territory, colonialism, and the coloniality of gender."

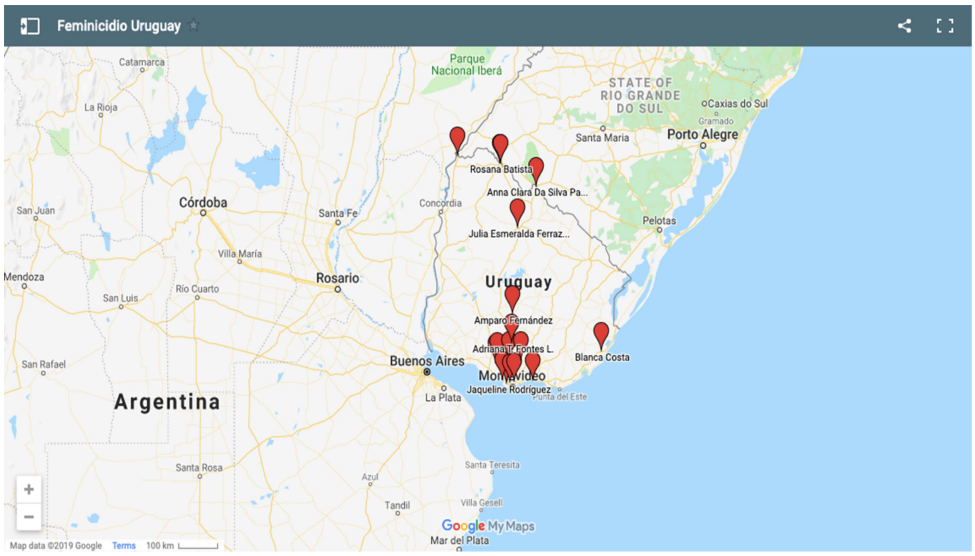


Fig. 5.14 – The Feminicidio Uruguay map from a wider perspective.

This aspect is especially relevant to intersectionality, an aspect that this thesis has touched upon several times.

> “There is this writer, María Lugones, who uses this term – la *colonialidad del género*, the coloniality of gender – and she uses the term interchangeably with intersectionality. We definitely understand violence against women as a product of gender in interaction with race, age, class, gender identity, and all these other categories. Mapping cases of feminicide is imbued in all that understanding. And, as a parenthesis, in a way what I'm trying to elucidate in my research is how much understanding really transpires through the maps – am I just holding it in my head and it is not conveyed strongly through these data structures? Am I, is the data, actually saying all the things I want to say, or do these structures come short in explaining all of it?”

The need for visuality is thus not only a push towards more data efficiency. While Helena's work is not conceived as art, aesthetics does seem to play a role within it.

> “In some of my work I've taken inspiration from Bifo, he said something about refrain and *ritournelle* and poetics. I've looked at feminicide as a refrain, we chant in the street against it, it's used as a rhetorical and poetic and aesthetic device. The flip side of that is the idea of rhythm, and these cases follow a particular rhythm, each location has similar patterns that you start to notice. There is a poetics in your work whether you like it or not, but I understand the point of whether it is intentional or not. That's why I'm interested in reflecting a bit more on it, because what's not happening in the mapping – because it was an urgent work, I did not pay attention to the visuality – is there are no “frills.” I used the standard Google markers, while in Mexico for example the markers have different colours,

different icons... sometimes they use crosses, or guns or knives as markers. I think the aesthetics of it are something I'm interested in, because I feel I haven't thought about it enough in my own work. I don't like to make hard distinctions like “I'm an activist” or “I'm an academic”. “Artist” is the label that I resisted the most in my life, but actually what does it mean to be an artist? I'm a producer, I've produced theatre pieces, protest performances as well, so I'm very involved with artists. At the end of the day the aesthetic object exists insofar as there is an aesthetic encounter, so when someone encounters that map, will they see it as art, activism, a performance? It's the encounter that will make it what it is.”

The aesthetic quality of the mapping might conflict with the openness of the data in ways that are unpredictable: in other words, how open the data is and how much of the victim is represented creates an unresolved tension within the project. It is crucial, then, to achieve a certain awareness of what the object or subject of the mapping is.

“I don't think [that] can ever be resolved to everybody's satisfaction, so I can only do it to my satisfaction. Is this an ethical way of doing it or my ethical way of doing it? I don't know. Part of the discussion I had when I was invited to work with WikiData is: what is the data about? When you are foregrounding the violence – you put a gun or a knife – you make it into a thing. In activist's works among which my work is situated – the mapping of feminicide – it tends to be the woman that is foregrounded. Showing data to represent the extent of the issue, but also to respect and remember the lives of these women. That's super tense, because you're straight away doing things that might not be “right.” You say you want to respect them, but by putting them in a map they will always be remembered as victims of feminicide, which they might not have agreed with, or their friends and families might disagree with. Somewhere in between is where I think I would be OK. Putting the data in WikiData is very important, since in order to understand the phenomenon you need data about the phenomenon, which is useful to formulate public policy, activist responses, or joint actions between activists and governments. What is representative is the case, the actual deed, something having happened, that is called feminicide and in which certain actors are involved. We're thinking the data should foreground a fact, a deed, *un hecho*, and we are also part of that event, and so is the government, the media, the rest of society as passive onlookers. I don't know how all of that can go into WikiData.”

