Accountability, Exile and Social Media:

An Analysis of Contemporary Online Public Shaming Practices and "Cancel Culture"

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Gender and Social Justice Studies

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Abstract

What is unique about contemporary online public shaming practices is the potential scope and reach facilitated by social media, where call-outs can go viral and a collective response can be provoked by reaching a massive audience in a short amount of time. Call-outs can at once be ephemeral (they can come and go quickly) and ever-lasting (the material posted online can be disseminated and reproduced indefinitely). What is also new is the ways our subjectivities, identities, and group dynamics are formed on social media; governed by neoliberal capitalist logic, we confess, curate, and broadcast our desires. Considering new media technologies to be a *pharmakon,* it makes sense that cancelling ("cancel culture") has emerged from these new technologies. Discursive acts shared through communications technology can draw attention to social ills as well as individual and collective acts of harm. I see cancelling as both a cure for social ills and a poison, a solution that nevertheless produces symptoms and dis-ease. Cancel culture raises questions about inequality, accountability, justice and democracy. It seems to be a collective expression of changing social norms. It illustrates the innovative use of social media to enact change and demand the disruption of the status quo. It highlights questions about the relationship between personal beliefs and values and job security and the responsibility that institutions face to enact change in a neoliberal economy. Cancel culture also brings up the relationship between systemic oppressive norms – racism, transphobia, and other bigoted ways of thinking – and the individuals who express and embody these ways of thinking. Drawing from case studies of online call-outs and cancellations, scholarship on cancel culture, and debates in mainstream and alternative journalism and activist groups, this thesis is an analysis of the multiple ways in which cancel culture is understood, defined, and experienced on social media platforms, and an exploration of both the effectiveness and the limitations of cancelling as an accountability practices that seeks to repair or intervene upon harm.

Keywords: cancel culture, cancelling, accountability, communications technologies, social media

Dedication

to my dad, Mike Pearson;

the first artist to inspire me
the first writer to encourage me to put into song the thoughts that cannot be spoken
the first person to humour my morning monologues and value my vivid dreams
the first man to show me unconditional love

you are still here.

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to my supervisor, Professor Chloë Taylor, who has guided and supported me throughout every step of the thesis writing process. Professor Taylor's encouragement to write on a difficult topic, and her ability to keep me balanced in my argument, were integral to the completion of this work. I am also extremely grateful for Professor Ada Jaarsma, who extended both constructive advice and enthusiasm throughout the writing process. Thank you to my third reader, Professor Robyn Lee, who inspired me in the first year of my masters and graciously agreed to serve on my defense committee. It has been an incredible privilege to be in the company of such intelligent, strong and inspiring women, and for this I am eternally grateful.

This thesis would not have been possible without the generous financial support I received throughout the course of my graduate program. I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, from whom I received the Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship, and the Government of Alberta, from whom I received the Alberta Graduate Excellence Scholarship (AGES). Last but certainly not least, thank you to Annabelle and Lexi Sydie for setting up the Ros Sydie Memorial Scholarship. It was truly an honour to be the first recipient of this award named after a feminist sociologist who dedicated herself to advancing gender equity at the University of Alberta and in sociological theory.

I would like to express my sincere admiration and appreciation to the faculty of the Women and Gender Studies department, and in particular, I would like to thank Professor Lise Gotell, who encouraged me not to shy away from asking unpopular questions and dissenting in discussions and debates of feminist thought. This was an invaluable lesson that I will always carry with me. I must also express heartfelt joy for my grad school bestie, Paula Cepeda Gallo, with whom I shared countless late night laughter, worries, dreams, drinks, and discussions.

I am also incredibly thankful to have had access to the University of Alberta library, an incredible national resource for scholarship and one that I hope will continue to be generously funded and supported in years to come. I would like to extend a particular thank you to Academic Librarian David Sulz, who helped me to expand my research capacities by teaching me how to use the library resources and for introducing me to the sheer magnitude of scholarship within reach through the library.

A personal thank you goes out to Dr. Kat Danser, my sister of the leaf. No matter the topic (which changed multiple times!), Kat provided intellectual support and creative exploration over the course of many afternoons spent smoking cigars in the backyard. She and her partner Jill also went above and beyond to support me emotionally during a trauma I faced during my thesis writing year. There were some dark days, but they brought in the light even when it was difficult for me to see.

Thank you to my family, especially my mum Louise and my sister Bryanna, both of whom I had the pleasure of living with in the winter of my thesis writing year. Intellectual labour is a strange form of work and I so appreciate the time, energy, and space they lovingly created for me to finish my thesis. I am also thankful for my sister Larissa and her husband Pete, who for years have inspired me with interesting conversations that bridge the disciplinary divides between gender studies, chemistry and politics.

Finally, words cannot express how grateful I am for my partner, Michael. He will always be my lover, friend, mentor and cheerleader. His unending patience, encouragement, nurturing and support is a rare blessing and I am so lucky to have him in my life. This past year was tumultuous, but he has and will always be the eye of my storm, the little haven of calm in the midst of chaos. May we continue to transform rage into enthusiasm and support each other and our expanding kinship networks with radical love, communication, reciprocity and curiosity.

