

Alex Hack

Witness Me: How TikTok Users Broke with the Sociopathic American Gaze in the Wake of George Floyd's Murder

Abstract

The proliferation of Black and Black Lives Matter content that flooded TikTok's "For You" page in the wake of George Floyd's murder managed to break with traditional American conceptions of race and ways of looking. This surge encouraged what Elizabeth Alexander calls the perspective of "witness" rather than "spectator," which motivated users to proactively take Black subjectivity seriously and inspired an incredible amount of action.

The most visceral of these videos take place in automobiles, and the enclosed environments bring about not only a physical proximity but allow the user to feel they are in what is normally a private space, creating a momentary intimacy. This article elaborates on the ways TikTok allowed for a kind of mutual looking that reoriented its users' gaze and opened their eyes to the value of Blackness and its possibility, and, further, provides an analysis on the relationship between TikTok's recommendation engine and the many eyes suddenly pulled towards BLM content. TikTok's young user base being a group of people whose collective sense of understanding and relationship to economic harm disrupts many of the assumptions that make it hard to identify with or understand Black subjection, they managed to break with the sociopathic nature of the American ordinary, demonstrated most savagely in Derek Chauvin's casual callousness as Floyd begged for his life. Engaging with interlocutors such as Alexander, Steve Martinot, Kimberly Juanita Brown, and Harriet Jacobs and individual videos posted by various TikTok users, this piece takes up these considerations along with social media technology, such as TikTok's method of video dispensation, and ends by thinking through the methods by which activist TikTok has maintained its corner of the internet since the summer of 2020.

For most of my youth, a fairly strong divide existed between millennials and the generations that came before us. This divide was not only ideological¹ but was also present in a popular culture that consistently put us down while also placing a revealing level of responsibility on our shoulders. In May of 2013, I graduated from college and an article titled, "Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation" and subtitled, "Millennials are lazy, entitled, narcissists who still live with their parents. Why they'll save us all," was published in *Time* magazine. At one point, the author says, in broad strokes and with all sincerity, "not only do millennials lack the kind of empathy that allows them to feel concerned for others, but they also have trouble even intellectually understanding others' points of view."² A few years later, Ellen DeGeneres' "millennial tests" would attempt to prove us inept via challenges requiring a young

person to use a phone book or rotary phone, refold a paper roadmap, or tune an analog radio³—must have skills for any twenty-year-old in the 2010s. Attacks on millennial character were unceasing and, tellingly, would often describe how millennial "entitlement" resulted in a loss of corporate productivity or wealth.⁴

Probably as a result of this, along with the ever-impending nightmare called earth, my generation has also been found to be rather cynical⁵ however, as Gen Z comes of age, we are no longer alone in this estimation, and I'm personally appreciative of the company despite the circumstances. In the midst of a global pandemic, my millennial peers and I found ourselves hope(lessly) tethered to younger faces that spent much of their time sounding off against injustice—in what was one, then three, and now ten minutes or less—wielding an attitude and serving deadpan that crystalized a

WITNESS ME

deep disenchantment. The events of 2020 led me to see power in our collective cynicism and our ideological similarities,⁶ as, even if only for a few weeks, many of us were able to escape the White (neo)liberal allegiances that monopolize America's sociopolitical discourse. In the time following George Floyd's murder, the video sharing app TikTok demonstrated the capacity of generations who lack an unquestioned faith in *America as concept* to do what Elizabeth Alexander describes as taking up "the perspective of [...] witness rather than [...] spectator,"⁷ and in doing so, managed to collectively reject America's supremacist capitalist roots. More succinctly, TikTok allowed young Americans to find kin in a time of isolation and channel their institutional distrust toward sociopolitical action.

America's bedrock or its foundation of slavery, colonial capitalism, western expansion, and the violence needed to maintain them, are what today make American racism so prosaic. According to Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton, racism's mundanity and control over American consciousness betrays a "total violation of reason and comprehensibility."⁸ This absurd moral blindspot is what largely holds this country and its spurious institutions together, a cognitive dissonance bolstered by insincere national assertions of freedom, equality, and civility, made plainly evident by our ever-growing vocabulary: from "separate but equal" to "no child left behind." This discrepancy is highlighted whenever racism makes the national news, and we witness an "awakening" or the collective shock that follows, as if such events qualify as unforeseen. After the 2017 violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, Huffington Post contributor, Cami Thomas wrote, "I was taken through an emotional rollercoaster, but I did not feel surprised," she continues, "Imagine my disbelief then when I logged on to Facebook to be met with posts that indicated shock and awe."⁹ The surprise Thomas catalogues is a symptom of this dissonance, as the American ethos relentlessly *neuralyzes*¹⁰ its public, restoring its ideological camouflage. As pointed out by Shannon Winnubst, "White culture" seems very much "allergic to ontological claims, especially about race and racism."¹¹ Referencing the racial strife that grew from the 2016 election and the subsequent increase of White supremacist activity, she notes the chant "No Hate! No Bigotry! No White Supremacy!"

that responded to Charlottesville.¹² She makes the point, however, that unlike the previous rhetoric of the 1990s and 2000s that looked to "celebrate diversity," stamping out "White supremacy" requires a referent. A referent, if taken seriously, would require us to reckon with the ontological nature of hate and to locate it within ourselves and those around us, within our speech, thoughts, and actions—in the sociopathic¹³ nature of the American ordinary. Such an implication may often be overlooked, as the stagnant banality of Whiteness and its historical weight overwhelmingly determine what and how we see, often via cultural mechanisms we hardly recognize. Yet, in naming an evil, it's a shift from our discrepant language, as it admits to a past and present problem, the presence of American White supremacy itself. This contrasts directly with calls for diversity and inclusion that, in corroborating the great American melting pot, work to dissolve the histories behind our differences and their resulting effects.

