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Web2 Capital: American Media and Culture in the 2010s

by

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A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English and Philosophy

Idaho State University

Summer 2023

Committee Approval

To the Graduate Faculty:

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Dissertation Abstract—Idaho State University (2023)

This dissertation examines changes in American media and culture as brought about the 2008 financial crisis. In the aftermath of such a culture-shift event, television shows and fiction works reflected new ideas about value. This project looks at three such aspects of American life that took on new value in the 2010s. The first is privacy, specifically internet privacy. As social media and Web2 expanded to function in every part of American life, the significance of user privacy also increased. I chart how *Silicon Valley* (2014-2019) addresses the importance of privacy throughout the seasons and how this corresponds to a greater societal awareness of the forces of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff). The second focus is on public reputation. The #MeToo movement made powerful men more aware of the reputational power they possessed, and how the internet changed the avenues by which that power could be weakened. I look thoroughly at the Netflix show *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020), examining how BoJack uses his reputation as a television star to dodge criminal accusations before his past finally catches up to him. I examine how the later seasons of the show work as a #MeToo narrative centered on power dynamics between reputation-enabled men and less powerful women. This chapter also examines Susan Choi's *Trust Exercise* (2019) and how its unstable narration reflects the trauma associated with sexual assault. *Trust Exercise* shows its women characters reasserting their power by changing the narrative, a focus of #MeToo stories. Finally, I address the concept of whiteness as a commodity focusing particularly on how "post-racial" awareness worked in the Obama and Trump eras of American life. I focus on works of Black satire that explore the limits of social climbing possible for Black characters. This analysis illuminates the structures, in television and

the world, that limit Black advancement. The conclusion considers the fiction of Jennifer Egan and how it frames the 2010s as a decade of American culture. Egan's work speaks to the changes that happened in the decade especially as it relates to the expansion of internet as a central force in American life and culture.

Introduction: Buying a Coffin: How the 2008 Recession and the Emergence of Web2 Rewrote Capital in the 2010s

> "Owning a home is a part of that dream, it just is. Right here in America if you own your own home, you're realizing the American Dream."

President George W. Bush said the above in June 2002, when the financial crisis and recession that rocked the end of that decade were still years away. Yet, as this dissertation will demonstrate, Bush's statement would have a profound resonance in the years that followed. This project concerns the decade after the 2008 recession and how American media and culture reflected the changes to capital that came about in its wake. It looks at new forms of capital that rose to prominence in the 2010s, and the way media reflected the cultural values newly associated with those forms, like internet privacy and public reputation. Broadly connecting the ideas of this project is the concept of Web2, the name given to the social web that emerged just after the turn of the century. Throughout the 2010s, Web2 came to dominate every facet of American culture, rewriting our norms of commerce, changing our means of social interaction, and completely upending the concept of capital.

I begin with the quote from President Bush, even though it was uttered several years prior to the housing crash, because it reflects the sizable role that capitalist ownership, in this case of one's home, played in the American imagination in 2002. It helps flesh out the timeline of American life in the 2000s prior to the recession, context that is essential for understanding how the recession, as well as other events of 2008, set the trajectory for American media and culture to follow over the next dozen years.

Bush's words in June 2002 come less than a year after two seismic events in American life and culture. Most obviously, this statement on home ownership comes after the September 11, 2001 attacks. Following the attacks, Bush famously encouraged Americans to go shopping and stimulate the economy, urging people to "get down to Disney World in Florida" to help stimulate air travel (qtd. in Stewart). In this particular quotation, we see that, come the following summer, home ownership was still quite prominent in the American imagination as a form of "consumer patriotism" (Stewart). Bush's link between home ownership and American identity is explicit and presented as a positive value. Such a mindset undoubtedly helped accelerate the rate of home ownership in the early 2000s, but in a way that masked an emerging but still hidden housing crisis, which came to a head near the end of Bush's presidency.

Though the "consumer patriotism" mindset following 9/11 certainly contributed to the severity of the impending housing crisis, the longest lasting effect of 9/11, and the one most significant to 2010s American culture, was the increasing practice of surveillance. 9/11 halted efforts to strengthen Internet user privacy regulations because, as chief counselor for Privacy in the Clinton Administration, Peter Swire puts it, "With the attacks of September 11, 2001, everything changed. The new focus was overwhelmingly on security rather than on privacy" (Swire qtd. in Zuboff 113). Ironically both of these components—security and privacy—would play major roles in the coming financial crisis as "securitized" bonds also came shrouded in (mostly unregulated) privacy. As September 11 directly led to the passing of the Patriot Act on October 26, 2001, it radically upended the concept of privacy while significantly expanding the government's powers of surveillance over its citizens.

The second seismic event of fall 2001 was perhaps not one that most Americans would readily identify: Apple releasing its first version of the iPod, which happened only three days

before the Patriot Act was enacted. As noted by Shoshanna Zuboff in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, prior to the iPod's release, there was a clash between consumers accessing music through peer-to-peer sites like Napster (launched in 1999) and music executives hoping to stomp out file sharing through fear and intimidation. In services like Napster we see the earliest glimmers of what eventually became the Web2 social networking mindset where web users seek to connect with other web users to share media, in this case circumventing the record labels to access music from other users. What made the release of the iPod so culture-shaking is the fact that, through that device, Apple created a "legally viable solution" (Zuboff 28) that bridged the divide between consumers and executives, and, in the process, accomplished something with far more wide-reaching implications than just the music industry. As Zuboff puts it, "Napster hacked the music industry, but Apple appeared to have hacked capitalism" (28). Going on, she adds that "The iPod/iTunes innovations flipped the century-old industrial logic [of people like Henry Ford], leveraging the new capabilities of digital technologies to *invert* the consumption experience. Apple rewrote the relationship between listeners and their music with a distinct commercial logic" (29). Not only did the launch of the iPod set the stage for technological advances that would develop into Web2, it effectively "hacked" capitalism, completely reworking the market logic so that, when Web2 technologies would catch up a few years later, Apple and others were already well positioned to install "chokepoints" (Giblin and Doctorow) and funnel the entire American economy online and through their data-extraction systems.

Thus, in less than two months—between September 11th and October 26th—forces were put in motion that would define American life for the years to come. Simply put, the September 11th attacks destabilized Americans' sense of security. As such, attention that might have led to more robust internet privacy protections shifted to an entirely opposite focus on security. At the

same time, the iPod emerged, setting the stage for a new landscape of Big Tech, data-driven capitalism that wouldn't fully take shape for another decade. A general, lost sense of security and an attendant sense of risk shook financial markets and prompted Bush to explicitly connect home ownership with American identity. This helped to exacerbate the looming recession even if, in the short term, it did help stimulate the American economy. An emphasis on security appears again as securitized loans, shrouded in mystery and lacking sufficient regulation, further fueled the housing crisis when it hit a few years later. All of these factors—American identity, increased security, decreased privacy, Apple "hacking" capitalism—would shape American life leading up to the recession and, more pointedly, would dictate the terms of American capital in the decade following the recession.

Seven years later, in the fall of 2008, three events occurred that, like the pair of events in fall 2001, would radically reshape American culture. First and foremost was the failure of Lehman Brothers on September 15, 2008 (Blinder 3). This is usually marked as the start of the housing crisis, though a slight decline had been present during the previous year. As Alan Blinder puts it, prior to September 15th, 2008, "the economy was hardly in great shape but neither was it a disaster area" (3). Then, basically overnight, it became a disaster area as the "housing bubble" collapsed. Blinder notes seven factors that created and exacerbated the crisis, including inflated home prices, excessive leverage, lax financial regulation, and "the crazy-quilt of unregulated securities and derivatives that were built on these bad mortgages" (28).

This last point warrants more explanation, as the way mortgage-backed securities (MBS) and subprime loans changed the American landscape of debt and credit is crucial to grasping how capital changed in the Web2 world of the 2010s. As noted by Annie McClanahan in *Dead Pledges*, the subprime market of riskiest debt exploded between 1999 and 2006, something made

possible by securitization (145). Securitization makes debt something that can be sold, creating a "secondary market in traded debts to fund further lending," as one sees in the logic of the home mortgage market (145). The goal was a vicious cycle where banks could grant loans to unqualified buyers while diluting risk by reselling that debt to other speculative investors. However, "by transferring credit risk to very minimally regulated intermediaries, securitization also created opportunities for high-risk activities like arbitrage … and leverage … and radically altered the use of structured finance techniques by consumer banks (146). Put simply, by commoditizing consumer debt on a massive scale, the practice of securitization rewrote the entire relationship between banks and consumers in a way not unlike how Apple "hacked" capitalism with the iPod seven years earlier.

This reworked relationship would define much of the 2010s as "the development of debt securitization … meant that consumer credit was no longer simply an aid to consumption but an industry in itself" (5). In other words, a thing that had mostly existed in abstract terms (debt) now possessed enormous capital value. It's the exact same market logic that occurred in the 2010s as Big Tech profited from user data, speculating about it to advertisers in order to sell ads (Zuboff). This market logic, which significantly enhances the potential capital of user privacy throughout the 2010s, has a clear and direct tie to debt securitization and to the housing crisis it helped create and exacerbate.

While the housing crash that triggered the recession was the most significant cultural wave in fall 2008 that would shape the 2010s, it was not the only one. Additionally, late 2008 through 2009 was also a watershed moment for Facebook. In February 2009, Compete.com revisited an article from the previous year to find that, with almost 1.2 million monthly visits, Facebook had finally surpassed MySpace as the world's most used social media network

(Kazeniac). Also notable was the fact that Twitter was up to number 3, 22 spots higher on the list than it had been a year earlier. On September 15th, 2009—exactly one year after the fall of Lehman Brothers—Facebook announced that it had cleared 300 million users and had become cash-flow positive for the first time (Carlson). Social media, Web2, and the mechanisms for monetizing user data had matured to the point where Facebook was now a money-making force.

One final event of fall 2008 also helped to shape the next decade of American life: the election of President Barack Obama, the first Black United States president. This would intensify the growing rhetoric that America had become "post-racial"—essentially, that with the election of a Black president, longstanding patterns of racism and prejudice had finally fallen—when, in fact, the most sizable systems of racial oppression continued unchanged. Even more than that, Obama's election to the presidency stoked white anxieties and intensified a sense of grievance among some white populations. The led to the rise of the Tea Party movement in the 2010 midterm election and, eventually, to the election of President Donald Trump in 2016.

These events—the housing crash, the legitimization of Facebook as a money-maker, and the election of President Obama—would shape the next couple of years of American life and culture, but it would take some time for Web2 to take full command of every facet of American life. Recovery from the recession was a gradual process, with many sectors of American life still reeling from its effects into the early 2010s. One can see the shift to a Web2 world gradually emerging throughout the late 2000s and early 2010s, but for the purposes of this project, I date the start of Web2 as sometime in 2012 or early 2013. After all, 2012 is when Facebook purchased Instagram, strengthening their grip on social media (Rusli). Apple announced the iPhone 5 in September (Apple Newsroom). Throughout 2012, around 45% of US adults owned smartphones, but by April 2013, that number had climbed to around 55% (Statista). At the same

time, in February 2013, Netflix released their first original program, *House of Cards* (2013-2018), ushering in the start of the streaming era that would completely rewrite viewers' relationship to and consumption of television and home media.

With smartphones in the hands of a majority of Americans and Big Tech and Big Data poised to dominate the national economy, a new era had come. In the post-recession landscape, the relationship that Americans had to capital had already shifted significantly, from the homeownership promoted by Bush to something more technologically-mediated and personal yet still situated within the prevailing structures of capitalism. This project looks closely at three concepts that took on new significance as forms of capital in the 2010s, much how credit and security had been significant in the 2000s: privacy, reputation, and whiteness. Returning briefly to the 2016 election of Donald Trump highlights how these forms worked as capital in the 2010s. Throughout the 2016 election, and throughout his presidency, Trump was nearly synonymous with Twitter, using the power of a web-connected world to disseminate ideas quickly. While this may seem like the opposite of privacy, such efforts aided his attempts to keep shadier matters, such as his now-infamous tax returns, shrouded in mystery. Through a very public presence on Twitter, Trump shifted attention away from his private life, paradoxically highlighting the value private matters now held in the 2010s while also demonstrating how social media platforms like Twitter could be used to obscure them.

More than privacy though, Trump used his incredibly high name recognition and reputation as a successful businessman—a reputation bolstered by another manipulation of a mass media form, his time as the host of the reality television series *The Apprentice* (2004-2015)—to present himself as an economically sound politician. He further used his strong reputation among supporters to shield him against sexual assault allegations, even those caught

on the *Access Hollywood* tape released days before the 2016 election. Trump further used the value of whiteness—that is, the fact that a Black president had stoked the anxieties of Trump's large base of white supporters—to wage a campaign premised significantly on white identity and the fear of being pushed out by Americans of color. The fact that he won the 2016 election, and remains in high standing among supporters even after facing dozens of criminal charges, speaks to the cultural value that Web2 had instilled in internet user privacy, public reputation, and commoditized whiteness.

This project explores the cultural value that these concepts—privacy, reputation, and whiteness—had throughout the Web2-dominated 2010s. It does so by looking at works of media that highlight these themes and simultaneously illuminate the new value they hold. The works of this study are predominantly works of television and fiction, paired to highlight how the same idea is similarly explored in different media contexts. A great deal of this study centers on television, as the very essence and architecture of television distribution was upended by Web2 and the rapid dominance of streaming platforms. As noted by Amanda Lotz in *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast*, by allowing on-demand access to programs, "Internet-distributed television" prompted a "reinvention of the television businesses" spurred by changes in how people watched (5). We could think of Netflix "hacking" the television industry the way Napster "hacked" the music industry, connecting this new evolution in television back to the tech-enabled disruptions brought about by the explosion of the iPod, the iPhone, and iTunes.

As a bridge between network television distribution and streaming distribution, and as an indication of how American media reflected the shifting grounds of capital and value around the time of the recession, I want to briefly consider *The Office*, which ran on NBC from 2005 to 2013. Indeed, besides speaking to the change between network and streaming television, *The*

Office has the further benefit of running before, during, and after the housing crisis, providing us with an example of how television shows register shifting notions of capital over time in the years at the heart of this dissertation.

The Office was not an instant hit, but after low ratings during a six-episode first season, the show found its audience quickly in the second season. The season 2 premiere, which aired on September 20, 2005, had viewership numbers double those of the season 1 finale (Wikipedia/Nielson). Viewership held steady through season 5, before a dip in seasons 6 and 7. Viewership for seasons 8 and 9, after the eponymous office's manager, Michael Scott (Steve Carell), had left the show, were roughly half of what they were at the peak popularity of the early years. The dip in viewers corresponded to a generally perceived dip in quality. For example, the 16 reviews of season 5 found on Rotten Tomatoes—all fresh—had an average score of 8.3 out of 10. The 15 reviews for season 6, then, included 4 rotten scores and, more notably, an average score of 7.3 out of 10. Given the small sample size, a drop like that is significant.

Data from an aggregate site like Rotten Tomatoes has its limitations, but it's useful in this instance for charting general perceptions among critics and audiences over time. Such data reflects that, for critics, seasons 2-5 have an average score of 8.2 out of 10 with seasons 6-9 having an average score of 7.15 out of 10. Audience data, which is more general and draws on a much larger sample size, reflects a similar change. Audiences score seasons 2-5 at 9.26 out of 10 and seasons 6-9 at 8.16 out of 10.

Viewership numbers and critical responses all agree about one thing regarding *The Office*: seasons 2 through 5 are a substantively different show than seasons 6 through 9. It is reasonable to say that declining quality typical of aging sitcoms contributes to this difference, but I argue that the recession, in full effect by the time production began on season 6, also

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contributed to this change. Put simply, once the housing market crashed and the recession set in, *The Office*, which had always been a show about the American workplace and the capital forces associated with the "American Dream," moved sharply away from the banal aspects of the workplace to focus much more on characters and their optimistic lives outside the workplace, effectively locating sources of capital and value outside of the place of employment, where capital is perhaps most traditionally manifested.

We can see this shift by contrasting Michael buying a condo in season 2 with Jim (John Krasinski) buying his parents' home in season 6. Michael, the regional sales manager at Dunder Mifflin Paper in Scranton, Pennsylvania, is obsessed with the "American Dream." Indeed, he buys into the rhetoric of President Bush that home ownership is a key part of living that dream. And so, early in season 2, Michael gets a condo, declaring proudly, "Today I, Michael Scott, am becoming a homeowner" (2.3), his confidence revealing his naivete toward the intricacies of how the home buying process works. This episode aired in 2005 and so, fittingly, Michael is embodying the home-buying ethos of this time and the idea that home buying was easy, a sound investment, and the right and privilege of every American regardless of the economic capital they possess. Michael speaks in terms of his future deathbed confessions, connecting success in life to whether or not he "owned real estate." Of course, owning a modest condo in a small, depressed urban area is not exactly the same as owning "real estate" in the way Michael envisions that concept, and remains a far cry from the idyllic image of the American Dream that Michael perpetually chases.

During this episode, "Office Olympics" (2.3), Michael and Dwight (Rainn Wilson), a Dunder Mifflin salesman and assistant to Michael, leave the office to go condo shopping while Jim, another salesman, organizes the titular "Office Olympics." Everyone in this episode is

blowing off work, but the episode contrasts the sincere and spontaneous fun of the office

Olympic events with the sadness at the core of Michael's condo buying adventure, something

that he is doing because he feels it's what he's *supposed* to do. Indeed, there's a hollowness to

Michael's experience as he imagines future grandchildren enjoying the house across the street,

only to see that his condo is actually behind him, indistinguishable from the others on the street.

This being early in season 2, Michael is still not a very sympathetic character. As such,

audiences are likely to laugh at his foolishness in this condo-buying endeavor. At the same time,

though, the episode aches with a sadness as we know that Michael is being duped by the

"American Dream" and what he's made to believe he wants. Even after meeting a neighbor, a

yarn salesman clearly beaten down by the soul-crushing state of the world, Michael is undeterred

from his dream of home ownership, though he does have a moment of pause when he realizes

how thin the walls are, allowing sound from the other condos to enter. Here the camera quickly

pushes in on Michael's face filled with worry and distress.

The feeling passes as Michael sees the third bedroom and begins thinking of it as a kid's

room. This highlights his unshakeable devotion to the American Dream and its emphasis on

nuclear families despite the fact that Michael doesn't even have a girlfriend at the time. Michael

is convinced that he will have a girlfriend "once she sees this place," and he is thoroughly

convinced that his ownership of this condo will be the catalyst for achieving the other pieces of

his American Dream. As noted by McClanahan, the early 2000s were a time when "Entire

television networks were dedicated to recasting the home as simultaneously a fetish object and a

savvy investment" (99), rhetoric that Michael has bought into completely. Michael sees the

condo as an investment in his future ability to achieve the American Dream, complete with the

family he's always wanted.

Michael is familiar with the idea of home ownership, but ignorant of the particulars, panicking at the thought of paying off a mortgage for thirty years. Dwight, who lives comfortably on an inherited 60-acre beet farm, notes that "at Michael's age" he's essentially buying a "coffin." Michael finally sees that this isn't a smart decision, but to back out now would mean losing a $7,000 down payment, and because his low Dunder Mifflin salary obviously makes that a keen financial risk, he goes ahead and buys the condo, immediately convincing himself that it was the right decision.

This episode is already clear on the fact that Michael has not made a smart investment, over-extending his means in a lavish and unnecessary way. The episode reflects the show's cynical position toward the economic structuring of the corporate world. Michael is the regional sales manager of what is, at this time, a reasonably successful paper company. This episode highlights both Michael's specific folly—buying this condo without even a basic understanding of how the mortgage will work—and misfortune rapidly befalling the middle class. If Michael, in a stable middle class job with stable if unremarkable pay, can't afford to buy a house, then what chance do any of his employees, who have less stable jobs and less stable pay, have of ever buying a house or achieving this piece of the American Dream?

As noted above, Michael's condo buying serves as a secondary storyline of the "Office Olympics" episode, contrasting the present fun that Jim and others experience with the future fun Michael hopes to have in the condo. The version of the episode that aired on NBC devoted much of its time to the Office Olympics storyline, highlighting it as a major point in the developing relationship between Jim and Dunder Mifflin's secretary, Pam (Jenna Fischer). Since *The Office* has moved from its long-time streaming home of Netflix to NBC's streaming platform Peacock, NBC has begun releasing "superfan" versions of the episodes that feature many previously

unreleased scenes edited back into their original episodes. That Peacock finds this a worthwhile use of resources speaks to the enduring power of *The Office* throughout the Web2 era. I bring it up now, however, to observe that many of the scenes concerning Michael's condo do not appear in the original version. This includes several of the most cynical moments—such as Michael's encounter with the neighbor or his speculation about future kids in the third bedroom. Without these scenes, the original version of the episode significantly downplays Michael's fixation with this condo as a fetish object and piece of the American Dream, and makes Michael's entire experience in purchasing it a bit less grim. Such a move suggests that, even in the early years, *The Office* consciously calibrated how cynical it wanted to be, removing several sequences that shed light on how coffin-like this condo situation will be for Michael.

Michael's condo doesn't appear many more times in the course of *The Office*, though it is the notable site of the disastrous "Dinner Party" in season 4. Much of this episode is a perverse parody of Michael's first time in the condo. One moment sufficiently captures how the condo has come a coffin where Michael's American Dream aspirations have gone to die. In the first walk through of the condo in "Office Olympics," Michael comments that he will put in a plasma screen TV opposite his bed. Dwight calls this a bad idea as it is a shared wall with another condo. Dwight says that in the instance that a "Neighbor throws his wife into the wall" then the plasma screen will be "totally smashed." In "Dinner Party" we see that Michael has his plasma screen, but it's comically small and placed in the dining room. Moreover, it gets "totally smashed" when Jan, Michael's girlfriend at the time, throws one of Michael's workplace awards at it. The potential domestic violence that Dwight glibly speculated would come from next door, in fact, comes from within Michael's own house, highlighting how the condo, and then later Jan, embody how Michael's dream of middle-class home ownership failed so completely.

Early in season 5, which premiered only 10 days after the fall of Lehman Brothers, we see a very different image of homeownership. Airing a week before Thanksgiving on November 20th, 2008, the episode "Frame Toby" (5.9) ends with Jim surprising his fiancée Pam by buying his parents' house. The scene provides a clear counterpoint to Michael's condo disaster. Jim doesn't buy a lavish condo but his modest family home, complete with shag carpeting, a stuck front door, and a location by a quarry that makes it less desirable. Jim's purchase of the family home is not driven by status or a vision of a home as a "fetish object." It's clear-eyed and realistic, while also being loving and generous. Under the current economic conditions of America, this is the best that he and Pam can do in terms of homeownership, and that's perfectly fine.

As *The Office* has sustained popularity throughout Web2 and been watched by later millennial and Gen Z fans, this moment is frequently pointed to as "the Worst Thing Jim Ever Did" (Maple). The critique in articles like this one from Taylor Maple is that this was Jim's worst act because Pam wasn't consulted or brought into the home buying process. There is a legitimate point to be made here, as it's reasonable to suggest to that asking Pam about this house purchase outweighs the sweetness of Jim's act as a romantic gesture. However, such a critique fails to account for how this moment functioned in terms of the show's broader narrative, indicating an attainable and non-toxic vision of homeownership. Though Maple does recognize that Jim and Pam's finances are tight at this point, she, and others who point to this moment as "the worst" seem to lack a full awareness of the dire state of homeownership at this time. If Jim doesn't act fast and buy this house, any possibility of homeownership might quickly disappear. With this story point, which could well have been added to the episode after the fall of Lehman

Brothers two months prior, *The Office* is charting a new direction, one that leans into feel-good stories and away from corporate cynicism.

Such an ethos can be seen in a brief appearance of Michael's condo toward the end of season 5. In "Dream Team" (5.21), Pam shows up to work for the new Michael Scott Paper Company that he's launching from his garage, having left Dunder Mifflin after a dispute with corporate leadership. The first piece of mail Michael receives addressed to the company informs him that this business violates his condo agreement, so he and Pam must quickly leave to secure an office. The glimpse we get of Michael's condo here is homely and stable. It is far removed from the garish display seen in "Dinner Party." With Jan long gone Michael's condo seems, if not particularly fulfilling, at least livable. This condo appearance aligns with this storyline of Michael, Pam, and Ryan (B.J. Novak) striking out on their own to create a startup rival to Dunder Mifflin. In "Dream Team" Pam compares their endeavor to how Steve Jobs started Apple in his garage, aligning the condo not with Michael's failed realization of the American Dream but with a spirit of entrepreneurism and optimism that American culture associates with building one's own business.

However, the cynicism found in season 2 is gone. The episodes centered on the Michael Scott Paper Company focus on the hard work of starting a business, but the show does not critique such efforts as meaningless. It's a shift that can be seen in the late part of season 5 and throughout season 6 that makes the later years of *The Office* feel like an entirely different show. Season 6 leans even more into such feel-good stories, centering major arcs of the year on Jim and Pam's wedding and Pam's pregnancy. It may not have been as popular with critics or audiences, but season 6 seems to have done what the show wanted to, providing a stable image of wholesome American family life distinct from the toxic one previously embodied in Michael's

condo and overall feelings of workers' precarity. The time for cynical cautionary tales had passed. Now was the time for feel-good TV that would help viewers disconnect from the harsh recession realities happening in American life, which earlier seasons had openly documented.

With this example from *The Office* demonstrating how the narrative arcs of a show fit into the historical trajectory of American culture leading up to the start of Web2, this dissertation can proceed in earnest to address its major topics. The first chapter concerns privacy and how it has risen in value throughout the 2010s. It builds on Zuboff's work about surveillance capitalism, combining it with McKenzie Wark's assertion that a traditional sense of capital is dead in the Web2 world. The focus of this chapter is on the Internet and how privacy took on greater value because of Big Tech companies who wished to leverage user data for speculative profit. It addresses Bo Burnham's 2021 comedy special film *Inside*, which emerges from and encapsulates the tech-based anxieties of the 2010s. It then briefly considers Ernest Cline's 2011 novel *Ready Player One,* and how its approach to the value of privacy foreshadows the concerns of coming years. I then thoroughly analyze the HBO series *Silicon Valley* (2014-2019), a show centered on the tech world and how one can—or cannot—succeed in a capitalist sector that uses user data for profit when one remains resolute in one's position that one will not mine and sell user data, keeping privacy intact.

Chapter Two takes up the topic of public reputation, considering it in the context of #MeToo narratives. It looks at how the Web2 world was instrumental in creating the social network landscape where something like #MeToo was able to have real cultural power. #MeToo spread that power across a vast number of people, ensuring that women who had been blocked from wielding power were now able to upset the status quo in terms of the public reputation of powerful men. As such, the concept of reputation took on new importance to said men as a

carefully guarded commodity that enabled their social power but could also spell their undoing. This chapter pairs the Netflix series *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020) and Susan Choi's novel *Trust Exercise*, two pieces of media concerned with the way narrativizing disrupts patriarchal power imbalances in order to bring about some form of social reckoning, even if this reckoning often extends only as far as a man's reputation.

The third chapter takes up the topic of whiteness, particularly in terms of how the structures of white supremacy continue to create limits to Black success even as the election of Obama signaled a supposedly "post-racial" America. This chapter builds on Danielle Fuentes Morgan's work on Black satire and her conception of "kaleidoscopic Blackness" as a means of maintaining Black personhood and humanity in the face of white systems that attempt to extinguish it. It also builds on Taylor Nygaard and Jorie Lagerwey's work on 2010s television series centered on "Horrible White People." They argue that such shows prop up the televisual systems of white supremacy that seem to want to critique. I use this work to analyze Netflix's *Dear White People* (2017-2021), a series in the vein of other "Horrible White People" shows but centered on a dynamic group of Black characters. That show uses satire to maintain characters' individual personhood for a largely white audience while also drawing attention to the way the structures of whiteness, and the capital that comes with it, limits characters' possibilities for advancement. I explore a similar idea in Natasha Brown's 2021 novel *Assembly*, which reveals how such ideas about the limits of Black advancement in white supremacist structures are not limited to American media or the realm of television. The chapter also briefly considers how Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You* (2018) uses techniques of surrealism to literalize the power of whiteness in modern capitalist structures.

Finally, an extended conclusion wraps up the discussion of Web2 by considering works of contemporary literature and how they reflect the value of time in the age of Web2. Wark notes that social media companies have effectively dissolved the boundary between work and leisure as our leisure activities, on phones or watching Netflix, still create capital—data—for them to monetize. Work never ends, and social media has come to feel nearly inescapable. This is the sentiment of John Green's *The Anthropocene Reviewed* (2021) and Patricia Lockwood's *No One is Talking About This* (2021). Lockwood's novel in particular highlights the way the Web2 Internet and world of social media fundamentally rewrite one's sense of time and how to make meaning in the world. This chapter also considers two novels from Jennifer Egan that bookend the range of this study. Published in 2011, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* captures the cultural shifts of the early 2000s while also anticipating how the logic of the emerging Web2 Internet could rewrite how we think and read. Egan returns to the same world and characters in *The Candy House* (2022). Here, at the end of the Web2 era, she reflects again on societal changes, thinking rather explicitly of the influence the Web2 social net has had on our connections and the way we approach time and memory.

The title of Egan's later novel comes from the line, "never trust a candy house" (125), which refers to something that is too good to be true. A character uses this phrase in the early 2000s, right as Apple and the iPod are rewriting the history of American commerce, media, and culture. The chapter as we read it presents the character in the early 2020s remembering the advice her father gave her in the early 2000s. In both instances the candy house refers to the Internet and the ways that it is connected to capital. It is fitting that the metaphor is a house. In 2005 Michael Scott's condo was a "coffin," a fetishized object soon to collapse with the impending recession. Nearly twenty years later, our "house" is a digital one found in a world

driven by data, content, and capital systems that seem similarly poised for impending collapse. This study is about the ways that value shifted between those two houses, and how we can best make sense of the capital structures of Web2 as we advance into the uncertainty of a new era of Internet life.

Chapter 1: Sometimes You Wanna Go Where Everybody Knows Everybody: The Emergent Capital of Privacy in the 2010s

In May 2021, comedian Bo Burnham released his latest comedy special *Inside* (Netflix). Born of pandemic isolation and a desire to "make [viewers] some content," *Inside* was an immediate commercial and critical success. Shot in Burnham's home with a do-it-yourself set-up reminiscent of YouTube videos from ten years ago, *Inside* was then sold to Netflix before wide acclaim and popularity prompted a short theatrical run (Haring). This distribution journey alone makes *Inside* a useful avenue into thinking about the morphing that has occurred in the very concept of "television" throughout recent years as it has become more and more intertwined with our internet-driven lives. *Inside* follows a version of Burnham as he struggles to feel productive in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. He's oppressed by mental health struggles ("Shit," "Goodbye") and the feeling that he needs to perform for the Internet algorithm in order to have value as a person ("Content," "Welcome to the Internet," "That Funny Feeling"). What starts out as an attempt to make "content" in the form of humorous videos with light social commentary (like "White Woman's Instagram," "Problematic") turns into a much weightier project addressing deteriorating mental health, the crippling effects of climate change, and how Internet mega-powers like Facebook and Amazon ("Bezos I") now effect every aspect of our lives. The title "Inside" speaks to both Burnham's current pandemic isolation and the sense that social media apparatuses trap us inside a world of the Internet from which there is no escape.

Related to *Inside*'s examination of a social-media fixated society is the idea of privacy and how it has largely gone extinct. In a 2018 interview for the podcast Zall Good, Burnham says, "I think the way we hope to be seen by the world is maybe a realer version of ourself than

how we really are. … That's the real truth that matters now, what is your performed truth to other people. 'Cause your private truth is dead now. There's no private moment anywhere. … That version of ourself is going away. … The public performance of ourself is everywhere now" (sic). Here, Burnham astutely understands that, as the internet has fully overtaken our lives, the notion of a private self that holds a "private truth" has become threatened. He sees this as, effectively, the death of privacy. Burnham is possibly correct in the assertion that privacy is dead or rapidly dying in the social media Internet age. As privacy has been in the process of dying over the past decade, it has accrued enormous cultural capital over recent years as something increasingly hard to maintain.

Themes of privacy hang over *Inside*, though the topic is rarely addressed explicitly. What is quite explicit is how the special engages with how the economic infrastructure of the tech ruling class has changed television, specifically as it exists in terms of YouTube videos and user-generated video content. I begin this chapter with *Inside* as those two things—the imagining of television in the social-media age (2010s and beyond) and the emergent ruling class centered on technology—are at the core of the argument of this chapter and the rest of this project. Only by properly understanding how television has changed to meet the contemporary moment, and how technological vectors have largely rewritten the capitalist system, can we look at how other forms of capital have emerged in relationship to these forces and how they have then been reflected in recent television shows, films, and novels.

Bo Burnham is the perfect person to address in discussing the changes to television over the past decade because he has been in the midst of this change at every juncture, starting his career on YouTube before moving to linear cable channels and then streaming platforms like Netflix. In her book *Online TV,* Catherine Johnson discusses online television in terms of TV

natives, online natives, and content natives (80). TV natives have "extended an existing service into the internet ecosystem," like NBC Universal has done with its Peacock streaming platform. Online natives, meanwhile, have "originated online services for the internet ecosystem" like Netflix. Finally, content natives have extended a "content-based business in another field into an online TV service" (80) like Arsenal Player, a streaming service dedicated to Arsenal football. Johnson distinguishes YouTube from these online TV systems because it operates on user-generated content (81). This is a reasonable distinction but one I challenge for the purposes of thinking of how YouTube, in many ways, fed into both the emergence of streaming services and the emergence of social media culture.

YouTube was officially launched in February 2005 and went public in January 2006. It was purchased by Google in fall 2006 (Britannica). On December 21, 2006, Burnham uploaded his first video. Titled "My Whole Family," which currently sits at slightly over 12 million views. Burnham would peak in viewership with "i'm bo yo" in June of 2008, which sits just shy of 35 million views at the time of writing. It would be the first track on his debut live album *Bo Burnham* released in March the following year. By this point an 18-year-old Burnham had successfully parlayed his YouTube fame into real industry success. This was still a rare thing, as mocked in the *South Park* episode "Canada on Strike" (12.4), released in April 2008. In this episode, the characters try to make money with a viral video but end up with only theoretical dollars. In his closing monologue, Kyle says, "I learned something today. We thought we could make money on the Internet, but while the Internet is new and exciting for creative people, it hasn't matured as a distribution mechanism to the extent that one should trade real and immediate opportunities for income for the promise of future online revenue," noting that it will "be a few years" until it does. As this monologue suggests, Burnham was something of a unicorn

in the early days of YouTube, the rare example of someone who was able to turn virality into monetized industry success.

Burnham was still very much on the rise in the early 2010s. His second album, *Words, Words, Words* (2010), was accompanied by a standup special from Comedy Central. In spring 2013, he starred in a fictionalized sitcom version of his life titled *Zach Stone is Gonna Be Famous* on MTV and closed out the year releasing *what.* on Netflix. Whereas his first two albums had been mostly centered on humorous songs, *what.* saw Burnham go in a more conceptual direction. It's more of a one-man-show than it is a straight-forward comedy special, full of high-concept bits about the creative process. In *what.* Burnham interacts extensively with a soundtrack, highlighting the artificiality of the performance. For example, early in *what.* he takes a drink of water and says, "So this show is called what … and I hope there are some surprises for you." While setting the water back on the stool, he knocks it over and says, "Oh Jesus, sorry, that's a good start." He then picks up the water and randomly breaks into dance while a pre-recorded soundtrack of Burnham's voice informs the audience, "He meant to knock the water over, yeah, yeah, yeah, but you all thought it was an accident, but he meant to knock the water over, yeah, yeah, yeah, art is a lie, nothing is real." The on-stage version of Burnham then immediately resuming the special as if nothing happened.

This is a key moment for understanding *Inside* eight years later as, already in 2013, Burnham was concerned with the idea that any piece of entertainment content, no matter how authentic seeming, is just a performance. Authenticity is closely related to privacy in Burnham's work as here what seems to be an authentic moment—an unscripted mistake shared privately with the audience—is revealed to be carefully planned and meticulously coordinated to highlight the artificiality of Burnham's performance. In the podcast interview cited above, Burnham

expressed the idea that the public performance of ourselves through social media has dissolved our "private truth." This bit in *what.* highlights such a philosophy as the "private truth" felt by the audience seeing the spilled water is shown to be performance. If one simply follows this line of thinking through a decade of social media dominance, one arrives at the ethos of what *Inside* expresses about how performance—through social media—has killed privacy.