The aesthetic element of mapping also involves different kinds of performativity.

“Doing the maps is performative also in the way that you are thinking about, it's a performance. I went into it a bit more in my MA dissertation at Goldsmiths. There is a performance in making the map, I can't just make it. I receive an alert, a news

item, and I say “OK, this looks like a new case”. I have to put myself in the position where I'm doing the map, the way I'm sitting... Am I crying? I used to… If someone watched me or any or the other women doing this, they would realise there is a performance of emotion and activism. And of course the map becomes performative, it generates other emotions on the other side.”

Some of the subjects involved may be collective ones, as well, which complicates the whole dynamic. Here, the issue of gender, colonialism, and nationality come back.

“[P]art of the reason why we are having this discussion about structuring the data [is] to minimise the risk of people being assholes, for example by vandalising the records related to actual human beings. But there's more to the performativity of the map and actualising feminicide. It actualises the idea of a woman, an idea of this country... Because we're using Google Maps, it works very much within the frame of this particular state configuration, and what is interesting and dangerous of this use of mapping as an activist tool is that the mapping kind of fixes this territory. In the Feminicidio Uruguay map there are a few cases of women who were murdered outside of Uruguay but were Uruguayan women. It's just a few cases, but it already troubles this idea of the map. The fact that it's just a few cases actually makes it worse. What is the map recording? Is the map showing cases of murders of women in Uruguay or of Uruguayan women? It's very unstable, but it looks very stable. What is a woman, what is feminicide, what is Uruguay?”

In terms of labelling practices and collective identities, Helena's use of specific tags to share the map online represents a more familiar approach to tagging activism.

“In my project I chose three hashtags that I did not invent myself. I tried to avoid obvious ones like #FeminicidioUruguay, so I used #feminicidio, which is purely categorical – what is this? – and the other two are #MachismoMata and #NiUnaMenos. The first one is offered as a way of explanation: machismo is very known in Latin America and #MachismoMata does not leave room for doubt – although it leaves room for contestation and dispute, of course. It's something I've seen used in Spain and in contexts related to violence against women, so by using this hashtag I'm also trying to insert the project in a wider online conversation. #NiUnaMenos is also related to feminist activism and it's a bit more ambiguous – if you don't know what it is, you wouldn't understand it. It means “not one less (female)”, but what is this “una”, this female thing that we don't want to miss? Of course in Latin America it has become a rallying call against feminicide, so it's very familiar in the region and now even outside the region. It's even been on The Guardian, so it's very recognised as part of feminist activism. All of these hashtags

do not really say much if you look at them on their own, but the meaning you fill them with is feminist activism. I use those hashtags repeated almost ritualistically, I always put them in the same placing, in the same order – that's part of what I am, a bit of a control freak. What I feel I am doing is naming the issue, explaining the issue, and calling out for feminist activism."

For the reasons outlined above, researching this type of feminist mapping requires confrontation and discussions that go beyond the digital, and factor in multiple locations and approaches. Ultimately, Helena's project feeds back into embodied space.

"I'm proposing to look at Feminicidio Uruguay, but also projects in Mexico and Ecuador. I'm at a stage where everything might change, but I wanted to look at three or four different activist initiatives of this kind, including my own, looking at the political implications of visualising data in this particular way. In order to explore it together with other activists I'm hoping to lead or organise a series of workshops, also with programmers, academics, or government officials who are interested in data visualisation to work on feminicide as a category for data creation."

Not unlike a trending hashtag on Twitter, then, geo-tagging can also become the first step towards the connection of situated experiences.

VI.
Conclusion: Towards a (Counter)Stereotypical Imagination

While tagging is often a very neutral technical term used in a range of disciplines, throughout this thesis I have discussed the concept in relation to its most charged connotation: identity labelling. In so doing, I have contextualised a range of tagging practices on different social media platforms within different scholarly traditions and critical debates.

The chapter on tagging itself addresses how important the practice has been in the definition of social media, and beyond: from its unprecedented affordances in terms of information organisation to the impact of hashtags as catalysts for political action. Here I develop the main theoretical argument of the thesis: a case for a cultural and aesthetic reading of tagging as a collective performative practice, from which problematic cultural avatars can emerge. While I express skepticism towards the representative quality of those figures, I leave the possibility for subversive attempts at figuration cautiously open.