Martinot and Sexton implicate the spectacle, making the claim that the general public's relationship to police brutality is one of "spectacular events" (like the many horrific recordings of police violence released over the years) that work to hide racism's existence in our everyday lives. As both the exception and the rule, they conceal "the banal as excess."¹⁴ This excess becomes unnecessary to even comprehend, because, certainly, such acts of wanton violence must be extraordinary in our 'civilized' society, founded on the equality of all men. These events exhibit *exceptionally* bad cops, or fearful cops, or misinformed cops and yet still work to assemble and maintain the implicit guilt of the Black body as paradigm—as the beating of Rodney King was used to justify its necessity. Alexander quotes the officer who supervised the night of the attack, who, at the time of her writing was declared "psychologically disabled," and spent his days reading over the case's files and rewatching the brutal video.

You blow it up to full size for people, or even half size, if you see Rodney King four feet tall in that picture as opposed to three inches, boy, you see a whole bunch of stuff... He's like a bobo doll. Ever hit one? Comes back and forth, back and forth. That's exactly what he's

doing. Get him down on the ground. Prone is safe. Up is not. That is what we're trying to do is keep him on the ground, because if he gets up it's going to be a deadly force situation...¹⁵

His words demonstrate a commitment to the narrative of Black aggression and the necessity of White violence. His actions were mimicked by Rush Limbaugh who played a piece of the video “over and over again until it *did* look like Rodney King was advancing on the police officers.”¹⁶ While these explosive instances of terror may captivate their audience, they never evidence racism’s everyday, rooted, omnipresent nature, its tacit mundanity, as gentrification, the military control of Black neighborhoods, intrusive surveillance, or extreme methods of arrest and incarceration exist as unexamined and appropriate givens—the spectacle of police violence somehow inferring both White impunity and Black guilt, determining both rarity and rule.

In many ways, George Floyd’s murder broke with this logic. Perhaps it was the murder’s duration, eight minutes and forty-six seconds of a cop unsympathetically suffocating a man to death, or the video’s lack of explosivity. Beyond the boredom of the COVID-19 pandemic, something won out over White denial. Derek Chauvin and his fellow officers’ casual callousness as Floyd begged for his life and called out for his mother, the officers’ rejection of the pleas of nearby witnesses, and Chauvin’s contempt when they began to question him as the life drained from Floyd’s body, all somehow laid bare the commonplace nature of this disturbing violence. For Martinot and Sexton, spectacles serve exemplary means, but, “Examples cannot represent the spectrum of contemporary white supremacy from the subtle (e.g., the inability to get a taxi) to the extreme (e.g. the *de facto* martial law occupation of many black and brown neighbourhoods), all of which has become structural and everyday.”¹⁷ However, in contrast to the horrific electricity present in much of the video evidence of past police brutality—from the beating of King to the murders of Robert Davis and Alton Sterling—Floyd’s murder revealed something much more methodical, communicating the proximity and presence of the systemic rather than the singular cautionary warning of the exemplary. This is evidenced most clearly when four police

officers indifferently kneel on George Floyd’s neck, back, and legs, as he lies motionless, or we might locate it in the seven minutes Chauvin spends kneeling on his neck, even *after* calling in medical assistance for Floyd, as he bleeds from the mouth. Besides Floyd’s muffled pleas, the murder is quiet, still, and lacks much of a struggle.



Figure 1. In this cropped image of Derek Chauvin murdering George Floyd, we see him peering down at his victim as Floyd begins to lose consciousness. At the same time, bystanders accuse Chauvin of “enjoying” the activity, but he appears unfazed by the accusation.

Source: Darnella Frazier

As life leaves Floyd’s body, we see Chauvin look down at him, and it’s hard not to see his actions as coolly calculated, as reasoned and purposeful. Chauvin gets upset when he’s momentarily bothered in his work, as bystanders attempt to point out that Floyd is no longer conscious, Chauvin pulling what appears to be mace on them, before returning to his subdued task. Rather than depicting a sudden or unexpected outburst, his actions evidence his point-of view, his training, his nineteen years as a police officer, and the eighteen official complaints against him¹⁸—including an upsettingly similar incident involving a fourteen-year-old Black boy, who Chauvin bludgeoned with a metal flashlight across the head and held down with his knee until the child lost consciousness, also ignoring pleas that the boy could not breathe.¹⁹ Lastly, the video tells us this murderous intent isn’t specific to Chauvin, as his accomplices support and engage in the killing, oozing of the same habitual indifference.

Chauvin and his fellow officers’ apparent attitude is reminiscent of the “Mrs. Flint” Alexander discusses from Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. The White mistress of a Southern plantation, Mrs. Flint’s “nerves were so strong she could sit in her easy chair and see

WITNESS ME

a woman whipped till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash.”²⁰ This kind of violence is demonstrative of its own prosaic calculation, commonplace in the Antebellum South and not yet dead. Floyd’s murder demonstrated this ruthlessness, a ruthlessness that often goes unseen in so-called “civilized” space, as White Americans work to maintain an ontological distance from the cruelty of the prison or the over-policing of the ghetto. Jacob’s hope, however, was that such violence would implicate its viewer or her reader. But obligatory attention, driven by White guilt, the kind that encourages the posting of a resource list or a black square and not much else, does little to escape American sociopathy and the assumption of Black transgression, especially when the viewer identifies more with enslaver than enslaved.

In her visceral depictions of violence, Jacobs urges her readers “to reject Mrs. Flint’s perspective and assume instead her own, the perspective of a witness rather than a spectator,”²¹ hoping to make abolitionists of them. For Alexander, the perspective of witness often involves a kinship that acknowledges the precarity of one’s own position, as many of the Black testimonies she cites involve the knowledge that this violence is also meant for, and may very well be experienced by, those narrating. Consequently, I claim that a combination of generational harm and institutional distrust²² along with TikTok’s format and algorithm, including the idea that those on your “For You” page (TikTok’s home page or “newsfeed”) are also *like you*—whether that be queer, Black, radical, into cottage core, kinky, conservative, etc.—allowed a kind of witnessing and collectivity to take place, that skirted the ubiquitous mundanity of White, capitalist, American logics.