Burnham retired, so to speak, from comedy after the tour for his 2016 album, *Make Happy,* gave him panic attacks. This special was also released on Netflix. From here he turned to directing, finding success as a director of Jerrod Carmichael's stand-up special *8* (2017) and the feature film *Eighth Grade* (2018) about the life of the average social-media embedded teenager. It follows Kayla (Elsie Fisher) as she navigates the social minefield of eighth grade while dealing with social anxiety and panic attacks. She copes with her difficulties at school by making video diaries of her life and putting them on YouTube to an audience of almost no one. Over the course of the film, Kayla makes a few connections with other characters, works through some of her anxiety, and resolves at the end to stop making videos. She found a way to experience the private truth of her life in a way free of YouTube and the algorithms that come with it. The film was praised for its realistic depiction of eighth grade life and use of real eighth graders (Ryan). Burnham also won the Writers Guild Award for best original screenplay.

In just over a decade, Burnham had lived his way through the maturation of the internet, watching as YouTube and social media grew from infancy into major forces of culture. He had gone from internet videos on YouTube, to having his own traditional cable show on MTV, to releasing his specials exclusively on streaming platforms in 2013 and 2016 (2010's *Words, Words, Words* also streamed for many years on Netflix and can be found on Paramount+ at the time of writing). With this intimate and first-hand knowledge of video technology, streaming,

and the Internet's effects of one's teenage years, he made *Eighth Grade*, in which he further explored what being constantly online does to us as humans, especially young people still developing our understanding of the world. This sentiment carries over into *Inside*. As I will discuss below, the use of the camera in *Inside* reflects both the change in television/streaming over the previous decade, but also how this change has inherently led to what Burnham thinks of as the death of privacy.

Inside is a useful resource for understanding the Internet landscape in the late 2010s and 2020s, or what is now frequently referred to as Web3. *Inside* is not particularly concerned with television as a medium, but it is highly concerned with "content" and how the contemporary obsession with content has taken over all aspects of modern life. Kate Eichhorn refers to this as the "content industry," which she defines as "an industry that generates revenue from the production and/or circulation of content alone" (14). Circulation is key to the understanding of content, as content often circulates "solely for the purpose of circulating" (3). Eichhorn uses the example of the Instagram egg that set the world record for being the most "liked" photo back in 2019. Content like the Instagram egg imparts no information or social utility; it is famous solely because it's famous. There are other kinds of content that *do* impart information, or at least appear to. It's common after major global or political events to see the same dozen infographics passed around on social media. This is an example of content that does contain some information, but that fact of its circulation is more important than the information it contains which is circulating.

Eichhorn goes on to address the content industry as one that exists "only in parasitical relationship to other industries, from marketing and publishing to education and entertainment"

(22). This is because the content industry is, in Eichhorn's view, the "ultimate expression of neoliberalism" (27).

> Under the logic of neoliberalism, everything—politics, desire, sociality, art, culture, and so on—is reduced to mere nodes in the market economy. Reducing all forms of cultural production to content non only conveniently erases the specificity of different types of cultural production but also effectively ensures that all types of cultural production can be easily substituted for each other and exchanged. After all, all content is part of a single and indistinguishable flow. (27, 29).

Eichhorn highlights the way the content industry effectively flattens out everything so that it is reduced to pure, market value. This value is built not on the value of the thing itself—whether it carries information or usefulness—but solely on its value as a thing that circulates. People, like Burnham, who make videos for YouTube are called "content creators," highlighting the way their production exists in relationship to the content industry. Content is a major focus of *Inside* and the perfect starting place for this chapter as it blends the worlds of television and an emerging capitalist system of social media centered on the value of privacy.

While it is fair to say that YouTube isn't equivalent to the way we traditionally think of television, it would be a mistake to ignore the overlap between YouTube content and television. In 2017, YouTube launched YouTube TV, a name embodying an inherent tension. The service, however, is much more TV than YouTube as it functions much like a traditional cable provider. Prior to this was YouTube Red (now called YouTube Premium), which existed from 2015-2018. This was YouTube's failed attempt to launch a Netflix-equivalent streaming platform. Only one show, *Cobra Kai* (2018-present), made much of a splash. *Cobra Kai* is a good example of how messy the line between YouTube content and television like you might find on Netflix can be.

The first season of *Cobra Kai* was released on YouTube Red as its flagship program. By season 2, YouTube Red had changed its name to YouTube Premium, the name emphasizing a pivot away from original series. The show was more popular than either YouTube streaming platform, so season 3 of *Cobra Kai* aired on Netflix. This complicated journey—three different streaming platforms in three seasons for a popular show—highlights the way the streaming industry exists in "parasitical relationship" to the content industry. *Cobra Kai* is a television show made for what YouTube hoped would be a successful streaming platform, but it also functioned similarly enough to content that it easily fit into Netflix's system.

With YouTube Red, YouTube tried to shift focus exclusively from user-generated content to include a streaming platform. Similarly, Netflix has found recent success by turning attention from their streaming platform to other content spaces like TikTok. A dance from *Wednesday* (2022-present) went viral on TikTok shortly after the show's debut so that, as of now, the #wednesday has nearly 40 billion views. It was such a viral craze that CNET and CNN posted videos about it on their pages. This is an example of Netflix taking a portion of their show, excerpting it as content, and then helping it circulate among content platforms, especially TikTok. *Cobra Kai* speaks to how easily television shows can function as content easily distributed to different platforms, and *Wednesday* speaks to how scenes or memes from a show can circulate as content. Both examples highlight the messy overlap that now exists between the television industry and the content industry.

The line between content and television is much murkier than it was even in the mid-2010s, and Burnham explore this murkiness through *Inside* and *The Inside Outtakes,* released one year after the original special. However, Burnham's examination of content does not serve only to think about television, YouTube, social media, and the lines between them; instead, it

chiefly functions as a way consider the relationship of capital, especially the content industry, to these user-driven spaces. Content, in a way, is the internet's version of television programing, but it's also the primary way that companies like Facebook and Amazon profit off our internet behavior. Here I turn to Mckenzie Wark's theorizing of vector capitalism, an idea which will ground much of this chapter and the subsequent project.

In her 2019 book *Capital is Dead: Is This Something Worse?*, Wark boldly proclaims that the previous age of capital driven by landlords and property ownership is over, having been replaced by forces of the tech industry. This is because companies like Amazon and Facebook/Meta have found a way to "commodify leisure" (2), eliminating the division between leisure time and labor time. This is because the new capitalist tech ruling class owns and controls the "vector along which information is gathered and used" (3). As the "dominant ruling class of our time [that] owns and controls information" (5), Wark terms this the vectoralist class, declaring this new structure as something even worse than the typically conceived neoliberal capitalism that preceded it. There aren't many people in vectoralist class as it's limited to the billionaires and tech companies that own and control the vectors by which we transmit data. It's a class of the likes of Zuckerberg, Bezos, Cook, and almost no one else.

Wark contrasts the bourgeois vectoralist class with the proletarian hacker class that produces "information that has enough novelty to be recognizable as intellectual property" (13). This is not a problem shared by factory line products of previous capitalist ages. The impulse for "enough novelty" is one of the central characteristics of the vectoralist/hacker economic structure as the content industry, ruled and moderated by the vectoralist class, needs content that is distinct enough to be valuable as unique IP, but it also wants it to be similar enough that any one piece of content serves the algorithm as well as any other (Eichhorn). As noted by Eichhorn, the quality

of content is irrelevant, another significant difference from capital in ages past. Algorithms will use hate speech or masterful works of poetry in the same way. It's all equivalent and equivalently useful as content.

Except this isn't quite the case, as many studies have shown negative and rage-filled content to be best at driving clicks, thus creating more website traffic which, in turn, creates more content in the form of reaction videos. In a world defined by vectoralist and hacker class structures, information becomes a kind of private property (Wark, 72), but also one that is "alternatively policed and encouraged: policed where it infringed on corporate monopolies; encouraged where free labor or nonlabor could be captured as information that had value" (72). Of course, all internet information under this construction has some value, but the real value is found in things that are unique enough to produce more information, thus generating the possibility of more web traffic, reposts and reactions. All of these processes have the possibility of generating more useful-enough content to feed the vectoralist machine. However, all web activity, whether useful or not, falls into the category of what Shoshanna Zuboff calls "behavioral surplus."

In her book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power,* Zuboff argues that the move to utilize what had previously been a surplus of user behavioral data propelled the world into the age of surveillance capitalism. Similar to Wark's vectoralist model, Zuboff focuses on flows of internet information as the location of the economic world. However, whereas Wark focuses on the elimination of the labor/leisure distinction, Zuboff takes things further to present a dystopian image of a surveillance state. This is in line with what Burnham expressed earlier as the idea that your private self and private truth are now dead.

The core of Zuboff's argument is elegantly summarized in the following diagram (97)

showing the process by which tech corporations, like Amazon or Google, turn user behavior data

into profit.
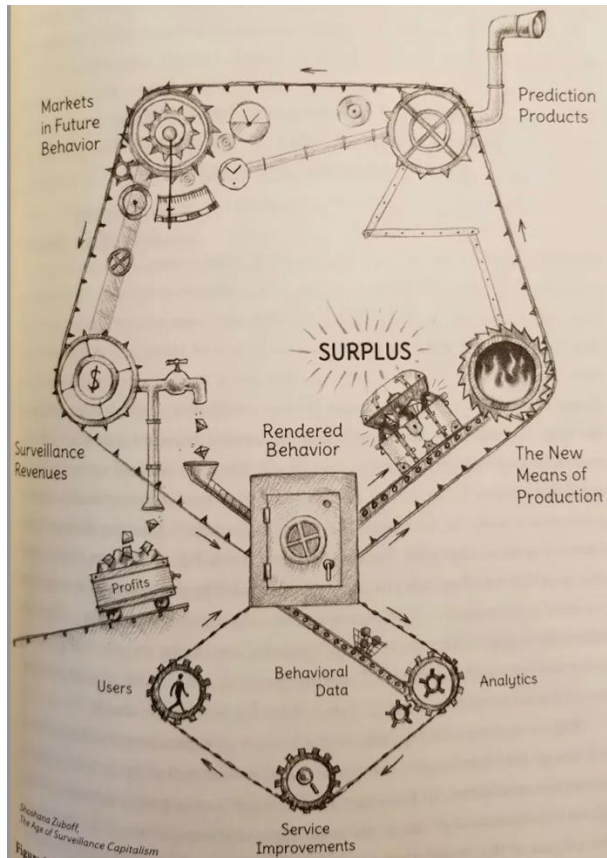
At the bottom of the diagram, we see users generating behavioral data. Much of this is what

Wark considers lesser information since it lacks the intellectual property element of "content."

However, for Zuboff, this "useless" user information is essential as creates a surplus. The surplus

is then refined and met with prediction products. Here is where the real money can be made as

companies make sales based less on user behavior that has occurred and based more on user

behavior that is likely to occur in the future. It's fitting that this age of capitalism (or something

worse) emerged in the post-recession economic world as betting on and leveraging futures is a

large part of what prompted the recession in the first place. The future behavior market turns into

revenue through ads, and the promise of more surveillance in the future, and the whole thing still works to push the internet toward a place where it possesses a totality of information (97). As the vector class receives more and more information (raw product), it gets better at refining and packaging it as a new product (in the form of ad sales). Expand this logic to encompass all of society, so that everything is extracting, refining, and marketing on behavior, and you have the fully realized age of surveillance capitalism. Or, put another chilling way, "There was a time when you searched Google, but now Google searches you" (261).

  Inside is a work caught between worlds, as so many hacker class participants are. The character "Bo" in this special (which is slightly differentiated from the artist Bo Burnham making the special) understands the soulless nature of content creation—as he says, "Look I made you some content, daddy made you your favorite, open wide"—but he also understands that he will only get paid by producing that content, for Netflix to house on Amazon Web Services (AWS). He is a hacker class hero, valiantly trying to make something of value while wrestling with mental health, pandemic loneliness, and climate change, but his only avenue to address his anxiety from these things is to create content which, in turn, benefits the forces most responsible for the issues in the first place. It's a vicious cycle and Burnham, like Zuboff, isn't optimistic we can escape. Through social media and companies like Amazon, we have already given the vectors so much of ourselves that the private self is dead.

  Inside, then, is a uniquely positioned work for addressing how, in a vector-driven age of surveillance capitalism, all of human life has turned into content. *Inside* opens with the song "Content" (containing the lyric quoted above), before including songs emphasizing the performative justice of social media ("Comedy"), the struggles of digital connection ("Facetime with My Mom" and "Sexting"), and the strange space of social media ("White Woman's

Instagram"). "White Woman's Instagram" is particularly interesting as you have the mention of things like "tiny pumpkins" and "incredibly derivative political street art" broken by a sudden heartfelt post commemorating the death of a mother. The incongruity here is essential as something real, human, and incorruptible by capitalism collides with the cliched essence of social media. Sincerity can break through, but there is no escaping how your actions feed and improve the totality of internet's vector-driven machine.

Moreover, the outtakes for *Inside* highlight the labor that went into making songs like "White Woman's Instagram" which, when presented without music, rings as even more soulless and hollow while highlighting the labor of the process. This speaks to what Wark says about the loss of distinction between labor and leisure, as Burnham is exerting labor to make a song about leisure activities that people will likely consume as a leisure activity "on in the background" ("Don't Want to Know") which will then be further converted to "labor" in the form of behavioral surplus.

YouTube maven that he is, Burnham has a keen understanding of content. The theme of content comes up in nearly every song in the first half of *Inside* while the musical motif of "Content" makes several reprises as background music to some of the skits. The overwhelming inescapability of content is further prominent in the outtakes. Originally released on YouTube, the outtakes are a well-edited and tightly crafted hour of leftovers from *Inside* highlighting Burnham's labor in making the special and the unavoidable reality of content. Embedded in the content of the special is the content of many fake ads, made by Burnham promoting things like the fact that jeans are apolitical or a sale at Kohls celebrating "Mental Health Awareness Decade." The hour ends with a Marvel-esque ad promoting the new *Inside* Cinematic Universe, or ICU. This contains the obvious pun on Intensive Care Unit, as well as a less obvious pun on

the phrase "I See You," all while presenting a parody expressing the never-ending scope of content (in this case, the proliferation of superhero films and television shows as part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe). Or, as Burnham put it years earlier on "Repeat Stuff" (his most successful piece of viral content from the *what.* era) about the soulless nature of pop music, "We'll stop beating this dead horse when it stops shitting out money."

Inside's emphasis on the problematic nature of content reaches its climax in "Welcome to the Internet." This is a song about the overwhelming nature of the internet's "mountains of content, some better some worse." Bo, inhabiting the persona of a crazed carnival barker, plays a rapidly accelerating melody while mentioning increasingly extreme things. The third verse asks the listener if they would "prefer…to fight for civil rights or tweet a racial slur," thus embodying Zuboff's discussion of how the forces of the internet have no regard for what information you give. Content helping the fight for civil rights is "better," both in terms of its social use and moral compulsion. Content consisting of a tweeted racial slur is "worse," both in terms of its lack of societal value and its immorality. But, as Eichhorn demonstrated, the content industry doesn't particularly care which you do and, as Zuboff noted, it would actually prefer you to do whatever action will generate the most behavior surplus data and profit. As "Welcome to the Internet" continues, this feeling of whiplash intensifies through the next verse, which states "here's a tip for straining pasta, here's a nine-year-old who died." Lines like this embody both how the internet provides "a little bit of everything all of the time" and the extreme tonal disunity on social media, where posts about cataclysmic world events and goofy memes sit side by side, equally welcomed by the content industry and its powerful algorithms.

Though the early verses set up listeners for shocking juxtaposition, the final verse before the chorus is on another level entirely. The song throttles forward faster as Bo sings,

See a man beheaded, get offended see a shrink

Show us pictures of your children, tell us every thought you think

Start a rumor buy a broom or send a death threat to a boomer

Or DM a girl and groom her, do a Zoom or find a tumor in your

Here's a healthy breakfast option, you should kill your mom

Here's why women never fuck you, here's how you can build a bomb

Which Power Ranger are you? Take this quirky quiz!

Obama sent the immigrants to vaccinate your kids

This passage encapsulates the entirety of *Inside's* perspective on the internet, social media, and the obsession with content. A video of a man beheaded—content in the most perverse way—prompts the viewer not to action but to a sense of being "offended." This offense will likely lead to creation of content about the video, the circulation of this content rooted in the viewers feelings of "offense" then leading to additional behavioral surplus. Predatory grooming and cancer prevention appear in the same line, once again giving equal weight to both internet realities and highlighting the cold, immoral calculus of the internet.

Buried in this torrent of shocking and memorable images is the less noticeable line "Show us pictures of your children, tell us every thought you think." This speaks to the internet's desire to know "everything" and give it back to you "all of the time," but it also echoes the strange reality of privacy which has existed implicitly throughout *Inside.* Given earlier lines in the song like "a random guy just kindly sent you photos of his cock" and the mention of grooming a few lines later, we can easily read the internet's demand that you "show us pictures of your children" as a predatory gesture. The internet, and thus its users, wants information about them, but it also wants to groom them into being people embedded in the logic of the internet

and its market systems. This is reinforced during a far more peaceful-sounding bridge that sings "Mommy let you use her iPod, you were barely two. And it did all the things we designed it to do." The tone of the message has changed, but the goal is still getting kids hooked on, and into, the internet very young so as to then extract the maximum amount of behavior data from them so the vector class can grow as rich and powerful as possible.

This increased emphasis on the impossibility of privacy in "Welcome to the Internet" is significant as it leads into the most direct addressing of privacy a few songs later in "All Eyes on Me." This is a song about Bo's deteriorating mental health and obsession with performance, featuring the refrain "We're going to go where everybody knows everybody knows, everybody, ohh." This echoes the famous theme song of the show *Cheers*: "Sometimes you wanna go where everybody knows your name," but the changes Burnham makes are significant. Whereas *Cheers* highlights the choice—the wanting to go—"All Eyes on Me" makes the going non-negotiable. Then there is the change of "your name," a personal, specific part of your identity, into "everybody." Both songs use "everybody," but it is not the same connotation. The everybody of *Cheers* is limited to a small space and the comradery felt in a familiar bar. The "everybody" of "All Eyes on Me" is truly *everybody,* the full scope of the internet and its totality of knowledge. "You name" becomes lost in the undifferentiated "everybody," your identity subsumed within the collective whole of the internet. This highlights a personal dimension that is slightly overlooked in Zuboff's work, as the totalizing nature of the internet not only turns every action and thought into economic capital but is also inherently dehumanizing in the process as it strips the individuality from its users. According to Burnham, as the private self has died so too has something inherent to our humanity.

Inside highlights the way that traditional television morphed into something better described as another manifestation of content. It then expresses how the inescapability of said content weakens our humanity. This is because everything that contains even slight originality is consumed by the vector class (Wark) in an effort to have total comprehensive knowledge of human behavior (Zuboff) to feed the insatiable content industry (Eichhorn). In such an internet landscape, privacy takes on extremely high value, as it is the best tool the hacker class has for fighting back.

Inside reflects on the way that social media platforms and the content industry "killed" privacy throughout the 2010s, but, early in the 2010s, one could already find similar sentiment regarding the value of privacy for the hacker class as they fight back against totalitarian vectoralist powers. Published in 2011 and set in the not-so-distant future of the 2040s, Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* follows Wade Watts, who spends nearly every moment as his avatar, Parzival, plugged into a massive internet virtual reality space called the OASIS. Here Wade as Parzival goes to school, hangs out with people, and watches movies. With the exception of sleeping and eating, the totality of his life is in the OASIS, reflecting our current, highly online society. Wade is driven by a mysterious quest to locate James Haliday's Easter Egg which grants the finder complete control over the OASIS. While many, like the reviewers for *USA Today,* have latched on to this *Willy Wonka*-esque plot, the actual games of *Ready Player One* are far less important than the reason Wade has dedicated every bit of his life to this search: because he finds the alternative—a fully privatized and corporatized Internet—a fate worse than death. This is future that Innovative Online Industries (IOI). IOI uses their power and resources to search for the egg continually. If they find it, IOI's corporate interests will make the OASIS more restricted, and more costly, thus removing what little freedom and solace Wade finds in life.

The characters in *Ready Player One* are perfect examples of Wark's vectoralist capitalist structures. IOI is a soulless corporation that desires absolute control over the OASIS. In the *Ready Player One* universe, the OASIS is roughly synonymous with the internet, expansive and containing the totality of society and knowledge. It is the dystopian extension of what Zuboff calls "Big Other" (377). If IOI got control of the OASIS, they would control the vector to all user knowledge and would be able to use the massive behavioral surplus to get rich and force poor people like Wade further to the outreaches of society. It's important to note that the OASIS, like the internet, already contains vast amounts of user information, information that IOI already accesses illegally when it suits them. Surveillance capitalism in the OASIS has already won, though the "capitalism" part is being kept in check for now.

However, Wade doesn't see it this way. Wade continually sees the OASIS as a wholly good thing that just needs to be stewarded by the right people. He ignores the more dystopian surveillance elements of the OASIS and focuses on his open-access utopian understanding of the OASIS. As such the novel captures a tension between how the young and idealistic Wade sees the OASIS and the fark darker realities he either can't or won't see. This optimism is consistent with Wade as a hacker class hero hellbent on undermining corporate logic. The odds are stacked against Wade and his friends except for the fact that Haliday, improbably, is on the hacker's side in the form of instituting this quest. Haliday, now deceased, seems to be a hybrid of Bill Gates and Steve Jobs. He represents a mythic sense of computer tech in the 1980s and 1990s as something with unlimited upside and no negative effects.

Haliday seems uncorrupted by the vector capitalist forces that emerged very much while he was still alive and significant. Wade shares in Haliday's delusion that the OASIS can still be the ultimate shared societal good, bridging class divides. *Ready Player One* wants to have it both

ways. Cline wants there to be an evil corporation hoping to control the OASIS, and a contrasting

hero strong enough to fight against them. But it's telling that such a hero can only exist *because*

someone with actual vectoralist power—Haliday—wanted to create a world where the hacker

had a chance. Given what we know about the vectoralist class and the content industry, it's

difficult to imagine such a figure as Haliday actually existing as someone who achieves

enormous wealth and power only to choose not to use it for capitalistic gain. However, this

suspension of disbelief is necessary to uphold the mythic utopian sense of the early internet that

Wade, Haliday, and Cline himself, can't ever seem to shake.

However unlikely it may be, Haliday's quest does give the hacker class a chance to "win"

and keep the internet free and accessible. This is especially important now that the Great

Recession is in its third decade (51) and the world faces "catastrophic climate change" (1). Wade

summarizes the conditions of the world by saying that,

> At a time of drastic social upheaval, when most of the world's population longed for an
>
> escape from reality, the OASIS provided it in a form that was cheap, legal, safe, and not
>
> (medically proven to be) addictive. The ongoing energy crisis contributed greatly to the
>
> OASIS's runaway popularity. The skyrocketing cost of oil made airline and automobile
>
> travel too expensive for the average citizen, and the OASIS became the only getaway
>
> most people could afford. As the era of cheap, abundant energy drew to a close, poverty
>
> and unrest began to spread like a virus. Every day, more and more people had reason to
>
> seek solace inside Haliday's and Morrow's virtual utopia. (59)

Wade draws clear lines between the real-world dystopia of unrest and crisis and the OASIS

utopia. However, *Ready Player One* makes no such distinction. As the novel goes on, the line

between the two grows blurrier and blurrier. This is particularly true in the second and third parts

of the novel, which show Wade's utopian outlook dimming only slightly even as his non-virtual body faces frequent danger. The OASIS seems a little less safe once virtual events get Wade's real life trailer park home blown to bits (145).

This is because Wade's sense of safety is tied almost completely to his perceived sense of privacy. His hideout apart from his trailer holds "immeasurable value" due to its privacy (25). He understands that, in the OASIS, anonymity is "guaranteed" (57) and "one of the major perks" (28). Wade knows that "Gregarious Simulation Systems [Haliday's company that produces and operates the OASIS] keeps all OASIS user records confidential" (117) and feels no reason to fear for his actual life. This is until he meets with Nolan Sorrento, the almost cartoonish villain head of IOI, who uses Wade's real name before revealing that IOI knows about Wade's real-life whereabouts (141). He claims to have obtained this information from school records, but it seems entirely possible, even likely, that IOI has other, illegal means.

Without the protection of privacy, Wade's world immediately gets dangerous. His home is blown up and he is only saved by the privacy of his hideout discussed earlier. He then flees to another part of the country where he adopts high tech security measures but still faces danger. He escapes by adopting a fake identity and infiltrating the IOI base of operations with his physical person. Similarly, one of his friends in the OASIS who's also getting closer to finding the egg is tracked down by IOI and killed (247).

Wade's initial privacy was the only thing keeping the events of the OASIS from wreaking havoc in his real, as opposed to his virtual life. This guarantee of privacy turned out to be far less of a sure thing than Wade initially believed. With privacy gone, the power of the hacker class diminishes considerably as the vector forces can easily kill the real-life people behind the avatars. *Ready Player One* uses this heightened importance of privacy to draw

attention to *our* real-life world in which privacy has become increasingly scarce, and therefore valuable. As noted, this novel came out in 2011 before Facebook had purchased Instagram (August 2012) or WhatsApp (February 2014). At the time of *Ready Player One*, Netflix didn't have original programing and AWS hadn't reported as profitable (January 2015). It is a novel about the terrifying power of vectoralist forces when equipped with surveillance many years before such concerns grew justified by world developments. Much like *Inside*, *Ready Player One* imagines a world where everything has turned to content with little originality. Privacy is the only thing one has left of any real value, and once this "dies," as Burnham suggests it has and as happens in the middle of the novel, the internet utopia crashes into the dystopia of the non-internet world.

Of course, *Ready Player One* is a bleak and cynical book, and only seems more so as the 2020s unfold. The world of this novel is every bit as isolating and destitute as other science fiction dystopias, and the only hope for any sort of victory for the hacker class comes from a mythic dead figure who, in any reasonable version of this universe, would be part of the vectoralist class himself. It is a novel that echoes the dizzying sentiment of "Welcome to the Internet" and the overwhelming exhaustion that comes with experiencing "everything all of the time."

Of course, *Ready Player One* is not the only work of 2010s media to deal with tech enterprises, internet technology, and privacy. I turn now to the television show *Silicon Valley* which aired on HBO from 2014 to 2019. Over six seasons, it catalogued remarkable change in the way American society understood the vectoralist forces of technology, yet it did so while maintaining a light, often optimistic, tone. Unlike Wade, *Silicon Valley* isn't blind to the harmful capitalistic impulses of the internet, but it also isn't naïve enough to suggest we should live

without the internet. As in real life the internet of the show is just a fact of life that we have to deal with as best we can.

The series focuses on Richard Hendricks (Thomas Middleditch) and his attempts to turn his tech start-up Pied Piper into a revolutionary force in data compression. He's aided by a loveable band of misfits including well-meaning rivals Gilfoyle (Martin Starr) and Dinesh (Kumail Nanjiani) and level-headed businessman Jared (Zach Woods). They live as "incubees" in the house of Erlich Bachman (T.J. Miller), a braggadocious "tech bro" type who obsesses about his 10% stake in Pied Piper and hopes to get as rich as possible by doing as little as possible. This group serves as the hacker class of *Silicon Valley*, to one degree or another. Richard, as head of Pied Piper, is the hacker-class hero of the show, continually using his rigorous code of ethics to guide his decision making. This is essential to his character as it sets him apart from nearly everyone else in the tech world of Silicon Valley (both the show and the place). His friends who work with him at Pied Piper have varying degrees of moral fortitude, at times encouraging Richard to wear the black hat so to speak (2.8) and at other times encouraging him to stick to his principles. What is important to note is that all of them, under the leadership of Richard, are guided by a more rigorous and stable moral code than other tech players in the Valley, and this serves as a crucial differentiation between the classes of the show.

This moral code, shared by Richard and his friends and dismissed by the leaders of tech, hinges squarely on the gathering and use of user data. Richard is consistently adamant that Pied Piper will never harness user data or sell ads while everyone else gleefully wishes to mine and exploit this data as much as possible. This aligns with Zuboff's understanding of the age of surveillance capitalism as it rose to prominence and significance throughout the 2010s. Because of its run from 2014 through the end of the decade, *Silicon Valley* was uniquely positioned to

comment on this emerging market space of data mining as it relates to the loss of internet privacy. Accordingly, though data factors into all of the seasons, it increases in importance and focus as the show goes on, reflecting a growing awareness and anxiety surrounding tech and data extraction.

However, unlike in *Ready Player One* where Wade is mostly able to enact his hacker dreams within his circle of classmates, Richard and the men of Pied Piper must attempt to maintain their hardline moral stance—not collecting user data or selling ads—within the capitalist systems of the Valley while working with people who very much don't share their ideals. These are the VCs (venture capitalists) from whom they get funding so they can go against the big tech companies like Hooli and its founder Gavin Belson (Matt Ross). Hooli is akin to one of the big tech companies like Facebook/Meta or Google, though in the show, these and many other tech companies exist, making it somewhat of a joke that Hooli has found success when they seem to offer nothing that isn't already accomplished by another company.

The central tension of the show can be stated simply as that between the privacy-centric moral code of Richard and Pied Piper and the ruthless vectoralist capitalism of Hooli and others. In the middle are the VCs who invest in Pied Piper in hopes of making money. Their aims are aligned with the vectoralist class, but they lack the actual power that comes with controlling the vectors of information. They are characterized by having money, desiring to make more of it, and possessing an unwavering devotion to maximizing profits. The VCs aspire to be in the vectoralist class, but they can't achieve such goals even with significant amounts of money. Paradoxically, though they lack money and means, throughout the show, the Pied Piper team ascends as a vectoralist force, with a vectoralist product, but faces continual setbacks due to their moral stances. The show makes it quite clear that Richard and the team could be very rich and

successful were it not for their rigid devotion to not selling ads or harvesting data holding them back.

Hooli is a company that perfectly embodies the vectoralist class, as they turn user data into ad sales and product in both legal and illegal ways (3.7). Then there are VCs. They present themselves as part of the vectoralist class but they don't own or control any real vectors of informational power (unless or until one of these many compression plays they're all making hits it big). Then you have the crew of Pied Piper, which has a product that could make them a Facebook-level force in the vectoralist world if Richard compromised his moral code. Through his refusal to harness user data or sell ads, Richard resists the "extraction imperative" of surveillance capitalism which demands that "raw-material supplies must be procured at an ever-expanding scale" (Zuboff 87). As long as he resists this, which he does throughout the show's six seasons, Richard cannot achieve monetary success because he is attempting to do so against the economic rules governing the current market of surveillance capitalism.

With these forces mapped out, I turn to the show to demonstrate this emphasis on privacy as it relates to the theories of Wark and, especially, Zuboff. Such a reading of the show also demonstrates how its treatment of privacy, and its importance, changes over time as the forces of the real-life tech world became increasingly enmeshed in the age of surveillance capitalism. The topic of user data becomes much more important in later seasons, but ideas about data lurk in the background of the early years.

Early in the pilot, Richard answers a phone call from Peter Gregory (Christopher Evan Welch). Like Gavin Belson, Gregory was a pioneer of older tech innovation, a Bill Gates type to Gavin's Steve Jobs. These days he operates more in the higher end of the VC world with his protégé Monica (Amanda Crew). Richard is talking with Nelson "Big Head" Bighetti (Josh

Brener) when the call comes through about working together. Big Head remarks "It's Peter Gregory. Not sure how he got my number" (1.1). Later in the episode, Monica shows up unannounced and there is this exchange.

Richard: How'd you know I was here?

Monica: Peter Gregory is invested in a company that uses GPS in phones to track people.

Richard: That's creepy.

Monica: You don't know the half of it. And neither does Congress. (1.1)

These two brief scenes show that though data will play a larger part in the plot of later seasons, the themes of safeguarding data privacy are present in the show from the outset. Similarly, though season 1 presents Peter as a more ethical and upstanding character than Gavin, this exchange highlights that he is far from a saint. Like everyone in the Valley aside from Richard, he's more than willing to bend the laws to suit his industrial aims. Peter aligns well with Zuboff's characterization of older tech pioneers and their continued emphasis on maintaining a profitable lawlessness in the internet space, noting that this lawless impulse is driven "by the logic of their own creation" (105) as the neoliberal market forces them to value profit margins above all else.

The emphasis on data is more pronounced as we get to season 2. In the first episode Gavin intones that "data creation is exploding," while simultaneously voicing fears of a "data black market" and "data-geddon" (2.1). This reflects what Zuboff understands as the discovery of behavioral surplus. She dates this phenomenon to the early 2000s (81) but its effects as a market force roll out slowly over the next decade. This is until the early to mid-2010s when "Google discovered that *we are far less valuable than others' bets on our future behavior*" (93, ital. orig.) which Zuboff rightly declares "changed everything." At that point, there exists an

effective way to monetize the surplus of behavioral data (as outlined in the chart above). Put another way,

> We are no longer the *subjects* of value realization. Nor are we, as some have insisted, the "product" of Google's sales. Instead, we are the *objects* from which raw materials are extracted and expropriated for Google's prediction factories. Predictions about our behavior are Google's products, and they are sold to its actual customers but not to us. *We are the means to others' ends.* (94, ital. orig.)

Gavin now shows increased awareness of the market connected to data creation, and increased anxiety about its volatile nature. He fears a world of a "data black market" even though such an idea is something of an oxymoron as data has usually been thought of as something easily available. This also highlights how data extraction is an open secret in Silicon Valley, frequently shrouded in numerous layers of obfuscation.

Throughout season 2, the Pied Piper crew is even more data-conscious than Gavin. The season concerns a lawsuit that Gavin levies on Richard stating that Pied Piper was created on Hooli property. It's an extremely vague and specious prospect, highlighting the inherent legal absurdity in much intellectual property law. This trial is contrasted throughout the season with how people actually interact with IP, as Dinesh and Gilfoyle absentmindedly give part of their code to a company by writing it out on a white board before that company connects with EndFrame, and then Pied Piper "hacks" into EndFrame with log-in information Gilfoyle finds on a post-it note. As is typical of the show, the reality of how things go is far less glamorous than how Gavin and others make it out to be. Pied Piper ends up winning the lawsuit because shifty language in Hooli contracts nullifies the whole of the contracts (a fact that Gavin uses to his benefit to fire many employees without severance). Again, it is the lack of vectoralist ethics

which spells the ruin of Gavin. But because the system of tech capitalism is rigged in his favor, he emerges unscathed.

Season 3 sees Pied Piper join forces with Jack Barker (Stephen Tobolowsky), a businessman with more power than the VC "middle class" of this universe but less than Gavin. He rose to tech fame by coining the "Conjoined Triangles of Success" and now coasts on that one "innovation." He's a competent businessman with little regard for tech aside as a money-making venture. Throughout the show, he butts heads with Richard over the nature of Pied Piper and later with Gavin over how to run Hooli. Richard, firmly situated in his hacker class mentality, has always conceived of his company as consumer oriented. Jack wants to make things business facing in order to get as much money from the profits of Pied Piper as fast as possible. His mindset is similar to that of VCs. He's not entirely wrong, either. A product, called simply "the box" (3.2), is the best way for them to get to market fastest and beat the competition. But this is the logic of Silicon Valley and, once again, it is not shared by Richard. He does cautiously come around to the idea of a more business-facing model, but chafes at how layers of security will affect Pied Piper's ability to use the totality of user experience to improve. His conversation with Jack in this episode is telling. Jack reminds him that "businesses want to protect their data. They're huge pussies when it comes to security" before reiterating "Pied Piper's product is its stock" (3.2).

The tension between Jack and the Pied Piper team relates to privacy in the following episode when the Pied Piper team organizes a crafty plan to keep working on their vision of Pied Piper while appearing to work on Jack's box. It's the ultimate hacker move, taking down the economic imperative of vectoralist practice from within. It also fails immediately as Richard trips walking into work and spills all their plans on the floor (they had intended to shred them at

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work, another great moment of irony). As with the post-it log-in ID and whiteboard of the previous season, once again privacy is thwarted not by complex tech operations but by human error and tangible materials.

The back half of season 3 continues drawing more obvious distinctions between Richard/Pied Piper and Gavin/Hooli. Gavin spends the season altering the Hooli search algorithm to wash away his bad press (3.2) and admits later to reading private Hooli emails (3.7). In contrast, when Richard learns that their network is full of fake users, Gilfoyle gives him a flash drive that would allow him to scramble the data and make fake users appear as real users. Here, Richard could use shady practices to get marginally ahead, but he doesn't do it. But perhaps even more than a moment of moral dilemma, this incident shows Richard's unwillingness to compromise on matters of data. Just as he won't harvest user data or sell targeted ads, he sees this faking of user numbers as a similar data-based violation. I think it's fair to say that this action would be far less ethically suspect than reading private emails or scrubbing the internet of bad press. Yet even the case of this lower-level tech "crime," Richard holds firm to his principles.