The chapter on the Gangsta develops the issue of labelling and social hierarchies: on one hand labelling is a top-down tool for othering and control, on the other it is a way for strategic self-branding. The collective dramatisation of the criminal on social media is thus an ideal example not only of the contradictory and fraught nature of tagging, but also a testimony to the subterranean politics of online knowledge. If the Gangsta may suffer the impact of social media by paying lucrative visibility with a dangerous (and potentially freedom-threatening) stereotyping, the (Black) Nerd – a figure that can be highly problematic when divorced from race – can leverage the emancipatory quality of technology to embrace both community and individuality.

My discussion of the Digital Nomad addresses a more subtle politics of knowledge through the lens of work and mobility. By focusing on geotagging as a spatial tool for the materialisation of a shared geography of tourism and deterritorialised work, I highlight another way in which the seamlessness of social media infrastructure conceals the political quality of the social differentiation it facilitates – namely the global-scale gentrification of digital nomad hubs. The nomad being a traditionally transient figure, my proposal for reinstating specificity and situatedness within this cultural avatar is the potential development of an internal, possibly parodic self-critique, acknowledging the internal imbalances of globalised digital work.

The Troll completes the arc by addressing knowledge and classification in more explicit terms. The recent conflict between the figure and its projected opponent the Social Justice Warrior reflects a more mainstream juxtaposition of free speech (in

the name of facts and knowledge) and (category-driven) social justice – a tension that periodically animates academia and that is often used to delegitimise critical theory and the categories that situate it. While politics are here discussed as an object of debate and not just looming in the background, the infrastructural claim to neutrality of social media (and academia) manifests itself in the discomfort around politics themselves: speech flattens difference and humour naturalises categories. A third figure – the Lurker – is finally evoked to resolve the conflict, inviting a silent, more empathic trolling based on listening rather than dialectic.

The final chapter multiplies the complexity of the previous case studies by gesturing towards a range of other possible tagging conflicts, and pulls them together with the theoretical call for an aesthetic approach to tagging outlined in the first chapter by presenting a catalogue of tagging tactics. Interviews are presented as extensively as possible, but organised according to themes and critical direction. While centred on tagging, their input is fundamental in scaling up the relevance of the thesis, opening it to further conversations.

Having arrived at the conclusion, then, it is now fair to take stock: what use is a thesis on tagging?

If anything, it demonstrates that tagging is a very useful concept. First of all, it can tell us something about how the technical infrastructure of social media materialises a certain kind of social relations, rendering them visible and tangible (or, at least, “roll-over-able”) – this is the most scholarly established asset of tagging, and one that I touch upon through the work of many of the other academics who have been interested in the practice. Secondly, tagging can help us understand how certain processes of social labelling survive the standardisation of globalised informational progress – this is where this thesis converges with current reclamations of the social specificity of Internet processes, a more recent wave of scholarship that in part follows the disillusionment with the revolutionary character of the participatory web. Thirdly, tagging can be a useful tool to engage in shared cultural imaginaries in a practical, but nonetheless critical, way – this aspect builds on a renovated enthusiasm about the versatility and tactical potential of tagging practices, an enthusiasm that has some continuity with early Internet lore, but was enriched and made self-reflective by the aforementioned wave of social media pessimism. Indeed tagging is here often used in a slippery fashion, as a part for a whole – the whole being the creation and persistence of identity labels or social media as a sprawling, increasingly inescapable infrastructure.

Beyond social media and identity labels, however, my exploration of tagging revolves around this conceptual pivot to explore a range of other topics. One of these threads is the discussion of stereotype as a techno-cultural process: in what ways are social media – as an infrastructure for the globalisation of imaginaries – inherently

stereotypical? And also: if technical affordances do the heavy work in stereotyping, can they also be tweaked to produce counter-stereotypes, or at least better, more fine-grained stereotypes? Folksonomies are an excellent place to start discussing this issue, but as I highlight the situated knowledges championed by critical theory are fundamental to it. Another, more subterranean leitmotiv throughout the previous chapters is mapping certain cultural negotiations around the way knowledge is produced online. The three cultural avatars I explore at length in the case studies are meant to provide a nuanced account of the conflictual, often incommensurable connotation of those knowledges, with the goal of complicating the binary notion of social media as either politically revolutionary or driven exclusively by proprietary corporate interests.