These logics determine the expectation that in viewing anti-Black police violence you accept the assumed criminality and baser nature of those harmed. But this concept has become troubled amongst a group of young people that often accept theft, criminality, and sex work as an essential part of their condition under capitalism. We see this evidenced on TikTok, as hypermarket employees condone the theft they witness while on the clock, or individuals explain how selling feet pics and dirty underwear or webcamming paid their rent. In a shift away from the slander of the 2010s, a 2020 *Washington Post* article declares Millennials “the unluckiest generation in U.S. history,” finally

reckoning with the Millennial reluctance to purchase diamonds²³ and fabric softener.²⁴ As if the exploitation of “economic growth” has much to do with chance, we are placed below every generation—in descending order Silent (1925-1945), Boomers (1946-1964), Progressive (1843-1859), Gen X (1965-1980), Missionary (1860-1882), Transcendental (1792-1821), Gilded (1822-1842), and Lost (1883-1900)—in economic growth after entering the workforce.²⁵ This fate is, of course, now also befalling Gen Z, with the pandemic only worsening their circumstance. As a report by the Economic Policy Institute notes, the unemployment rate for young workers, ages 16 to 24, soared during the pandemic, jumping from 8.4% to 24.4%. This demographic was also the most likely to experience job loss, and young people who came of age during the pandemic often could not receive unemployment benefits as they had not yet been employed, regardless of an inability to find work.²⁶ These circumstances have only been made more dire due to persistent rent hikes,²⁷ inflation, the sky rocketing cost of education,²⁸ and the dismantling of workers’ rights and protections.²⁹ We should be far from surprised that generations forever harmed by American fundamentalism (the same system that has violently abused the non-White for longer than the generational expanse just listed) often lack the desire (or ability) to live and die by its laws and social customs.

Rather than being produced for the evening news or as the eye-catching fodder that might populate your Facebook newsfeed, the personal style of the TikTok content posted in response to Floyd’s murder—often handheld, including eye contact, physical proximity, and point of view perspective—avoid what Kimberly Juanita Brown calls “voyeristic distancing,” and in cases of physical harm, foreclosed on the usual visual and aural techniques utilized to allow the viewer to “escape the violation on display,” like distance, obscurity, a reliance on racial stereotype, or the implication of the fantastic or superhuman.³⁰ The latter often used rhetorically to characterize Black men who find themselves victims of the police. As Alexander notes, Rodney King “was described as a ‘buffed-out’ ‘probable ex-con,’ ‘bear-like,’ ‘like a wounded animal,’ ‘aggressive,’ ‘combative,’ and ‘equate[d]...with a monster.’”³¹ In many ways, the videos managed to bypass the way Black pain and experience is often “distorted and dehistoricized”³²

via the mechanisms that maintain America's supposed ignorance. Surprisingly, TikTok instead unearthed a more authentic Black subjectivity, and I don't say that lightly, and gave it a platform. Some of the most visceral of these videos taking place in automobiles or enclosed environments, engendering not only a physical closeness, but allowing the user to feel they are in what is normally a private space, creating a momentary intimacy rather than maintaining a spectacular distance. However, these uploads broke with the traditionally happy-go-lucky environment curated by the app. We might assume because the sheer volume of them was hard to censor. As observed Kate Klonick, and reported on by Shelly Banjo for Aljazeera, TikTok's scale alone makes it "pretty impossible to enforce a rule like, 'We only allow fun on our site.'" Further, Banjo writes, in January of 2020 the company had made changes to its guidelines allowing for content that may be "educational, historical, newsworthy, or otherwise aim to raise awareness about issues," even when it broke with the app's rules.³³

In one video, user @j.esquire_'s (now @jandcgang_) phone seems to lie in his lap, looking up at him, as he sits in his car with the window open. Through the open window we see the hands of his young son. The text across the video reads, "On My Way To A Protest And My Son Teared Up And Said 'Please Be Safe Daddy' 'Tell The Cops You Have Kids.'" As the video plays we hear his son say, "Tell the police please don't hurt me I have kids," and as it ends the pair exchange "I love yous," and his son reaches through the window for a hug.³⁴ In another, we witness user @theblackqueen24, a shaken service member in uniform, worried about Vanessa Guillén. She sits in her driver's seat and begins speaking as she puts on her boots, "Hey guys, I know a lot of you are worried about my safety cause I'm talking about Black Lives Matter and about Vanessa, but the reality is Vanessa's in the Army, I'm in the Marine Corps, she's one of us."³⁵ As user @kevoysomers (now @kevtheboy) begins a video, tears already run down his face, the camera sits at eye level. He starts by stating, "I'm tired, I'm pissed off." He expresses his dismay that even during the recent protests Black individuals were still being brutalized more than other protesters. The video ends with his voice raised as he tearfully repeats "Why the fuck is White skin still more fucking valuable?

Why the fuck is it still more valuable? What's the fucking point of all this shit?"³⁶ While standing in her bathroom, user @libra.moonstone, tells a "put a finger down" story—a popular trend on TikTok that asks viewers to "put a finger down if *this* has happened to you." Her story starts, "Put a finger down if you started to feel your stomach getting really upset..." and then tells us of her experience being dismissed by seven separate doctors, the eighth, the only "woman of color" of the bunch, finally taking her claims seriously, only to find a thirty-foot tape worm that, due to medical neglect, had laid eggs in her intestinal tract.³⁷ In one video, reposted from LiveLeak by @cutepeye01, a family is attacked by a white mob after being told that their car is stolen. As the young daughter in the backseat cries in fear, the father, Lee Allen,³⁸ repeats that "This is not her car!" referring to the woman who made the claim. The video is from his daughter's perspective, and whips around to capture various people attempting to violently open the car's doors, producing a kind of heart-wrenching motion sickness in its viewer. The whole ordeal is terrifying, as you view the event through her eyes, and you can hear this terror in her voice as she repeats, "Dad! Dad!" through muffled cries.³⁹ Such personal experiences, thoughts, and stories are not common content on other social media apps, let alone fed to you in succession.