By season 4, Pied Piper, though now focusing on video chat (and a new internet), is fairly established though still constantly struggling due to their inability to fit within the capitalist rules of the Valley. In the first part of the season Richard, not wanting to work on a video chat app, leaves the Pied Piper team for a short time to try and do his own thing: remaking the internet with Pied Piper. His vision of PiperNet, which is much more important in seasons 5 and 6, will be free of spam, data mining, and all the other things Richard doesn't like about the current internet. At the same time, Dinesh is running Piper Chat. As noted earlier, Dinesh has the weakest moral backbone of the Pied Piper team. He does buy into Richard's vision, and does

value the technological advancement of their work far more than it is valued by the VC and vectoralists, but he also wants to get rich. Much more than the others, Dinesh is hoping to be financially successful in this endeavor. As such, when given largely ceremonial power as CEO of Piper Chat, such power goes to Dinesh's head with farcical severity and speed. This contrast underscores further just how rare Richard's ethical grounding is and how easy it would be for his morals to waver. To do so, in many cases, would come at the cost of user privacy. Though much of the point of this short-lived Piper Chat storyline is how quickly Dinesh messes up as CEO, the ultimate end point is deeply rooted in a matter of privacy. Due to sloppy legal vetting and a lack of age guard, Piper Chat becomes inundated with sex offenders, each use by its many underage users adding to the fines the company will face. Such a plot point highlights the explicit connection between ethical practices in tech and the significance of privacy, as a lack of age restriction, and thereby a lack of privacy, got Piper Chat in their legal trouble.

Dinesh and Pied Piper get out of this legal mess by selling Piper Chat to Gavin. Significantly Gavin wants to buy Piper Chat solely for its supposedly encrypted user data on Jack Barker. Gavin's faux-spiritual guru Denpok (Bernard White), wanting to prove his continued usefulness, says that he overheard Jack's plans to "move against" Gavin (4.2) when no such plan exists. This prompts Gavin to purchase Piper Chat so that he can (illegally) access the record of Jack's call, a call that doesn't actually exist. This is a complex, hilarious, and astounding moment. Gavin has no issue violating the privacy of chat users. Furthermore, his drive to violate this privacy in service of his own ends is so extreme that he is willing to purchase another company solely for these records (which, again, don't actually exist). To add further irony, Piper Chat is willing to be purchased because of their *own* privacy snafu, namely that they weren't private *enough* in screening users through a legally sufficient terms of service contract.

Stepping further from the specifics of the scene, it provides an instructive look at how things work in the world of *Silicon Valley*. Echoing Burnham's fear that privacy is dead, Gavin sees full access to any and all user data as not only a privilege of using Hooli but as his right. This user data, all of it, is the product that he sees as wholly his to access and control. Similarly, the "failing" of Piper Chat was to be open to a point of endangering the privacy of children. However, such privacy is already severely endangered through both the very legal means of Hooli terms of service agreements and the illegal means of Gavin monitoring the data himself. To drive this point home even further, the real chat conversations that Jack had were with his grandkids. A company that Gavin could easily buy because it endangered the privacy of children was purchased so that Gavin to access chat data that endangered the privacy of children. Except he checked the insignificant boxes that made it legal while Piper Chat forgot to do so making it illegal (and costly to the account of 21 billion dollars) (4.2).

Such passing mentions of privacy are plentiful throughout season 4 leading up to an instance of actual hacking by Gilfoyle. Jian-Yang (Edward O. Yang), who lives with the Pied Piper team in Erlich's incubator, purchases a smart fridge that mocks Gilfoyle with its password protection. Gilfoyle, ever a man to make a point, hacks the fridge with the Pied Piper algorithm so that he can access it and tell the fridge to say "Suck it, Jian-Yang." At the season's end, this pettiness saves them as the fridge is able to store the data when the network goes down.

Season 5 aired in spring of 2018, only 4 years after season 1. However, the shift in the approach to data and privacy has been profound. The pilot plays Peter Gregory's use of phones to track people as a "creepy" occurrence, but a humorous one. Then the joke was that Congress "doesn't know the half of it" (1.1) underscoring the way big tech skirts the rules the rest of us follow. This point is further emphasized by the IP trial of season 2 which makes the point that

Gavin, through spurious contracts, skirted the rules that others, like Richard, lived by. It was a case of the intent of the law/ethical practice versus the letter of the law. Privacy is connected to these early season plotlines, but the point of such events is to draw sharp contrast between Richard's hacker ethos and that of the vectoralist tech ruling class.

A few years later, this has changed, and matters of privacy are the focal point of the season 5 and 6 storylines. In one episode Richard "outs" a gay man as a Christian, to which the man replies that, although he is openly gay, he's "not openly Christian" (5.4). Funny as this is at highlighting the tech community's default atheist position and opposition to Christianity, it's also a moment that highlights privacy and the importance of that privacy to industry success. Similarly, Jian-Yang makes little secret of his plan to steal the code of companies like Pied Piper and present versions of them for the Chinese market.

This season also features the resolution and escalation of the smart fridge storyline and the AI forces related to it. In putting Pied Piper on the fridges, Gilfoyle inadvertently made all the fridges of that brand—of course, a subsidiary of Hooli—display the same "Suck it, Jian-Yang" message and obscene gesture. The smart fridge higher-ups, prompted by Gavin, push a suit on Pied Piper related to this infraction. However, Pied Piper easily escapes the infraction with evidence that the fridges are "listening to us" (5.3) and keeping records of conversations. This is a key piece of Zuboff's theorizing of the age of surveillance capitalism that she calls "Big Other." A play on Big Brother, Big Other is similarly all-seeing and all-knowing but without regard for control. Big Brother, in the context of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948), is a totalitarian force that dictates what its subjects should think and feel. By contrast,

> Big Other does not care what we think, feel, or do as long as its millions, billions, and
> trillions of sensate actuating computational eyes and ears can observe, render, datafy, and

instrumentalize the vast reservoirs of behavioral surplus that are generated in the galactic

uproar of connection and communication. (Zuboff, 377)

Big Other is the end result of many years of mining the behavioral surplus discovered earlier in

the late 2000s and early 2010s. From this emerged the true market power of tech and user data,

thus creating a world where to the vectors go the spoils. These forces of tech monitoring and user

data acquisition have now matured and with it the insatiable capitalist appetite of the vectoralist

ruling class. Zuboff compares Big Other to poachers and users to elephants slaughtered for their

ivory. She reiterates that, "you are not the product; you are the abandoned carcass. The product

derives from the surplus that is ripped from your life" (377).

This is certainly a chilling conception, one made far more banal by *Silicon Valley* and an

off-color joke displayed on a fridge. The idea is the same: Gavin's feared "data-geddon" never

came to pass, instead advancing quickly to a time of increasing surveillance and, crucially,

increasing brazenness to admitting it. Gavin's tech data domination is contrasted explicitly with

Richard who declares on a television interview, "We will never sell you ads. We'll never collect

or sell your information" (5.5). This has been Richard's firm moral stance since season 1, but

now, with the Big Other forces of Gavin and others all the more apparent, his words carry more

weight. The dystopian age of surveillance has come about in full, privacy is dead, and Richard

and Pied Piper seem to be the only hope of fending off Big Other and resisting the poachers.

This sets the stage for the final season and a nearly impossible task facing the show.

While maintaining its signature wry wit and lighthearted attitude, *Silicon Valley* has to face the

increasingly dire state of user privacy in the world while maintaining the Pied Piper crew's

genuine love of technology and optimism for human advancement. Somehow the team needs to

"win" the battle with the Valley VCs and vectoralists and maintain their stance guarding user

data and privacy. At the same time, the team cannot "win" in any major market way since doing so, throughout the show, has been consistently in opposition to their ethos. In a market run by behavior surplus, there is no place for their morality. The Pied Piper team needs to fail and succeed simultaneously.

Season 6 opens with Richard giving a speech about the importance of user privacy before Congress, a clear parody of Mark Zuckerberg's testimony from April 2018. Following this Richard's tech peers and the area VCs mock him for saying something so antithetical to the logic of the market. In this same episode the Pied Piper team must confront their biggest developer about his MMORPG (Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Game) which records user conversations and turns them to in-game ads with hilarious speed and efficiency. Richard tries to blackmail him over some incriminating admissions, but this only makes him more enthusiastic as the ad-algorithm becomes further optimized. Such incidents highlight how Richard is truly alone in the Valley in terms of his approach to user data, and how his efforts to recruit others to his way of seeing things proves futile. The market impulse to exploit user privacy is too strong.

This point is driven home without a hint of subtly in the next episode which sees the Pied Piper team consider taking funding from a VC named Maximo (Arturo Castro). He offers them a billion dollars in much needed funding, though Richard has hang-ups about Maximo's family history of human rights abuses. Richard is still wrestling with these when Maximo unveils his grand ambition to get into the data mining world just as his ancestors used to mine diamonds with child labor. In drawing the explicit comparison between data mining and child slavery-fueled diamond mining, *Silicon Valley* underscores the serious weight of the subject as something far more dire than in years past; the cutesy articulation of "data-geddon" is long past. Similarly, this underscores the lack of morals inherent in much of the Valley by comparing their

illegal, exploitative practices to those more commonly called out as such. The moment further serves as a wake-up call for Richard, that whatever morally upright people might have been present in the Valley years ago are long gone. It's the lawless domain of war lords now.

This reality is all the more apparent through the plotline concerning "tethics," Gavin's newly coined word of ethics in tech. Gavin is now disgraced (somewhat) following Amazon's purchase of Hooli. This is also significant as it causes much of the Hooli brand name to be dissolved into nothing. Reeling from his newfound anonymity he becomes a spokesman for "tethics." The joke here beyond his obvious unfitness as a moral barometer is that everyone gets upset with Richard because he won't sign Gavin's obviously vapid tethics pledge, a pledge that he stole from Applebees. As noted by Odie Henderson, this storyline "cleverly mocks this notion of performance-based influence, zeroing on how easily people can be manipulated by the most simplistic of gestures" (par. 8). Such an irony further underscores how Richard and Pied Piper stand alone against an un-tethical world.

Following a FyreFest/Burning Man-esque music festival, the Pied Piper team realizes that their algorithm only works as a viable internet platform through engagement with artificial intelligence. AI has been a lingering theme through the series, be it self-driving cars (1.6) or the robot Fiona (5.6). In these cases, and many others, Gilfoyle offers his passing remarks about how AI is the inevitable future. But as the significance of privacy as something of value has increased as the show has gone on, so too has the legitimacy of AI. Ironically, with AI integrated into the Pied Piper network, the network will continue learning and compressing data until, eventually, privacy is destroyed (6.7). Richard has finally achieved his dream of a fully decentralized internet, yet the technology he needs to make it actually run is the very same that will undermine his vision for the internet in the first place.

In order to prevent this Oppenheimer-esque doomsday scenario—a metaphor that, like the data/diamond mine one earlier underscores the serious nature of the topic—the Pied Piper team decides to "shit themselves to death," attempting to execute a launch that fails so spectacularly that no one tries to make an internet like this again. With Dinesh racing to the rooftop to put their bad code *back* into the system (because, of course, someone noticed something was off and tried to prevent their failing), Richard gives one final speech reminding everyone, yet again, that in his world "you and you alone will control your own data and identity" (6.7). With this, the command happens to make Pied Piper fail. As with the fake plans from season 3, which were exposed almost immediately, the team fails to the very end, failing even at their attempts to fail. Their bad code goes through, but it's not as catastrophic as hoped. However, they get lucky, and something about what they did causes a large mass of rats to emerge from the sewers making their final act an inversion of the Pied Piper story that is their namesake.

In this finale, Richard and Pied Piper retain their position as hacker heroes while vanquishing numerous foes. In destroying the company before launch, they prevent AI from running amok and destroying privacy. In failing in a public and embarrassing way, they prevent other VCs and vectoralists from trying what they did. The plight of the hacker force is best summed up by Dinesh, saying that he helped save the world and his reward is that he's still super poor (6.7). A blow can be struck by the hackers against the vectoralist forces, but it cannot accompany capital rewards. This is because in the behavior surplus-run market of the 2010s, the rules of the market ensure that profit is connected to the poaching of people for user data.

Yet *Silicon Valley* is a much less depressing work than *Ready Player One* or the theories of Zuboff. It is a world that teeters on the edge of disaster but through moral fortitude, and a

hefty measure of sheer luck, manages to avoid doomsday. It does so while realizing that tech is not the enemy; it's human greed. The Pied Piper team hates capitalist vectoralists like Jeff Bezos, Gilfoyle especially, but they also understand that they need to use AWS to house their network. They harbor no illusions about the immorality of the capitalist system around them, but they also aren't so naïve as to think they can escape it completely. And through it all, they remain deeply committed to using technological innovation to improve the world. As such the show serves as a reminder of one of Zuboff's central ideas: "surveillance capitalism was invented by a specific group of human beings in a specific time and place. It is not an inherent result of digital technology, nor is it a necessary expression of information capitalism. It was intentionally constructed at a moment in history" (85). *Silicon Valley* challenges all viewers to acknowledge this, and then strive for something better.

Chapter 2: "Aren't You the Horse From *Horsin' Around*?" The Capital of Reputation in *BoJack Horseman* and *Trust Exercise*

It is rare that a standup special shakes the cultural landscape, prompting think pieces, universal acclaim, and awards, but that is what Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette* did when it premiered on Netflix in 2018. It ranked number 1 in a *Time Magazine* article on the best standup specials of 2018, where Ashley Hoffman goes so far as to say that "*Nanette* kickstarted a global conversation" about trauma and contemporary culture's failure to address systemic abuse, ensuring that Gadsby's "underrepresented perspective was finally seen and heard" (Hoffman). The *Guardian*'s Brian Logan similarly articulates the significance of *Nanette*, saying that it is about "the power of stories and how, if the stories we tell ourselves are simplified or smoothed over, we leave unchallenged the wider stories society tells itself (in this case, about gender, sexuality and power)" (par. 5).

Due to this emphasis on storytelling and the way personal trauma relates to systemic trauma, *Nanette* became the perfect standup special for the #MeToo movement, a social media movement premised on telling stories of abuse in an effort to expose abusers and reclaim the narrative from that of being only a victim. *Nanette* is but one significant expression of a #MeToo story, but it is uniquely useful in naming the significance that public reputation plays in the Web2 age. With the depth of knowledge the internet has made available, public figures experience a level of precarity that was less prevalent when things hidden tended to stay hidden and public images were more easily curated. Gadsby's special, performed throughout 2017, foreshadows a kind of "cancel culture" paranoia that would rise to prominence especially in 2021. Here she rightly understands that, in an information-based economic landscape, the

greatest power belongs to those that control the information. Reputation, then, is a highly valuable commodity, as the information people know about you will ultimately affect your bottom line.

This is why *Nanette*, and the other #MeToo influenced texts of this chapter, place a great deal of emphasis on storytelling, as it is through collective storytelling that abused parties are hoping to change the narrative (and reputation) of powerful people and reclaim the power of their narrative. *Nanette* is particularly useful for how directly and bluntly it deals with the cultural capital attached to reputation. Gadsby gets to this point through art history where she was taught "There's only ever been two types of women. … Virgin or whore. We [girls] were always given a choice. Take your pick. Ladies' choice! That's the trick. The patriarchy, it's not a dictatorship. Take your choice!" She uses this false binary, a deft jab at the illusion of choice inherent in patriarchy, to segue into speaking about Pablo Picasso, saying repeatedly how she hates Picasso but also isn't allowed to hate him because "cubism." Gadsby sarcastically suggests that cubism is important for suggesting "you can have all perspectives... at once," before driving home the question "[are] any of those perspectives a woman's?" Of course, the answer is no.

This section of *Nanette* sets up the crux of Gadsby's argument by showing the important, unquestionable reputation of Picasso while drawing attention to the way art history has traditionally ignored the perspectives of women. "Perspective" in this sense relates to her broader points about narrative, as allowing a women's perspective on art would open one up to demand a woman's perspective on anything, thus destabilizing the established (white, cishet, male) narrative. This brings Gadsby explicitly to the commodity of reputation, as "nobody owns a circular LEGO nude, they own a Picasso!" It is for this reason that we can't "separate the art from the artist," as the saying goes, because, in the case of figures like Picasso, the art—or at

least the value affixed to it—*is* the artist. This seems even more true in the post-2008 information age as the existence of public figures has become more closely linked to the information that circulates about them.

This is why Gadsby says that the thing we should make jokes about these days is "our obsession with reputation." She continues:

We think reputation is more important than anything else, including humanity. And do you know who takes the mantle of this myopic adulation of reputation? Celebrities. And comedians are not immune. They're all cut from the same cloth. Donald Trump, Pablo Picasso, Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, Woody Allen, Roman Polanski. These men are not exceptions, they are the rule. And they are not individuals, they are our stories. And the moral of our story is, "We don't give a shit. We don't give a fuck… about women or children. We only care about a man's reputation." What about his humanity? These men control our stories! And yet they have a diminishing connection to their own humanity, and we don't seem to mind so long as they get to hold onto their precious reputation.

This is a crux of Gadsby's argument relating to reputation, providing many insights that apply to other #MeToo-influenced texts of the 2010s. The first is a tension between reputation and humanity. Gadsby argues that by placing cultural importance on the reputation of powerful men, like those listed here, we have degraded our sense of humanity. This is true of the men, who are seen only in terms of their reputation and powerful persona, but it is all the more true of the women whose humanity is subsumed by the dominant "perspective" of these men. Gadsby adds that the only men who lose their humanity are those that "believe they have the right to render another human being powerless." Public reputation gives the power that enables one to diminish the humanity of someone else, eliminating their perspective and forcing one dominant narrative.

Gadsby's point is not about the individuals listed but rather the collective dehumanizing manifestations of reputational power present in the culture, power that is mediated by vectors of Internet information.

To summarize the broad picture of *Nanette*, Gadsby calls for her audience to care more about shared humanity (especially that of the powerless) than the reputation of powerful people (usually men). She sees that a far-reaching system of patriarchy has eliminated the perspectives of women in service of more desired (white, male) narratives, and that the way to rectify this discrepancy is to reclaim power by telling one's own story and ensuring that more stories get told. I would add, and will demonstrate in the remainder of the chapter, that the significance of reputation in recent years is a decidedly post-2008 phenomenon brought about by the democratization of information vectors that accompanied the era of Web2; that is, if it's harder for individuals to control the information that people know them, then it's harder to shape a pristine public image and thereby harder to profit on such a finely curated image.

Before moving on to examples of how 2010s stories intersect with the climate of #MeToo, it is helpful to define what a #MeToo narrative is. Coined by Tamara Burke in the mid-2000s, #MeToo exploded, almost overnight, when the Harvey Weinstein story broke in fall of 2017 (*Chicago Tribune*). Enabled by the informational networks of Web2, and at the urging of actress Alyssa Milano, women the world over started sharing an avalanche of stories about their experiences with sexual abuse and sexual assault. The effect was immediate, as quickly stories broke about Larry Nasser (Oct. 18), Kevin Spacey (Oct. 29), Roy Moore (Nov. 9), Louis C.K. (Nov. 10), and Matt Lauer (Nov. 29) (*Chicago Tribune*). By January of 2018, there was the related but distinct movement #TimesUp, which originally focused specifically on workplace sexual harassment in the entertainment industry but quickly became synonymous with #MeToo.

The salient difference is that #MeToo is about sharing past experiences in an effort to reclaim the narrative of one's life, and #TimesUp is more future-minded, hoping to change a broader workplace culture.

We might say that #MeToo narratives are stories centered on sexual abuse and a power imbalance between victim and abuser, usually an older, powerful man and a younger, less power-filled woman. Baked into this point is the key dynamic of reputation, as it is the reputation of the powerful figure that insulates them from allegations of lesser-known or completely unknown women, at least for a while. Second, the narrative is centered on abuse with a sexual component. I word it this way because there are narratives that are clear #MeToo narratives that center on physical or emotional abuse, such as *BoJack Horseman*'s late seasons. However, as explored below, there is still an aspect of sexual power imbalance in this narrative, crucial to understanding it as a #MeToo narrative. Finally, #MeToo narratives are centered on women telling and reclaiming their stories. Yes, the movement, and the narratives related to it, is about taking down powerful abusive men, but it is also about finding solidarity with other women, and healing trauma through community. This final point demonstrates why the #MeToo movement could only happen in a connected web-enabled world where information is easily disseminated. All of these characteristics further align with Gadsby's remarks on reputation in a special that pre-dates much of the cultural #MeToo conversation as it was performed throughout 2017.

Central to understanding gendered power imbalance is the matter of patriarchy and the way the systems of patriarchy insulate men against reputation-damaging allegations and claims. Sady Doyle provides one definition of patriarchy as "a cultural and moral hegemony that mandates one specific, supposedly 'natural' family structure … and, on a grander scale, builds societies that look and function like patriarchal families, ruled by all-powerful, male kings and

presidents and CEOs and Gods" (xvi-ii). Doyle's thesis is that patriarchy takes a harmful and highly cis- heteronormative family structure and forces every aspect of society into it. Put another way, "the promise of patriarchy is that every man will exercise absolute power over at least one woman, and that lucky men will exercise power and control over other men as well" (xvii). In terms of #MeToo narratives, that power is largely the power of reputation. A man is able to keep the narrative under his control due to the power imbalance between the two parties. The #MeToo movement used the vectors of internet information to shift this power balance, even as the structures of the modern world—such as press outlets and the hierarchies of the entertainment industry—remain highly imbued with the structures of patriarchy.

With this in mind I turn attention to *BoJack Horseman*, a program that ran on Netflix from 2014-2020. This timeline is important as it gave *BoJack* ample opportunity to comment on many significant political issues throughout the 2010s (such as abortion rights, gun control, and especially the emerging #MeToo movement). Being one of the earliest Netflix original series, *BoJack* also provides a way to see the model of video streaming assert its dominance throughout the decade. When the final episodes were released in January 2020, Netflix, as a streaming platform, looked completely unrecognizable from when *BoJack* launched as the service's first adult animation offering.

Though fitting within the genre of adult animation television, *BoJack* has little in common with other animated shows. Like many shows before it, it is an animated ensemble sitcom, geared toward adults, full of both subtle and overt social commentary. The medium of animation allows for the world of *BoJack* to be populated with animal and human characters, sparking much of the show's animal-pun-based humor. Narratively speaking, though, *BoJack* has much more in common with the antihero-led serial drama that flourished in the late 2000s

immediately before it. Plot lines stretch the length of entire seasons and demand that viewers watch in a serialized fashion. By the later seasons especially, the show is more of a drama than a comedy, dealing with eating disorders, pain pill addiction, depression, and many kinds of abuse.

This blending of genres—half-hour ensemble sitcom and antihero character drama—is significant to how the later seasons of *BoJack* function as a #MeToo narrative. As noted by Margrethe Bruun Vaage in *The Antihero in American Television*, the antihero is typically a murderer but very rarely a rapist (120). Citing Lisa M. Cuklanz's survey of rape in American television from 1976-1990, Vaage notes that rape factors into what Cuklanz calls the *basic plot* of cop dramas, in which "a very violent rape committed by a stranger is typically used to contrast this thoroughly evil and sick rapist with the compassionate, understanding police detective, who is righteously angered and disgusted by the rape, and who often seeks revenge for the victim" (123-4). Vaage is most interested in how rape portrayals create "a polarization between the evil criminal and a good policeman" (124). In the context of antihero television, rape is used to make the antiheroes "morally preferable" (127) to the even worse perpetuator of rape. Vaage analyzes *The Wire* to show the incredibly low number of instances of rape—three—across five seasons of criminal dealings and murder (123-6).

Vaage further finds it curious that, though in the real world of western society, murder is punished more harshly than rape, on television this is reversed. "As spectators we seem to be willing to imagine ourselves in the shoes of a murderer, such as Tony Soprano … But we are not asked to sympathize with a rapist. Why the asymmetry between real life and fiction?" (132). Though *BoJack Horseman*, like Vaage's other examples, similarly does not ask viewers to place themselves in the shoes of a rapist, it does deal with rape culture, and ideas connected to the #MeToo movement, far more than other antihero shows. There is no murder on *BoJack*.

Moreover, the one instance of suspicious death is connected to sexual power imbalance. More than any other antihero show, *BoJack* confronts ideas related to sexual abuse and violence while ignoring any manifestation of organized crime. I contend that it can do this in large part because it is animated. The layers of distance, through animation and further through BoJack being a horse, provide enough distance between the viewer and the character that we are able engage with the show's themes of sexual power imbalance. But even as *BoJack* addresses rape and rape culture much more than other shows in a similar vein, it still doesn't include explicit rape, on screen or off, further strengthening Vaage's point that such territory is unbroachable in American television for anyone other than the most explicitly vile antagonists.

With this in mind I turn to the show itself and the way it uses reputation in terms of capital. In Gadsbian terms, BoJack Horseman is the rich and powerful man, embodying the elite of the entertainment industry, continually failing upward and often protected by patriarchy. The beats of his story are simple. From 1987-1996, he was the star of *Horsin' Around* where he played The Horse (1.1) raising three human orphans. The show is a generic late 80s/early 90s family sitcom, its closest analogue being *Full House*. Following the end of *Horsin' Around*, BoJack didn't do much for a decade, seeming to coast by on residuals. Frequently people stop him to ask "Hey, aren't you the horse from *Horsin' Around*?" (1.11, 2.5) signaling how his reputation remains tied to the show even years later. In 2007 BoJack starred in the short-lived *The BoJack Horseman Show*, an ill-fated *The Dana Carvey Show* (1996)-like vehicle that hoped to be edgy and experimental. BoJack saw this as his chance for people to stop seeing him as the horse from *Horsin' Around* (3.2), but the show bombed, and so he remained washed up and defined by this one past success.

Throughout the show BoJack resents being seen through the prism of this role, but he is also quick to defend *Horsin' Around* as a bastion against the cynicism and harshness of the world. His relationship to the role, and its being synonymous with his reputation, drives the majority of his storylines throughout the series. On one hand BoJack owes his wealth, status, and career to *Horsin' Around*, but he also wants his legacy to be more than that of a TV actor. This takes many forms. In season 1, it's working on a memoir, in season 2, it's working on the movie *Secretariat*, and in season 3, it's trying to win an Oscar for *Secretariat.* The complex production saga of *Secretariat,* and BoJack's shifting involvement with it, is crucial to understanding both the capital of reputation in *BoJack* and BoJack's future #MeToo reckoning.

Late in season 2, the production team on *Secretariat* decides to go in a different direction, softening the gritty details of Secretariat's story—his opposition to the Vietnam War and death by suicide at age 27—in favor of something family-friendly and saccharine. The film's indie director, Kelsey Jannings, goes along with the new plan, understanding how showbiz works and how little power she possesses in its economy (2.9). Still, she wants this movie to be good for the sake of her own niche reputation and goes along with BoJack's scheme to get a key scene at the Nixon Library and hope its included in the movie. The producer finds out and fires her immediately. BoJack expresses guilt that this happened, but he doesn't stand-up for Jannings or tell the producer that Jannings just went along with his idea. It's possible that BoJack could fight for Jannings and keep her on the nearly completed film, or at least confess that getting the shot was his idea, but he values his own reputation too much to do either. BoJack has the power in their dynamic, even as Jannings is the director, but he is unwilling to use that power to stick up for her.

BoJack immediately buts heads with the new director, and, angry at the "terrible movie" that's going to "ruin [his] career" (2.10) stops showing up for work. Eventually, he's coaxed by his agent Princess Carolyn to go back to set where the director, mad at BoJack for trashing his movie, makes BoJack do the line "I'm tired of running in circles" countless times. Something snaps in BoJack. He goes home, still angry, and gets dumped by his girlfriend Wanda. They originally got together at the beginning of the season because Wanda didn't know who BoJack was and so his reputation held no sway with her. Now, she does know him and, seeing the "red flags" of their relationship, leaves. Once again, BoJack doesn't fight for this relationship or try to smooth things over with Wanda; he just drives his car to New Mexico chasing a former love and a fragile understanding of happiness.

These events with the *Secretariat* movie, and BoJack valuing his reputation over his regard for Jannings and her work, prompt BoJack to flee to a place where his reputation won't be a factor as reflected in the episode title, "Escape from L.A." (2.11). BoJack's hope is to reconnect with his old friend Charlotte, someone he knew *before* he got famous. Here and elsewhere, Charlotte represents the path BoJack's life could have taken if he'd never gotten famous, thus presenting happiness and public reputation as opposites.

The trip does not go well. BoJack's fantasy of reconnecting with Charlotte as if the past 30 years never happened shatters immediately as Charlotte introduces him to Kyle and the kids. Replacing the typical *BoJack Horseman* theme song, this episode features "Kyle and the Kids," a mock 80s sitcom intro, underscoring how much Charlotte's life fits into BoJack's sitcom-based conception of happiness, and how much his own life doesn't. BoJack buys a large boat and spends the next two months living in the front yard of Charlotte and family. The situation is almost the premise of a sitcom, highlighting how BoJack struggles to relate to the world in any

other way. By now he's fitted himself into Charlotte's family in a troubling way, chaperoning Charlotte's 17-year-old daughter, Penny, and her friends, Pete and Maddy, to the prom. BoJack is not a responsible chaperone, buying the kids bourbon, taking them away from the school prom, and releasing glow-stick balloons into the night. This last gesture seems sweet until its revealed minutes later that this is something BoJack and Charlotte did back in the day. As such, the entire sequence is a misguided attempt by BoJack to capture the magic of his youth with Penny in the place of Charlotte.

These actions have consequences BoJack doesn't want to address. Maddy gets alcohol poisoning or something like it, so he dumps her at the hospital, leaving Pete to take care of her not wanting to risk being recognized and hurting his reputation. Once again BoJack values his reputation over the well-being of others, those "others" all being women. It's also telling that BoJack immediately changes the story, telling Pete to tell the hospital that he doesn't know where Maddy got the whiskey (2.11). Here BoJack uses his power to change the narrative in order to protect himself and his reputation while acting in a dehumanizing way toward Maddy, showing no regard for her well-being.

BoJack and Penny return home, and things go from bad to worse. The events that follow are crucial for understanding *BoJack Horseman* as a #MeToo narrative in the later seasons, and so must be walked through in detail. Penny is troubled by how things went with Maddy, but is still transfixed by the previous events of the night. She kisses BoJack on the cheek, and then attempts to kiss him more passionately. BoJack resists. Penny insists that she's ready to "do it" if he wants to. She didn't have anything to drink and is of consenting age in New Mexico. Everything is "totally legal" (2.11) even as we know that nothing about this dynamic is morally right, built on manipulation, longing, and jealousy. BoJack then talks to Charlotte, revealing to

viewers that the glowstick balloons are an echo of irresponsible youth, further enhancing the murkiness of the episode. BoJack kisses Charlotte. Charlotte quickly shuts him down for getting the wrong idea, and then dismisses BoJack's fantasies of running away together. It's a scene similar to the previous one with Penny, though here Charlotte, not BoJack, is resisting.

Returning to the boat, BoJack finds Penny waiting for him and asks, "What are you doing here?" (2.11). This line is a recurring theme throughout season 2, connecting *Secretariat*, where BoJack uses it in a scene, to BoJack's sense of aimlessness. It relates to reputation as he struggles, through the *Secretariat* movie, to assert a sense of himself (you) apart from *Horsin' Around*. Here it echoes Charlotte's greeting to BoJack at the beginning of the episode. He tells Penny to "go to bed," but leaves the boat door open, casting doubt on his feelings. Does he not want to sleep with Penny, or does he want to sleep with Penny but not feel guilty about it, convincing himself he did all the right things to prevent it from happening? Charlotte wanders out that way, hears commotion in the boat, and now the door is closed. She opens it to see BoJack and Penny, fully clothed, on the bed, Penny about to take off BoJack's tie.

As Penny insists, nothing happened, though the show walks a fine line. The power imbalance is clear, as is the fact that BoJack is motivated by his long-ago affection for Charlotte and not anything to do with Penny. In leaving the door open, BoJack at least partly encourages the encounter. He may be not be doing anything illegal, though the events earlier than night related to the alcohol were, but legality will not matter in terms of his reputation. Here is the start of *BoJack Horseman* as a #MeToo narrative, as this is sexual moment connected to a power imbalance that threatens to ruin BoJack's good standing in the industry.

Upon returning to LA and Hollywoo (the "D" is stolen by BoJack early in season 1 and everyone immediately adjusts to the new name), BoJack learns that they finished the movie

without him, using a scan taken of his face at the beginning of season 2 (2.1). But it's more than that, as they discovered that "computer BoJack had so much charisma and screen presence" (2.12) that they went back and edited him out of the rest of the movie. This is important as it means that no genuine performance of BoJack exists in *Secretariat*. His acting, generated by a computer, will be completely detached from BoJack's skill as an actor. As such the ensuing Oscar campaign of season 3 is based *entirely* on reputation as the idea of "BoJack" is all that remains in the film.

This is but a minor detail to BoJack as he campaigns for the movie just as if it were the greatest accomplishment of his career. *Secretariat* is still something that can boost BoJack's credibility as an actor, and as such, it matters to him a great deal. This theme of reputation bleeds over into the power dynamics of season 3. BoJack, well into the grind of the awards circuit, thinks he'll be next, until Jurj Clooners (an obvious George Clooney parody), reminds BoJack that "Jurj, Bread, Mitt, those are names. Like real names. Lernernerner DiCarpricorn, that's a name. BoJack, not a name" (3.6). Jurj's statement carries obvious irony as "Lernernerner" and "Bread" (Bread Poot, *BoJack's* version of Bard Pitt) are not names. This emphasizes how what makes a "name" in Hollywoo has nothing to do with being an actual name and everything to do with a level of fame.

This moment happens in the midst of an episode about abortion, featuring cis- white men asking, "has the concept of women having choices gone too far?" (3.6). The episode sees Diane campaigning for the access to abortion and the power of women to make choices about their bodies right as BoJack is campaigning for an Oscar. As such, we are meant to see the connection between women's lack of power in the abortion debate and BoJack's obsession with the far less

consequential power of winning one of the *many* Hollywoo awards, like the Golden Snowflake, that emphasize the fragility of the egos of actors like BoJack.

These two threads—BoJack's campaign for more industry power based on reputation and Diane's campaign for basic women's rights—collide at the end of the episode as BoJack's publicist, Ana Spanakopita, drops Jurj to focus on BoJack's campaign. When she tells BoJack this, she exerts her power over BoJack, giving him a handjob without his consent. While doing this she asks if BoJack likes being in control, before squeezing BoJack to remind him that she remains in control. It's a troubling moment as BoJack is assaulted by one of the show's very few Black women characters. Perhaps the intent is to use one of the most marginalized groups in American culture, Black women, to highlight this inversion of expected power, or perhaps it was just a thoughtless racial misstep. However, we should not miss what this moment illuminates about power as it relates to sexual dominance and reputation. Ana, like BoJack, makes her career as a publicist on being "the Oscar whisperer." As such she controls BoJack's Oscar fortunes—and the reputation bump that would come with it—much as she controls him sexually in this moment.

While this moment does well to show that the #MeToo movement transcends gender to address power structures, it does so by making BoJack a victim. As such, viewers run the risk of seeing BoJack's past and future problematic sexual escapades as a result of the abuse he suffered. The show frequently addresses how the emotional and potential physical abuse that BoJack suffered as a child effect who he is today. This is a well-made point about generation trauma and the way it reverberates through one's family. However, this moment with Ana threatens to excuse BoJack's actions where the point here is about power as it relates to BoJack's reputation.

Ana's assault of BoJack threatens his manhood, figuratively and literally, leading BoJack to exercise his patriarchal right to exert power of at least one woman (Doyle). That woman is Emily, voiced by Abbi Jacobson. Emily is a long-time friend of Todd, a well-meaning comic relief freeloader who's spent years crashing on BoJack's couch. BoJack met Emily a few weeks earlier at a bar and, knowing she was Todd's ex-girlfriend, has sex with her (3.7). I point out that Emily is voiced by Abbi Jacobson because Penny is voiced by Illana Glazer, the two of them making up the comedy duo on *Broad City* (2014-2019). Furthermore, when BoJack meets Emily, they exchange the greeting "hey" which Penny associated with her high school crush, calling it "their thing" (2.11). This connects Penny and Emily, highlighting the similarity between the two circumstances, neither of which were strictly illegal but both of which were based on a power imbalance and caused harm to BoJack's friends (Charlotte and Todd respectively).

BoJack's encounter with Emily leads to an even more troubling relationship late in season 3. Ana's power proves insufficient to get BoJack an Oscar or even a nomination though a mix-up leads BoJack to briefly think he was nominated. As such BoJack received public adoration and gifts, like a giant chocolate Oscar, only to have them taken away at the end of the episode (3.10). Someone comes to take back the giant chocolate Oscar because his boss only wants the product seen with "real Oscar nominees" in order to "maintain the integrity of the giant chocolate Oscar brand" (3.10). Such a moment is an absurd reflection of the capital reputation has in Hollywoo that even this company worries about status and brand integrity. No one comes to reclaim the luxury car that BoJack was also given as a nominee.