Both of these themes converge in a wider framing of social media as part of an increasingly aestheticised, globalised society. The complex ecologies of social media cultures, their subjects, and their main actors, all participate in conscious and semi-conscious performances; understanding these performances of online identity as something that is separate from society would be a huge mistake, and that is why we need a cultural critique that is able to de-naturalise the materialisation of labels by channelling the experiences of its users – especially the most disenfranchised. While the effects of media infrastructures are real, and we need appropriate responses in terms of data science and policy, data and information are a different thing. As discussed by a growing range of theorists (for example Apprich, Chun, Steyerl, Cramer, 2018), the correlationist credo of analytics and the extraction of predictions and facts from the white noise of overflowing and ambiguous data needs to be contrasted by alternative approaches, from the queering of homophily (Chun, 2018) to a paranoid reading of facts (Apprich, 2018). It is for this reason that culture and aesthetics are crucial in (re)grounding the politics of labelling and tagging: while accepting the playful and banal nature of these gestures, we ought to take seriously the ripples they have on our imaginary and their potential for future resistance against reductive, datafied stereotyping.

This blazes a trail for my future research: ultimately, in fact, the goal of the specific cultural approach I outlined across this thesis is understanding how cultural avatars – figures that do not materially exist – interact with socio-technical dynamics that are grounded and situated in relation to actual bodies. As the increasing adoption of artificial intelligence in a widening spectrum of public contexts demands new approaches to technology, I believe the issue of tagging will become more and more relevant in cultural negotiations to come – as evident in the line of scholarship going from Harrell's (2013) “phantasmal media” to the “algorithmic imagination” envisioned by Finn (2017), both of which I reference in the first chapter. As technology makes us more connected and mediated, understanding how stereotypes

are socially engineered and technically enforced from a cognitive, computational, and cultural perspective is more urgent than ever, and the only way to move from a stereotypical to a counter-stereotypical imagination.

In terms of identity labelling, machine learning is a natural object to point to for a future exploration of tagging. As explored in my interview with Max Dovey, the act of labelling reaches far deeper than textual tags, and is a fundamental actor in image classification – a process that often happens in the background. Image classification is a key element for the translation of cultural experiences into machine readable data (Carah & Angus, 2018), but also one of the most controversial applications of artificial intelligence. From Google infamously tagging black people as "gorillas" (Dougherty, 2015) to Snapchat's quickly retired "yellowface" lens (Solis, 2016), it is evident that this form of machinic labelling is influenced by human bias and culture in potentially problematic ways. Yet, despite increasing mainstream awareness of the dangers of unregulated face recognition technology, popular software like FaceApp or Pinscreen regularly seduce millions of users into feeding their own likeness and data into their algorithms, in order to see themselves turn old or transform into a dancing avatar (Panzarino, 2019; Knight, 2019). While academic literature on deepfakes often focuses on how to detect their authenticity (e.g. Maras & Alexandrou, 2018; Li & Lyu, 2019), I believe the viral appeal of the playful applications of facial recognition mentioned above demand cultural scrutiny, as well as technical.

Like in my exploration of tagging and social media, then, future research may focus on how the collective performance of identity (through real-time avatars and face filters) helps naturalise potentially dangerous technologies like facial recognition and deepfakes – controversial developments of an increasingly visuals-driven algorithmic culture that have far-reaching social and political connotations. Given the availability of software like Spark AR Studio, which allows users to create their own face filters, the notion of "phantasmal media" (Harrell, 2013) – forms of computing that can be designed to reinforce or defuse cultural stereotypes – will be important to survey any critical responses to dominant tropes by artists, theorists, or activists[60]. Since protest avatars have been already theorised as "memetic signifiers" (Gerbaudo, 2015), the politics of mask-making (Lovink, 2019) will undoubtedly become more and more central as a response to pervasive tagging.

Finally, I shall acknowledge the limits of this doctoral dissertation. Firstly, this thesis could have taken the form of multiple PhDs: by choosing to explore a range of figures and practices theoretically, I renounced the depth and nuance that an ethnographic analysis of the online communities I discuss might have provided. The existing research I reference throughout every chapter fills in in that respect, but it is

[60] An example is the website https://www.thispersondoesnotexist.com/

worth acknowledging that critique – while it is very useful to draw unexpected connections, bridges, and deep cuts – often implies a distance from the fields it touches upon. Likewise, each of the cultural producers I interviewed is embedded in a specific context, which the format I chose for this doctoral thesis did not allow me to explore at length. Tagging is indeed a powerful tool to engage all of them in a fascinating and productive dialogue, but also a framing that may not capture the whole picture. Not all of my interviewees share the same views on identity labelling, and in some cases that is not necessarily the primary lens through which they see their own work. The biggest limit, at least in terms of the interviews, is however the partiality of my sample: not all the people I reached out to responded or agreed to collaborate, which makes the perspectives I survey skewed towards certain categories – for example, having no trans interlocutors in a study on identity labelling online is bound to leave the reader a little disappointed.

Beyond these points, while a counter-stereotypical imagination may be an impossible goal (and a clunky concept), I hope this thesis can be the starting point for many discussions.

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