Figure 2. Stills from three of the TikToks described above. Created by users @j.esquire, @theblackqueen24, and @kevoysomers.

In another video, posted by user @sarah_dib8, a man holds his phone up and we see him as well as a police officer who is reaching his hand inside the young man's vehicle, shining a light in the car as its owner yells, "Can you please stop! What are you doing? What have I done?" The officer doesn't answer and once the police get the door open, we hear an officer say, "Get him out." As the young

WITNESS ME

man is pulled from his car and wrestled to the ground by police, he yells, “What have I done? Stop! Stop!” and the video becomes increasingly violent. As it ends, it looks as if he is being choked.⁴⁰ This perspective is echoed by a White twenty-two-year-old, user @johnnyk451 (now @aboveaveragesimp), limping home from a protest. Having already been shot by a rubber bullet, he notes that the police are still following him. But as he addresses the camera he’s knocked hard to the ground by the police, who yell, “Put your hand behind your head!” and “Stop resisting!” The police continue to press him into the ground and at one point appear to knee him in the skull.⁴¹ The two posts’ memetic nature—they feature upsetting movements brought on by police aggression, the young men’s cell phones violently jerked around once they hit the ground as streaks of light dance alarmingly across the screen, highlighting the bodily harm being done—demonstrating not an equivalency but a solidarity that surpasses the obligatory social media post.

After the first COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020, I downloaded TikTok about a month before Floyd’s death. As soon as the news of his murder hit and the subsequent protests began, my “For You” page was almost entirely populated by videos reacting to the tragedy or documenting the resulting unrest, and my engagement with these videos meant they would continue to be fed to me. This is due to TikTok’s algorithm. Similar to YouTube, when you watch a video (particularly to the end) or engage with it (comment on it or like it), its algorithm assumes you want to continue to see similar videos, as whatever holds your attention is likely to keep you on the app for longer. That being said, the app also houses features that are largely specific to TikTok—most obviously, its short-form video format, recently mimicked by Instagram’s “reels.” In the amount of time you can watch a single television show or a couple of YouTube videos, it’s possible to consume hundreds of TikToks. Further, not only can videos be just seconds to minutes long, you also do not get to “select” what you’d like to watch next. Instead, the videos shown to you are determined by the app’s algorithm, based almost entirely on your behavior. While “on YouTube more than 70% of the views come from the recommendation engine,” on TikTok it’s closer to 90 or 95%. According to an investigation done by *The Wall Street Journal*—which used over a hundred “automated TikTok” accounts to “understand how [the app] knows

users so well”—“officially, the company says that shares, likes, follows, and what you watch, all play a role in what TikTok shows you.” That being said, they “found that TikTok only needs one of these to figure you out, how long you linger over a piece of content, every second you hesitate or rewatch, the app is tracking you.” This means that TikTok’s method of dispensation is not simply based on what you “like” or consciously want to see, but what you linger over even for a moment. This, *The Wall Street Journal* claims, is one of the reasons TikTok can learn its users’ preferences so quickly. By its bot accounts simply “rewatching or pausing on videos,” the app “fully learned many of [the automated] accounts’ interests in less than two hours, some it figured out in less than forty minutes.” While this kind of affective surveillance and its resulting knowledge should doubtless alarm us, and its resulting echo chambers have been legitimately and endlessly critiqued, it can be said that TikTok’s recommendation engine results in highly personalized subcultures that the app works hard to cultivate and maintain.⁴² Upon downloading the app, it did not take long for it to suss out my interest in Black and Indigenous community, leftist politics, or even regenerative agriculture. As a result, when George Floyd and Breonna Taylor became the focus of the summer of 2020, TikTok easily found exactly who might wish to not only recognize this callous loss of life but act on it.

The videos I mention in this paper, and the vast majority of countless others that were posted in response to Floyd’s murder, were uploaded by this country’s younger generations. These TikToks garnered billions of likes, views, and shares (videos using #BlackLivesMatter reaching over 10 billion views in June of 2020).⁴³ They exhibited the unexceptional nature of stories based in American racism and race-based violence, in both their volume, TikTok’s short-form enabling a scalar shift, and their intimacy, as users shared personal moments and stories that lacked the highly stylized commercialism more common on other platforms. This type of engagement was boosted by the app’s algorithm, as much of the content was posted not by influencers or brands but by the app’s everyday users. According to *Wired*, citing an official TikTok blog post, “a new user with few followers can still make it to the For You page,” and this is because of the way the app vets and promotes videos.⁴⁴ When a TikTok is posted, barring “objectionable”

content, it is likely shown to users that have already demonstrated an interest in similar videos, regardless of the number of followers its creator has. Users that engage with videos that discuss racism or the Black Lives Matter movement are used as test subjects for newly uploaded videos with similar content, and their level of engagement is what determines the success of the video. In other words, when a new video is posted, rather than its reach depending wholly on whether its creator already has an active or sizable following, TikTok tests out the video on relevant users and as the video continues to do well, it goes on to be shown to more likeminded individuals.⁴⁵ So, in the wake of Floyd's death, TikTok's algorithm fed relevant videos to those sympathetic to this influx of testimony.

Further, the app had already done the work of identifying the many young people dismantling the lie of meritocracy and deconstructing our country's narratives. In a video from early May of 2020, TikToker Jacqueline Ajueny says direct to camera:

A lot a y'all love to say, "but if the roles were reversed?" Reverse them! Shit. I'm tryna go driving out at 4am, like in the teen angst movies, without getting pulled over. I wanna walk through Home Depot without some random woman following me. Reverse the roles, baby. Chase after what you believe in. Make that dream a reality. Live in your truth.