Following this scene, BoJack accidently reveals to Todd that he slept with Emily, causing Todd to give a speech reminding BoJack that he is the problem and that he needs to be a better person. It's very similar to the speech Charlotte gives in season 2 (2.11) where she notes that

BoJack can't escape himself no matter where he goes. This combination of events—the lack of Oscar nomination and the guilt from what he did with Emily—causes BoJack to call up Sarah Lynn to party. Sarah Lynn played the youngest child on *Horsin' Around* and then went the way of someone like Britany Spears with a music career, tabloid drama, and various drug problems. She joins BoJack on what becomes a massive bender (3.11). 31 hours into the bender they show up at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting both drunk. BoJack gets on a stage and introduces himself, adding, "like you didn't know." Such a line highlights how even now, in this place of anonymity, BoJack feels bound to his reputation. It also references the song that plays over the credits of each episode featuring the line, "I'm BoJack the Horseman / Don't act like you don't know." BoJack further breaches the anonymity of the space by bringing up what happened in New Mexico with Penny Carson, noting, "That's her real name, you can look her up" (3.11). This further links Penny to Emily, and shortly to Sarah Lynn, by explicitly reminding viewers of what happened. BoJack further explicitly acknowledges that he "tried to sleep with the mom" and then with the daughter," eliminating the slight ambiguity that was present in season 2.

BoJack continues blacking in and out as he and Sarah Lynn drive all the way to Ohio. It's clear that BoJack's gestures of remorse are not built around ensuring the well-being of Penny as much as they are about his self-centered guilt. Penny seems "totally fine" until BoJack appears and revives her past trauma. Penny's discomfort intensifies when someone nearby recognizes BoJack from television and they swarm him for selfies. His reputation, usually an asset, here is a detriment to his efforts to see if Penny is okay, his reputation overpowering the moment.

On the drive away from Ohio, Sarah Lynn finds "BoJack" brand heroin in the glovebox, noting that "Getting a drug named after you is way cooler than getting an Oscar" (3.11). BoJack's name is quite literally tied to a lethal drug (as noted earlier in episode 3.3, "BoJack

Kills"). Sarah Lynn's congratulations are sincere, insisting that they "have to do BoJack" (3.11).

She procedes to "do BoJack" in two ways, as they do the "BoJack" heroin and also have sex

(they have sex explicitly in 1.11; it's implied that it happens again in 3.11). One could read this

sequence as BoJack—the person—being a dangerous drug for everyone around him, and this is

often the case, but more than that, it is his reputation that kills. The drug is named for him not

because he's special, but just because heroin is called horse and he played a famous horse (3.3).

It is his reputation as the Horse from *Horsin' Around* that is, once again, generating the

destruction around him.

At the end of the bender, they find themselves in a seedy motel. On TV it's announced

that Sarah Lynn just won an Oscar for "The Silly Banana Song (Love Theme)" from Jurj

Clooner's movie *The Nazi who Played Yahtzee*[1]. The comical nature of these names contrasts

with the darkness of the bender while also recalling Jurj's point to BoJack episodes earlier that

he's not a real name. These are among the silliest names of the whole show, emphasizing that the

specifics of the name don't matter, only the reputation it can wield. After a whole season of

trying to win an Oscar, BoJack watches Sarah Lynn win an Oscar that she forgot she was

nominated for. The win could, in theory, provide a reputation bump for her, too, but she isn't

there to experience the glamour of Hollywoo; she's in bad shape in a hotel strung out on BoJack

in several meanings of the word. They leave the hotel, go to the planetarium at the Griffith

Observatory, and Sarah Lynn dies of a heroin overdose.

Much of this episode—"That's Too Much, Man"—echoes BoJack's time in New

Mexico. Upset with his reputation taking a hit—either from being in what he thought was a bad

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[1] As Sarah Lynn isn't present to accept the Oscar, her award is accepted by her stepfather. Several times
throughout the show it is implied that Sarah Lynn was abused by her stepfather, further intensifying the themes of
abuse and trauma present at this moment.

movie or from the embarrassment of the Oscar nomination mix-up—BoJack checks out for months on end. He finds comfort in people from his pre- or early fame days, Charlotte and Sarah Lynn, who remind him of his time before he was just the Horse from *Horsin' Around*. Illegal substances—alcohol given to minors and heroin—enter the equation, as does sexual desire that, while not illegal, severely exploits the power dynamic between BoJack and Penny/Sarah Lynn. There is an additional layer of disgust as BoJack had a quasi-fatherly relationship to both girls, taking the place of Kyle as prom chaperone for Penny and playing Sarah Lynn's father for many years on *Horsin' Around.* These two incidents, along with the season 3 business with Emily which helps to link the two events, demonstrates a pattern of behavior from BoJack that solidifies *BoJack Horseman* as a #MeToo narrative. BoJack, in defense of his reputation, acts in his power to diminish—and, in the case of Sarah Lynn, extinguish—the humanity of young women around him, striving to protect his reputation, and the industry capital it wields, at the expense of their safety and well-being.

These incidents with Penny and Sarah Lynn are mostly contained to their respective episodes, but brief attention should also be paid to the long-term women in BoJack's life, Diane and Princess Carolyn. One can make a case, especially in later seasons, that Diane is the protagonist of the show. She is certainly the major character that experiences the most personal growth, leaving her deceptively happy marriage with Mr. Peanutbutter (Docherty) and making a successful career as a young adult fiction writer. She's the most prominent human character, adding to role as surrogate for the audience. Most importantly, she's the only major character to leave Hollywoo, spending the last season living in Chicago.

Diane's relationship to reputation is a complicated one, as she works in and around the Hollywoo elite but without much status. She wrote a biography on *Secretariat*, but then is hired

on the movie as a consultant given the nonsensical job of telling people not to trip on a cable (season 2). She also is the ghost writer of BoJack's memoir (season 1). More than the other characters, Diane wants to effect real change in Hollywoo and the world, campaigning for numerous women's rights causes. Her only moment of significant reputation status is when she draws attention to the sexual harassment allegations against Hank Hippopopolous, a beloved talk show host known as "Uncle Hanky" (2.7). This is the most overt reference to a #MeToo scandal in the early years, referencing the allegations against Bill Cosby while also setting up for BoJack's incidents at the end of season 2 and throughout season 3. Season 5 sees Diane leave her job working as an underutilized writer for the Buzzfeed-esque blog Girl Croosh and return to the world of Hollywoo on the set of the gritty procedural *Philbert*. Following the messy end of this show, addressed thoroughly below, Diane leaves Hoolywoo, and the reputation economy that comes with it, and makes a life popular middle fiction writer. In accepting this much more minor level of reputation, Diane also finds love, health, and something close to happiness. Season 6 is not subtle in highlighting how all these good things—the same things BoJack continually seeks—only came to Diane when she left Hollywoo and stopped valuing her reputation and her perceived need to be a "serious" writer.

Diane is also important at showing how the process of seeing someone's true colors, and the abuses of power that come with it, takes time. BoJack does not do anything heinous toward Diane, but there are a lot of little things. He attempts a relationship with her while she's seriously dating his friend and while Diane is in the process of writing BoJack's book (season 1). BoJack welcomes and encourages her crashing at his place, against his girlfriend's (Wanda) wishes and much longer than was healthy for BoJack or Diane (season 2). He co-opts her crusade for feminism (5.4) and repeatedly makes Diane feel guilty for his reckless behavior (6.15, and many

other times). BoJack's actions toward Diane are not as egregious as those toward Penny or Sarah Lynn, but the pattern is still present. Diane, like the viewers, comes to realize the depths of BoJack's abuse issues gradually, positioning her to speak against them most directly at the end of season 5.

The other woman in BoJack's life is Princess Carolyn. Her narrative with BoJack is even messier as it is longer and does involve a formal relationship. They dated for seven years (6.12) starting in 2007 (3.2), making the end of their relationship shortly before the show starts in 2014. She's worked as his agent and manager from shortly after the start of their relationship, so 2008 or 2009, until the very end of the show. Unlike Diane, Princess Carolyn finds happiness at the end of the show while remaining in the world of Hollywoo, but it should be noted that her career was never built on her own reputation. Also that Princess Carolyn is a healthier and more well-adjusted person than BoJack throughout the show, never struggling with depression or substance abuse problems. Like Diane, BoJack's toxicity dawns on her slowly largely because of their long relationship. She provides an important contrast to Charlotte, a short-lived fling of BoJack's past who was able to move on from him. Conversely, Princess Carolyn is less able to "quit" BoJack, much like how an overdose of BoJack—the drug and the person—killed Sarah Lynn. The similar names—Carolyn and Sarah Lynn—further make this point as does the fact that they are the only people to know BoJack for upwards of 15 years.

It's very significant to *BoJack Horseman* as a #MeToo narrative how Diane and Princess Carolyn finally come to realize the toxic nature of BoJack. This gradual process highlights how #MeToo information often comes to light slowly and only when the experiences of many women come together. Throughout the show, BoJack's reputation remains durable as long as his worst deeds—with Penny and Sarah Lynn—stay hidden. Despite very little to show for his recent

career as an actor, BoJack keeps getting by on wealth, privilege, and his sparkling reputation as the Horse from *Horsin' Around*. Even without recent industry success, season 5 provides BoJack the chance to work on *Philbert,* a boilerplate antihero drama. Such a show encourages viewers of *BoJack Horseman* to think about the increasing antihero nature of *BoJack Horseman*; as BoJack struggles with blurring lines of his life and the *Philbert* production, we are meant to be more aware of the blurring genres going on with *BoJack Horseman* as the antihero themes become more pronounced.

Philbert is, without question, one of high points of BoJack's career, premiering to critical and audience praise. Princess Carolyn quotes one such review as saying, "this is not the sad man as suave and cynical anti-hero but a barely scabbed-over wound of a person" (5.10). Audiences seem receptive to BoJack's detective Philbert and his complex morality, but Diane—and by extension, the viewers—has seen the truth. Early in the season showrunner Flip brings Diane on as a consultant so people will say "huh, a lady worked on the show. Guess it's not sexist" (5.4). But Diane isn't buying the ruse. She plainly sees that *Philbert* is "posing as a deconstruction of the edifice of toxic masculinity, but it's just using that as an excuse to relish in its own excess." This is a moment when *BoJack* (the show) is wrestling with its role in normalizing problematic behavior (even if it stops short of glamorizing it, as Diane suggests about *Philbert*).

In one of the many ironies of Hollywoo, BoJack uses this sentiment, and the rallying cry "choking your wife is bad" to become a feminist icon, relaying Diane's sharp critiques of patriarchy through his "male voice" (5.4). It is yet another example of BoJack's disregard toward the feelings of others, especially women, in service of his own reputation and brand. This episode also briefly introduces Vance Waggoner, a known misogynist and racist. In this season 5 appearance, he seems cartoonish and excessive, a walking embodiment of the Hollywoo bad-boy

trope. Vance is a villainous, extreme version of Bojack included to make BoJack morally preferable in the eyes of viewers (Vaage 120). When Vance reappears toward the end of season 6, it's clear that BoJack is much more Vance-like than he wants to admit.

At the *Philbert* premiere, BoJack gives a speech saying, "I'm sure we all have Philberts in our lives, or we are Philberts. You know, we've all done terrible things that we deeply regret" (5.10). BoJack continues, "[What *Philbert* says] is that we're all terrible, so therefore we're all okay" (5.10). When BoJack expresses the sentiment that we're all terrible, the camera suddenly cuts from BoJack to Diane aghast at this sentiment. Back in 5.4 after Diane calls out *Philbert* for failing to deconstruct toxic masculinity, she is contacted by Ana. Ana's representing Waggoner whose career is now "over for about two or three years," but Ana has come to realize her complicity in the system providing "cover" for problematic men like Waggoner (5.4). She gives Diane a tape with partial details about BoJack's time in New Mexico, details that Diane writes into a *Philbert* storyline to hopefully prompt an honest confession (5.7). At the premiere, Diane realizes that BoJack shares in the hypocrisy of *Philbert* and similarly has no interest in using his part in *Philbert* to dismantle toxic masculinity or promote genuine feminist ideals. In 5.7, Diane made it clear to BoJack, through the *Philbert* script, that she knew some of what happened. She gave him however long it was between then and the premiere to own up and deal with it, and BoJack just confirmed that he was not going to do so.

Following the premiere, Diane catches up to BoJack and calls him out while also noting her own complicity. "I made [Philbert] more vulnerable, and that made him more likeable which makes for a better TV show. But if Philbert is just a way to help dumb assholes rationalize their own awful behavior, well, I'm sorry, but we can't put this out there." This is, perhaps, the moment when *BoJack Horseman,* the show, most directly confronts its role propping up the

"edifice of toxic masculinity." BoJack, the character, is extremely vulnerable and, at times, quite likeable despite most of the examples that I address here. At other times, his behavior is (or at least, should be seen as) repellent. Here, the show seems to be wrestling with its own conflicted feelings, embodied through the *Philbert* storylines. Surely it hasn't glamorized BoJack's addictive, destructive behavior, but has it played a role in normalizing it?

It is telling that the show titled *BoJack Horseman* is here aligned not with BoJack's sentiment but with Diane's complex feelings of personal responsibility regarding the television product and how it might be wrongly received. This makes Diane's next statements even more intriguing. To BoJack she says, "I am very publicly your friend, so it if gets out that you're doing creepy stuff, that makes me look bad" (5.10), before BoJack sarcastically says that his behavior "hurts [her] brand." As noted above Diane's reputation capital is far smaller than BoJack's, but it is not nonexistent. The difference in reputation understanding is notable, as it is BoJack who uses the language of branding. This is how he conceives of the world when all evidence suggests that Diane's concern with something making her look bad relates to her principled stands. Her reputation may hold some power, but it's not threatening to dehumanize anyone.

One could argue that *BoJack Horseman* (the show) is also now in a conflicted place regarding BoJack (the horse). BoJack's speech is very aligned with the perspective of what Emily Nussbaum calls "bad fans." Nussbaum coined this concept in 2014 regarding fan response to *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) and the earlier influence of *All in the Family*'s (1971-1979) Archie Bunker. She attempts to express how two groups of viewers can both love a program "in very different ways" (38). She understands that no one "wants to hear that they're watching something *wrong,*" but Nussbaum remains resolute in the belief that there are right and wrong ways to watch a given show. She asserts that the fans of *The Sopranos* that "[fast-forward]

through Carmela and Dr. Melfi to freeze-frame Tony strangling a snitch with wire" (38) are watching the program wrongly and drastically misunderstanding the purpose of the antihero in the program.

Unsurprisingly, Nussbaum's theorizing of the bad fan comes up often when discussing the later years of *BoJack Horseman*. Michael Docherty writes that "*BoJack Horseman* feels directly attuned to this 'bad fan crisis,' its presentation of BoJack's misdeeds an active challenge to the viewer who watches a certain kind of violent, abusive, tormented male antihero and identifies positively and uncomplicatedly with him" (4). This scene between BoJack and Diane after the *Philbert* premiere seems like such a moment. *Philbert* is the embodiment of the "dark dramas" Nussbaum discusses. BoJack, in promoting *Philbert* and maintaining his reputation, seems to want to ignore the less savory aspects of the show, or at least downplay them. Diane, challenging *Philbert's* complicity and awareness of the "bad fan crisis," to use Docherty's words, isn't letting him get away with it that easily.

Roberta Klimt adds to Docherty's point about bad fandom noting that *BoJack* is a "self-conscious heir to the 'Difficult Men' school of television arguably incepted by *The Sopranos* and refined by *Mad Men,* both shows whose success depends in heavy part upon the audience's sympathy and identification with destructive, sociopathic protagonists" (3). Throughout most of five seasons, *BoJack Horseman* has certainly courted audience sympathy with its titular character. Even as viewers remain conflicted about his behavior and actions, they stay mostly on his side, sharing in his pain. I would argue this is the case up through "Free Churro" (5.6). This whole episode is BoJack's eulogy at his mother's funeral, a highly cathartic and bittersweet episode following the up-and-down ride of his mother's dementia throughout season 4. But following this episode, BoJack gets increasingly more dependent on pain killers, and more

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willing to hide his secrets from those closest to him (like his girlfriend and *Philbert* co-star Gina or sister Hollyhock). By the *Philbert* premiere, I would argue that *BoJack Horseman* intends for our sympathy with BoJack to be waning. Through this exchange between BoJack and Diane, we see a literalized version of how the show is starting to distance itself from BoJack, the character, in light of his failure to acknowledge his misdeeds as more terrible than the average person.

The blurring of *Philbert* and reality takes a tragic turn for BoJack in the next episode, "The Showstopper" (5.11). Here the fragile membrane of show and reality, which was weakened when Diane included details from BoJack's past in the *Philbert* script (5.7), collapses completely. The *BoJack* theme song is replaced with a *Philbert* theme modeled heavily on *The Sopranos*'s "Woke Up This Morning." This leads to another episode highlighting BoJack's mental instability as seen before in 1.11 and 3.11. Two seasons later the format is back with Gina replacing Sarah Lynn from the previous drug-riddled episodes. This ominous portent comes to fruition at the end of the episode when BoJack, on the *Philbert* set which looks eerily like his living room, loses control and chokes Gina before people intervene and pull him off her. Gina doesn't die, but BoJack's violent acts certainly inflict trauma.

This trauma becomes directly tied to reputation in the following episode, the season 5 finale. Princess Carolyn and the *Philbert* team, in full PR triage mode following the leaked tape where BoJack chokes Gina, set up a short puff piece interview with Biscuits Braxby, a woman well-known for these kinds of PR appearances. We can see her as part of the "Apology Tour" ecosystem satirized earlier in the season connecting to Vance Waggoner (5.4). Against Princess Carolyn's wishes, BoJack has seen the tape prior to the Braxby interview and is truly shaken by it. He wants to go on and try to apologize and smooth things over, but Gina adamantly opposes this. Prior to taping she tells him "My career, after so many failed attempts, is finally starting to

take off … People know me because of my acting. And all that goes away if I'm just 'the girl who got choked by BoJack Horseman.' … I don't want you to be the most notable thing that ever happened to me" (5.12).

Here we see not only Gina's concern for her own suddenly meaningful Hollywoo reputation, but also the complexities of reputation capital in the information age. Everyone involved with *Philbert* has the same information—the truth that BoJack's offense was serious and dangerous—but only BoJack stands to benefit from that information. Paradoxically, if he apologizes, he will join the Apology Tour rhythms, rehab his career for a couple years, and emerge largely unscathed. In the process, Gina, having done nothing wrong, will be nothing, erased by the bigger reputation of the BoJack Horseman name. BoJack's reputation threatens to undermine both Gina's status and her humanity as a person unrelated to him.

BoJack doesn't feature prominently in the second half of this episode, a shift from past season finales that centered heavily on him. This is part of a growing trend in season 5 of the show pulling back, slightly, from BoJack's narrative just as Diane has done throughout season 5. Two episodes in season 5 (5.2 and 5.5) hardly feature BoJack at all, with another two (5.3 and 5.8) focusing more on other characters. BoJack is a background character in much of the first half of season 6, too.

Netflix released season 6 in two parts and the final episode of part one is notably the first episode of the show's run to not feature BoJack at all. Titled "A Quick One, While He's Away" (after The Who's song of the same name) the episode highlights how people are affected by BoJack long after he's physically out of the picture. We see Character Actress Margo Martindale wrestling with her past crimes, all prompted by BoJack. We see Kelsey Jannings working on a commercial for Chicken 4 Dayz, far afield from her indie darling status of yesteryear. She's

scarred from working with difficult people like BoJack and hesitant to do so again. We see Gina who *has* managed to keep her career going strong following the end of *Philbert* but is a much harsher and temperamental person than she was pre-BoJack, showing the lingering effects of her trauma. This episode also introduces Paige Sinclair and Max, characters who provide much of the comic relief in the second half of season 6 while also uncovering the story of BoJack's misdeeds.

We also see a snapshot of Hollyhock's college life where she is similarly haunted by her time with BoJack. She's terrified to drink any alcohol, afraid that she'll spiral out of control like her half-brother BoJack tends to do. Hollyhock is similar to Gina, still reeling from the trauma inflicted by a Horseman (Hollyhock was mostly the victim of BoJack's mother throughout season 4). Time has passed, and Hollyhock is doing better even than in season 5. Still, at a party she has a panic attack and is calmly talked down by Peter, Pete from "Escape to L.A" (2.11). Pete wasn't present for the part with Penny, but relays BoJack's giving alcohol to minors and the subsequent alcohol poisoning that results from it. The episode ends with Pete saying the guy was someone famous, showing BoJack's reputation starting to backfire on him, and Hollyhock asking, "Who is it?" An explicit answer is not needed, as it's clear that everyone knows it's BoJack.

This episode is in stark contrast to the previous episode in which BoJack tries, again, to go to AA, has a nice moment with Mr. Peanutbutter, and feels something real at a re-enactment of an early Horsey church service. That episode ends with the horse acting the part of pastor saying, "Looks like you found some solace in our show. Stay if you like. In 30 minutes, we start over" (6.7). This is a powerful line linking the concepts of "solace" and "show." BoJack has long found solace in the tight and easy sitcom format of *Horsin' Around*, and now finds it in a

different sort of show, a performance of a religious service. Viewers, bad fans or good fans, might find solace in the show *BoJack Horseman*, but just as *Horsin' Around* is a myth promising happy endings and neat resolutions, so too is this show, doomed to start again. And then, in less than 15 seconds, the next episode autoplays, reminding viewers of all the trauma BoJack is responsible for. When 30 minutes has passed, this half of the season is over, and there is no solace to be found as BoJack's past gets ever closer to catching up with him.

The second half of season 6 is the story of how these fissures form and grow in relationship to his #MeToo reckoning. It's how the threads of BoJack's conversation with Diane at the *Philbert* premiere, the incident with Gina, and the continuing trauma seen in "A Quick One, While He's Away" all come together. Hollyhock cuts off her relationship with BoJack even as they are now both at Wesleyan, Hollyhock as a student and BoJack as a drama teacher, his reputation, again, helping him to land a job. BoJack enjoys his semester of teaching and attends AA meetings sporadically (6.9), but all the while, Paige and Max are investigating and getting closer to having the real story about the death of Sarah Lynn.

BoJack finds out about this real story after the end of semester acting showcase, his proudest moment as a teacher at Wesleyan. Diane and Princess Carolyn take the news of this investigation differently. Diane recognizes that this is the moment that BoJack needs to own up to his mistakes. Princess Carolyn remains in agent mode, already thinking about how they can spin this for the press. BoJack goes with Princess Carolyn's advice, and Diane walks out. The rift that intensified with BoJack's remarks at *Philbert* premiere has cause irreparable damage to their relationship. This is the last scene BoJack and Diane have together until the finale. It's difficult to overstate the significance of this moment for the show and how it speaks to the capital of reputation. From the beginning the BoJack and Diane relationship has propelled the show as

she's worked to write his memoir and then on the set of *Secretariat* and *Philbert*. Her career and BoJack's have been tied together for several years, through many challenges. This is because Diane is a type of BoJack who exists on the fringes of Hollywoo.

Like BoJack, she struggles with depression and comes from a challenging home. Diane deals in reputation capital but by nature of being a Vietnamese woman writer and not a white male TV star, she never achieves the heights of BoJack—or even her NPR heroes—but gradually becomes okay with that. In the finale she says that she's doing okay, "working on this middle-grade fiction series. I mean, who am I, Rick Riordan?" to which BoJack replies, "Who's Rick Riordan?" (6.16). Rick Riordan is far from obscure in terms of children's literature, but he's obscure enough for BoJack not to know about him. Diane could plausibly achieve a Riordan-level of reputation within the children's literature space. Such status would represent far less than Diane once hoped to achieve, but she's come to accept that and be okay with it. In the speech to his class, we see that BoJack might do the same. He's settled into a life far away from the world of Hollywoo and has adapted to the corresponding hit in reputation. In many ways he's a new person, until the Sarah Lynn story comes up and he reverts to "old BoJack" as Todd calls it. In shunning Diane's advice to own up to the allegations, BoJack loses relationship with Diane while also signaling that he has not successfully transitioned to "new BoJack" as well as Diane has adjusted to the rhythms of her new life.

Paige's story goes to print and it doesn't reflect well on BoJack, so he and Princess Carolyn call in Biscuits Braxby to do PR triage as she did for *Philbert* after the Gina incident in season 5. The interview goes well, but Princess Carolyn is still a bit shaken, saying "You've definitely gotten your 10,000 hours in when it comes to apologizing" (6.12). For the first time, she seems to be growing tired of the Hollywoo charade and coming to realize the harm of the

Apology Tour. Princess Carolyn is wary of doing a part 2 for the network, but BoJack pushes for it, saying "we're starting a dialogue," when in truth he feeds on the attention and praise he received after the first interview.

The second interview is not the easy affair that the first one was. Paige talked to Braxby and informed her that there was a 17-minute gap between when he realized Sarah Lynn was passed out in the planetarium and when he called the cops, a gap that he used to absolve himself of being there when it happened. This is new information for the audience, too, casting an even harsher light on BoJack and the Sarah Lynn incident. Braxby then drills down on the common link through BoJack's pattern of behavior of abusing power over women, a power differential he frequently denies. This point ties into episode 6.8 which highlighted the way BoJack's influence still haunts Gina, Kelsey and Hollyhock. Biscuits sums it all up in devastating fashion:

> You gave Sarah Lynn alcohol when she was a child. She then became an addict. … When she was intoxicated, you had sex with her, and when she was sober, you gave her the heroin that killed her. Then, in an effort to cover for yourself, you waited to call the paramedics that might have saved her life. And you don't think you have any power over women. (6.12)

The interview is over. Like before, BoJack and Princess Carolyn meet outside in the parking lot, but now Princess Carolyn is fully done with BoJack. The camera slowly pushes in on her as BoJack walks back and forth, recounting their 7 years of dating. He rhetorically asks, "Do you think I took advantage of you?" to which Princess Carolyn responds, "I'm here, aren't I?" She doesn't deny that BoJack took advantage of her, and her response, of still being there after everything that's happened, can be read as confirmation that not only did BoJack take advantage of her years ago, but that their professional relationship has continued in this vein ever since.

Whatever relationship they may have following this moment, their decades long friendship (we see in 5.8 that they've interacted at least somewhat since back as far as 1994) is done. BoJack fell out with Diane at the *Philbert* premiere, Todd after the showcase, and now, most painfully of all, Princess Carolyn following this interview.

BoJack's #MeToo reckoning has come at last and the hit he takes to his reputation capital is severe as one magazine names him the number one Most Hated Man (6.13). His financial capital also takes a severe hit as he settles with Sarah Lynn's family for 5 million dollars. For the first time, he doesn't easily get a new acting gig, his cherished title as "the horse from *Horsin' Around"* now gone. Only the manipulative and despicable Vance Waggoner seems to want to interact with him, showing that the implied distinction between BoJack's misdeeds and those of Vance highlighted in 5.4 has disappeared.

The show ends with BoJack serving a short and seemingly painless stint in prison. He's directing a production of *Hedda Gabler* with the inmates, a detail that echoes all the way back to the show's first episode when he describes *Horsin' Around* as "not Ibsen." The prison production strips Ibsen of the status BoJack—and his mother—once connected to it (1.1, 2.1). BoJack is slated to get out in a few months and already has a movie, *The Horny Unicorn*, lined up with Vance Waggoner. An obvious crass pun, the title also shows BoJack leaning into the villain persona made for him, eschewing his (now dead) wholesome family image for something "edgy." There's a further irony as "unicorn" indicates something unique and magical, while BoJack's time on the Apology Tour is anything but unique or special. It appears his reputation will soon largely bounce back. But his relationships, with Princess Carolyn, Diane and Todd, are gone forever.

Whatever reputation BoJack has once he leaves prison will not include *Horsin' Around*. This is because an old network exec, Angela Diaz, one of the few women in the show to have power over BoJack, buys him out of his backend for *Horsin' Around* (6.14). The plan is to re-cut the episodes without him in them, a dark echo of BoJack's erasure from *Secretariat* in season 3. She convinces him to sign on to this plan, saying "Do it for Sarah Lynn. Doesn't she deserve more than to be remembered as the girl you killed?" Angela wields the power of reputation once last time, echoing Gina's sentiment from the end of season 5. BoJack takes a hit to his own legacy in order to build up Sarah Lynn's. However, I'm skeptical that this *Horsin' Around* re-cut project will ever happen given BoJack's reputation is already bouncing back by the finale. More likely, Angela wanted to be done with him, manipulating him by appealing to his regard for Sarah Lynn's reputation. Sarah Lynn had a successful pop career, won an Oscar, and had a song in space (6.15), so it's unlikely she would be as forgotten as Angela suggests. Still, the resonance of the scene comes from the way it echoes Gina's idea of being completely overshadowed by the misdeeds of a man and trauma done to her.

BoJack Horseman presents a clear #MeToo narrative focused on a powerful man, his abuse of power in relationship to younger women, and how his public reputation insulated him from retribution for a long time. These are key aspects of the #MeToo narrative, but *BoJack Horseman* does not focus much on women working through their trauma and, crucially, reclaiming their narrative in order to move beyond trauma. In other words, this aspect of #MeToo narrative highlights the limits of reputation capital once the abused women reclaim their humanity through telling their experience.

For an example of how storytelling leads to working through sexual trauma and reclaiming one's narrative and humanity, I turn now to Susan Choi's 2019 novel *Trust Exercise*.

The novel unfolds in three parts, each titled "Trust Exercise." This is an extraordinarily difficult book to summarize because each part radically upends one's reading of the previous part. Part 1 concerns Sarah and David, high schoolers in the early 1980s attending at an elite performing arts school called CAPA. What constitutes a plot of this section concerns Sarah's time in the arts school, her complicated relationship with David, her unhealthy relationship with their drama teacher, Mr. Kingsley, and a few strange weeks when students from a British performing arts school visits CAPA.

One spends half the novel feeling around this world of unstable narration and decreasing levels of realism only to turn to Part 2 and realize it as all a lie. Now it's the late 1990s, and what we just read in Part 1 is revealed to be a novel written by Sarah processing her time at CAPA. Now we follow Karen, who informs us this isn't her name just as "Sarah" also wasn't the real name of the focal character of Part 1. The plot of this section concerns Karen reconnecting with David as he's staging a play for Martin, leader and chaperone of the British students from Part 1. In this section Karen also fills in some of the abusive details only vaguely hinted at in Part 1.

Part 3 launches forward in time to the early to mid 2010s and concerns Claire someone possibly connected to Karen and Part 2 and possibly entirely separate. This section also concerns naming and how one's name carries on one's reputation. The plot here follows Claire as she attempts to learn something about her birth mother—possibly Karen—and fends off the advances from Robert Lord—possibly either Mr. Kingsley from Part 1 or Martin from Part 2. Though only about 20 pages in length, Part 3 upends one's previous understanding of the much longer Part 2, just as Part 2 upended the reading of Part 1.

The confusion is largely the point as Choi gives readers of *Trust Exercise* three different narratives, each of them from a woman processing her trauma. They contradict each other and

could concern several different mentor figures of power and reputation, or all three parts could be telling the same story in different ways. As noted above in relation to Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette,* the capitalization of reputation is premised on telling one specific narrative of male genius—such as that of Picasso—and excluding the parts that don't fit—such as the diminishing and abuse of young women. *Trust Exercise* is full of these "parts that don't fit" relating to the experiences of Sarah, Karen, and Claire. Each part is their attempt to tell these excluded fragments of narrative in a way that reasserts their humanity by disrupting the narrative of "genius" that gives the men of the novel their power of reputation.

Keeping in mind that this novel presents three different versions of the truth, we can analyze each section both in terms of what it says and, more importantly, how it conveys its ideas. Though the events of *Trust Exercise* are those one expects to find in a #MeToo narrative—men in power abusing women in their care—it is the way that Choi reveals the details of *Trust Exercise* that make it a particularly illuminating text for showing *how* the women process their trauma through storytelling as a means of reclaiming themselves.

As we approach *Trust Exercise*, it's worthwhile to consider Sophie Gilbert's words on the literary abuser trope. Writing in May 2021, Gilbert names a trope in contemporary fiction that concerns young women and their abusive relationships to authors and English teachers. Gilbert notes that she isn't sure how to classify this new genre in which "women seem to use writing to separate their understanding of abuse from their understanding of language itself" (4). Though the figures of *Trust Exercise* are not exactly literary abusers, Gilbert's sketching of this idea remains useful as *Trust Exercise* shows women using their understanding of language, and performance art, to process their abuse. Sarah writes a novel. Karen acts in a play. Karen also points out directly to readers where Sarah's book blurred the "factual" record that Karen knows,

putting an emphasis on language as Sarah uses it to obscure the "reality" of their time in CAPA. Gilbert further notes that this genre is "tricky" as "truth and invention can become so intimately enmeshed" (5). Such an enmeshment is clear in *Trust Exercise* as Sarah attempts to write her experience in novel form and as Karen attempts to show readers where Sarah failed before getting enmeshed in a play of her own.

There's a fine line between how Gilbert understands the literary abuser trope and how we might apply it to *Trust Exercise*. The men of the novel are not authors or English instructors, but they also aren't far removed from it. Martin, in Part 2, writes the play they put on (159) and Mr. Kingsley, as a drama teacher, teaches a kind of literature but one told not exclusively through the language of words but also through the language of performance. As such we can see Sarah and Karen use artistic production—through words in the form of a novel and acting performance—to separate their understanding and experience of abuse from the way it shaped their understanding of language and performance. As such we can understand *Trust Exercise* as something very similar to the literary abuser trope that Gilbert describes and can similarly think about its enmeshment of "truth" and invention as a way of guiding us through the novel.

As we find out in Part 2, Part 1 of *Trust Exercise* is a portion of Sarah's novel relaying her time at CAPA especially as it relates to David, Mr. Kingsley, and the traveling group of English People come put on a controversial production of *Candide.* This section is told through third person narration creating a distance between Sarah of Part 1 and the author "Sarah" revealed by Karen in Part 2. In Part 1, Sarah, David, and other quickly addressed students like Manuel and Karen, exist in a world of young talent dominated and organized by their drama teacher, Mr. Kingsley. He's known among the students for being tough and demanding, often pushing them to their limits in activities called "trust exercises." To use Todd's language from

BoJack Horseman following the acting showcase, there is something "super sketchy" about Mr. Kingsley. Sarah sort-of witnesses a potentially illicit meeting between Manuel and Mr. Kingsley, but, from her vantage point, she "has no way of knowing for sure if Mr. Kingsley is in there" (69). She muses about how "no rules exist [at CAPA] to define [student] relations with teachers. … They can shed tears and tell secrets, or not. Vague norms emerge and dissolve" (71).

In evidence of this point, the whole CAPA group goes to Mr. Kingsley's house for a cast party where Sarah sees Manuel get an expensive blue shirt from a tiny room at the top of an uncarpeted staircase (75). She asks if Manuel lives there, to which he replies that he does not. This encounter, coupled with the almost-witnessed meeting previously certainly presents Mr. Kingsley as someone exhibiting the behavior of a groomer, plying Manuel with gifts that he keeps at his house. However, as Sarah tells us, there are "no rules" governing student and teacher relationships. Once we know from Part 2 that Part 1 is Sarah's novel, incidents like this get murky. Is Mr. Kingsley a sexually abusive person grooming Manuel? Or is this depiction of him rooted in another instance of trauma? We are similarly asked to confront whether Sarah's articulation of the lack of rules between students and teachers is simply her stating a fact about the way the CAPA community worked or is this an attempt to rationalize her abuse as something less serious because it didn't break any rules. We saw Princess Carolyn do something similar after BoJack's play, emphasizing BoJack's not illegal actions as a means of not facing the fact that she, too, had been "taken advantage of" (6.12) by him for years.

Sarah's abuse happens not at the hands of Mr. Kingsley but at that of Liam. Liam is a member of the English People group, playing the lead in *Candide*. He is 24 and "six years out of high school" (91). This detail underscores Liam's distance from the CAPA group as well as his inability to move on and grow up. Martin, the English People's version of Mr. Kingsley, stages

this production of *Candide* specifically for Liam (91) in a way that foreshadows how David will mount Martin's play in Part 2. Both Liam and Martin are staying with Mr. Kingsley while in town for the tour, Liam in the small attic room where Sarah previously encountered Manuel. It is in this room where Liam rapes Sarah, saying, "my willy's in your *squashy wet tight squashy hot*" (115, italics orig.). Given that Part 1 is "Sarah's" attempt to process her sexual abuse trauma through novel writing, such childish language shows enmeshment of truth and invention. Liam is not a character of a realist novel, saying childish things like "I dooo want a boothstah" and barking like a dog (104). Such an unrealistic character, and one so out of step with the tone of the rest of the section, is much more easily understood when we consider Liam as a part of "Sarah's" trauma processed through writing. Such an idea also fits with Gilbert's understanding of the literary abuser trope as Liam is distinguished by his strange ways of using language, a manifestation of "Sarah's" attempts to untangle her abuse and her understanding of language.

Seeing Liam as a manifestation of Sarah's trauma makes more sense when we consider the similarities between Liam and David. Prior to the rape scene, Sarah notices that the attic is now "as squalid as—what? It took her a moment to understand the familiarity of the squalor. The room was as squalid as David's car" (112-13). Such a comparison makes it even more likely that Liam exists as a narrative device to enable Sarah to process her trauma. The link between Liam and David suggests that David may be truly responsible for Sarah's abuse with Liam as the invented version of him. The fact that David mounts Martin's play in Part 2 only strengthens the link as does Karen's assertion that the Sarah and David of "Sarah's" book, which we read as Part 1, were barely altered from Sarah and David as Karen knew them at CAPA (133). If Sarah had been sexually assaulted by David, a close personal friend, it makes sense that she would reflect that experience in some other character, Liam, rather than tell the painful truth about someone so

close to her. As such we can see that Sarah's way of narrativizing her story through her novel requires the invention of Liam in order to face the truth about her experience with David. Such an interpretation is not explicit in *Trust Exercise*, but it is does make sense with how #MeToo narratives can work in terms of processing trauma.

Very little of Part 1 concerns the reputation of these men though a great deal of it is related to using storytelling to reclaim the narrative. In Part 1, reputation is limited to how Mr. Kingsley is regarded by his students with a mixture of admiration and unease. However, this reputation, and the power he gains from it, seems to run parallel to the abuse narrative of Sarah and Liam/David. Part 2 is much more concerned with reputation and while also showing a fraternity between David and Martin in the Elite Brotherhood of the Arts.

Part 2 of *Trust Exercise* is explicitly a #MeToo narrative centering chiefly on credible sexual assault allegations, reputation, the challenges of what is meant by "justice," and the (male) system that protects abusers. Karen sums this all up elegantly with the phrase "the Elite Brotherhood of the Arts" (150). "Elite" expresses the status and value tied to the group, "Arts" reflects this group's indelible connection to entertainment, and "Brotherhood" notes the way that this space is entirely the purview of men. It is, quite literally, a massive fraternity hellbent on protecting their elite-ness. Vance Waggoner, Hank Hippopopolous, Mr. Peanutbutter, and BoJack belong to its ranks. In Part 1 of *Trust Exercise*, Mr. Kingsley and Martin are certainly among its ranks with 24-year-old Liam rapidly joining them, if he hasn't already. Now, in Part 2, we see that 30-year-old David was now "clearly a member" (150), and, as such, has kept in touch with Martin, ready to defend him when the time comes.

Part 2 shifts focus from Sarah to Karen who informs us that Sarah wasn't really her name but recognizes that "Sarah and David are the people they must obviously be" (133), suggesting

that, at least in Karen's perspective, the Sarah and David characters of Part 1 are thinly veiled

versions of the people Karen knew back at CAPA. "Karen" of Part 1 also wasn't the real name of

Karen narrating Part 2, but she's made peace with this "yearbook name" (133). The narration of

Part 2 is also slightly different from Part 1, as Karen now uses a mix of first person and third

person narration. She says, in first person, "I'll be Karen… See: I've taken off the quote marks"

and then follows this with "Karen stood outside" (133) in third person. Part 2 is first person

narration just with "Karen" in the place of "I." As Sarah abstracted her memories through writing

and changed identities, so too does Karen relay Part 2 with the distance that saying "Karen," and

not "I," provides.

Such an approach aligns with Karen's emphasis on names, both to clarify Part 1 for the

readers and elsewhere as she plays "Girl" in David's play. As Sarah did with her novel that we

read as Part 1, Karen, likewise, is putting her life into a story form spoken directly to readers.

This makes Karen's sense of "truth" and "invention" (Gilbert) even harder to parse as she

doesn't have the medium of fiction to mediate her narrative. There are times when the truth

seems to burst forth despite Karen's best efforts to keep it at bay. One such moment is the line

[David's] boomerang flight had been longer than Melanie's, shorter than mine" (149). Here is

seems that Sarah's real name might be Melanie, that just this once, Karen forgot to change it in

her retelling of her life and let the truth escape her web of invention. Is this an intentional act on

Karen's part or a mistake brought about by the narrativizing of trauma? It's not clear, but

"Melanie" is never mentioned anywhere else in the novel. One could see in this moment a

comparison to Sarah in Part 1 where the "mistake" of Liam as an outlandish and unrealistic

character can, eventually, be explained as a manifestation of Sarah's trauma.

We see by now, still early on in Part 2, that Karen might be an even more unreliable narrator than Sarah was. Though she does provide readers with glimpses into the "real" truth of Part 1, she also switches between first and third person narration, messes up names, and never finished reading Sarah's novel. We learn that Karen has a "bookmark stuck in it at page 131" (145), the very same page where Part 1 ends in the paperback version of *Trust Exercise*. This suggests that the whole time, we as readers have been aligned with Karen without realizing it. Where she stopped reading Sarah's book, so did we. This causes us to realize that not only is Part 1 tricky because of how it enmeshes Sarah's experienced truth with her invented fiction, but also because we didn't get the full story. Karen stopped reading, we stopped reading, and whatever else Sarah wrote is left unread. This creates in the reader a sense similar to the trauma Sarah attempts to process as we are left to fill in the gaps of Part 1 even as Sarah used the process of writing her novel to fill in the gaps left by her trauma.

Understanding Karen's unreliable nature as a storyteller is crucial to understanding how *Trust Exercise* deals with its #MeToo storylines. As already noted, it's very possible that David and Liam are based on the same "historical person" (to use Karen's language). Mr. Kingsley and Martin might be, too. This possibility does nothing to explain whether this might be an intentional choice on the part of Sarah or a trauma response. Karen suggests the opposite possibility too, saying "I can guarantee there was no *one* Manuel. Of clear sources, I count at least three" (163). This line is striking because throughout part two, Karen has not been keen on "guaranteeing" many things, constantly presenting layers of distance and abstraction. Her belief that Sarah drew Manuel from three or more sources suggests that there could be much *more* abuse perpetrated by the men of Part 1 than suggested. As we continue through Part 2, we now must face the simultaneous possibility that some of the characters of Part 1 could be the same

person (such as Martin and Mr. Kingsley) and *also* that there could be many mistreated and/or abused "historical persons" completely unrepresented in Sarah's narrative.

The story breaks open with a credible allegation of abuse in the form of a newspaper article dated Oct. 4, 1997, with the headline "Top Teacher Dismissed Amid Allegations" (156). The teacher in the article is Martin, and David was given the article from Mr. Kingley, showing the network of Elite Brotherhood of the Arts at work. An unspecified amount of time passes with Karen and David hanging out, and Karen noticing things about the person that David has become. Beyond just being among the Elite Brotherhood, she starts to see how his "reputation as a guy who's irresistible to women" (160) shapes his nightly bar interactions.

> Karen knew David had always viewed the cancellation of *Candide* as proof of the hypocrisy … of this 'little burg' David and Karen called home. Karen further guessed the cancellation of *Candide* had played its role, alongside Beckett and Northwestern, in the way David viewed himself now: theatre rebel, proud discomfiter of paying audiences. Martin having paved the way, the article must seem to David like evidence of a world gone mad, in which the vengefully lying were rewarded and the truth-telling teacher and artist fully destroyed. (161)

Karen, despite not having much contact with David for many years, believes she "knows" these things about him. What she suggests might well be true, but her ability to "know" certainly seems suspect given her consistent unreliability as a narrator. The phrases "vengefully lying" and "truth-telling" are instructive here as Karen throughout much of part two presents herself as a truth-teller. She is the one to move through the gauzy nature of Sarah's book and tell who "truly" each character was, down to beliefs about how Sarah combined three or more people into one or split one person into three or more characters. Karen seems sure she knows where truth turns into

invention, but, as Karen is dealing with her layers of trauma and fractious memory, we are right not to trust her.

David, in duty to the Elite Brotherhood that sees Martin as a "truth-teller," makes it his project to stage the play Martin was going to do before it was so "unjustly" taken from him. The play centers on two people, an old bartender named Doc (to be played by Martin), and a young girl called Girl (to be played by Karen). Karen's playing of Girl seems to be another instance of pantomime, of seamlessly blurring in and out of a role, but the name "Girl" adds yet another layer to this. It is a name that lacks specificity, even the layers of artificial specificity found in Sarah's book. "Karen," as a replacement for "I" in Part 2, provides our narrator with distance between herself and the events of the chapter, a sense that whatever is described is not really about her. The character of "Girl" gives our narrator even more distance but at a cost of her specific humanity. "Girl" cannot reclaim her story as her name has literally been overtaken by the reputation of a powerful man, in this case, Doc.

The core of the play is the sexually charged and eventually violent interaction between Girl and Doc. *Trust Exercise* is effectively this core dynamic fractured over and over again, be it with Sarah and David, Sarah and Liam, "Manuel" and Mr. Kingsley, or Karen and Martin. They all seem to be different people, but they also all seem to be shades of the same two or three people, all presented in *Trust Exercise* through layers of narrative telling. Karen even acknowledges this, noting, "Therapy can seem like revision of memory" (182). All of Part 2 has been Karen's revision of memory—Sarah's memory as put in the book, and her own lived experience. One could then reasonably say that telling stories is therapy for the people who lived the stories. This thought is directly in line with Hannah Gadsby's understanding that the telling

of stories, specifically the perspectives of young, powerless, and abused women, is the way to strike a blow against the reputation of powerful men and effect real change.

The climax of Martin's play, as he's written it, ends with Girl shooting Doc in the back room, thus making him a victim of a young woman's attack. Karen decides to revise this script, just as Part 2 has been her revision of Sarah's novel. Writing for *The New Yorker,* Katy Waldman notes that Parts 1 and 2 both end in "phantasmagorical and unlikely ways… Their fractured logic [conjuring] the moment when you realize, right before waking from an unravelling dream, that the reason nothing makes sense is because nothing is real" (para. 12). This sense of unreality is clear as the "staging of the play went through a series of evolutions that would almost make you think Karen had supernatural powers" (218). This invocation of the supernatural is particularly interesting as a scene just two pages earlier featured a flashback to Karen's high school years when she "[said] goodbye to God" (216). Back then Karen was pregnant with (presumably) Martin's baby but doesn't get an abortion because of her family's Christian beliefs. Now, Karen describes herself as almost having supernatural powers about the orchestrating of events when it came time to stage Martin's play. Of course, Karen *does* have supernatural powers in a sense, as she is the narrator controlling all the events that make the page we're reading. She can pull off any number of *Deus ex machina* moments through the power of storytelling.

In doing so she can reclaim the narrative of her own abuse at the hands of Martin. She does this by shooting him in the crotch with a blank (233). It's a jarring, unexpected, and largely out of character move, one that makes more sense as a stroke of retribution enacted from writer-Karen than by person-Karen. According to Sophie Gilbert, in her article "*Trust Exercise* is an Elaborate Trick of a Novel,*"* that's exactly what happens. In this final action of Part 2, "[Karen]

puts herself in Mr. Kingsley's role, in Sarah's role, in Choi's role. She creates a simulacrum of a work of art, something that exposes the lie at the heart of her education—the idea that a performance of something can be as profound as the reality of it" (par. 14). Gilbert articulates what is essentially the thesis of *Trust Exercise,* that the ways Sarah and Karen relay their traumatic stories is power to the reader whether "true" or not. In narrativizing about abuse, the invention in more important than the way things actually happened. The veracity of memory is less significant than the way Sarah and Karen reframe, and reclaim, their own experience. This is underscored by Karen's final line to Martin: "You won't die…You just won't be the same" (234).

In shooting Martin in the crotch, Karen enacts violence against the thing and person that wronged her, but she also strikes a blow against Martin's reputation. Many things in Part 2 connect the Elite Brotherhood of the Arts and matters of sexual potency, even as narration of sexual situations (in each of the novel's three parts) undercuts this idea. Despite the allegations against him, Martin was not "cancelled." David jumped to his defense, public perception failed to provide justice for Martin's crimes, and so Karen took matters into her own hands, acting where others would not. In a cruel irony Karen is the kind of person who might be in the Elite group of the Arts if it were not exclusively a "Brotherhood." She's an accomplished and successful dancer of some regard, certainly as much or more renowned than David's minor directing career. But there is no place for her in the boy's club, just as Diane quickly exhausted her own potential for reputation capital. In this fictionalized 1998—not coincidentally, the year of the Monica Lewinsky scandal— the Elite Brotherhood is the only force that can regulate public reputation. But Karen can still make sure that Martin is not the same, striking a blow to a different facet of his manhood and sexual reputation.

Part Three shifts to the 2010s, and it's immediately clear that the internet has changed how reputation capital functions. Though only about 20 pages, Part Three presents far more on the theme of reputation than the previous parts. This suggests that even though we are prior to the #MeToo explosion of 2016-2017, the expansion of Web2 has significantly changed the way reputation works as a means of capital. The section opens with someone (later identified as Claire) commenting back and forth with a laptop-enabled tele-therapist about a large event she attended, saying she "ended up sorry [she] went" (235). This opening grounds us, literally, in a transaction mediated by the internet, priming readers to think of the way the internet is used to shape and influence discussions of celebrity reputation. We might also recall Karen's earlier words that "therapy is a revision of memory" (182) leading us to think that this third part will reframe and destabilize again the "truth" of Part 1 and Part 2.

The large event, we soon learn, was a tribute for Robert Lord (1938-2013) (240). The occasion is further used to announce that the school will get a new name, the "*Robert Lord* School for the Arts" (242, italics orig.). But Claire has rewatched this tribute many times through the years, so it's unclear how long after this 2013 event her therapy sessions are. Everything else about Part 3 is similarly unclear. Is Mr. Lord the Mr. Kingsley of part one? Is David the "maybe forty or thirty-five or fifty" (240) year-old-man Claire meets at the service? When Claire goes searching for her birth mother, is that person Karen? And is "Karen" the mysterious Velva at the end of the novel? (257) There is effectively no way to decipher any of it because the "truth" of these questions is not the point. Though this section is one-fifth the length of Part 2, it's crammed with almost much plot detail so that the movement from the tribute to the school to Mr. Lord's apartment, where Claire is sexually assaulted, to the cryptic ending (which bears a similarity to that of Part 1) happens at incomprehensible speed. Whereas Parts 1 and 2 have a

hundred-plus pages of narrative buildup, revealing the strangeness, the unreliability of the narration, and the toll of trauma gradually, Part 3 moves in a blur in which far more is left out than is presented.

Writing for *Vox,* Constance Grady has taken great pains to dissect this final section of *Trust Exercise*, arriving at a similar puzzling end but striking at some intriguing possibilities in the process. She suggests that Part 3 implies that Sarah's interaction with Liam was with Mr. Kingsley instead. "It's as though all of the trauma inflicted by a beloved teacher has been projected off onto these weirdos with the British slang, characters it is safe to loathe and be viscerally disgusted by" (par. 39). As Grady then notes,

> Part 3 reveals that Mr. Kingsley was fictional, too. He's Mr. Lord, and Martin and Liam are also Mr. Lord. They're all the same person, fragmented into different fictional characters in the same way that Karen saw herself fragmented in Sarah's book, so that their victims can bear to hate the predator without hating the celebrated teacher. (par. 40)

This is a key insight as it speaks to the way *Trust Exercise* has used the stories of Sarah, Karen, and Claire to process sexual trauma, but it also notes the role of reputation. There is a dimension of reputation to this man/men that exists in the public sphere, the sphere at which they name schools after you. But there is also the dimension of the student-teacher relationship, where reputation is similarly important but more easily corrupted by breaches of trust. This notion of hating the predator without hating the celebrated teacher is merely a play on the "separate the art from the artist" idea which Gadsby and others have so effectively critiqued. *Trust Exercise* suggests that only by fracturing and manipulating the narrative telling can one separate the person and influence that Mr. Lord/Mr. Kingsley/Martin/Liam/David had on one's life from the trauma and violence they perpetuated.

But unlike the first two parts, Part 3 of *Trust Exercise* does hint at a tiny change

suggesting the cycles of abuses of power enabled by reputation might stop. As there was in the

fictionalized 1997-8 of Part 2, there is "a credible allegation of sexual abuse from a former

student" (256), but this time, very possibly right around 2017, it means something. The decision

to rename the school after Robert Lord is reversed. The ultimate posthumous mark of honor to

solidify the reputation of a distinguished member of the Elite Brotherhood of the Arts is undone.

As one thinks of the hundreds of "Manuels" and "Sarahs/Karens/Claires" unspoken throughout

the 30 years of *Trust Exercise*, this reversal is hardly justice, but it does speak to a change. Now,

in the Web2 world, public fervor can grow. Claire reads this news not in a newspaper sent across

the ocean but on a Facebook page. It is an ending that speaks to the power of narrative,

specifically that of survivors, when internet communication has eliminated some of the

traditional gatekeepers of male power. As Diane and Princess Carolyn escaped the orbit of

BoJack, so too can the woman/women of *Trust Exercise* reclaim her/their story and find small

moments of healing. As Karen said to Martin at the end of Part 2, "You won't die…You just

won't be the same," and at the end of the novel, that's where things are. The crimes of the men

throughout the novel won't die, and neither will the trauma they inflicted, but through precise

acts of narrative reclamation, their reputations won't be the same.

Hannah Gadsby suggests that attacks against the reputation of powerful men are essential

to healing from the trauma of sexual assault, and *BoJack Horseman* and *Trust Exercise* show this

to be the case. BoJack coasted for years on the capital of his reputation. Only when his reputation

turned from "the horse from *Horsin' Around*" to the Most Hated Man did he face any

consequence for his actions in the form of a 5-million-dollar settlement paid out to the family of

Sarah Lynn. BoJack pays a further price as he's now ruined the significant relationships he once

had with his half-sister, Hollyhock, his longtime friend, agent and manager, Princess Carolyn, and his kindred spirit, Diane. Only Mr. Peanutbutter, a fellow member of the Elite Brotherhood of the Arts, seems keen to remain friends with BoJack once he gets back into society. BoJack loses all these relationships but still, his reputation will bounce back. It's too durable to fail, so as *BoJack* shows us how the power of reputation is wielded to escape legal consequences for "super sketchy" and sometimes outright abusive behavior, *Trust Exercise* shows us how the women of these stories, women who saw their identities and lives overtaken by men of reputation, can reclaim their narratives. Sarah and Karen find a way to express the truth about their experiences only by inventing narrative. In this space they can reclaim their humanity and deal a blow to the reputation of abusive men in the process. No, the reputation of these men won't die (probably), but it won't be the same, and these texts suggest that, at least for now, that's the best we can hope for.

Chapter 3: "I Would Have Voted for Obama a Third Time": The Shifting Value of Whiteness in the "Colorblind" 2010s

In her book *Laughing to Keep from Dying: African American Satire in the Twenty-First Century,* Danielle Fuentes Morgan tackles recent manifestations of Black satire found in media and culture. She argues that "the laughter inspired by satire opens up space to acknowledge kaleidoscopic Blackness—the multiple autonomous ways of being Black—that prevents psychic death, or being objectified and flattened" (3). Much of her book centers on this idea of "kaleidoscopic Blackness" and the way it challenges the "post-racial" myth that rose to extreme prominence throughout the Obama years (2008-2016). Notable for our purposes is how this timeframe aligns with that of economic recession and recovery, and with the smartphone boom and the proliferation of social media.

Morgan further states that, "If the mythology of the 'post-racial' emerges from the rhetoric of white centrality—where only people of color are expected to move *beyond* racial identity because only nonwhiteness is racialized—kaleidoscopic Blackness, the variety of ways of looking at, thinking about, and asserting one's own Black identity, emerges from the Black interior" (3). Here, Morgan draws a distinction between non-racialized white centrality and racialized Black cultural subordination, suggesting that it is through satire that such concepts are best challenged. Such a formulation draws attention to the value of whiteness as the thing that allows one to be centered, heard, and avoid objectification and flattening. Such an idea is at odds with the idea of the "post-racial" or "colorblind" society. These latter terms suggest a space where whiteness is not a significant societal factor when in fact, quite the opposite is true.

Morgan suggests that not only is "post-racial" thinking not based in reality, it, ironically, reinforces the prominence and value of whiteness within society.

Morgan demonstrates the increasing value of racial identity in the twenty-first century through an example that also serves to illustrate how this whole system of value centered on whiteness/Blackness is further connected to internet technologies and the same vector and surveillance forces discussed in previous chapters. The example comes from eBay where, in 2001, Mendi and Keith Obadike sold Obadike's "blackness" on the site. Before being removed from the site, it reached a bid of $152.20 from a starting bid of $10 (Morgan 58). As Morgan notes, what's interesting about this instance of turn-of-the-century Black satire is both the prospect of selling identity—something that feels well in-line with the satire of Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (2000)—and the fact that this "item" sparked a back-and-forth bidding war. She continues, "If we reduce this to *just a joke,* we must still ask ourselves whence the humor is derived…are the bidders aware that *they* are the actual objects of mockery?" (58).

This example is illustrative in a number of ways. As a work of satire, it functions as an attempt to bridge the gap between white centrality and Black subjugation by making (surely) white bidders the butt of the joke. However, this example further literalizes the notion of Blackness as a commodity. In selling "blackness" Mendi and Obadike are acknowledging that Obadike's "blackness" exists as a saleable commodity with an implied value of at least 10 dollars. In bidding on it, the presumably white public is validating this understanding of Blackness as a commodity and as one with value that far exceeds 10 dollars. Also interesting is the fact that the price rose so much, suggesting quite a lot of action on this "item." Even if done as a joke, such bidding only substantiates the notion of non-racialized or default whiteness; flipping the project—selling "whiteness" instead of "Blackness"—seems absurd.

It must be noted that this example is from 2001, making it temporally somewhat beyond this chapter's discussion of 2010s shifts. Similarly, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's study *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* discusses research conducted in the early 2000s. Though later editions include a chapter on the effect of Obama's election as president, many of the findings are somewhat dated by this point. But these older examples are still useful as they illustrate how the forces of Blackness-as-a-commodity and colorblind racism accelerated throughout the 2000s, leading to, and not emanating from, the election of Obama.

Bonilla-Silva notes that this colorblind racism has been taking hold since the 1960s and late era Jim Crow America, growing into the banal and unnoticed prejudices that he observed in the early 2000s. He writes,

Obama, his campaign, and his "success" are the outcome of forty years of racial transition for the Jim Crow racial order to the racial regime I have referred to as the "new racism" [elsewhere called color-blind racism]. In the new America that presumably began on November 4, 2008, and was extended in 2012, racism has remained firmly in place and, even worse, is becoming a more daunting obstacle. The apparent blessing of having a [Black] man in the White House is likely to become a curse for [Black] and brown folks. (259)

Colorblind racism, argues Bonilla-Silva, is a greater obstacle now because people are even less aware of it, just like the potentially oblivious bidders on Obadike's "blackness." This new racism comes at a time in which sentiments such as "I'm not racist, but" or "I'm not racist, I have Black friends" have fully permeated American culture and become increasingly clichéd in the years since Bonilla-Silva's study. Importantly, a phrase like "I have Black friends," or its facsimiles

that appear often in *Racism Without Racists,* both centers whiteness—the "I" speaker—and positions the Black friend as an object possessed by the white speaker ("I have"). This returns us to Morgan and her thesis that satire is needed to bridge this gap, reveal linguistic absurdity, highlight racial prejudice, and reclaim Black agency.

With a sense of how whiteness and Blackness function as commodities in recent American history, and with a sense of how colorblind racism grew over time before becoming the dominant frame of American racial thinking, we can now look to artworks of the 2010s that highlight the economic forces surrounding Blackness and how such values have shifted in the Obama and Trump eras. Such a discussion begins with the show *Dear White People* (2017-2021) which highlights all manner of American cultural issues related to race within the context of a predominantly white, fictional, Ivy League school, Winchester University. Helmed by Justin Simien and based on his 2014 film of the same name, *Dear White People* uses dark humor and satire to reveal the edifice of whiteness that surrounds its characters in their Black bubble at a white university.

Dear White People exists alongside shows like *Atlanta* (2016-2022) and *Insecure* (2016-2021) as what Taylor Nygaard and Jorie Lagerwey term Diverse Quality Comedies (DQC). This term is a corollary to what they call Horrible White People (HWP) shows, the subject of their book *Horrible White People: Gender, Genre, and Television's Precarious Whiteness.* Published in 2020, Nygaard and Lagerwey's book is one of the first major works of television criticism to make a broad argument about a large segment of "Peak TV," confronting a new sense of televisual norms and illuminating cultural blind spots. They define horrible white people shows as those that emerged mostly between 2014-16, targeting "affluent, liberal, White audiences through prestige aesthetics and innovative, progressive representations (2). Notable HWP shows

they mention include *Girls* (2012-2017), *You're the Worst* (2014-2019) and *Fleabag* (2016-2019).

There is, however, a dark side to these shows, as Horrible White People shows also "reflect the complicity of the White Left, obsessed with its own anxiety and suffering, in the rise of the Far Right—particularly in the mobilization, representation, and sustenance of structural White supremacy on television" (2). In attempting to reflect white liberal values, these shows end up reinforcing the same racial structures against which they hope to act. Put more bluntly,

> The proliferation of Horrible White People shows, along with the industry that produces
> them, is complicit in the rhetorical shift toward White suffering that has helped sustain
> White supremacy and worked to support the rise of the political Far Right in the United
> States and elsewhere where these shows are produced, distributed, and consumed. (9-10)

According to Nygaard and Lagerwey, these shows centered on anxiety and millennial unrest—lost jobs, relationship struggles, gentrification, and more—helped to raise the profile of white anxiety and suffering. Doing so did *not* challenge or disrupt white supremacy, as was likely the hope, but worked in tandem with Far-Right efforts to re-centralize whiteness, especially in the context of victimhood.

This is a sobering insight, and one that must be taken seriously in the context of this project's analysis of 2010s television. Indeed, several of the shows of this study—namely *Silicon Valley,* and *BoJack Horseman*—have a great deal in common with the Horrible White People trend even if they aren't all easily put in that category as Nygaard and Lagerwey have framed it. These shows are mostly centered on white characters, white situations, and the white settings of Silicon Valley and Hollywood, respectively. Their creative forces are predominantly white, and their primary creators have frequently expressed white liberal values in the show and elsewhere.

There is a great deal to be gleaned, culturally and artistically, from the study of these shows and many others, but it is essential that we continue to engage such media critically, always on guard against the "bad fan" tendencies articulated by Nussbaum (chapter 2).

The project of *Horrible White People* is to illuminate the shortcomings of Diverse Quality Comedies and analyze how such shows, unintentionally and most often unwittingly, reinforce the centralized whiteness and white supremacy they hope to disrupt. Here is where systems of capital re-enter the equation as such HWP shows emerged in a post-recession, second-term Obama world. As summarized by Nygaard and Lagerwey, "In its no-holds-barred attack on the basic tenets of the middle-class American Dream … the US version of the recession laid bare the foundational fictions of that dream" (16). This helped with the emergence of HWP shows that focus on new imagined versions of nuclear families—usually of friends, roommates, and lovers—and domestic spaces, most often urban apartments or condos.

Such family/friend dynamics and domestic spaces work as newly imagined tenets of the American Dream in the aftermath of the recession, but they also reinforce whiteness as a commodity as these shows are dominated by white characters in white, upper-class jobs. They are often actors and writers experiencing much career success and few monetary struggles even while the show foregrounds their anxiety and supposed suffering. Often this privilege is lightly mocked but rarely met with outright ridicule.

As such, diverse quality comedies are an essential part of the HWP television landscape as they provide a space to engage with the tenets of this new post-recession American Dream image while *actually* decentering whiteness and focusing on non-white characters. Only by decentering whiteness, and dealing with this idea directly, can such shows begin to disrupt the idea that only Blackness is racialized. As noted above, the idea of someone selling "whiteness"

on eBay is culturally unthinkable, absurd in a way that even selling "Blackness" isn't. For this reason, the commodity of whiteness is less easily seen as it is so often presented as the default state of being, on television and elsewhere in American media. It is easy to see commoditized Blackness in Horrible White People shows as many of these shows feature non-white side-characters or boyfriends. A Black boyfriend on one of these shows serves as capital for the characters of the show—obsessed with appearing progressive and not racist—and for the show itself, also hellbent on proclaiming its "progressive" colorblind ideals.

However, as in the eBay illustration, the inverse—how whiteness functions as a commodity—is less apparent in these shows, except in the case of the diverse quality shows. This is why this chapter is framed around whiteness as a commodity, rather than Blackness, as whiteness is the component of racial capital less often seen in the architecture of television. It is telling that *Atlanta* is the only show mentioned in *Horrible White People* that centers on working class struggle (at least for the first two seasons), highlighting how the whiteness of other similar HWP-counterpart shows is also equated with wealth and less economic precarity. Unlike *Atlanta*, *Dear White People* is not focused on economic struggle but instead presents Black life at the far opposite end of the economic spectrum. This focus on affluent Black students allows the structure of the show and its content to highlight the gap that exists between white and Black student life at Winchester. In illuminating this gap, the show also creates the space to see the commodity of whiteness as something these otherwise privileged characters don't and can't have.

Shows like *Dear White People* share the aesthetics and narrative complexity of HWP shows but do so in a way that decenters whiteness and critiques its structures. Put another way, "rather than recentering Whiteness [in a post-recession context], [these shows denaturalize] it by

making it an often-central locus of conflict, rendering notoriously unrepresented structural White supremacy more visible for both these shows' viewers of color and their majority White audiences" (Nygaard and Lagerwey 156). Or, while horrible white people shows hide the architecture of white supremacy behind gestures of diversity and liberal posturing, shows like *Dear White People* draw attention to such systems by highlighting the gap that exists between the non-white characters and the white economic systems under which they live. *Dear White People* uses its position at the upper limits of American wealth—an elite, fictional, Ivy League school—to highlight how Blackness remains a limiting factor for achieving success in a system that inherently places a higher value on whiteness.

The works I'll be discussing in this chapter all concern characters positioned respectably on the ladder of wealth, capital, and privilege. Based on their standing and connections, we would assume the world to be open to them, and yet, due to their Blackness, there are limits to their success. These are works that illustrate that even if you have privilege, wealth, and opportunity, not only is the journey to the top harder for non-white people, but the highest levels are, in fact, unreachable to Black people since the systems are inherently centered on whiteness.

With this in mind, I turn to *Dear White People* to analyze major characters and their stories as related to Blackness, specifically how their Blackness reveals a system prejudiced toward whiteness. My analysis will focus mainly on the first two seasons, as this is when the show was at its most interesting in terms of exploring Blackness in the context of white space. As noted by creator Justin Simien, complex characters are at the heart of *Dear White People,* as he hopes that if viewers—especially white viewers—connect to the characters and the "truth about what they're going through, then maybe you'll care and think about it" (Simien qtd. in Nygaard and Lagerwey 187). Unlike the unlikeable protagonists that populate many HWP

shows, *Dear White People* understands that asshole behavior is a component of white privilege and, as such, the series creators must make more likeable, stronger characters to bridge the gap to its white audience. As expressed by Morgan, the best way to do this is through satire, and so the comedy of *Dear White People* possesses a Spike Lee-esque bite.

The central character of the show is Samantha "Sam" White (Logan Browning). Sam runs the radio program "Dear White People"[2] where she broadcasts her beliefs and opinions to the white population of Winchester. Much of the show's action is centered on the historically Black Armstrong Parker (A-P House), the very name of which conveys the show's ironic bent as these Black characters are far from "advanced placement" at the school. The central incident of the first season is a blackface party hosted by the *Harvard Lampoon*-esque Winchester satire publication, *Pastiche*, thrown with the explicit intent of taking Sam down with a "politically incorrect party" (1.1).

Pastiche's vitriol toward Sam appears to be two-fold. Through her radio show, Sam speaks directly to the majority-white population of Winchester, often admonishing them for racial insensitivity and microaggressions. In doing so she is a component of Winchester's student media, a media landscape dominated by *Pastiche. Pastiche* further seems to have a particular hatred toward Sam due to her whiteness which seems to embolden her to speak against them while challenging *Pastiche's* simple caricatured understanding of race in the process. The party does not succeed at taking down Sam, only enraging her further. The school administration, headed by the Black Dean Fairbanks, cancels the party, though it is unclear if the cancellation is based on racial considerations or administrative optics. But the party happens anyway because someone (Sam herself) leaks the invitation.

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[2] Radio programs, like "Dear White People," are technically in italics. I will use quotes for it and other named radio shows to prevent confusion with the show's title.

Following the party, Sam opens the narrative's first major radio broadcast, saying, "Dear white people. Here's a list of acceptable Halloween costumes: a pirate, slutty nurse, any of our first 43 presidents. Top of the list of unacceptable costumes: me. Winchester couldn't get through 2017 without blackface?" (1.1) Such a plot point immediately centers the presentation of Blackness in the show while also highlighting Sam's character. As the narrator already disclosed, Sam is mixed race. Her father is rich and white—it's literally his last name—and her mother is Black. Sam spends her life existing largely in the context of other Black individuals, but she often struggles with feelings of not being Black enough, especially as it concerns her white boyfriend Gabe (John Patrick Amedori), the show's only major white character. In her relationship with Gabe, Sam often feels insufficiently Black whereas, at all other times, it is her whiteness that doesn't translate to the world at large.

The blackface party is a fascinating starting point for the show in terms of its engagement with the subject of racial capital. The *Pastiche* staff are using their own white privilege to throw the party, even if a higher level of such privilege—the school's administration—attempts to cancel it. Furthermore, the intent of the party is to "take down" Sam. Sam is Black enough to pose a threat to *Pastiche* but emboldened by her whiteness enough to speak out against Winchester's racial injustice, something we see others, especially the darker-skinned Black man Reggie (Marque Richardson) understandably hesitant to do. A nuanced racial hierarchy of Winchester is already revealing itself with the average Black students of A-P House at the bottom. Next comes Sam at a level of more privileged and powerful Black students. This level also includes Troy Fairbanks (Brandon P. Bell) and Coco Conners (Antoinette Robertson). Above this is *Pastiche* and the white majority student population. Higher than them is the

administration and Dean Fairbanks. These are the four major class levels working in the show in terms of power.

In the blackface party incident, we see *Pastiche*'s inherent value of whiteness in the fact that they run the magazine and had the thought that such a party could and should happen in the first place. Such a party would give them space to further commodify Blackness for their own aims of sticking it to Sam and her whiteness, which they've deemed insufficient. However, *Pastiche's* level of white power is overridden by the administration putting a stop to it, highlighting how *Pastiche's* actions in throwing this party are motivated by racial insecurity both of people like Sam disrupting their misplaced sense of free speech and the white administration stopping their fun. Sam seems particularly passionate about this incident due, at least in part, to the way it connects to her mixed-race identity and her recurring feelings of being insufficiently Black or white enough.

At Black Caucus, which, in Sam's words, is a "completely masturbatory and pointless pissing contest under the guise of unity," we meet Troy Fairbanks and Coco Conners. Black Caucus exists under the guise of bringing together the four major factions of Black student life at Winchester, though it often seems to create more dissention than it resolves. Sam heads the Black Student Union (BSU) which exists in tension with the Coalition of Racial Equality (CORE). This tension stems from the BSU being "Winchester's first and only relevant group fighting for Black causes on campus" (1.1.), but CORE being the only group "invited to sit at the dean's quarterly student council," thus possessing the most administrative sway to create positive change in Black student life. Also at Black Caucus is the African American Student Union (AASU) and the Black American Forum (Black AF). Such groups represent the "kaleidoscopic Blackness" found at Winchester.

If we consider the hierarchy sketched out earlier, this puts CORE in the position of being both more powerful and less powerful than a group like *Pastiche*. They would sit between *Pastiche* and the administration in terms of direct influence, but they are also, functionally, below *Pastiche*, at the same level as Sam, in terms of their actual power to affect change. CORE occupies such a position solely based on their Blackness opposed to the whiteness of the systems of power.

CORE is the home, so to speak, of two of the show's most fascinating characters in terms of racial capital in regard to whiteness: Troy and Coco. They are, for lack of a better word, the Barack and Michelle Obama of *Dear White People*, characters that attempt to achieve the maximum amount of political power while being Black. Troy is the son of Winchester's Dean and, as such, is a legacy kid and heir apparent to his father's success. As highlighted in the first Troy-centric episode (1.3), while the blackface party was going on, Troy was schmoozing with the school's doners in an attempt to win the election for student body president while in the process laughing off racially insensitive comments about his assumed football acumen (1.3). The show's narrator relays that Troy takes action to stop the blackface party (by calling in campus police), and as a result becomes the "man of the moment," helped by "white people needing to assuage their guilt."