Currently, this TikTok sits at over 474,500 views and has over 187,100 likes. Its comments pick up on her irony, stating "If you wish upon a star ✨🙏🏻" or "she finished it off with a 'live laugh love ✨'." Others simply back her sentiment. For example, the comment "'but if the roles were reversed' is admitting there is inequality," has over twelve thousand likes.⁴⁶ Such a video and its response are not unique on the app and they provide us with a solid example of the attitudes of, not all, but many of the politically engaged young people that use it. In this environment, of eye-contact and unfiltered feeling, the ideological strain of identifying with those exploited by the system, or with a desire to unsettle it, is broken down significantly. Young people across the app demonstrate real efforts to witness Black experience, not just as spectacle or entertainment

but as comrade, as partners in crime. Users are encouraged to interact with each other via stiches, duets, replies, and comments—features that allow for a kind of talking *with* rather than a talking *to*.⁴⁷ After Floyd's murder, videos including demonstrations, police violence and misconduct (much of which has since been removed), oral storytelling, protest tips, discussions of White privilege, education, relevant news, Indigenous experience and solidarity, and calls for justice and restraint, flooded the "For You" pages of those who already sympathized or identified with a marginalized positionality—matching the "talk" already present on the app with action. Many of the posts asked something of their viewer, and engendered an incredible amount of activity, including the signing of petitions, the building of coalitions, the creation of websites, the attending of protests, the redistribution of wealth and contribution to mutual aid, and eventually the sabotage of a presidential political rally.

In her 1992 article *Eating the Other*, bell hooks discusses young Americans, along with the belief in diversity or pluralism. She states:

Masses of young people dissatisfied by U.S. imperialism, unemployment, lack of economic opportunity, afflicted by the postmodern malaise of alienation, no sense of grounding, no redemptive identity, can be manipulated by cultural strategies that offer Otherness as appeasement, particularly through commodification. The contemporary crises of identity in the west, especially as experienced by white youth, are eased when the "primitive" is recouped *via* a focus on diversity and pluralism which suggests the Other can provide life-sustaining alternatives.⁴⁸

hooks makes the point that the desire for difference, or "spice," is an appropriative one and this appetite is certainly present on TikTok, most clearly evidenced by dance trends created by Black users and then adopted by White influencers who gain views and notoriety via the appropriation of Black labor and culture. Charli D'Amelio, a White eighteen-year-old, who was, until June of 2022, the most followed user on the platform, grew her account by doing just that. Similar to Winnubst and

WITNESS ME

her point that calls for diversity are often “a façade of good faith efforts towards social equality,”⁴⁹ hooks specifies that this kind of appropriation is often a tool to assuage White guilt. hooks remarks on “a group of very blond, very white, jock type boys,” she overheard while teaching at Yale, who express a desire to have sex with women outside of their race. She claims that their open dialogue and free expression of such a, once taboo, desire, allows the boys to distance themselves from the White supremacy they undoubtedly uphold, a “deni[al] of accountability and historical connection.”⁵⁰ Consumption as a method of absolution. However, in contrast to 1992, many young people today have spent their more conscious years contending with the presence of overt White supremacy, as it’s shed many of its past euphemisms. “Diversity,” especially as lone solution, may not only feel a bit trite but lies dangerously close to the #AllLivesMatter that always seems to follow recognitions of or commitments to Black life.

hooks goes on to say that when diversity is offered up to validate American progressivism, “it is not African American culture formed in resistance that surfaces.”⁵¹ Further, both Alexander and Brown, examine how Black experience is stripped of its information when passed through White hands,⁵² encouraging White spectatorship, rather than the camaraderie of witness. This is what, in many ways, TikTok has proven itself capable of avoiding, as we might locate hook’s radical culture in Ajueny’s TikTok or in many of the others this paper discusses. Videos are recorded and edited by their creators, often with no intention (or means)⁵³ of making a profit, then, rather than enter a space that requires one to acquiesce to a mainstream White audience, they are instead shared first with the like-minded and as they gain views are provided a larger reach. This isn’t a perfect transaction by any means. There are content moderators, racist filters available to users that can change the shape of your facial features, and formatting requirements to conform to, in addition to TikTok’s leaked aims to suppress the videos of those it deems “ugly” or poor.⁵⁴ However, even given these challenges, users managed to create and maintain communities that were capable of uplifting the voices of the minoritized, and arguably still are.

Since last summer, TikTok has slowed the wide circulation of similar posts, even more than it had previously, actively pulling its users towards a

White universalism, as well as educational content as opposed to activism, with a shamelessly biased algorithm⁵⁵ that will often suppress or block single posts or whole accounts based on the content being created and the identity of the poster. This phenomenon was overwhelmingly evident when “Stop Line 3” became a call to action over the summer of 2021. One Indigenous creator, who now goes by kitha⁵⁶ and was actively involved in protests at the Line 3 site in Minnesota, had to create new accounts consistently as their previous ones would be suspended by the app. Although less extreme, White creators speaking on the issue would also see their content suppressed. After receiving a fair amount of pressure from her followers, environmentalist and YouTube content creator Shelbi Storme posted a video⁵⁷ to TikTok on the issue, but it performed worse than the majority of her other educational and lifestyle posts, despite its high engagement—interaction that traditionally should work to increase a post’s visibility. In fact, the only other videos she posted during this time with similarly low views were sponsored videos, which tend to do poorly due to a lack of interest. Not only is there persistent evidence that the app has begun to work harder to discourage this kind of political activity, and the many “controversial” Black and Indigenous creators engaging in this kind of content, TikTok often instead heavily encourages a contemporary minstrelsy. Even in 2021, some of the app’s most popular Black creators revolve entirely around racial stereotypes, and Black users have continued to note the suppression of their content and accounts.⁵⁸

Keeping all this in mind, since the summer of 2020, there’s been a consistent activist presence on TikTok. We might note the Amazon Labor Union or ALU account,⁵⁹ created by Chris Smalls, the thirty-three year old president of the ALU looking to unionize on Staten Island, which, while clearly suppressed by the app, managed to help support his efforts, workers voting to unionize in April of 2022,⁶⁰ despite the 4.3 million dollars the company has spent on anti-union consultants.⁶¹ More recently, and inspired by Small’s success, a TikTok based advocacy group, Gen Z for Change, have organized the “People Over Prime Pledge.”⁶² The pledge, so far signed by over ninety TikTokers with a combined follower count of fifty-eight million, is a promise to stop working with the company until certain labor standards are met.

As stated by *The Washington Post*, the influencers claim, “TikTok is a particularly potent threat to the e-commerce giant because it is both where Gen Z users go for news and where narratives that eventually appear in legacy media are set.”⁶³ This generational awareness is powerful, working from not only what is true of all social media, that users and their content are the engine that drives such platforms, but demonstrating the social capital of young people who are aware of their own influence. And these efforts may never had occurred if it wasn’t for the newly revolutionary potential the app demonstrated in the summer of 2020, momentarily cleaving itself from TikTok’s traditionally heavy censorship, censorship born in China in efforts to quash political dissent.⁶⁴

TikTok, like its social media predecessors may not be the hub of revolution we hope for, however, the users who were ready and willing to amplify and support Black voices, spurred on by another senseless death, became aware of the fact that *more* is indeed within reach. TikTok’s young user base was encouraged to serve as witness and to take up Black *disorientation*⁶⁵ in new and emancipatory ways. The app allowed for a kind of mutual looking that reorganized its users’ gaze and opened their eyes to the value of Blackness, the possibility in its perspective, and its accompanying nausea.⁶⁶ And,

despite a “feud” regarding side parts and skinny jeans,⁶⁷ a solidarity was found amongst communities and generations, doubtless held together by their disappointment in the American Dream, and quite possibly the “semantic elasticity”⁶⁸ of its rhetoric. This alliance being supported by a class consciousness that continues to grow on the app. We see this demonstrated by users like Madeline Pendleton, a thirty-five-year-old business owner who splits the company’s profits equally amongst her and her employees. Her videos work to educate the app’s users about communism and fair wages. Or the Brooklyn based @bettyimages, who prepares herself a meal while discussing exploitative economics in her series “Anarchist Cook Book.” Or Imani Barbarin, @crutches_and_spice, whose content focuses on Blackness and disability and the way these intersecting identities are affected by ableism within colonial capitalism. It’s important to note that TikTok and its social media counterparts will *on their own* never lead to sustainable change. That being said, there is a power there, a power held by its users. And we might credit much of this collective strength to a short moment in time, when young Americans managed to build upon and create community that worked against American sociopathy as baseline.

Alex Hack is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Southern California, where she also earned her M.A. in the same field. Having a background in communication and UI design, her current research examines digital media, the invisible, and matters of minoritized experience and embodiment that remain unreal and undervalued. Her dissertation project takes up medicine and its software as fertile ground for humanistic analysis as they force us to consider that racial harm lies too in supposed benevolence, that it has become elemental and rhizomatic, and that its killer instinct doesn’t simply resolve with better data or more training. Considering this, she aims to investigate how the logics of chattel slavery remain present in American health care and to counteract its specificity via the incorporation of wisdom that has long been judged unscientific.

Notes

- 1 Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy. “The Generation Gap in American Politics,” March 1, 2018. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2018/03/01/the-generation-gap-in-american-politics/>.
- 2 Joel Stein, “Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation,” *Time*, accessed September 13, 2020, <https://time.com/247/millennials-the-me-me-me-generation/>.
- 3 *Ellen’s New Millennial Challenge After Rotary Phone Fail*, The Ellen Show, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gjin8t633pc&t=58s&ab_channel=TheEllenShow; *Can This Teenager Use a Rotary Phone?*, The Ellen Show, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=updE5LVE6tg>.
- 4 Frank Chung and News.com.au, “Why ‘Lazy’, ‘Entitled’ Millennials Can’t Last 90 Days at Work,” *New York Post*, March 12, 2019, <https://nypost.com/2019/03/12/why-lazy-entitled-millennials-cant-last-90-days-at-work/>; Larry Alton, “Millennials And Entitlement In The Workplace: The Good, The Bad, And The Ugly,” *Forbes*, November 22, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/larryalton/2017/11/22/millennials-and-entitlement-in-the-workplace-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly/>.