But, like Sam, Troy's actual power is very limited. He has direct access to the administration—through his role in student government and his personal life—but this is undercut by a hesitancy to stand up to his father. The implication is that the closer Black people get to wielding actual power at Winchester, the less likely they are to rock the boat. In the aftermath of the party, Troy sees his father, the Dean, meeting not with *Pastiche* about their racially insensitive party but with Sam, chastising her for sending the invite that made the party

happen. It is a clear note of Black respectability politics where the Black characters with the greatest power—the Dean and Troy—are most interested in retaining that power and keeping the status quo. One major question of the first season regards which approach is the "right" one. Does Sam have the right idea, creating a spectacle and forcing the hand of the administration? Or is Troy's approach the better one in the long term, working Black power in parallel to white systems? However, in both systems, the Blackness is unmissable. No such dilemma exists for white characters who can use either approach to reliably execute their whims.

Coco presents a counterpart to Troy. Unlike Troy, she doesn't come from inherited wealth, probably ranking among the poorest of the characters (Gabe, the white character, is also on the poorer side). However, Coco will not let this slow her down as she is among the most driven and ambitious characters, frequently talking about her political aspirations and willing to do whatever it takes to climb to the top. She begins a relationship with Troy due to some romantic feelings but also because such an alignment will enhance her power. She understands that, being a dark-skinned Black woman, her privilege and power are extremely tenuous even as she is charismatic and conventionally attractive.

Also in the mix is Lionel (DeRon Horton), the character most modeled, it seems, on Simien. He is a writer and reporter, at least a year or two younger than most of the characters who are now juniors. Especially in the later seasons, Lionel provides an important point of intersectionality for the show as much of his arc centers on his claiming of gay identity and figuring out what this means in the context of his masculinity and Blackness. He is another example of how every Black character on this show brings a new dimension to the Black experience. However, his storylines are less directly tied to race as it relates to capital, so his part in this chapter is limited.

Gabe also plays an important role in the show. The only major white character, Gabe serves as a point of identification for many likely viewers, or at least an intended one—a white guy who goes well beyond the liberal veneer of many people at Winchester. Far from wealthy, Gabe nonetheless has an awareness of his privilege and tries to use that privilege for good. Operating within the Black space of A-P House by nature of being Sam's boyfriend, he also has the unusual experience of being a minority, both on the show and in its spaces. Like many viewers, he is a white person being carefully included in a predominantly Black bubble within an otherwise white-structured world (Winchester or American television).

All these characters highlight the many facets of the commodity of whiteness at play within *Dear White People*. Most of darkest-skinned Black characters—like Reggie and Joelle (Ashley Baine Fetherson-Jenkins)— try to stay out of the way, Reggie especially. Next comes Sam who, emboldened by her half-white identity, calls out white people through her radio show, making herself the target of their racial aggression. On a similar plane is Troy and, by extension, Coco. They possess power by nature of their political leanings, but this power, even at the level of student body president, has limitations. Around their same level is every random white person at Winchester, unremarkable though they may be. This includes Gabe who at least acknowledges the situation and tries to work with Sam to create meaningful change. Above them is Dean Fairbanks, a powerful figure at Winchester who, by nature of being Black, still occupies a fairly low position within the hierarchy of the school's predominantly white board. The hierarchy, taxonomized, read as follows:

White school board

Dean Fairbanks

Most white students (including poor ones like Gabe)

Troy (and by extension, Coco)

Sam

Most Black students (Reggie, Joelle, Lionel, etc)

It's worth noting that, in season 1 at least, there is very little upward mobility within this hierarchy. Coco is able to move from the ranks of the common student through her proximity to Troy and the power that he has, but she understands this is tenuous and fragile, as is clear especially in season 2. Troy, in his campaign, is attempting to move up to the level of white student power, but his efforts are mostly futile.

With this framework in mind, I now look closely at the storylines of season 2, analyzing how they communicate the limits of Black power and influence, and, crucially, how doing so illuminates the inherent lack of limits experienced by white counterparts. This is how a diverse quality show like *Dear White People* finds space through its satiric structure to reveal and disrupt the white supremacist forces inherent in American television.

Season 2 opens on a shot of Sam putting sugar on her breakfast of grits before pulling back into a wide shot to reveal that the cafeteria of Armstrong Parker is now populated by white students intermingling with the Black students. The narrator tells us to "watch closely," a frequent refrain of this season and one with clear ties to Spike Lee's famous "wake up!" exhortation. We are then told how, in 1837, the former slave quarters Armstrong Hall and Parker house combined to accommodate the school's ethnic (Irish and Italian) students until sometime after the 1920s when these populations "graduated to whiteness" (2.1). Such a statement underscores the idea that whiteness is a higher level of existence. Previously Italian students were seen as second tier students, but they were able to "graduate" to perceived whiteness much the way the characters of the show are attempting to graduate with their degrees. This is an

obvious bit of wordplay, but a powerful one all the same as it underscores ideas of hierarchical whiteness and the proverbial ladder to achieve it.

The narrator thus brings the past into connection with the present, highlighting how a student in the 1960s didn't approve of the new Black population at Winchester, and how Troy, at the end of season 1, broke the front door of Hancock House, named for that student. This was in tandem with other protests around campus and a mysterious fire in Davis House that displaced its residents into AP. *Dear White People* artfully intercuts this recap with a clip of Martin Luther King shortly before his assassination, saying, "As Jimmy Baldwin said on one occasion, 'What advantage is there in being integrated into a burning house?'" The irony is powerful as it is the *white* Davis House now integrated into the Black world of A-P. Furthermore, this whole storyline is a parody of school integration efforts that saw Black students awkwardly placed in white schools. In flipping the dynamic, the show highlights how absurd and engrained the idea of neutral white space is in life and in television.

The next scene introduces the other main story thread of the season: the emergence of internet troll AltIvyW. Though season 1 aired in spring 2017 much, if not all of it, was clearly made prior to the election of Donald Trump in November 2016. As such season 2 is *Dear White People's* first real opportunity to comment on the way that Trump's election took the white insecurities of the HWP shows era (2014-2016) to another level entirely. They do that largely through the new mysterious presence of AtlIvyW, a Conservative Far Right social media troll who, like *Pastiche* in season 1, has a particular vitriol for Sam. AltIvyW has fans, too, like the newly emboldened hosts of "Dear Right People" which uses the radio equipment in the studio just before "Dear White People" airs.

Season 2, then, plays out on these two axes of tension: white students involuntarily invading the Black space of AP and AltIvyW voluntarily making Sam's life hell, emboldened by shifting tides in American politics. In the midst of such tensions, the focus of the main characters is still doing their best at school and positioning themselves for success in the "real world." Following breaking the glass door of Hancock House, Troy's career in school politics is over. This enables him to strike out on his own, no longer burdened by expectations of being seen, first and foremost, as the Dean's son. One may expect his privilege to earn him a quick redemption arc, but this is not the case as his Blackness forecloses such opportunity for public forgiveness. Equally telling is the fact that Troy doesn't attempt such a comeback only to fail. He knows his place and knows that Black people aren't afforded the same opportunities to get back in the public's good will. He recognizes that he's lost most of his social power and so, rather than try to reclaim it, he shifts focus to work on something he loves—comedy writing—which is more significant to the story in later seasons.

However, Coco's previous proximity to Troy has not tanked her social stock as she is thriving in the new AP-Davis House landscape. With Troy mostly out of the picture, Coco is in prime position to achieve the presidency of CORE and the power and influence that comes with it. She anoints herself the "somebody [who has] got to keep the peace" in hopes of being a "senator by the time [she's] 30" (2.4). As in season 1 we see that proximity to power comes with greater desire to maintain the status quo. Of course, life has other plans as she finds out she's pregnant. Coco goes to talk to Troy about this, as he is the father, but upon seeing him high and generally out of it, tells him to officially resign the presidency of CORE but doesn't tell him about the pregnancy.

This marks the end of Troy and Coco's relationship, the "divorce" of the show's Barack and Michelle. Their relationship was marked by the characters' mutual regard for each other and also a mutual understanding that each person enhanced the other's individual brand and prospects. They used each other less in a conniving or mean-spirited way and more in the way they needed given the limitations of their power within the white systems of the school. Troy needed Coco to help him appear stable and well-rounded before the donors; Coco needed Troy to climb out of obscurity and position herself for greater future aspirations. The show treats such needs not as crass, calculated, and cynical but as necessary given the hierarchies of the school. Most HWP shows with similar dynamics convey more cynicism, a reflection of their privilege as those characters are permitted to be more calculating and mean-spirited—and get away with it in the eyes of viewers—just as they can be anti-heroes and retain viewer sympathy.

With a quick vote, Coco achieves her desired office as president of CORE, but now faces the BSU faction and their desire to bring Carson Rhodes (Tyler James Williams) to Winchester. Rhodes is perceived by white students to be a "controversial" figure for his position against police shooting Black teenagers. Coco decides that, "With the climate the way that it is, I can't have civil unrest going down on my watch," and remains skeptical of the proposal, swayed slightly by Lionel emphasizing how such a guest speaker would raise CORE's national profile.

There is, however, still the matter of Coco's being pregnant with no father in the prospective picture. We see Coco at the abortion clinic before leaving it. She tells Troy, makes up with Sam, and we flash forward 18 years to see Coco, now a professor at Winchester, celebrating as her daughter starts at Winchester. It's a nice moment that is a complete lie. No such happy upwardly-mobile ending possibility exists for Coco. If she keeps the baby and drops out of school, she will end up like her mother, relatively poor and limited in opportunity. It cuts

back to the clinic before a long tracking shot of Coco as she walks down the hallway. She stares at the camera, as characters do at the end of each episode, but this instance is particularly powerful as it is prolonged and continues until Coco's face shadows the camera and creates the black screen of the credits.

Such a moment forces viewers to see the fantasy presented and confront the way systems of racial wealth inequality make such an idea untenable. This is not how the moment plays out in Horrible White People shows. On *BoJack Horseman*, Princess Carolyn, an independent unmarried affluent woman, spends multiple seasons trying to get pregnant. Similarly, when Diane contemplates and has an abortion, economic stability hardly factors into her decision even though, at the time, she has a fairly unnoteworthy job as a blog writer. These are ambitious single women, like Coco, but their relationship to having children is depicted as having nothing to do with economic stability or how said children may hinder their career aspirations. It is a less complicated matter of desire and what they want for their future family. Coco has no such privilege, a fact that viewers must face without obstruction at the end of this episode. The contrast of how the scenario plays out for Coco versus Diane or many other HWP show characters illuminates the way the characters of *Dear White People* constantly come up against the underlying forces of white power within the world.

At the end of episode 6, we learn the identity of AtlIvyW was Silvio (D.J. Blickenstaff), a writer friend of Lionel's. It's not a particularly interesting revelation, and Silvio's reasons for doing the trolling are similarly uninteresting, reheated platitudes about defending free speech and wanting to foster a space of challenging ideas (2.6). What's far more interesting than the reveal itself is the way the show treats the reveal and what such treatment says about white power structures. The reveal comes at the end of episode 6, which focused on Lionel, a background

player for much of season two largely unconnected from Sam, Troy or Coco. This episode also comes between more memorable episodes focusing on Coco (2.4) and Gabe (2.8). Here, at the end of episode 6 of a 10-episode season, the reveal of AtlIvyW is far from a climactic point of the season because the mystery of who AltIvyW was never particularly mattered to the characters or to the viewers.

Sam, the character most antagonized by AltIvyW, doesn't care about his identity as much as the feelings and emotions he provokes in her and the way he is symptomatic of changes in the culture of Winchester (such as the new boldness of "Dear Right People"). Lionel only cares about unmasking him because it's a story of note for the paper. Most of the other characters barely spare AltIvyW a second thought. This is because the idea of a reveal like this comes inherently laced with privilege, both the privilege to devote time to the mystery and the privilege to see the narrative in terms of individuals and not larger systems and ideological frameworks at play at Winchester and in the world.

Like with the arc of Coco's abortion story, this is an important contrast with how narrative reveals work in white television shows. Consider the identity of the Man in Black at the end of *Westworld* season 1. His actual identity doesn't matter so much as the way he functioned structurally in the season. The season continually foregrounded this mystery—and many others—so that viewers cared a good deal about the identity of the Man in Black, prompting online speculation prior to its reveal. Significant for the comparison is that the reveal happened at the end of the season and that the reveal was something viewers cared about. Similar big twists in *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) or *The Good Place* (2016-2020) also happened in the last two episodes of their respective seasons and similarly provoked conversation in and around the show.

The reveal of Silvio as AltIvyW does none of these things. It doesn't particularly matter in the structure of the season, as it's overshadowed by more significant character moments relating to Coco, Sam, and Gabe. Most of the characters don't care about this information, and viewers won't either. This is because unmasking someone like AltIvyW, or a person behind something like QAnon, does little to nothing to affect the way white power functions in society. The effect of Silvio's persona AtlIvyW is a systemic one, emboldening the students with far-right politics to take up more space and make their opinions known. Taking down one troll doesn't undo that effect, just as "Trumpism" as a broader political posture has proven to be far bigger than Donald Trump himself.

Dear White People understands that even the way television shows have typically structured plot twists comes with privilege that Black people and characters don't have, like the privilege to see individual villains and not systemic ones. The show drives this point home at the end of the season as the narrator Giancarlo Esposito appears in the flesh to Lionel and Sam and explains a complex secret society of Black people throughout the years at Winchester. But, at the beginning of season 3, Sam dismisses such an idea as sounding like "the third season of a Netflix show" (3.1). Inherent in this moment of meta-humor is the commentary that there are TV subgenres—such as characters unmasking a secret society—that Black characters can't participate in because they are too busy with other problems and trying to stay alive. As with Coco's pregnancy, the AltIvyW reveal forces white audiences to confront the very unsatisfying narrative nature of the reveal and reflect on how this is largely because the characters don't have the privilege to care about this mystery.

The reveal is also unsatisfying because it's not connected to Sam and her emotions. Such emotions are the focus of episode 8, nearly all of which is centered on Gabe and Sam talking.

Only now, two episodes after the reveal, does AtlIvyW's unmasking carry substantial emotional or narrative weight. Sam is upset with Gabe for his documentary efforts which are similar to "Dear White People" in aim but more effective because the voice behind them is white (recall BoJack's successful co-opting of feminism). As Sam puts it, "You're getting praised for doing a version of my show while Silvio and his alt-right army have turned my mentions into a 4chan message board" (2.8). Gabe's efforts are well intentioned, but Sam is upset that he as a white man will never have the same stakes in the conversation that she has a Black woman.

Gabe then reveals that Silvio/AltIvyW got more popular after he was revealed, supporting the ideas previously discussed about how the reveal was meaningless in terms of the balance of power among *Dear White People's* core Black characters. In fact, Silvio's power has grown exponentially with an article getting picked up by Breitbart and with Rikki Carter (Tessa Thompson), a Tomi Lahren or Candace Owens type, doing a segment of it on her Fox News show. Gabe then suggests that some people wonder if Sam bears partial responsibility for his rise.

We must pause on this idea as it is related to the thesis of *Horrible White People* that suggests that white prestige television aided the rhetoric of the far-right in its focus on white anxiety and suffering. Sam, as a character, is not a direct stand-in for the genre of HWP shows, or diverse quality comedies, but there is a similarity here in how she functions in *Dear White People*, and how HWP shows and Diverse Quality Comedies have functioned in the television landscape of the 2010s. She is a mouthpiece for change that articulates progressive ideas but, in the process, raises the awareness in white people of their own violent anxieties. Like HWP shows, she wants a different and more equitable future but attempts to achieve this by talking to white people more than affecting actual change. This seems to me a moment where *Dear White*

People is acknowledging the limits of the "Dear White People" radio show and of shows like *Dear White People* in general. There is much that it can do—from presenting nuanced characters that reflect kaleidoscopic Blackness to revealing instances where televisual norms just don't work for Black characters to making complex statements on whiteness as a commodity—but it has its limitations. As a show, it will always be more talk than action and its mere existence will bring the trolls out to tear it down.

Gabe and Sam debate for much of the rest of the episode until Sam says this in reply to Gabe asking what he can actually do: "What I need from you and everyone else who benefits from this thing called whiteness is to acknowledge that it's a fabrication and do the actual work to dismantle it." With Gabe being a stand-in for the white viewers of the show, this statement functions as a thesis for the whole show. *Dear White People* exists as art meant to make white viewers acknowledge the ways they benefit from whiteness—such as how their abortion story may not have the same socio-economic stakes that Coco's does—see the ways whiteness is a constructed thing within the world, and then actually do something about it.

This analysis has shown how season 2 of *Dear White People* illustrates the functional capital of whiteness in the 2010s and especially the Trump era. The storyline of AtlIvyW shows how trolls have become emboldened and more powerful, something for which HWP shows bear some responsibility. Similarly, Troy's fall from social prominence reflects how easy it is for a Black man to fall out of favor with the public and how difficult or impossible a redemption arc is in contrast to a white counterpart. Perhaps most significantly, Coco illustrates the limits of class climbing for Black people, especially Black women, who must approach things like childbirth and career achievement with higher stakes. Even as Coco achieves her desired success in season

4, it comes at a higher cost—literal and metaphorical—than that of her white peers. She can climb the ladder of success, but only so far and with certain limitations.

This theme is similarly the focus of Natasha Brown's 2021 novel *Assembly*. Brown's unnamed narrator is a young, successful Black woman who works for a bank. She does so understanding that she lacks the "prerequisite connections or money to venture into politics" (22). She similarly understands banks as "Ruthless, efficient money-machines with a byproduct of social mobility" (22). As a Black woman, she sees this as her best shot as social advancement. This is a good place to note that unlike Coco and *Dear White People*, the narrator and context of *Assembly* are very British. It's a novel highly concerned with racial dynamics in the aftermath of Brexit, an unnamed force that permeates the novel just as Trump did with season 2 of *Dear White People*. It's a novel that asks its readers to interrogate their understanding of colonialism and the way it has shaped the myths white British people, particularly men, accept about themselves and their place within nationhood. *Assembly* is the only primary text of this dissertation that is not American in focus, but, if anything, this only makes the previous insights of *Dear White People* stronger. Nygaard and Lagerwey rightly understand that the phenomenon of Horrible White People shows is a transatlantic one, emphasizing the ways shows like *Fleabag* (2016-2018) work similarly to their American counterparts. As such we can see in *Assembly* a similar kind of social mobility striving as with Coco in *Dear White People,* ultimately with similar limitations.

The narrator of *Assembly* works for a bank and is up for a notable promotion, which she gets but is forced to share with Lou, an average, middle-aged white fellow proud of his own rise from being "dirt-fucking-poor in a shack, essentially, in Bedford" (32). Also at the bank is her white friend Rach. The narrator is in a serious relationship with a man called either "the

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boyfriend" or "the son," when discussed on the context of his parents. The only major narrative of the novel, aside from a passing mention of things like the narrator getting the promotion, is the narrator's trip to the country to be present at the boyfriend's parents' 40th anniversary. They get names, Helen and George (61), just as all the side characters do. The only unnamed characters are our young Black narrator and her young white boyfriend.

Lingering in the background of the novel is the fact that the narrator possibly has cancer. It's eventually revealed that she doesn't, but this idea affects her understanding of her life as a precarious one while also making her hyper-concerned about money and wealth. She has an acute understanding of the difference between the two and rightly understands that all her efforts at the bank produce only money. Meanwhile, the boyfriend has wealth, "Tied up in assets in trusts and holding companies with complicated ownership agreements" (43). Wealth, in this way, avoids the precarity the narrator associates with money. Money is temporary, but wealth is forever.

This wealth vs money dynamic is central to the novel's understanding of race where wealth is continually equated with whiteness, land, and an unshakeable birthright of empire. The narrator understands that she's been "transformed" (17) by even her modest amount of money, but she's skeptical that she can ever achieve wealth. Such wealth is felt in "the anger of a man who himself understood in his flesh and bones and blood and skin that he was meant to be the head of a great, hulking giant upon which the sun never set" (6), recalling the famous description of the global reach of British imperial power in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By contrast, she feels precarity even in her legal home of England, a precarity clearly amplified by the effects of Brexit.

Such observations on wealth and money and their relationship to the racial hierarchy of the land make up much of the novel. *Assembly* centers on the narrator's thoughts as she tries to climb the social ladder through money only to gradually find that she has no chance of ever attaining wealth. To the empire, she remains what she's always been, "pure, fucking profit. A natural resource to exploit, denigrate, and exploit" (47). She is still "[working] to pay off the interest" of Britain's paying off the slave owners when they ended the slave trade (92-3). Meanwhile, those with wealth, like her boyfriend, "[live] off the capital returns." It's a powerful literalization of the novel's wealth vs money distinction. The boyfriend lives his life "buoyed by a wealth he's never had to earn, never worked for," while she, in her world of money, pays taxes that, indirectly, are *still* paying off the ending of the slave trade.

These thoughts, set within the context of the lavish anniversary party for Helen and George, lead the narrator to a crisis of identity concerning her relationship to the boyfriend—called the son during this section—and her relationship to the socially mandated pursuit of money. She recognizes that her life at present feels like a story of "enfranchisement and belonging" with this moment being "a narrative peak in the story of my social ascent" (68). Meanwhile her boyfriend goes through life thinking about what would be in his biography, the narrator recognizing that this brief chapter will "ultimately reduce to a sentence—maybe two. Thin evidence of his open-mindedness, his knack for cultural bridge-building" (67).

From this point, it's clear that the couple is not going to last, a realization that frees the narrator up to think even more abstractly about the dynamics of wealth and money as they relate to race, belonging, and the history of the British empire. Around her there is a "basic physicality" to the wealth, a stability that encourages children like the boyfriend/son to "take chances, pursue dreams, risk climbing out to the highest furthest limb…knowing the ground beneath is soil, soft

grass and dandelions" (77). This is contrasted with the abstract notion of assimilation, of "[melting] into the London's multicultural soup" (78).

Such thoughts lead her to confront core ideas of nationhood and history that are tertiary to the issue of whiteness as capital but nevertheless crucial to the understanding of *Assembly*. She asks, "How do we examine the legacy of colonization when the basic facts of its construction are disputed in the minds of its beneficiaries?" when the "erasure [of history] itself was erased." (86-87). Furthermore, how do you do that when "Britain continues to own, exploit and profit from land taken during its twentieth-century exploits[?] Burning our futures to fuel its voracious economy. Under threat of monetary violence" (87) all at a time when British sons still write narratives of history in which the blame falls on "a single, flawed individual. Not a system or society or the complicity of an undistinguished majority in maintaining the status quo…" (88, elip. orig.).

The narrator of *Assembly* doesn't have answers to these thorny questions, and neither do I. Such questions, though, are similar to those posed by *Dear White People* in attempting to speak the truth of white economic privilege through a structurally white medium to audiences living in a structurally white world. Brown leaves these questions to linger in the minds of readers, but it does tie up the narrative in a somewhat positive way. The narrator realizes that wealth is never hers to attain, by design, and that her simple pursuit of money is not a particularly good way to live. Through banks, she was able to move up the social ladder but with a hard limit at the top for her rise. It is these social and economic structures, more than individual prejudice, that tells her she doesn't belong here, in this family or world of the wealthy. And yet, the book reminds us often that such structures stay the way they do because of prejudice and a desire to retain the wealth its beneficiaries enjoy. The world of the wealthy is one of quasi-

progressive "metaphors of boats and tides and rising waves of fairness," but "Not reparations—no, even socialism doesn't stretch that far" (86).

Dear White People and *Assembly* both present a vision of racial hierarchy as it relates to money, wealth, and upward mobility. In both works, possessing or "graduating to" whiteness comes with significant economic and social advantages, making whiteness almost impossible for Black characters to attain. It's easier and more lucrative to be white. However, the final work of this chapter—Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You*—takes the understanding of whiteness further and in a more surreal direction by presenting whiteness as something Black people *can* achieve albeit at enormous cost. It is a work of both satire and Black surrealism.

This chapter has already dealt thoroughly with satire as a way of illustrating kaleidoscopic Blackness and thus restoring Black humanity while preventing the psychic death and flattening that comes through white systems and the white gaze. As a way of conceptualizing Black satire, I turn to Rochelle Spencer's *AfroSurrealism: The African Diaspora's Surrealist Fiction.* As Spencer explains, Surrealism is a movement that "resists race, gender, and class oppression by liberating the imagination" (1), much in line with Morgan's conception of kaleidoscopic Blackness. Spencer describes AfroSurrealism as distinct from the more frequently addressed Afrofuturism in that it "[forces] a confrontation between memories, present-tense reality, and dreams of the future (5). In the case of Cash (LaKeith Stanfield), the protagonist of *Sorry to Bother You,* this is the confrontation between his memories of Black life and community, his present reality struggling to keep a job and make ends meet, and his future dreams of success that are extremely, unquestionably, white.

Spencer argues that AfroSurrealism is particularly concerned with how the "peculiar institution" of American slavery is "in fact a surreal experience: an entire system of oppression

based on race, a socially constructed phenomenon, [that] continues to produce devastating psychological effects within people of African descent" (6). Such a perspective aligns with Riley's film and its emphasis on the link between twenty-first century workplace economics and slavery. In the film we meet Cassius Green (i.e. cash is green) as he is hired on as a telemarketer selling encyclopedias and similar book series for Regalview. He's told to "Stick to the Script," a rigidly capitalist text that urges Cash to turn any problem into a solution. As Cash makes the calls, the film dabbles in surrealism, showing Cash at his desk crashing into the home of the person he's calling. Such flashes of abnormality serve to establish the bigger surrealist moves to come.

Cash has no luck selling until he interacts with Langston (Danny Glover), a longtime employee whose character also serves as a winking critique of the "magical negro" stereotype in films. Like that archetype, his character serves to teach something to our protagonist, but rather than teaching a white person something about themselves, Langston teaches our Black protagonist about his need to tap into his white self, specifically his "white voice." This voice doesn't sound nasally but rather, "like you don't have a care. Got your bills paid. You're happy about your future. … Breezy like, 'I don't need really this money.' You've never been fired, only laid off. It's not really a white voice. It's what they wish they sounded like." In other words, the white voice is the personification of the American Dream, of the success and wealth they wish they could attain. In Brown's terms, the white voice is one of unshakable, birthright wealth.

Cash starts using this white voice—that of cartoonishly white comedian David Cross— and quickly rises up the ranks at Regalview in pursuit of being a "power caller." This, they keep saying, is where the real money is made. Such talk and open embrace of the employees being a "family" highlights the way Regalview, and, by extension, American capitalism, is set up like a

pyramid scheme or a system of multi-level marketing. It's all about distracting the workers from their current predicament and the inhumane conditions of labor under this system by encouraging them to strive upward.

This only works to an extent as the workers, rallying behind Squeeze (Steven Yuen), protest and go on strike. At this same time, Cash makes power caller, forcing him to betray either his dream and newfound opportunity or his friends. It's worth noting here that unlike Coco or, especially, the narrator of *Assembly*, Cash doesn't hit the proverbial ceiling of advancement. This is because this is a work of surrealism in which the white voice—and its embodiment of wealth—can actually be attained by Black characters, but only through the freedom of the genre. The film makes it quite clear that without this white voice, Cash has no prospects of advancement. In saying this the film is also clear that in actual life, Black people can't access this magical white voice and so are doomed to stay where they are.

As a power caller, a PA system in the elevator taking Cash to the top, literally and figuratively, strongly urges Cash is to "take [his] place alongside legends like Hal Jameson," a legendary power caller obviously named for Fredric Jameson. Getting off the elevator Cash is greeted by a Black man (Omari Hardwick) who reminds Cash "White voice at all times here." This is significant as it slyly suggests something different than expected. Cash has not graduated to whiteness or been accepted by other white power callers. Instead, he's graduated to a place where he's among other Black people whose Blackness has been overridden with whiteness, specifically white voice, for the purposes of making money. It's the clearest indication that something sinister is going on, something that goes beyond the sinister baseline of capitalism.

In this vein, we learn that WorryFree is the company's biggest client. Specifically, Regalview is a middleman selling the labor force of WorryFree to other employers. We've seen

WorryFree twice so far in the film, first as a too glossy embodiment of the idyllic American life and then in terms of its CEO Steve Lift (Armie Hammer) denying the allegations that WorryFree is modern slavery. It's now obvious that the encyclopedia sales are just a front, an opportunity for Regalview to sus out elite (Black) candidates for power caller positions while placating the masses with the belief of economic advancement. In selling a labor force, Regalview is further connected to the modern prison industrial complex, noted by Michelle Alexander and others to be akin to 19th century chattel slavery (*The New Jim Crow* 26, 94).

While this connection may seem obvious, the weight of it should not be ignored. Through this scene director Boots Riley and *Sorry to Bother You* are equating *all* of contemporary neoliberal economics with slavery, emphasizing in particular the way that such economic systems harm and limit Black people. To put it in terms drawing on the other sources of this chapter, the film argues that the world is based on white structures and that these white structures are driven by wealth and entitlement. People suffer within such structures attempting to make money while believing—wrongly—that they can achieve wealth. Black people and white people similarly labor under this delusion, but the system is more damaging to Black people due to their lack of a place at all within broader white systems and socially- and economically-enforced racial hierarchies. As such the full scope of economic reality destroys the possibility of kaleidoscopic Blackness and thus threatens psychic harm and death on all Black people. Because the economic systems are white, whiteness is inherently bestowed with greater value that Blackness and other forms of non-whiteness.

This has always been the case, at least for the hundreds of years of capitalism, but we have seen such realities play out differently in 2010s media. Seeing someone like Obama achieve the American presidency, Troy and Coco and others think they can similarly achieve prominence

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and success. Maybe they can, but as season 2 of *Dear White People* and *Assembly* make clear, events like the election of Donald Trump and Brexit underscore the preeminent and predominant place of whiteness within Western culture. All the money in the world doesn't translate into carefree wealth. But as the narrator of *Assembly* realizes, not only can she not attain such wealth, but she also doesn't really want to. It doesn't have the same mythological importance to her, and it never will. She can never feel in her "flesh and bones and blood and skin" that she is entitled to the wealth of empire, and so abandons that dream in hopes of actual happiness.

Cassius Green is not so lucky, and pays the price with flesh, bone, blood, and skin. The blood is prominent on his head after he's hit with a can crossing the picket line of the Regalview strike. This grows his fame and eventually gets him an audience with Steve Lift himself. There Steve unveils his evil masterplan to run WorryFree through horse-human hybrids called equisapians. He calls this the "future of labor," understanding that these horse people will eventually form society and need someone to relate to, an "equisapian Martin Luther King, Jr." Cash rejects the offer, eventually getting the word out about what's really going on with Regalview and WorryFree. Does the world care? No. WorryFree's stock price shoots up and Cash becomes even more of a celebrity. Cash and Squeeze decide on one last ditch effort to disrupt the forces of economic power and evil through another picket line. This time there's a lot more money and industry at stake and so it's met by armed police resistance. Cash is knocked out and stuffed in a truck where he watches the violent scene. But eventually some newly freed equisapians push back attacks, sharing with Squeeze and Cash in the labor struggle. The labor force won, Cash got back his girl (Tess Thompson) and is finally content with his modest lot in life. It's a happy ending.

Until it isn't, as indicated by the final shot which shows a horse nose emerging on Cash's face. This final shot, and the whole last act, highlights AfroSurrealism's emphasis on the grotesque (Spencer 10) and how the "grotesque can serve as a means of apprehending, interpreting, and interacting with the world" (49). In other words, if Black satire helps restore kaleidoscopic Blackness to characters and ward off the flattening inherent to white economic systems, then the grotesqueness of AfroSurrealism can help reveal the systems doing the flattening. In showing the similarities between Black experience of slavery and the banal realities of capitalism, *Sorry to Bother You* powerfully disrupts the myth of wealth and reveals the lie of behind the "white voice." It is a fictious thing, an aspiration that distracts white and Black people similarly. Works such as these suggest that "whiteness" has many levels to it, and that the most valuable levels are rarely even achieved by white people. More than anything the economy of whiteness is one of division and misplaced belief that only serves to aggravate a sense of entitlement and white grievance. At the same time, the systems of the world, especially as they relate to social and economic advancement, are so white that it is the job of works such as these to reveal those systems to white audiences. The goal of such revealing is less to radically change the white structures. This would be ideal but is often impossible. Instead, works like these encourage their audiences to see to the lies propping up whiteness and chose to reject them in favor of more valuable pursuits. What use is money if it will never produce wealth, for anyone, Black or white?

Conclusion: The Middle of the Internet: How the Internet Changed Time and What it Means for the Future

Throughout the previous chapters, this project has considered topics such as privacy, reputation, and whiteness, that have grown in terms of social importance and social capital over the course of the 2010s. They have increased in significance, I have argued, due to factors like the global recession of 2008 and changing Right-leaning politics throughout the early 2010s. Through explorations of various artistic works from this period, this project has explored ways that these shifts in capital have been presented, such as *Silicon Valley*'s emphasis on tech privacy or *Assembly*'s understanding of social climbing as it relates to whiteness as a foundational aspect of culture.

All of these previous chapters have been connected to architecture of the internet, whether as a means of television distribution or a social space that grew movements like #MeToo. However, none of these chapters have really addressed what it *feels* like to exist within the Web2—and now emerging Web3—landscape. The closest was the chapter on privacy, but even there, the focus was on symptoms of the internet—like the isolation of *Inside* or the dystopia of *Ready Player One*—rather than on experience of the thing itself. Even Zuboff's work on surveillance capitalism is more concerned about the economic conditions related to technology and monetized privacy than it is considerate of the human experience within such a system.

As we move from the 2010s into the 2020s—and from the Web2 social media landscape we've known into the more unstable Web3 world of cryptocurrencies and rapidly advancing artificial intelligence—it's worth reflecting on the experience of humans within an internet-

dominated world. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 global pandemic, it's particularly worthwhile to think about this experience as it relates to the concept of time. Time is an abstract concept, but a useful one when thinking about human engagement with the internet world.

As addressed in relationship to surveillance capitalism, social media platforms are incentivized to keep you on their platform as long as possible, generating as much monetizable data as possible. Here we recall McKenzie Wark's assertion that the commodification of leisure time is what solidified the rise of the vectoralist class that monetizes social media information (2). She takes this idea a step further saying, "Not just our labor; not just our leisure—something else is being commodified here: our sociability, our common and ordinary life together, what you might even call communism" (3).

As the leisure time vs labor time distinction has faded within the vectoralist economy, so, too, has our ordinary life been subsumed by such forces. Such an anxiety can be observed in the hit 2022 show *Severance* (Apple TV+) which morphs the idea of a work-life "balance" into a dystopia whereby one's brain is split between "work" and "life," so that the "work" and "life" consciousnesses never share their memories or experiences. In the world of *Severance,* it is impossible to know what (most likely ominous) things your work self is up to, but it's similarly impossible for your labor time to encroach on your leisure. That such a premise would resonate so strongly with audiences speaks to a cultural desire to separate labor time and leisure time as a means of, hopefully, reclaiming some aspect of ordinary life that is not monetized by the vectoralist powers.

Through vectoralist power structures motivated by surveillance impulses, Big Tech and Big Data have created a modern society where the internet is inescapable. As such we are all always living within "internet time" which is an amorphous, data-driven and distinctly non-

human thing. Add to this mixture a global pandemic that shut down the normal rhythms of life—

and further increased dependance on the internet as facilitator of human social interaction—and

the current decade unveils itself as one driven by an impulse to reclaim what Wark calls

"ordinary time" as a means of asserting human values that just might be kept (mostly) free of

vectoralist impulses. Such a project has grown even more urgent as the creative outlets of the

hacker class have been consolidated by Big Tech and Big Content into increasingly few

"chokepoints" that serve to make artistic pursuits untenable and miserable for the artists (Giblin

and Doctorow). This conclusion chapter explores works of the 2020s written from a perspective

of being thoroughly embedded within the Internet-world. In their focus on time and how it works

within a world dominated by the Internet, they show how, in the 2020s, we might reclaim some

portion of our time as something free of Big Tech influence and oversight and filled with

genuine human experience.

The main focus of this chapter is two novels, *No One is Talking About This* by Patricia

Lockwood and *The Candy House* by Jennifer Egan. However, as a means of framing these

works, I first turn attention to John Green's essay collection *The Anthropocene Reviewed.* A

book-version of his podcast of the same name, Green's book provides dozens of short essays on

the stuff of human experience, be it the perplexing chemical make-up of diet Dr Pepper or the

rapid twentieth-century necessity of air-conditioning. This book is particularly useful for our

purposes for two reasons. First, the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic lingers throughout the

book, much of which was written throughout 2020. In an essay on the Indianapolis 500, usually

run over Memorial Day weekend, Green writes, "The rupture of continuity was part of what

made May of 2020 so difficult for me. … So much of what had recently been extraordinary—

wearing a mask, being conscious of every surface I touched or every human I walked past—was

in the process of being mundane" (173). Such passages illuminate communal feelings present in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, while also hinting at the role of time through this sense of ruptured continuity and emphasis on recent phenomena growing mundane.

The book is also particularly useful for this study of time as it relates to a world emersed in the internet as Green frames every topic, regardless of specific ideas, in the context of a 5-star rating system. There is a profound irony to Green's essays when he applies such a system to things like building a path through the woods. He notes that, "the five-star system doesn't really exist for humans; it exists for data aggregation systems, which is why it did not become standard until the Internet era" (3). Inherent throughout the essays is the tension of the information-based data aggregate world of vectors and the natural world that still resists such things by default. This tension leads to many of Green's thoughts on time, as he attempts to force his brain to think beyond the conditioning of the Internet. He says things like,

> When you measure time in [appearances of Halley's comet] rather than years, history starts to look different. As the comet visited us in 1986, my dad brought home a personal computer—the first in our neighborhood. One Halley earlier, the first movie adaptation of *Frankenstein* was released. The Halley before that, Charles Darwin was aboard the HMS *Beagle.* (28)

It's notable that these examples relate to the history of science and technology, be it the earliest days of personal computing, the infancy of film, or the scientific breakthrough of evolution. This leads Green to his concluding statement, "History, like human life, is at once incredibly fast and agonizingly slow" (28). Essays like this one on Halley's comet present an effort to regain a sense of time that is uncorrupted by the mechanisms of the internet.

Such ideas echo throughout the book as Green tries to articulate concepts that will make readers slow down and break from the technological forces of their lives. He summarizes a memoir from Amy Krauss Rosenthal that posits that, if one has an 80-year lifetime on earth, equating to 29,200 days, how many times does one look at a tree? Rosenthal throws out the random number 12,395 before adding, "Absolutely, that is a lot, but it is not infinite, and anything less than infinite seems too measly a number and is not satisfactory" (Green 149). Green then adds that the song "Auld Lang Syne," the subject of this particular essay, captures "how it feels to know you have 12,395 times to look at a tree" (149). Green shares Rosenthal's sentiment that anything less than infinite times to look at a tree is not enough, reinforcing the book's emphasis on the value of engaging nature as a way to reconfigure one's sense of time back to a pre-internet, or, for our purposes, pre-2010s, conception of the world and how time moves within it.

Throughout the book existence within the internet-world is usually implied, through things like the 5-star rating system, rather than explicitly addressed except in the case of the essay "The Internet." At four pages, this essay is a short one, even by the standards of the rest of the book, consisting mainly not of musings on the current state of the internet but of an anecdote from Green's youth. It describes a time in 1992-3 when Green connected to people through the CompuServe Teen Forum and the joys of connection and discovery that came with it. In summer 1993 he was hired as a moderator for Teen Forum, meaning he got free internet and his own phone line. He explains that, "if a single event in my life occurred outdoors that summer, I do not recall it" (87). Green voices concern that he was "romanticizing" the past, and then turns to the present:

What does it say that I can't imagine my life or my work without the Internet? What does

it mean to have my way of thinking, and my way of *being*, so profoundly shaped by

machine logic? What does it mean that, having been part of the Internet for so long [30

years], the Internet is also part of me? My friend Stan Muller tells me that when you're

living in the middle of history, you never know what it means. I am living in the middle

of the Internet. I have no idea what it means. (88 itl. orig.)

This sentiment encapsulates the whole of the essay collection, as it combines the human

experience of time—Green's 30 years with the internet—with the way engagement with the

internet has warped his sense of being. Green is disturbed by the degree to which "machine

logic" shapes his thinking and existing in the world, trying in many other essays to re-write this

system. This passage, like much of the rest of the book, reflects Green's growing anxieties about

how Internet technology is diminishing our connection to the natural world and, specifically, to

the way time works in world. It is a call to human readers to think like a comet, always look at a

tree, and chart our brief lifespans by the temporal rhythms of nature and not the mechanized blur

of the Internet.

In *The Anthropocene Reviewed*, Green puts forth his understanding of what it means to

be "living in the middle of the Internet" while also offering insights about the natural world as a

way to help readers break away from this internet-world, at least briefly. Also released in 2021,

Patricia Lockwood's novel *No One is Talking About This* similarly confronts what it means to be

living within the internet, presenting its inescapable reality through an onslaught of social media

jargon and meme culture delivered to the reader in a barrage of stream-of-internet-consciousness

fragments. The first part of the book can't reasonably said to have a plot, as we follow the mind

of a millennial woman who lives her life very online within "the portal" (15). This is the word

the book gives to the social media space, a highly significant one as it indicates something about space and time in relation to the Internet. Thinking in terms of science fiction, portals are things that transport us to another place. As such the narrator can pass through the portal and suddenly be at a protest in Atlanta, on the floor of Congress, or in a celebrity's backyard. Similarly, portals distort time as the transporting between places, as in a video game, happens instantaneously. As such "portal" captures the essence of Wark's argument about the erased distinction of labor time and leisure time as embodied in the essence of the internet.

Lockwood's narrator, always thinking in the third person, is self-aware about the portal, but this awareness doesn't make her alter her behavior. One moment she thinks, "Why had she elected to live so completely within the portal?" (15) and then the next moment, "Every country seemed to have a paper called *The Globe*" (15) and the next moment, "'Colonialism,' she hissed at a beautiful column, while the tour guide looked at her with concern" (17). Here, she's in a foreign land—possibly Australia (14)—but rather than remark on particularities of the place, she thinks in terms of fragments that would make good memes or tweets. Any sense of the wonder of this place is lost in the ubiquity of *The Globe*. Appreciation of the beautiful column is made subordinate to the performative urge of the portal to call out colonialism. This is because, as she admitted, she's barely in Australia or wherever this particular appearance is and always remains living "completely within the portal."

The narrator's position from within the portal presents the mindset Green hopes to disrupt with his consideration of natural phenomena. It also demonstrates how the other subjects of this study connect to the internet and become implicated by the internet's architecture. At the very start of the novel, she considers privacy, musing, "Why did the portal feel so private, when you only entered it when you needed to be everywhere?" (3). This sentiment recalls that of Bo

Burnham addressing the internet as the place where everybody knows everybody. Other thoughts, like "What do you mean you've been spying on me, with this thing in my hand that is an eye?" (95) show the narrator as someone who has an awareness of surveillance capitalism and carries on with life in the usual fashion. The loss of privacy is not something to fight against but something to just accept as a fact. This seems to be partly the narrator's own mindset as something fully enmeshed in the portal and partly a comment on the 2020s and the increasing difficultly of rejecting the continual surveillance of the Internet-world, whether we want to or not.

Matters of reputation and so-called "cancel culture" are treated with a similar sardonic flippancy. "Every day their attention must turn … all at once, toward a new person to hate. Sometimes the subject was a war criminal, but other times it was someone who made a heinous substitution in guacamole" (9). Within the portal, these are crimes of the same level, subject to the same loss of reputational status. Elsewhere she thinks simply, "Callout culture! Were things rapidly approaching the point where even *you* would be seen as bad?" (62). Such a thought highlights the way the internet and its portals have democratized the commodity of reputation so now everyone, famous and unknown, similarly fears loss of status and the possibility of being treated as a war criminal for a guacamole miscue.

The commodity of whiteness comes up in the novel in its relative absence. This is a narrator living within the portal, and the default of the portal is to whiteness. The structures of this space, like that of television and the rest of the world, are inherently white, causing this definitely white millennial woman to consider matters of race and class as infrequently as possible. Such ideas surface in passages like, "White people, who had the political education of potatoes—lumpy, unseasoned, and biased toward the Irish—were suddenly feeling compelled to

speak out about injustice" (33). Significant here is the distance the narrator feels between herself those white people. They are the uneducated political force speaking ignorantly of injustice; she the innocent portal user pondering her "new class consciousness" (8). Significant, too, is that even this moment does not name the injustice as racial injustice, a tactic of deflection similar to that employed by the narrator. She is living in the portal and as such has no awareness of white supremacy or the structures of racial power, brushing it off as "injustice" just as the portal itself deflects the hashtags. The algorithm is built on a default of whiteness.

In addressing all the topics of this study, *No One is Talking About This* helps to show how all these forms of 2010s capital, by nature of their relationship to the Internet, are similarly impacted by the Internet's sense of time. The first part of Lockwood's novel suggests that those of us living in the portal—which is nearly all her readers, provided they understand the jokes and references that litter the pages—live our lives under its logic, thinking in a similarly fragmented way dictated by algorithms. As such, our sense of time has been fundamentally distorted as true "leisure time" or "ordinary time" has been subsumed by the instantaneous nature of the portal.

The narrator makes such an idea explicit in numerous references to time: "At nine o'clock every night she gave up her mind" (10); "California, which we had come to accept as being always on fire" (59); "They said all you needed to be remembered was one small stone piled on another, and wasn't that what we were doing in the portal, small stone on small stone on small stone?" (47). This last observation is significant as it presents a moment where the outside surroundings—The Cairns in Scotland—cause a breakthrough, prompting her to think differently about time, even if such a thought is promptly articulated in terms of the portal.

The first part of the novel does show fleeting indications that the narrator is dissatisfied, even if little action is taken to escape it. Perhaps the most stirring example of this is her thoughts

on writing. "Why were we all writing like this now? Because a new kind of connection had to be made… Or because, and this was more frightening, it was the way the portal wrote" (63). Here she recognizes that the portal is taking away something distinctly human about communication and writing. Her sense of time seems mostly overtaken by the mechanisms of the portal, but perhaps there is something that can disrupt her mind-less existence in the portal. At the very least, here she admits to something frightening about the portal. Elsewhere she compares the portal to the "fizzing black void" on her sister's ultrasound picture. Here she remarks that both the portal and void were "dimensions where only one thing happened: you revised your understanding of reality" (75). This is a deep and also deeply ironic thought as the portal has not caused the narrator to revise her understanding of reality, only to focus on what the portal deems reality to be.

After this she says, "I know what you're going through … but sometimes you'll be scrolling along, and NASA will post a picture of the stars" (75). Dialogue is rare in this novel, and even less frequently presented as a direct quote, making this moment stand-out as significant. It is significant, as even though part 2 does not start for almost 50 more pages, this moment sets the stage for part 2 as it shows the narrator thinking of something breaking into the void. The way it's presented here is highly ironic as she compares the portal to the void and then suggests an action of the portal—NASA posting a picture of the stars—as the thing that breaks through the floating nothingness of the void/portal. It's the paradoxical moment when something in the portal provides the kind of real human experience you usually only find outside the portal.

Following from this moment, part 2 of the novel is dominated by thoughts related to this child, who ends up born with an ever-expanding head. The birth of her niece, and not anything found in the portal, disrupts the narrator's sense of self, changing how she understands the world

and, especially, time. It's immediately clear the child has severe health complications and isn't going to live long. This prompts the narrator to tell her husband, "A minute means something to her—more than it means to us" (171). This is true in the sense that, since the child has fewer minutes on earth, each one is more precious. However, the statement is also significant in regard to thinking of the portal and how it warps time. The child, untouched by the forces of the portal, has a pure and untainted way of understanding time, free from the trappings of the Internet. As such a minute means something to her that it long ago stopped meaning to the narrator. A minute means nothing in the context of the portal's temporal reality. It only means something outside of the portal, here represented by the narrator's dying niece. The significance of this passage is further driven home by the narrator's thoughts when the child dies. "Six months and one day old. Everything contained in that extra day" (186). Such a thought highlights how a small temporal increment—like a minute or a day—meant more to the niece both because she had fewer of them allotted to her and because her sense of time was uncorrupted by the portal's temporal logic.

Throughout part 2, we see the narrator's Internet obsession disrupted by the health problems of her niece, but the tug of the portal is ever present. One passage at the end of the novel recounts that

> Surrounding the meticulous documentation of the baby's final days in her [the narrator's] photoroll were: a picture of Ray Liotta's recent plastic surgery; a screenshot of a news story about how fake nudes of a congresswoman had been debunked by foot fetishists; … a fluffy eagle with black wings and filmy gray eyes … ; and minutes before it happened, herself, bent over in the darkness of that hospital room and wearing sailor stripes. It would show up on her screen in another year, the announcement that she had a new memory. (203-204)

The narrator's photoroll of the baby's last days shows the stark juxtaposition between the incredibly fleeting information of the portal and the enduring memory of the child's last days. However, since this final photo is there on her phone, backed up in Google Photos or something similar, she will be reminded of it, by the urging of the portal, a year later. A year that the child did not have (157). At such a time the photo will "announce" a new memory, the idea being that the memory is created by portal putting it on her screen and not by her brain prompting such a recollection organically.

Such a passage reflects similar self-awareness as at the beginning of the novel when the narrator notes the harms of the portal, such as lost privacy, and uses it anyway. Here she seems to understand that it's not ideal to be prompted to remember something significant only by the portal that specializes in producing insignificant information (Zuboff), but she seems unwilling or unable to escape the transportive power of the portal.

The novel ends with the narrator at a dance club, enjoying the closeness of all the people dancing. "Someone at some point slid her phone out of her pocket and she lifted off her feet, lighter. Her whole self was on it, if anyone wanted. Someone would try to unlock it later, and see the picture of a baby opening her mouth, about to speak, about to say anything" (208). With distance from her phone, she feels lighter even though her whole self is on the phone. The portal that the phone holds transports and also traps. Her trapped self is there for any and all to access, though her thoughts suggest that she thinks this is unlikely as, odds are, no one will want to. "Unlock" seems to refer equally to the phone and the narrator's sense of self. Any chance of "unlocking" the real her will come through the phone. But when someone attempts this "later," they'll see a picture of the now gone child, trapped on the screen in the portal, as she was previously in the pre-birth void. Again there is a connection between the narrator and the child,

but as the child is frozen in that moment, unable to speak, the narrator feels a similar desire to say something real, something more real than a post. The final "anything" seems to suggest the unlimited scope of the internet and the portal, while also ironically suggesting that anything—no matter what it is—spoken apart from the portal will carry more weight and value than the unlimited "anything" the portal contains.

Like Green, the narrator finds herself living in the middle of the Internet, but unlike Green, she seems unable to escape this state of mind, even occasionally. The only thing that breaks through is the reality of her niece, uncorrupted by the portal at least until the narrator (and presumably also the child's mother) brings her into contact with the portal. However, this powerful experience outside the portal does, at the very least, reveal to the narrator the way that time works outside the portal, where minutes and days mean something. It's a powerful message to convey to the readers about the way the vectoralist portals of Big Tech and Big Data corrupt our sense of time and, with it, our grasp of reality.

The narrator of *No One is Talking About This* doesn't escape the portal or reclaim much understanding of time apart from it, but some of the characters of Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House* do. Published in 2022, *The Candy House* is the perfect conclusion to this whole project as it functions as a sequel or sorts and continuation of Egan's 2010 novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad.* In considering how the works present time to the readers, we can clearly see the profound influence of the internet throughout the 2010s in changing our relationship to time. In short *The Candy House* reveals how all the changes throughout the 2010s reflected in the other works of this study fundamentally altered our relationship to time. In speculating out beyond 2022, it further provides a blueprint for the future and a hope of how we may reclaim some form of "ordinary time" apart from the temporality dictated by vectoralist forces.

The focus here is on *The Candy House,* but much of its power comes from the space between it the earlier *Goon Squad.* The twelve years between the books provides a literalization of how our relationship to time and the internet changed throughout the 2010s. *The Candy House* is a novel that really tries to make sense of what it means to be living "in the middle" of the internet. However, unlike *No One is Talking About This,* it doesn't concern itself with the stuff of the internet—memes, in-jokes, cultural references—but rather with the structures of the internet, specifically with how these structures are affecting our relationships with each other and with time.

Such ideas are best seen in the contrast between *Goon Squad* and *The Candy House.* Time is incredibly important to the loose literary structure of *Goon Squad.* The title comes from a saying of Bosco, an aging former rockstar who, thinking himself running out of time, plots his "Suicide Tour." He recalls the expression as "Time's a goon" (127). The expression passes from Bosco to the man interviewing him, Jules, to Jules's sister, Stephanie, to her then-husband Bennie, who, nearly 20 years later, repeats it to Scotty, saying, "Time's a goon, right?" at the end of the novel (332). The resurfacing of this titular phrase is reflective of how the novel works, as an interlocking puzzle of information that only comes together when taken as a whole. Regina Schober describes the novel's matrix of characters by noting how,

> The novel alludes to the multimedia collage of the Internet with different file formats requiring the reader to switch between different forms of 'reading,' from textual-linear to non-linear to the visual reading of diagrams and flow charts. Evoking metatextual awareness, the novel thus creates a non-chronological network of different modes of information. These links resemble the hypertextual structure of the Internet in that

characters function as links which, once "activated," open up further narrative windows in which they then become focalizers. (373)

Schober's insight highlights not only the constantly shifting ways of reading *Goon Squad* but also how its very character structure reflects the internet. There is a link between the two appearances of this titular phrase, a link that bridges over character relationships and nearly two decades.

The made-up idiom "Time's a goon" further reflects how time is considered throughout the novel. The Merriam-Webster definition of "goon" emphasizes that a goon is a "man hired to intimidate or eliminate opponents," as might be seen in the context of a mobster. Presenting time this way highlights how time is the adversary of the characters as they reach middle age and adulthood. Aging characters—especially the men like Bennie, Lou, and Bosco—feel time getting away from them. Others, like Jules, are more directly antagonized by time as he serves 5 years in various correctional facilities (119). The title of "goon squad" suggests the multiple ways that time torments you, whether through your aging body, your sense of lost youth (89), time lost to a prison sentence or time lost to premature death (90). All of these various goons of time come around to pay a visit, intimidating and disrupting your life and sense of self until, ultimately, eliminating you entirely.

This is how time is a goon to the various characters, but there is another way that time torments readers and that is through an incredible amount of imprecision. The narrative, which spans from the early 1970s into parts of the 2020s, is non-linear to an extreme degree, as each chapter wildly disorients the reader from where the previous chapter was. For example, the fourth chapter, "Safari," can be vaguely dated in the early to mid 1970s, but turn the page and the fifth chapter, "You (Plural)" finds us sometime around 2004 back adjacent to the characters

mostly addressed in chapter two, "The Gold Cure." That chapter mentions an incident "years ago" (23) that links, in the understanding of Schober, to the sixth chapter, which begins on page 92. "The Gold Cure" can further be dated around 2006 only in terms of hazy, half-remembered proximity to 9/11. Bennie notes that the band they just saw sounded different two years ago, before Sasha corrects him that "It wasn't two years ago … it was five," since the previous meeting had been "four days" after 9/11 (33-4).

As such, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* shows the goon of time harassing and intimidating readers just as it does the characters as the straightforward narrative of the novel is conveyed in a fractured and fragmented way reflective of the trauma-disrupted 2000s and emerging Internet style. Once you figure out the puzzle, the plot is relatively simple. Lou Kline is a big-deal music producer in the 1970s. Late that decade he runs into Bennie and his group of friends and takes Bennie under his wing. Twenty years later, in the early 2000s, Bennie has a thriving music business of his own—the specter of iTunes and Napster looms, unspoken in this novel—with Sasha as his assistant. At the end of the novel, Bennie's career is revived through a Woodstock-like event for a new generation that happens in the late 2010s (*The Candy House* will confirm it as seemingly COVID-free 2020).

Such a summary captures the general plot and thematic outline while failing to convey the content of at least half of the chapters. To "find" them you need to travel down a series of links. To "find" chapter 8, "Selling the General," you have to follow a link from Bennie to his wife Stephanie to her brother Jules to the woman Jules allegedly assaulted, Kitty Jackson. But the chapter about the encounter between Jules and Kitty Jackson is chapter 9, that is *after* the chapter in which you need that information. Such obstructions make *Goon Squad* a book that is both a thrilling puzzle and a maddening journey of seemingly useless information.

In *Goon Squad* an abundance of information is often connected to hazy temporal markers. For example, chapter 11, "Goodbye, My Love" concerns Ted Hollander tracking down his niece, Sasha, in Naples. It's around 1991—you need information from multiple places in the book to assert this—and shortly before Sasha goes to college and meets Drew and Bix Bouton. We read of Drew and Bix, briefly, in the previous chapter, "Out of Body," set in 1993. However, to this point in the novel, Drew and Bix are less characters than they are clusters of information, information that remains mostly useless to the purposes of understanding the characters of *Goon Squad* until *The Candy House* over a decade later. In "Goodbye, My Love," Ted appears similarly useless as a character with one appearance in *Goon Squad* and one with only a thin relationship to Sasha.

His tracking of Sasha through Naples turns out to be significant to getting Sasha on track for the rest of her life, the majority of which we've already read about. The trip also helps Ted with his career as an art critic but, again, this has effectively no bearing on the major contours of *Goon Squad.* One could skip this chapter entirely and the book would remain basically intact. However, the chapter exists as a good example of how time and excessive amounts of information intersect throughout the novel.

The chapter ends with a strange glimpse of the future, a moment more than twenty years later when Ted would visit Sasha, now married to Drew and living in California, and "for an instant he would remember Naples" (233) and this moment they shared. Such a passage provides a bit of closure for Sasha's roller-coaster journey throughout the novel, but it also reminds readers that the excessive details scattered throughout the novel are only superfluous from a certain perspective. Here was a 25-page chapter following the perspective of a very minor character in *Goon Squad* providing little insight into a life event we already had the gist of. From

the perspective of *Goon Squad* as a novel, this chapter is quite a long detour from any of the main threads of the novel. But from the perspective of Ted, this event is everything. This final passage is of a moment that cuts through the haze of time and reminds him of something entirely real and powerful, one crystal clear memory that slices through the hazy details of memory.

It is in this abundance of often superfluous information that *Goon Squad* best reflects the way the internet, since its inception, has shifted our relationship to time. Over the course of the time it takes to read the novel, the reader becomes more embedded in the "database of networked characters" (Katherine D. Johnston, 159) that populate it. This allows readers to "perceive a complex web of relations, both between characters and between the different eras of a single character's life, a web which the characters themselves are, at best, only dimly aware of" (Moorey, 77). The novel unfolds in waves of information, some of which is useful for the chapter, some of which makes sense later—either later in *Goon Squad* or *The Candy House*— and some serves little purpose at any time. For instance, the first chapter, "Found Objects," draws attention to a scarf at Sasha's house that means effectively nothing in the scope of the novel.

Combining networked characters with Schober's understanding of the novel in terms of hyperlinks, the experience of reading *Goon Squad* comes to resemble the internet practice of lateral reading whereby you compare information across sources and webpages, consolidating it together for your own purposes. *Goon Squad* is a novel that seems like you have 13 tabs open at once, pulling information from one chapter together with information from another chapter to create something more useful for your narrative purposes than the original "useless" information seemed to be. As such time bends and warps as you navigate between the different tabs.

This means of reading, and the instability it creates about time and "useful" information, connects to the main historical events that shape *Goon Squad*—September 11 and the increased surveillance that followed it, the 2007-8 housing crisis, the rapidly emerging world of Web2, still in infancy when *Goon Squad* came out. However, Johnston insightfully points out that while many readers have called September 11 the "chronological center" of the novel, it shouldn't be missed that the first iPod followed it on October 23rd of that same year (165). As such *Goon Squad* emerges from a decade in which the internet has exploded, changing how we process information and how we make connections, with each other and between ideas. It also brought with it increased surveillance technology, setting the stage for a world of increasing paranoia. If the other works of this chapter reflect John Green's sense of living "in the middle of the Internet," *Goon Squad* captures a sense of living in the beginning of the internet, unsure what the future will hold in the wake of the major social and technological shifts of the 2000s. And yet, even when Web2 is in its infancy, and Facebook is a resource for finding estranged friends (233), it's still had a powerful effect on time, making it more slippery and harder to cut through to reach authentic human connection.

This foundation of *Goon Squad* is necessary for reading *The Candy House* which breaks many norms of its predecessor. Whereas only the final two chapters of *Goon Squad* were set in a time later than its 2010 publication, eight of *The Candy House*'s 14 chapters are set in the 2020s or 2030s, at or after its 2022 publication. Six of the 13 sections of *Goon Squad* took place between 1997 and 2008, reflecting the social and technological shifts of the late 90s and early 2000s in the aftermath of 9/11 and the emergence of the iPod. Similarly, eight of *The Candy House*'s 14 chapters happen between 2022 and 2035. This is a significant thematic shift, pivoting

from reflecting on society in the wake of recent changes to speculating about the future those changes may create.

This shift accompanies a radically different relationship to time, as is apparent dozens of times throughout the novel. It first appears on page 4 when Bix thinks about when they were "busy defining, in 1992" the World Wide Web modems soon to be obsolete (4). The following page tells us it's "October" (5) before reiterating a sense of what the internet was in 1992 (6) and telling us that Bix thinks these things in 2010 (6). Shortly then we learn that "seventeen years had passed" since Rob's drowning in "Out of Body" in *Goon Squad*.

That makes five rock-solid temporal signifiers in the first 7 pages of *The Candy House*. You may struggle to find five signifiers this specific in the whole of *Goon Squad*. Based solely on information given to us freely and immediately, we know that this chapter, "The Affinity Charm," concerns the events of October, 2010. At the same time, Bix is reflecting on his college days of 1992 and 1993, the year his friend drowned (later were given the even greater specificity of it happening on April 6th (pg. 60)). A careful reading of *Goon Squad* can lead one to, mostly, pinpoint this event in 1993, but it requires one to piece together a lot of information; now it's just stated directly. It is immediately clear that time is no longer a goon in the way it previously was, for the characters or for the readers. Characters now seem to have near perfect recall, explained gradually to be the result of technology. Similarly, readers are given numerous touchpoints in each chapter to keep a firm grasp on what year it is.

Gradually we learn the reason for the temporal exactitude. In 2016, Bix Bouton, who years earlier launched the social media giant Mandala, came out with Own Your Unconscious (56). This technology allowed users to upload the whole of their consciousness to a Mandala Cube, a massive network of memories and experiences. It's totally free, except for the one-time

cost of the cube, and allows everyone in the network to access the memories of everyone else in the network and to see events as they happened from multiple points of view. The unreliable nature of time, so central to *Goon Squad*, is vanquished once and for all.

Like *No One is Talking About This, The Candy House* presents a sense of internet consciousness, but whereas the Portal caused the narrator to lose her sense of time and of herself, Mandala and Own Your Unconscious allows the characters of *The Candy House* to locate and access their memories with precision. As such the reading experience of *The Candy House* is quite different than *Goon Squad* as readers no longer have to pull together lots of different moments to get the full picture of the scene. However, even though the fraught nature of memory is no longer an issue, the world containing the centralized consciousness of hundreds of millions of people contains more information than ever before.

The Candy House makes the theme of sorting through information explicit through the musings of Charlene. The chapter "What the Forest Remembers" sees Charlene, one of Lou Kline's children and one who went on the safari, tapping into her dad's memories of a trip he took back in 1965. At the time Charlene, then going by Charlie, was 6 (131), but through the power of Own Your Unconscious, is able to access her dad's memories of this trip. This alone is impressive as he died in 2006, but Lou was on the cutting edge of innovation and had his consciousness backed up for a possible future time when it might be accessible in some way. This happened a decade later, in 2016, so now Charlene, not for the first time, watches back over this trip, a trip that set the course of her father's future as a music producer.

Toward the end of this chapter, Charlene reflects that,

I've witnessed this silent period [of meditation while on the trip] from every available consciousness in the collective, and I have glints of what ran through each mind… But

my problem is the same one had by everyone who gathers information: what to do with it? How to sort and shape and use it? How to keep from drowning in it? Not every story needs to be told. (139)

Such a statement names one of the major downsides of the internet, an overabundance of data making it harder to find what you actually hope to find. This is the same feeling experienced by the Lockwood's narrator as she sorts through the stream of her Portal scroll for something that feels real. This overabundance of information is also a problem we faced as readers with *Goon Squad* as Egan provided us with lots of random details (the scarf in Sasha's apartment) and minor characters (Rebecca, mentioned briefly and appearing again briefly in *The Candy House*) without a means to shape and sort this information. The only way was to take the whole of it and sort it out as best we could without a stable sense of reality or time to guide us. Charlene's use of the word "drowning" is significant as it was Rob's drowning that sparked Bix's whole world-altering project. But rather than making something that, through perfect factual recall, could save us from drowning in a sea of unknowing, Mandala and Own Your Unconscious just flipped the problem so now we drown in too much information and not too little.

How the Internet functions and relays information is a central theme of *The Candy House.* Following the invention and embrace of Mandala and Own Your Unconscious, characters divide into two main groups. Many characters accept the reality of this new Collective Consciousness world. Some, like Sasha's autistic son Lincoln, are thriving as "counters," their unique way of processing and cataloguing human behavioral information making them an essential part of the tech ecosystem.

On the other hand, there are characters either wary of collective consciousness or outright opposed to it. *The Candy House* charts how such wariness intensified over time, similar to how

the conversation about the importance of privacy grew more urgent throughout the run of *Silicon Valley* (2014-2019) and the 2010s. Set in 2022, "*i,* the Protagonist" sees Chris, Bennie's son, thinking at odds with his tech industry peers. "Bix Bouton was a god in Chris's world, but Chris secretly (very secretly) sided with the boomers who viewed Mandala's 'memorevolution' with existential horror" (172). Just as *The Candy House* begins in 2010, the year *Goon Squad* was published, it's significant that this sense of foreboding comes in 2022, the year *The Candy House* was published. Chris is growing increasingly wary about the future of the Internet and its technologies, as Egan seems also to be.

Glimpsing a decade down the line and such fears and feelings of existential horror were well founded. In "Lulu the Spy, 2032" we see Lulu, a childhood friend of Chris's, as a spy completing a covert government mission in a foreign land. She's become something beyond human, with numerous cyborg modifications such as a Universal Port between her toes (220) and something called a weevil in her skull (205). While on this mission and in harm's way, she reflects on the "Faustian allure of consciousness sharing" due to the fact that "human beings are unknowable" (220). Such a statement connects the internet space of the novel with the desire to know each other, hinting at the dark place that such a desire for connection took society. Following this service, Lulu is not herself, constantly paranoid that the government implanted weevil remains in her brain. Many others like her, including those who were never in the service such as Jules, battle similar paranoia. This thematic thread of weevils and implanted surveillance takes *Goon Squad*'s post-9/11 themes of paranoia and disorientation to their logical end thirty years after such shifts in surveillance and militarization happened. It's fitting that spies like Lulu are forbidden from joining the Collective Consciousness due to the secret nature of their

memories. As such, they remain unable to access the certainty and stability that so many others have now found through Mandala.

The novel's complex relationship with the internet is best summed up in the title, which comes from Lou Kline shortly before his death. This chapter, "The Mystery of Our Mother," sees Melora Kline, one of Lou's youngest daughters, reflect on the journey her life took from the vantage point of the mid-2020s. She's now estranged from both her only blood relative sister, Lana, and her mother, Miranda who has "eluded" and dropped off the grid of internet-connected society. Interestingly, though *The Candy House* tends to have far less mystery in its presentation of information than the instructible web of *Goon Squad*, the speaker only reveals herself as Melora, as opposed to her sister, Lana, at the end of the chapter. Such delayed information emphasizes the chapter's themes of connection while also reinforcing her stepsister Charlene's assertion that "there are still some mysteries left" (137) due to the fact that not everyone is connected to the Collective Consciousness.

Melora recalls how, in 1999, her father, Lou, had said, "In five years, not a single person is going to pay for music" (123). Such a prophecy reminds us of Johnston's claim about the significance of iTunes to *Goon Squad*'s themes. This passage also provides the only explicit mention of Napster found in either novel, though its specter of music-industry doom looms often. Melora then thinks of a few years later, shortly before Lou's death in 2006. As predicted, the music industry has gone into free fall (124), and Melora feels a twinge of dread similar to the one expressed by Chris nearly twenty years later.

> People were letting the Internet go inside their computers and play their music, so that
>
> they, too, could play songs they didn't own without having to buy them. The idea made
>
> us squeamish; it was like letting a stranger rummage through your house—or your brain!

Once the Internet was inside your computer rifling through your music, what else might it decide to look at? (124)

Such a passage draws a line between Napster/iTunes/early 2000s music sharing culture and Facebook/Mandala/2010s social media culture and the invasive weevils, spyware implanted literally within one's brain, seen in the late 2020s and 2030s of the novel. Such a passage drives home the uncomfortable reality that the internet, especially as it exists in its Web2 or Web3 form, cannot be separated from a requisite loss of privacy.

To further make this point, the next passage gives the novel its title, as Lou, near the end of his life, imparts a final bit of wisdom: "*Nothing is free!* Only children expect otherwise, even as myths and fairy tales warn us: Rumpelstiltskin, King Midas, Hansel and Gretel. *Never trust a candy house!* It was only a matter of time before someone made them pay for what they thought they were getting for free" (125). Such a sentiment further connects the different eras of the Internet, from Napster days of "free" music to the mid-2010s when Own Your Unconscious was "free." Egan's point seems to be that the internet, in any form and any era, is a candy house. It is not to be trusted. What seems "free" will always come with a cost to your privacy, mental well-being, and ability to connect with the rest of the world.

I end this project, as *The Candy House* does, with Ames Hollander. The middle son of Ted Hollander, Ames serves as the encapsulation of this whole discussion about what it means to be living in the middle of the internet and, crucially, what it means to live outside of it. Ames is a cryptic presence throughout the novel, not included in a family photo (15) often forgotten by his family. "They all had a tendency to forget Ames" (31). This is relayed in 2011 when Ames is "now allegedly retired, but he'd bulked up yet more, spent most of his time overseas, and, at the mention of Bin Laden's recent assassination, seemed briefly unsure who that was" (38). Clearly

Ames did something related to the military in the 2000s, a post-9/11 echo of the work Lulu would do later. Much later we learn that he was in Special Operations (291, a chapter taking place in 2034) and now tries to help other people, like Jules and Lulu, dealing with paranoia and fear of weevils.

The full picture of Ames comes into focus in the novel's final chapter, "Middle Son (Area of Detail)." It's worth noting that this concluding chapter is quite different from that of *Goon Squad*. The conclusion there, "Pure Language," leapt to the late part of the 2010s to highlight the rebirth of music careers and this massive Woodstock-for-a new generation event called the Footprint concert. It was an epic forward-thinking conclusion concerned with technology, the next generation, and how the internet has shaped human connection. *The Candy House* ends quite differently with a simple narrative of Ames, age eleven, playing baseball. The highly omniscient narrator, even more removed than usual, reminds us that "People forget his name. They forget he exists" (326). Furthermore, it's "1991, and a lot of things that are about to happen haven't happened yet" (326). This idea brings the novel full circle to Bix reflecting on 1992 and the soon-to-be obsolete modems he's working on (6).

In other words, this is a moment before everything else. It's before Bix's Vision and later invention of Mandala, before Miranda Kline publishes her book (1995) that propels Bix's technology, and, crucially, before the military and special ops work that made Ames so easily forgotten among his family. It's a moment before all the social and technological forces that animated *The Candy House* have come into being. Right now, Ames is a simply a kid at bat with "two outs, bases loaded, bottom of ninth" trailing by three (326). The narrator draws a clear comparison between this moment and 1991 on the verge of the internet, "The game is surely lost, yet the possibility of victory still exists" (326). Incredibly and improbably, Ames hits the

homerun, propelling his team to a 5-4 victory (328), but this does not become a turning point or crucial moment for him (329). His accomplishment was mythic for only another four weeks (329).

The narrator then withdraws from the anecdote to finally fill in the details of Ames's story, details omitted from the rest of the novel. He turned twenty-one days after 9/11 and was recruited to do Special Ops "targeted killings" when he was in his thirties (329). Such a time corresponds to the early 2010s again just before the society-shaking change brough about by Own Your Unconscious in 2016. The narrator notes that "flashes of humanity" gathered in him until finally recognizing, at age 43, "what his work had forced him to become" (330-1). At such a point he returned to Upstate New York, bought his childhood home, settled down, and started a family. As we read this we know it's a lie based on how we just saw Ames helping people with paranoia in the mid 2030s. The narrator draws attention to the "false bottom under this happy ending" (331) before tracking the real story of Ames's life after the military. This included getting his weevil removed in 2027 and then building a machine "to salve the dread of paranoids" (331). The narrator then follows Ames to the very end of his life, outliving his brothers, dying in bittersweet fashion in a nursing home (333).

This long summary constitutes the most dense, fact-filled, biographic account of any character in either novel, a 5-page journey through the full scope of a character's life without abstractions, omissions, or the need to reference multiple parts of the novel. I relay it in full, as best I can, to drive home the narrator's point immediately following this section, "Thanks to Bix Bouton, that genius, all this is in our reach" (333). Through the incredible invention of the Consciousness Collective (which Ames, of course, was prohibited from joining), all this detail can be given to the forgotten middle son, just based on the people he interacted with.