WITNESS ME

- 5 Walter Frick, “Millennials Are Cynical Do-Gooders,” *Harvard Business Review*, May 30, 2014, <https://hbr.org/2014/05/millennials-are-cynical-do-gooders>; Marty Beckerman, “Millennials Are The Most Cynical Generation Ever, Study Finds,” MTV, September 4, 2014, <https://www.mtv.com/news/oix3dc/millennials-cynical-study>.
- 6 Kim Parker, Nikki Graf, and Ruth Igielnik, “Generation Z Looks a Lot Like Millennials on Key Social and Political Issues,” *Pew Research Center’s Social & Demographic Trends Project* (blog), January 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/01/17/generation-z-looks-a-lot-like-millennials-on-key-social-and-political-issues/>.
- 7 Elizabeth Alexander, “Can You Be Black and Look at This?: Reading the Rodney King Video(s),” *Public Culture* 7, no. 1 (January 1, 1994): 77–94, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-7-1-77>, 83.
- 8 Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton, “The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy,” *Social Identities* 9, no. 2 (2003): 169–181, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350463032000101542>, 173.
- 9 Cami Thomas, “If Virginia Surprises You, You Haven’t Been Paying Attention.,” *HuffPost*, August 13, 2017, sec. Black Voices, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/if-virginia-surprises-you-you-havent-been-paying_b_59904997e4b0caa1687a60f6.
- 10 A “Neuralyzer” is a device from the *Men in Black* movie franchise. The pen like apparatus could wipe the memories of civilians who had come into contact with extraterrestrials. The MIB agents were then tasked with replacing the erased memories with a more plausible story.
- 11 Shannon Winnubst, “The Many Lives of Fungibility: Anti-Blackness in Neoliberal Times,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 29, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 102–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2019.1692193>, 103.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 102–103.
- 13 I use sociopathy as a non-diagnostic term to describe the lack of empathy that overwhelms not just our justice system but America’s social fabric. Later on, I locate this lack of conscience and concern in Derek Chauvin and his fellow officers. I take inspiration from Kimberly Juanita Brown here, who refers to “imperialism” as a “racial form of sociopathy,” see: Kimberly Juanita Brown, “Regarding the Pain of the Other: Photography, Famine, and the Transference of Affect,” in *Feeling Photography*, ed. Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu (Duke University Press, 2014), 181–203, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11319fq.13>, 188.
- 14 Martinot and Sexton, “The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy,” 173.
- 15 Alexander, “Can You Be Black and Look at This?” 91.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 92
- 17 Martinot and Sexton, “The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy,” 173.
- 18 Melissa Alonso, Andone Dakin, and Hollie Silverman, “The Minneapolis Police Officer Who Knelt on George Floyd’s Neck Had 18 Previous Complaints against Him, Police Department Says,” CNN, May 28, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/28/us/minneapolis-officer-complaints-george-floyd/index.html>.
- 19 Jenni Fink, “Derek Chauvin Indicted for Allegedly Holding Black 14-Year-Old by Throat, Kneeling on Neck in 2017,” *Newsweek*, May 7, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/derek-chauvin-indicted-holding-black-14-year-old-throat-kneeling-his-neck-2017-1589604>.
- 20 Alexander, “Can You Be Black and Look at This?” 83.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 John Gramlich, “Young Americans Are Less Trusting of Other People – and Key Institutions – than Their Elders,” Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/06/young-americans-are-less-trusting-of-other-people-and-key-institutions-than-their-elders/>.
- 23 The Economist [TheEconomist], “Why Aren’t Millennials Buying Diamonds? Http://Econ.St/294G6yf Https://T.Co/A822ggVZrK,” Tweet, *Twitter*, July 1, 2016, <https://twitter.com/TheEconomist/status/748670361840009216>.
- 24 Sharon Terlep, “Millennials Are Fine Without Fabric Softener; P&G Looks to Fix That,” *WSJ*, accessed August 18, 2022, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/fabric-softener-sales-are-losing-their-bounce-1481889602>.
- 25 Andrew Van Dam, “Analysis | The Unluckiest Generation in U.S. History,” *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/05/27/millennial-recession-covid/>.
- 26 Elise Gould and Melat Kassa, “Young Workers Hit Hard by the COVID-19 Economy: Workers Ages 16-24 Face High Unemployment and an Uncertain Future,” *Economic Policy Institute* (blog), October 14, 2020, <https://www.epi.org/publication/young-workers-covid-recession/>.
- 27 R.J. Rico, “Rents Reach ‘insane’ Levels across U.S. with No End in Sight,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 20, 2022, sec. World & Nation, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-02-20/rents-increases-across-us>.
- 28 Abigail Johnson Hess, “The Cost of College Increased by More than 25% in the Last 10 Years—Here’s Why,” *CNBC*, December 13, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/12/13/cost-of-college-increased-by-more-than-25per>

cent-in-the-last-10-years.html.

29 Ross Eisenbrey, “The Declining Rights of Workers,” *Economic Policy Institute*, October 31, 2006, https://www.epi.org/publication/webfeatures_viewpoints_declining_worker_rights/.

30 Kimberly Juanita Brown, “Entering through the Body’s Frame: Precious and the Subjective Delineations of the Movie Poster,” in *Black Female Sexualities*, ed. Joanne M. Braxton and Trimiko Melancon (Rutgers University Press, 2015), 13–26, 16.

31 Alexander, “Can You Be Black and Look at This?” 80.

32 Ibid.

33 Shelly Banjo, “TikTok Embraces Political Content for Black Lives Matter,” *Al Jazeera*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2020/6/17/tiktok-embraces-political-content-for-black-lives-matter>.

34 J.Esquire @jandcgang_, “👊👊👊 #fyp #foryou #dontgiveup #blacklivesmatter #fypchallenge #viral #family #endracism #love #father #1m,” June 6, 2020, https://www.tiktok.com/@jandcgang_/video/6835313401716133125.

35 This TikTok has since been removed by the user, her profile can be viewed here: “Ruth (@theblackqueen24),” TikTok, accessed August 27, 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@theblackqueen24>.

36 Kevoy @kevtheboy, “#notonething What the Hell Are We Doing,” TikTok, June 3, 2020, <https://www.tiktok.com/@kevtheboy/video/6834125431646473478>.

37) Lynae @thelibraboonstone, “Black Women in Healthcare, Am I Right?,” TikTok, June 19, 2020, https://www.tiktok.com/@thelibraboonstone/video/6840266162203397382?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1.

38 Milly Vincent, “Black Family Flees from Mob after Woman Claims They Stole Her Car,” *Daily Mail*, June 29, 2020, sec. News, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8471117/Black-family-flees-foul-mouthed-mob-Walmart-lot-woman-claims-stole-car.html>.

39 This TikTok is no longer available, the user’s account can be viewed here: “Cuteepee01 (@cuteepee01),” TikTok, accessed August 27, 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@cuteepee01>.

40 This TikTok is no longer available, the user’s account can be viewed here: “Sarah_dib (@sarah_dib8),” TikTok, accessed August 27, 2022, https://www.tiktok.com/@sarah_dib8.

41 Johnkantner @aboveveragesimp, “Arrested in Phoenix Peacefully Protesting and Trying to Go Home. #black-livesmatter #policebrutality #acab,” TikTok, June 2, 2020, <https://www.tiktok.com/@aboveveragesimp/video/6833959907914484998>.