Bix's machine makes all this superhuman, infallible memory possible but, "Even so, there are gaps: holes left by eluding separatists bent upon hoarding their memories and keeping their secrets. Only Gregory Bouton's machine—this one, fiction—lets us roam with absolute freedom the human collective" (333). This is a moment of phenomenal irony as Egan spent two entire novels highlighting the holes of fiction only to suggest that, in fact, fiction is the only way to fully experience the human collective. This seems to be Egan's answer for living in the middle of the internet, the way to escape the candy house and reclaim a sense of privacy and human connection. For all the ways these two books replicated the reading style and structure of the internet through hyperlinks and required lateral reading, Egan's novels resoundingly did not betray the privacy of their characters, revealing the slightest glimpses only when absolutely necessary.

As fiction allows us to do, we flash back to aftermath of the baseball game, the family walking joyfully away from the stadium. It says, "When they reach the car, his father pulls of Ames's baseball cap and kisses his sweaty head. 'What now, slugger?' he asks. 'Anything you want.'" (334). The fact that this final line is a statement, rather than a question, suggest that the full scope of anything is available to Ames following this moment, a fact that we know to be not rooted in the reality of the character. But we are in the purview of fiction, a machine that allows us to be here in 1991 with lots of things having not yet happened. In such a moment, not yet corrupted by the Internet, anything is possible.

The works of this concluding chapter highlight how living in the middle of the internet has warped our sense of time, a direct result of the loss of leisure time and "ordinary time" (Wark). But there is hope to reclaim this temporal reality. John Green suggests that observance of nature can remind us of other ways to think about time and our fleeting place within it.

Patricia Lockwood highlights how human connections, even fleeting or pain-filled ones, can disrupt the stream of the Portal and allow us to be fully present in our human moment. Jennifer Egan suggests that art, especially fiction, presents the only true way to remain tapped into the human collective; it's the only machine that can find the real humanity amongst the endless information of the Internet.

These are ideas we would do well to remember as we face an uncertain future of seismic climate change, unstable cryptocurrencies economic models, and AI programs that threaten to upend how we think about fiction and art. All of these things happen within a world in which privacy grows continually weaker and the vectoralist class grows ever stronger. We are still in the middle of the Internet and have been for some time. This has changed how we think of privacy, reputation, racial constructions, time, fiction, television, art, economics and everything else. The Internet has radically unsettled every facet of our modern world and shifted around the value systems. It will undoubtedly keep doing this as we pass through the 2020s and 2030s. But so to will new works of artistic production speak to these changes, challenge the systems of Big Tech and Big Content and keep fighting for the hacker class of disruptors.

Bix Bouton's machine of a ravenous social media internet isn't going anywhere, but neither is Gregory Bouton's machine of fiction. And as long as there continues to be artwork that challenges the structures of the internet-world, there we will always be able to maintain our humanity and fight for what it means to be human.

Teaching the First Era of Streaming Television

This chapter was proposed in spring of 2022 and was first written in early April of 2023. This was not long ago, and yet several developments in the ever-shifting landscape of streaming television, most notably the Writers Guild of America (WGA) labor strike, have made it such that, even two months later, I don't think a class like this makes sense. One can still teach the shows of this time. Class periods and assignments on *BoJack Horseman* or other shows still work much as a film class works. What I had hoped with the proposed class of this chapter was to craft a class that was both about the shows of this time and the changes in television architecture. My teaching philosophy usually tries to account for the particular works and the broader cultural shifts and movements that the works fit within. In the case of this course, that means striking a balance between the importance of the primary texts and the way they fit within the mechanisms of streaming television. Such an approach also works with my guiding ethos of teaching that education is a life-long process that matters far beyond the parameters of the classroom. My goal with this class is to show the importance of thinking about things in such critical terms, even something that may seem as fleeting as streaming television.

"Streaming television" has become something of an oxymoron as streaming programs and content resemble their television forebearers less each year. For example, one is hard pressed to find a sitcom, certainly one that runs more than 3 seasons, originating on a streaming platform. The sitcom has been an essential component of television and television studies since the beginning of the medium. Can something be "television" without the sitcom, or the distinction of "daytime" and "primetime?" For the first era addressed in this chapter, it seemed the answer was yes. Now, however, it seems that we may have reached a point, or will soon reach a point, where "television" and "streaming programs" are distinct media. Recent changes have become so

extreme, and, in many ways, existentially threatening to the very nature of television, that I doubt a class like this would actually work anytime in the near future. As such this is a pedagogy chapter about a class I designed on the first era of streaming television, while also being a chapter about how challenging it would be to teach said class in 2023 given the way the interests of large corporations have systematically stripped the life and soul from the medium.

The class is called "Studies in 'Peak TV'," concerning streaming television (whatever one might mean by that) from 2013-2022 what I call the First Era of Streaming Television. I use "Peak TV" in the course title as it is a catchier and better-known phrase. It would be an upper division course focused on contemporary television studies.

In a speech for the Television Critics Association in summer 2015, the FX network's CEO, John Landgraf, said the following, now famous, words: "There is simply too much television. My sense is that 2015 or 2016 will represent peak TV in America, and that we'll begin to see declines coming the year after that and beyond" (Rose and Guthrie). This statement became iconic for assigning the name "peak TV" to the mid-2010s boom of original streaming and cable programming. It was also demonstrably wrong, as peak TV was not in decline by 2015 or 2016. Even now, in 2023, on the other side of multiple years of a global pandemic that affected television production in numerous ways, reporters are cautious to declare the end of peak TV, offering instead such tentative headlines as "Peak TV May Be Coming to an End" (Adgate) and "The Era of Peak TV is Seemingly Over" (Franklin). Following Landgraf's warning in 2015, there seems to be a persistent sense that peak TV is finally ending, but part of the challenge in stating this fact with any certainty is not only that peak TV continues to be financially lucrative and culturally prominent, but also that peak TV, as a concept, has proven particularly difficult to define.

There are two central components to peak TV. The first, and likely the one that Landgraf originally meant when he established the term, refers to the number of original programs aired during a given year. 2022 featured 599 such programs, a sharp rise from the 371 programs of 2014 (Stoll). By such a metric, peak TV is far from over, but there are signs that this bubble may finally burst, as orders for scripted series were down by 24% in the second half of 2022 (Frankel). Numerous business woes from the likes of Netflix and Warner Brothers Discovery further suggest that this golden age of abundant streaming content is ending. But peak TV has come to mean more than just the quantity of television programs produced in a given year. The term was also used frequently to set a kind of standard for television quality. This was an era at its "peak" both in terms of the amount of and also excellence in television programming.

Though there was agreement that peak TV had ended by the end of 2022, the Writers Guild of America strike, which began on May 2nd, 2023 and shows no signs of resolving anytime soon at the time of writing, has all but made official the end of this era of streaming television. Similarly, the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) has authorized a strike to begin soon. When Warner Bros. Discovery rebranded HBO Max as Max and relaunched the app on May 23rd, they listed various writers and directors involved with a show as "creators," a move which drew swift backlash and Warner Bros. Discovery quickly reversed. Still, as Andrew King noted for TheGamer, such a move on the part of Warner Bros. Discovery does nothing to dissolve tension or discourage the prolonging of the writers' strike. It seems to make the possibility of the three major entertainment unions—WGA, SAG-AFTRA, and the DGA—all being on strike at the same time later this summer all the more likely. As such the future of television is more unstable at this moment than it has been in decades, possibly ever. This extreme lack of stability makes it difficult to imagine the context in which this course would work, without knowing what lies on

the other side of this watershed moment in entertainment history. However, such a moment does confirm that the era of peak TV is over.

The first era of streaming television can now be dated from February 2013—the release of *House of Cards,* Netflix's first big original series—and the Writers' Strike of spring 2023. This makes the era almost exactly ten years in length, though little has happened in the first months of 2023 that would prevent one ending the timeframe in 2022 if one wished.

The course then further breaks this era down into three phases each with their own distinct shows, mood, and streaming mechanics. The first part from 2013-2016 is called "Netflix: The Only Game in Town." During this time nearly all notable streaming originals were Netflix shows while Netflix maintained a *massive* upper hand over competition. With shows like *House of Cards* and *Orange is the New Black* racking up critical acclaim and awards, Netflix was both sitting pretty on top of the streaming world and proving that streaming shows can compete with the big names in broadcast and cable (especially HBO). Netflix isn't *quite* alone during this time, as Amazon finds success with *Transparent* starting in 2014. This section of the course will focus on the success of these shows and how they mapped out the streaming landscape. It will also address how #MeToo related allegations (in 2017) significantly tarnished the legacy of *House of Cards* and *Transparent* and, by extension, the flagship streaming programs of this era. This section of the course will also touch on *The Office* and *Breaking Bad*, two shows synonymous with modes of broadcast television—*The Office* as a standard network sitcom and *Breaking Bad* as a prestige cable drama—and how these shows had a resurgence in popularity and cultural impact as a part of being staples in the Netflix catalogue.

This part of the course is also where Jason Mittell's book *Complex TV* will be the most useful. First published online between March 2012 and July 2013 (350), Jason Mittell's *Complex*

TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling exists as a useful and interesting examination of 2000s television and the many changes it underwent in a short span of time. Through detailed analysis of shows such *Lost* (2004-2010) and *Veronica Mars* (2004-2007[3]) Mittell highlights how TV became "complex" in terms of viewer expectations regarding character, story threads, and viewing patterns. He frequently references shows such as *Arrested Development* (2003-2013) and *24* (2001-2010), which used the rise of DVD boxed sets to their advantage, creating the first sense of the "binge watching" mentality so often thought of now in terms of streaming.

Despite being written in the early 2010s, much of *Complex TV* already feels dated, but in ways that are useful for teaching the earliest years of streaming television. *Complex TV* demonstrates a comprehensive grasp of nearly every major US drama, cable and network, that ran throughout the 2000s. Such a comprehensive grasp would only be possible in the earliest years of the first era of streaming television as, by 2015 or 2016, the number of shows was such that it was impossible to keep track of all of them. Mittell highlights that there are two kinds of shows in this era: those with narrative complexity, like *Arrested Development*, and those without it, like *Two and Half Men* (2003-2015). *Complex TV* was written at a time when complex TV shows still seemed relatively rare, at least on network television, and before the term "peak TV" had been coined or the concepts it identified had become culturally ubiquitous. Mittell notes that narrative complexity "redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration" (18), something that is taken for granted in the streaming and peak TV age. Based on the way streaming technologies retain one's place in a season, it is now expected that a viewer will watch

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[3] Dates indicate the run of the show that had happened at the time of *Complex TV. Veronica Mars* returned in 2019, and *Arrested Development* retuned for season 4 in 2013 and season 5 in 2018-2019.

the show in the order specified by the streamer allowing more space for complex televisual storytelling.

This complexity is obvious in the second phase of the first era of streaming television, "Hat in the Ring." This was a time when, seeing Netflix's success, everyone wanted a piece of the streaming-revenue pie. While Netflix continued being the dominant streamer, the field was getting crowded. Amazon put a lot more attention on original programming, pivoting from a focus on HBO legacy shows like *The Sopranos* to originals like *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel.* Hulu also put more attention on originals, finally landing a mainstream hit with *The Handmaid's Tale.* Paramount+ entered the fray in 2017 making a mark with *The Good Fight* and various Star Trek shows before really striking gold with *Yellowstone* starting in 2018. Despite the increasing competition, this was a boom time for Netflix. Their success and status enabled them to throw lots of money at a wide range of projects (including *many* more films than before). It was a time of immense creativity and wide-reaching innovation. This section of the course focuses on the many interesting shows of these years and how they provided a platform for many marginalized voices that haven't traditionally had a place in television. It also addresses the high number of reboots and book adaptations, asking questions about what impulses lie behind these trends.

Creator driven shows of this era, like Netflix's *Master of None* and Hulu's *Pen15,* raise questions about auteur theory in relation to television. One useful line of discussion concerns this relationship, as framed by Timothy Corrigan's question, "How does a critical viewer reconcile the tension between auteurism and genre?" (24, *The Teaching Film*). Such tension arises because "While auteur criticism privileges the individual creative power in a film, genre studies emphasizes the repetition of industrial and artistic formulas put in place by a long film history and an industry always attuned to audience expectations" (24). Television has rarely been

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thought of in terms of the vision of an auteur, but that changed somewhat in peak TV age. Many shows are marketed on the name of their creators just as films are marketed based on directors. For example, Netflix paid Shonda Rhimes between 300 and 400 million dollars to make programing for their site knowing that the "Shondaland" name carries great weight (Giacomazzo). The Amazon Prime show *The Romanoffs* (2018) garnered little attention or acclaim but it still made a slight splash due solely to the fact that it was helmed by *Mad Men*'s Matthew Weiner.

As streamers like Amazon and Netflix have increasingly sought out high-profile creators to help their programs stand out in a sea of content, viewers have similarly become more aware of the role of writers and showrunners. Fans place an enormous amount of blame for the late season failings of *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) on the showrunner team of David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, even as dozens of other people were involved in the manufacturing and production of the show. This is a particularly significant example for highlighting the strange way auteurism functions in terms of modern television discussions. In 2015, right before the premiere of the show's fifth season, Walt Hickey noted that *Game of Thrones* was about to run out of book material (Hickey). As such, season 5 was seen as a much more uneven season compared to the universal acclaim received by season 4. This reputation has only solidified in the years following its release (Flavell). The prevailing opinion is that the first four seasons of *Game of Thrones*, which aligned with George R.R. Martin's source material, were considerably better than the last four seasons which were dominated by the oversight of Benioff and Weiss.

Such a cultural consensus reveals the ways that auteur theory functions differently for television than for film. George R.R. Martin, who never directly wrote or directed an episode of *Game of Thrones*, is given credit for its "glory years" because he wrote the novels upon which

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much of the first four seasons are based. Benioff and Weiss are given blame for the later years, especially seasons 7 and 8, despite the fact that they created the show and oversaw it throughout the whole of the 8-season run. They should receive credit for the "glory years" just as they receive blame for the lesser seasons, but viewers instead latch on to auteur theory, distributing blame and credit in illogical ways.

Returning to Corrigan's thoughts, it's worth getting students to ponder the role of "individual creative power" in terms of television, something that would be upended by the end of the first era of streaming television. Beyond the obvious fact that streaming television still has to be picked up and approved by the streamer the same way a film studio approves a movie, 2022 revealed the ephemeral nature of streaming platforms and how easily it can disrupt and undermine "creative power." It's becoming increasingly common for streaming platforms to remove even their own original programs. Though Warner Brothers Discovery and HBO Max did this with numerous high-profile shows in the latter part of 2022, Netflix's *Hemlock Grove* (2013-2015) proves a more interesting case. Released in spring 2013, *Hemlock Grove* was one of Netflix's very first originals. Marketed on the name recognition of creator Eli Roth, *Hemlock Grove* was never a runaway hit but did garner 3 seasons and 33 total episodes. And in October 2022, it left Netflix for unknown reasons (Moore). Unlike other removals, this one was not motivated by a tax write-off (HBO Max) or an attempt to consolidate their IP (Disney+ taking *Daredevil* (2015-2018) off Netflix).

Such a removal underscores the fragile nature of streaming shows, an important topic for students to wrestle with. For an assignment focusing on this new instability, I would provide students with many short articles related to show removals, specifically the high-profile ones from HBO Max in summer of 2022. Factual though they are, such articles make it obvious that

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the vast majority of content that "wasn't performing well" was centered on women and/or queer characters. Similarly, many of the harshest cuts came to animated programs like *Infinity Train* (2019-2021)*,* a show that also centers on a woman and contains numerous queer characters and themes. Using some of these articles, students would write something akin to an op-ed about the implicit systemic biases found in content production that's increasingly driven by engagement algorithms.

The artistic freedom that came with peak TV also led to a boom in queer representation on streaming services (through shows like *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019)*, Transparent* (2014-2019)*, She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018-2020)*,* and *Genera+ion* (2021*).* What does a willingness to not only cancel but fully remove shows with a large queer audience, like *Infinity Train* or *Generat+ion*, mean for the future of queer representation on television which has exploded parallel to the first streaming era? Furthermore, what does it mean to analyze such programs that may soon be very hard to access? The first streaming era came along with the promise that any original show would always be available for viewers to find on a given streaming service. Popular or otherwise, if it was a Netflix/Hulu/HBO Max original, it would always be there for viewers to access. As we move into the second streaming era, this is longer the case. This is a discussion relevant to the second phase of the first era of streaming television, as this boom of creativity is what made this moment of television history so universally regarded as "peak." However, the related issue of shows being removed is more connected to the third phase of the first era of streaming television as it anticipates the emergence of the second era.

Such a discussion brings us to the final phase of the first era of streaming television, "The Bubble Bursts." This encompasses 2020 through 2022 focused particularly on how different the streaming landscape has become compared to phase one. At the end of 2019, Disney+ and Apple

TV+ joined the now-exploding number of streaming options. NBC's Peacock and HBO Max (now called Max) launched a few months later in spring of 2020. With a very saturated market, everything was rapidly getting worse. Movies started bouncing between services, changing hands on a monthly basis[4]. By 2022, streamers started removing original programs, a massive change in the customer-streamer relationship. Suddenly the streaming landscape was unstable, prone to seismic shifts on a weekly basis. Similarly, many shows of this time started just being worse. Pandemic complications with shooting delays didn't help, but the bigger factor was streamers stretching their few resources far too thin. Rather than putting small amounts of money behind a wide variety of smaller prestige comedies, streamers, especially Netflix, devoted more and more resources to producing big hits with shows like *Wednesday* and *Stranger Things* season 4. It worked, to the extent that these shows did very strong streaming numbers, but the cost was paid in creativity and originality.

As this phase wound down, it became obvious that the business model of nearly unlimited spending had (predictably) failed and with it went many of creative shows that had flourished in the previous years. Netflix developed a reputation for being ruthless with cancellations, even of popular shows. 1899, an expensive show from the creators of the second phase sleeper hit German series *Dark*, was cancelled shortly after it premiered, a premiere that was overshadowed by *Wednesday* and the holiday season. Netflix gave *1899* no good faith attempt to find an audience or catch on before they pulled the plug on it. The focus had become more explicitly on the shows as content for the platform and not as artistic television in its own

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[4] For example, in June 2023, you can find *Shrek* (2001) and *Shrek 2* (2004) on Netflix and Peacock. *Shrek Forever After* (2010) is on Hulu, Prime Video and Netflix but not on Peacock. And *Shrek the Third* (2007) isn't streaming anywhere. To watch all the Shrek movies, one likely needs multiple streaming services and will *still* have to rent the third one.

right. As the era wound down, streaming television found itself in a time of existential crisis, a crisis that continues to the present day.

In this third phase, it is necessary to return to *Complex TV* and its thoughts on serialization and the poetics of television time. Mittell's earlier thoughts on serialization raise further points of discussion concerning *how* television is released to viewers and how such release patterns mediate viewer experience of the work. As of this writing, Netflix is still in the habit of releasing a full season (the length of which can vary widely) or a large chunk of episodes at once (*Stranger Things* (2016-present) season 4 was released in two chunks five weeks apart). However, most of its streaming peers have reverted to a weekly model, often dropping the first two or three episodes at one time and then releasing episodes weekly throughout the often 8-10 episode run.

The variety of release mechanisms for streaming shows has significant effects on how viewers engage the material, creating at least two primary audiences of the show: those who watch it week-to-week and those who wait for the whole season to air and then catch up. This disrupts the communal nature of television as what was once watched by people all at once can now be watched at any possible time after it airs. Thus, it is important that a course on the first era of streaming account for these differences as they represent a departure from decades of television norms. Such a class would ask students to consider these differences and how they understand television as a communal medium. What is lost by not watching things at the same time or with other people? And, conversely, what new kinds of television communities might have emerged to compensate for this lost connectivity?

Mittell further distinguishes three different components of time at play when referring to television, components that are essential to studying streaming television and its abundance of

material. The first component is story time, which is "how time passes in the storyworld" (26), usually linear unless that storyworld features time travel. Next there is discourse time or "the temporal structure and duration of the story" (26), which is full of ellipses, flashbacks and other manipulations. Mittell highlights this as one of the main characteristics of complex TV, and the features of it, like those of linear narrative, appear almost universally in streaming programs. Part of this can be attributed to the lack of week-to-week structures within the narrative. If a sitcom season airs from September through May, it makes sense that it will include episodes for major holidays that correspond to the week-to-week nature of its airing and consumption. Streaming has no such weekly considerations, with shorter seasons that appear to want to capture a moment of viewer attention rather than hold it for a sustained period of time. In other words, Netflix doesn't want viewers to return 16 times a year to watch something like *Monk* (2002-2009); they want them to watch 6-10 hours of it in a single weekend.

The third component of television time that Mittell posits is narration time, or how long it takes to consume a given unit of a series (26). He writes that,

> For film and television, [narration time] is strictly controlled, as a two-hour film takes the same of all viewers, and television restricts narration time even further through its schedule of weekly installments and commercial breaks; even with the variability and control enabled by DVDs or online video…it still takes the same amount of narration time for everyone to consume a given moving-image narrative. (26)

Of the three components of television time this one, seemingly the most stable, has been the one most upended by streaming. Netflix enables viewers to watch programs back at various speeds ranging from half speed to 1.5x speed. Similarly, it's become more common for viewers to skim through parts of the show they find unappealing, something that did happen in the DVD and

DVR era of the 2000s but has become much more common in the age of streaming. This is to say nothing of how watching an episode can shift between cell phone, laptop, and television over the course of many different spaces (bus, classroom, home) or the course of many days. The short-lived streaming service Quibi attempted to tap into this very aspect of streaming television. The concept was "quick bites" of movies or television that one could consume in ten minutes or less. Their 2020 Super Bowl ad promised "Quick bites. Big stories," emphasizing how even in time sensitive situations, like a bank heist, you had time for a Quibi program. Quibi, which shut down in December 2020, less than a year after its launch, is understood to have failed for a few reasons. A major one was the COVID-19 pandemic, which rendered the idea of 10-minute content bites you might watch on a bus ride utterly absurd. Another reason seems to be that people just didn't want this from their streaming experience. Though the first streaming era radically altered how viewers engage the narration time of a show, there are lines viewers won't cross, and Quibi crossed them.

These new ways of conceiving of time—discourse time and narration time in particular—open a range of important pedagogical questions about how television functions as a medium within our lives, and how we approach studying it. For example, what counts as "watching" a show? Does that require two or three episodes? Half a season? The whole season? Shirley Li coined what she calls the "Magical Episode 4" theory stipulating that one should watch four episodes of a show before deciding whether or not to keep watching. But if one watches four episodes of a show, can one reasonably say they watched the show? Does that change if the season has eight episodes or twelve?

Factoring in other possibilities enabled by varying narration time makes the matter of teaching contemporary television even more murky. What if, for example, a person watches

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every minute of the first three episodes of *Squid Game* (2021-present)*,* skims through about 50%

of the next three episodes, and then only watches around 20% of the last three episodes? They

got the gist of the whole show and can reasonably talk about it, but did they watch *Squid Game?*

This example is germane because many shows, like *Squid Game*, are practically designed to be

overlong and bloated. This is because such shows function as content (see chapter 1) as much as

they do artistic television, and so watch time is of primary algorithmic concern. Is skipping much

of the middle of individual episodes or scenes the same as missing a few episodes in the middle

of a season of *Lost* (2004-2010), for example?

In the context of a course on the peak TV era, I would have students wrestle with such

questions, composing writing on what it means to "watch" a show. A possible assignment to

address this would ask students to first reflect on how they usually watch television. They'd be

asked to account for what they usually watch, what time of day, and to what degree they do other

things while watching, such as housework or using their cellphone. Then students would be

asked to watch different things different ways. Students would watch one 40-minute program—

this assignment would probably work best with something episodic like *Fringe* (2008-2013) or

Gossip Girl (2007-2012)—as is. Another episode they would watch while skimming or skipping

through some scenes so that they watched the 40-minute program in 20-25 minutes. A third

episode they would watch on 1.5x speed as is an option on Netflix and possibly other platforms.

Students would then reflect on the differences between these various experiences of watching,

thinking especially about what is gained or lost depending on each method.

Such questions of attention, distraction, and deliberate omission force students to think

critically about the medium of television and how streaming has significantly changed how

television, as a medium, works in terms of engagement, distribution, and our temporal

relationship to it. As a follow-up to this assignment, a class period will be dedicated to watching an episode of something more recent on Netflix but watching it in a skim fashion or a 1.5x. There will then be class discussion about how one of these approaches might have worked differently for something like *Ozark* (2017-2022), made at a time where Netflix knows that some people are watching the show in this fashion, than for something like *Gossip Girl,* made when linear cable was the primary means of watching the show. Such an exercise helps to get at the degree to which TV has changed in terms of content and structure as watch patterns toward it changed in the peak TV era.

Such an unstable reality in terms of original shows disappearing with less than a day's notice highlights the way streaming television sits in awkward relationship to content and the content industry (Eichhorn and chapter 1). It is a mistake to call streaming shows "content" in the same way that posts circulated on social media are content, but the line can get rather blurry. As Eichhorn puts it, "Does a classic film streamed online rather than projected in a movie theater become content simply because of its context? … I would never refer to French New Wave filmmaker Agnès Varda's vast trove of films as content, but I suspect many executives at Netflix and Amazon Prime would" (21).

The core question here for students to wrestle with is the different ways streaming shows function for the consumer versus the platform housing it. Some of this dynamic is unchanged. AMC valued *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) for many of the same reasons Netflix values *Stranger Things* as they both equate to good business. But much of the dynamic is quite different as shows that (presumably) put up decent watch numbers and garnered positive reviews can be canceled, or taken off the platform entirely, because of considerations that have nothing to do with the shows themselves. This is where the tension between show-as-art and show-as-content is most

evident, and it is a pressing matter for television studies. Throughout television history, good reviews and/or good viewership numbers have been the mark of success for a show. This is no longer the case, as viewership numbers are shrouded in layers of obstruction and critical acclaim means little for the long-term life of a show. Students need to consider this radical shift and growing gulf between how users approach shows—based on the show itself—and how streamers approach them—based on algorithms and their merits as "content." How does this instability change their relationship to streaming and television? As consumers, do they feel as they are being manipulated, and how many these potential frustrations change their relationship to television?

Such questions expand on the previous assignment which concerned algorithmic bias and "lost" shows. A possible assignment in this vein might ask students to look through streaming watchlists and find shows that they were once excited about watching but never got around to watching. Why was this the case? Was it because no one was interested in the show a month later? Did Netflix cancel it before they got around to it? Ideally students can find one or two shows that fall into each category—for example, the buzz had faded on *The Chair* (2021) by the time I might have gotten to it, and Netflix cancelled *1899* (2022) before I started it. The assignment, then, further asks students to consider streaming shows in terms of "shelf life," either because its moment in the cultural zeitgeist is brief or because of the increasing likelihood that it will be cancelled before it can have such a moment. Students will then relate this to our discussion of "content" in thinking about the muddy line between what is strictly "content" in Eichhorn's sense and what is a television show still worth talking about five or ten years later.

Just as auteur theory applies to the peak TV era in new and important ways, adaptation plays a new role in the streaming television landscape as more shows have looked to adapt

previously existing material than ever before. This comes in the form of the explosion of reboots which, in a sense, adapt the tried-and-true formula of old properties (such as *Sex and the City* (1998-2004, 2021-2023)*, Gossip Girl* (rebooted 2021-2023)*,* or *Saved by the Bell* (1989-1992, 2020-2021) to a new socio-political context. Similarly, 2022 was been dominated by a number of shows (*The Dropout, Inventing Anna, WeCrashed*) adapting very recent real-life events prompting new waves of discussion about adaptation and ethics. Discussions about these recent adaptations raise many of the standard adaptation talking points in a different context.

Writing about the value of teaching adaptation in literary studies, Dennis Cutchins notes that adaptation studies helps students see how meaning in a work exists "only as a series of complex relationships *between* texts" and not as a rigid and unchanging thing (93). The wealth of reboots and based-on-real-events dramas of recent years highlights how many different ways there are to approach adaptation and parse out the ever-shifting meaning in a text. Consider, for example, the Peacock show *Joe vs Carole* (2022)*.* It's an adaptation of the viral Netflix hit show *Tiger King* (2020). While claiming to be a "documentary," there's widespread evidence that *Tiger King* manipulated the reality of events far more than documentaries typically do. This is because part of *Tiger King* concerns the filming of a *different* show within this documentary. Joe Exotic, the real person, makes a television show. The team behind *Tiger King* films Joe Exotic as he attempts to make this show. *Tiger King* is then a hit, both as a show on Netflix and as meme content that circulates social media. Its popularity prompts Peacock to make an additional show which is *not* a documentary but based on the "real" lives of Joe and Carole.

Cutchins's point is that students tend to approach the meaning of a text with a sense of certainty. Upon approaching a text, "[Students] understand meaning not as something that exists only as a series of complex relationships *between* texts, … but rather as stable commodity that

exists *inside* of a particular text, and that remains stubbornly essential, despite contexts" (93).

Teaching in terms of adaptation helps students see the way the meaning of a text shifts depending on context and relationships between the text and other things. His point is all the truer in terms of television adaptations, all of which exist not only in relation to the previous iteration of the show but also in relation to internet content and fan culture that helped spark the resurgence in the first place. Such reboots are useful for exploring the shows themselves as well as peak TV culture as the prevalence of reboots are an extension of the show-as-art and show-as-content dynamic addressed earlier.

Tying the course together is *BoJack Horseman,* a show the class will return to throughout the semester. Launching in August of 2014, *BoJack* was one of the first Netflix original shows, finding its audience slowly for the first couple of years. As such it benefited from the relatively uncluttered landscape of 2013-2016. By 2016, the show had a strong base of support. In the coming years, it benefited from the creative boom around it stretching the limits of its medium through many inventive (and critically acclaimed) episodes. It ended a month into 2020, but it still had plenty to say about that relates to the early 2020s. Season 6 features storylines centered on corporate conglomerates and vertical integration, market ideas that are clear in the show-removing impulses of streamers like Max and Disney+. Another season 6 storyline addresses the relationship of streamers and content even more directly as, following scandal, the television executives want to cut BoJack out of old episodes of his signature show *Horsin' Around.* Such a story point is similar to the idea that programs removed from streaming are likely to be lost forever, made to be as if they never existed. *BoJack Horseman* will provide an anchor point throughout the term as the rare show that "survived" through all of the First Era of Streaming Television.

With the era of peak TV over, it is time to think critically about how one will teach the first era of streaming. The rest of the 2020s will bring new topics to television studies as the relationship between show and content grows even more complex than it already is. Before students and television courses can grapple with this new era, we need to make sense of the first streaming era. I suggest that we do this by extrapolating out some of Jason Mittell's ideas about narrative complexity and the serial nature of television storytelling, now almost ubiquitous in streaming shows. Further, an understanding of adaptation is essential to understanding so many streaming shows that are adaptations, either of earlier shows or real events, and the relationship between television shows and content. A survey of this era also needs to account for the role of the showrunner and how this type of television auteur is distinct from auteurs in a film context. These topics are just a few of the many relevant ideas and issues that come with addressing this expansive and chaotic period of television history.

Peak TV

The goal of this class is to teach students about the early days of streaming, including the major shows, platforms, and ideas. Students will learn how to analyze specific programs, as well as how to think about those programs in the context of the era and television history as a whole. Special attention will be paid to thornier matters such as the legacy of shows like *House of Cards* and *Transparent* in light of #MeToo, the growing sense that streaming is just "worse" now, and the challenges of analyzing art that could disappear at any moment, possibly forever. Students will be required to have access to these shows, most of which will be on Netflix and Hulu. Harder to find things will be watched in class or accessed another way.

(Since this syllabus is just a mock concept, episodes won't always be specified. For each show we would most likely watch 1-3 episodes unless otherwise specified)

Netflix: The Only Game in Town

Week 1: Selections from *Complex TV* by Jason Mittell
Week 2: *House of Cards* and *Hemlock Grove*
- These are two shows that Netflix made with the same formula, modeled on what was already popular on their platform, but they had wildly different levels of success.
- We'll also consider how the legacy of *House of Cards* has changed, and how *Hemlock Grove* has been removed from Netflix entirely. What does this mean for how we/TV history should remember these early years?
Week 3: *Orange is the New Black* and *Transparent*
- Questions here pertain to the balance of comedy and drama in these shows, as they won awards as comedies. We'll also discuss if these shows would be made before the streaming era, and why or why not. And, as with *House of Cards*, we'll revisit the current legacy of *Transparent* and how this shapes our understanding of this era.
Week 4: *The Office*, *Breaking Bad*, and *How I Met Your Mother*
- These shows were not Netflix originals but were synonymous with the platform in the early days, even after originals launched. We'll look at some promotional materials from that time and talk about the degree to which we attribute the success of Netflix 2011-2015 to shows that they didn't make but had the broadcast rights to.
Week 5: *BoJack Horseman* season 1, specifically "Zoës and Zeldas" (1.4), "The Telescope" (1.8), "One Trick Pony" (1.10), and "Downer Ending" (1.11).
- These episodes address different aspects of this era while anticipating the next time frame. "Zoës and Zeldas" is an episode like any typical animated show, highlighting *BoJack's* roots in the norms of sitcom TV. "The Telescope" takes a dark turn addressing serious topics—cancer and AIDS—that don't often get addressed except as a "very special episode." "One Trick Pony" centers on adaptation while foreshadowing how weird "content" would become (we'll revisit this topic later). "Downer Ending" is the show's first formal experimentation, showing how, in the span of a dozen episodes, it went from fairly in line with other animated sitcoms to something else completely.

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Hat in the Ring

Week 6: *The Handmaid's Tale* and Hulu
- The focus this week is on *The Handmaid's Tale*, and how it's runaway success really complicated Netflix's hold on the streaming market. We might also look at an example of a failed show from this time, like *The Path,* and explore why one took off and one didn't.

Weeks 7 and 8: *Dear White People*, *Atlanta*, and Diverse Quality Comedies
- Drawing on some ideas in *Horrible White People*, these weeks focus on how this era fostered creative freedom and allowed for a diverse range of stories and perspectives to reach audiences. We'll discuss how Atlanta also captures the blurring line between cable and streaming, as the show aired on FX but found much of its audience on Hulu (and by season 3, was streaming next day on Hulu as Hulu and FX had effectively merged in the US).

Week 9: Representation Matters (and suddenly happens)
- This week doesn't focus on whole shows, but moments where queer representation took center stage in this era. This includes "Thanksgiving" from *Master of None*, the depiction of Todd's asexuality on *BoJack Horseman,* and more. This week also offers space for how many of these shows—like Infinity Train and Generat+ion a little later—were first on the chopping block when it comes to streamers removing content. Students will wrestle with what they think this means for the future of queer representation on streaming. Will it continue to play a large part in the streaming landscape, or was this is brief golden age?

Week 10: Stranger Things
- For all the strides that other streamers took in this time, Netflix still ruled the streaming world on the strength of Stranger Things. We'll look at examples from each season, thinking about the streaming landscape looked like when each came out, and how the episodes reflect the changes in how streaming operates.

The Bubble Bursts

Week 11: What does it mean to watch?
- Continuing discussion of *Stranger Things,* this week frames the final portion of the course in terms of what it now means to "watch" "television." The terms are in quotes and up for debate. We'll discuss various watch practices common with Netflix, and the degree to which we think this effects the substance of the show. We'll also discuss the line between "television" and "streaming" and consider the limitations of terms. Can a 2 and half hour "episode" of Stranger Things season 4 really still be considered an "episode"? What do such TV terms mean these days?

Week 12: Reboots
- This week will focus on a selection of rebooted programs and how they work on their own and as extensions of the former work. Discussion will center on *why* so many

reboots. Is it just laziness or a risk-averse mindset on the part of the streamers, or is there a bigger cultural thing going on? And how does a 2023 reboot differ from one from 2013 like *Arrested Development?*

Week 13: *Space Force* and the Lack of Sitcoms
- This week engages the form of the sitcom and how difficult it has been for streaming to find success with this classic television form. We look at Netflix's flashiest attempt to have a hit sitcom, *Space Force*, and consider why it is regarded as some level of disappointment or total failure. We also look, in class, at scenes from Ted Lasso and consider how it morphed from something close to a sitcom into something very different.

Week 14: Surreal comedy on Netflix
- As the semester winds down and students are busy with assignments like those addressed in the pedagogy chapter, this week focuses on *I Think You Should Leave with Tim Robinson* which still has a place on Netflix even as it seems more in line with the wild creativity of the second phase. We talk about what makes this comedy so strange, and why it seems to have connected with audiences at this time.

Week 15:
- The students will have a choice of various shows and ideas we could cover for the final week. They'll be polled about it early in the term. As the class wraps up, we'll also return to various ideas throughout the course and think about what we think will characterize the Second Era of Streaming.

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