42 WSJ Staff, “Inside TikTok’s Algorithm: A WSJ Video Investigation,” *WSJ*, July 21, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/tiktok-algorithm-video-investigation-11626877477>.

43 Banjo, “TikTok Embraces Political Content for Black Lives Matter.”

44 Louise Matsakis, “How TikTok’s ‘For You’ Algorithm Works,” *Wired*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.wired.com/story/tiktok-finally-explains-for-you-algorithm-works/>.

45 “How TikTok Recommends Videos #ForYou,” Newsroom | TikTok, August 16, 2019, <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/how-tiktok-recommends-videos-for-you>.

46 Jax @jaxajueny, “I’m Not Stopping You 🤔🤔🤔❤️ #foryou #fyp #foryoupage #foryourpage,” TikTok, May 3, 2020, <https://www.tiktok.com/@jaxajueny/video/6822803973607574790>.

47 TikTok allows users to reply to videos and comments with videos of their own, often these features must be “turned on” by the original poster, but they encourage continued conversation amongst its users that, due to their use of the first person video reply, often discourage the rampant anonymity more readily available via other social media platforms.

48 bellhooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (London: Routledge, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315743226>, 369.

49 Winnubst, “The Many Lives of Fungibility,” 103.

50 hooks, *Black Looks*, 369.

51 Ibid., 370.

52 Alexander, “Can You Be Black and Look at This?,” 80; Brown, “Regarding the Pain of the Other,” 183.

53 TikTok’s lack of monetizability is especially concerning given its dependence on Black creativity and has been widely critiqued by its users. Most notably by popular TikToker and long-time YouTuber Hank Green, who called out TikTok for paying creators from a finite pool of money much smaller than its total profit, this being distinctly different from the YouTube Partner Program, which shares 55% of its revenue with its creators, see: So...TikTok Sucks, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAZapFzPP64>.

54 Sam Biddle et al., “TikTok Told Moderators: Suppress Posts by the ‘Ugly’ and Poor,” *The Intercept*, accessed August 17, 2022, <https://theintercept.com/2020/03/16/tiktok-app-moderators-users-discrimination/>.

WITNESS ME

55 Abby Ohlheiser, “Welcome to TikTok’s Endless Cycle of Censorship and Mistakes,” MIT Technology Review, accessed March 1, 2022, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/07/13/1028401/tiktok-censorship-mistakes-glitches-apologies-endless-cycle/>.

56 “Kitha Is Screaming (@quibunnie),” TikTok, accessed August 27, 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@quibunnie>.

57 Shelbizlee @shelbizlee, “STOP SCROLLING! Take 2 minutes and make a difference— stopline3.org & shelbizlee.com/donate to have your donation matched #line3 #stopline3 #climate,” TikTok, August 8, 2021, <https://www.tiktok.com/@shelbizlee/video/6993042516689964293>.

58 Morgan Sung, “Some Black TikTok Creators Say They Were Sidelined from App’s Black History Month Event,” NBC News, February 19, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/viral/black-tiktok-creators-say-sidelined-apps-black-history-month-event-rcna16221>; Megan McCluskey, “These Creators Say They’re Still Being Suppressed for Posting Black Lives Matter Content on TikTok,” *Time*, July 22, 2020, <https://time.com/5863350/tiktok-black-creators/>; Taiyler Simone Mitchell, “Black Creators Say TikTok’s Algorithm Fosters a ‘consistent Undertone of Anti-Blackness.’ Here’s How the App Has Responded.,” *Insider*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.insider.com/a-timeline-of-allegations-that-tiktok-censored-black-creators-2021-7>.

59 “Amazon Labor Union (@amazonlaborunion),” TikTok, accessed August 27, 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@amazonlaborunion>.

60 Karen Weise and Noam Scheiber, “Amazon Workers on Staten Island Vote to Unionize in Landmark Win for Labor,” *The New York Times*, April 1, 2022, sec. Technology, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/01/technology/amazon-union-staten-island.html>.

61 Dave Jamieson, “Amazon Spent \$4.3 Million On Anti-Union Consultants Last Year,” *HuffPost*, March 31, 2022, sec. Business, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/amazon-anti-union-consultants_n_62449258e4b0742dfa5a74fb.

62 Gen Z for Change, “People Over Prime,” accessed August 17, 2022, <https://peopleoverprime.com/>.

63 Taylor Lorenz and Caroline O’Donovan, “Gen Z TikTok Creators Are Turning against Amazon,” *Washington Post*, August 16, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/08/16/tiktok-creators-amazon-protest/>.

64 Alex Hern, “Revealed: How TikTok Censors Videos That Do Not Please Beijing,” *The Guardian*, September 25, 2019, sec. Technology, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/sep/25/revealed-how-tiktok-censors-videos-that-do-not-please-beijing>.

65 Sara Ahmed, “ORIENTATIONS: Toward a Queer Phenomenology,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies* 12, no. 4 (October 2006): 543–74, 566. In her discussion of a queer phenomenology and a queer orientation Ahmed states, “a queer phenomenology would function as a disorientation device; it would not overcome the disalignment of the horizontal and vertical axis, allowing the oblique to open another angle on the world.” Disorientation is a way of thinking about an intellectual misalignment with the status quo.

66 *Ibid.*, 544.

67 I’m referring here to the 2021 TikTok feud that supposedly occurred between Gen Z and Millennials when the former decided parting your hair to the side and skinny jeans were no longer in fashion, see: Hanna Flanagan and 2021 05:39 Pm, “Why Are Gen Z TikTokers Making Fun of Skinny Jeans and Side Parts? Everything You Need to Know,” *PEOPLE.Com*, February 18, 2021, <https://people.com/style/gen-z-tiktokers-slam-millennials-side-parts-and-skinny-jeans/>.

68 Winnubst, “The Many Lives of Fungibility,” 103.