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Introduction

When I began a Masters in Gender and Social Justice Studies, I prepared myself to respond to the myriad ways in which people ask, with varying degrees of skepticism, "What are you going to do with that?" Having grown up in a rural town, I'm used to hearing comments such as "Huh? Gender? What's that?" or, "Oh, you kids these days and your newfangled *genders*". These questions require me to take a deep breath and come up with a witty retort that will hopefully encourage them to think more deeply about the consequences of their perspective. As a grad student, I suspected that answering the question "What's your thesis topic?" could be the quickest way to a dead-end conversation (unless it was asked by a fellow nerd over a drink at the university bar).

When I decided to write about cancel culture I was shocked to find that this was a topic of interest to people across the political spectrum. People of many ages, from teens to seniors, expressed familiarity with the subject, and everyone I know has something to say. "I'm writing my thesis on cancel culture" has become a fantastic icebreaker – this is something I could never have imagined, and I love to hear the heated and sometimes misinformed rants that emerge from people according to their identities, social position and lived experience. This, to me, is a sign of its widespread reach, but also an indication of just how entwined social media has become in the lives of so many people. In a recent TedxTalk, Elisha Lim (2020b) said that Facebook is not simply a social media platform but a "ubiquitous infrastructure that increasingly determines how we treat each other". Public shaming is an age-old practice that has long been used in societies as a form of punishment or retribution for sins (Mishan 2020). What is unique about contemporary online public shaming practices is the potential scope and reach facilitated by social media, where call-outs can go viral and a collective response can be provoked by reaching a massive audience in a short amount of time. In addition, call-outs can at once be ephemeral (they can come and go quickly) and ever-lasting (the material posted online can be

disseminated and reproduced indefinitely). What is also new is the ways our subjectivities, identities, and group dynamics are formed on social media; governed by neoliberal capitalist logic, we confess, curate, and broadcast our desires. These desires get translated into data and ultimately into profits for tech companies. The majority of the world's population operates within this hyper-networked connectivity.

My Interest in Cancelling

My interest in researching cancel culture developed out of the intense affective response I've experienced witnessing online cancelling campaigns, and by paying attention to the ideology of cancelling in everyday life as well. Not too long ago, I witnessed a co-host of a Canadian podcast host accused of unicorn hunting in a public accountability call-out on Instagram. The details of the call-out read as if the purportedly injured party (whom I will refer to as R) had been coerced into one or more threesomes with the accused and his girlfriend, before being tossed away like an object until the next time "they felt like fucking." R also stated that the host's girlfriend sent the speaker unsolicited nudes. The host was named a sex predator by R, and the cancellation campaign began. Re-tweets, shares, likes, blocks, deletes, unfollows; what followed was a cascade of capital exchange based on outrage. The host lost followers and R gained followers. R's comment feed was populated with messages of support, validation and belief. The host's comment feed was full of messages, too; everything from requests to "take accountability" to name-calling, accusations of toxic behaviour, gaslighting, predation, minimizing and abuse.

When the host released an apology on his podcast, he also described his experience of the incident that took place two years prior. He also clarified that, although the call-out made it sound like they had had one or multiple threesomes, he and his partner had never met R in person. They did spend a couple of days talking with R on Hinge and by text message. There was no mention of the nudes. The apology was torn to shreds by the affective community involved and he was widely characterized as a white supremacist sex predator who insists on profits (via

podcast streams) off the harm he causes to other people. R invited followers to pay her on Patreon for her voluntary emotional labour.

The accountability call-out created a social media spectacle, like watching a car wreck unfold in slow motion. Does a two-day text conversation count as sexual predation? Yes, unsolicited nudes are now categorized as a form of sexual harassment – but interestingly enough, the girlfriend who allegedly sent the nudes was not painted as a "sex predator" in the same way as her white male partner. Is the correct punishment for these transgressions to be de-platformed? As someone who is also polyamorous and in (not-so-active) pursuit of threesomes, would I one day also be publicly blasted for a proposition gone wrong? Could this harm have been better remedied through an honest and direct conversation or even confrontation in 2018, instead of a social media post in 2020? R said in the Instagram post that the host had "aggressively pursued" her to participate in a threesome; the host said in his apology that they talked about "the possibility – the *possibility* – of meeting up" and that from his perspective, the text conversation about the threesome was done in an attempt to ensure total transparency and consent from all parties. The incompatibility of these stories creates a situation where onlookers are compelled to take a side, even with conflicting or inadequate information.

The calls to de-platform were not only directed at the host's podcast where he interviews gender and sexual minorities; comments and calls to de-platform also flooded the comments section of another podcast he co-hosts which sheds light on the experiences of people who live with disability, chronic and terminal illness. Underneath a social media post promoting a doctor lobbying for Trikafta, a rare and expensive drug that improves the lifespan and quality of life of children and adults living with cystic fibrosis, the following comments were juxtaposed, one after the other: "Predator!" "Heck yeeeahhh. My 2 yr old kiddo needs this modifying magic <3 we're fighting with and for you…!" and "GET LOUD and ACCOUNTABLE about the abuse you caused women… YOU AREN'T HUMAN ENOUGH TO FACE HER." Seeing an advocacy post on a life-saving drug for people who live with cystic fibrosis being populated with name-calling and

accusations left me wondering: Does the host's track record as a public figure stimulating difficult and formerly taboo topics on fraught issues such as sex, kink, death and chronic illness not at least play a role in speaking to the host's integrity? It's not the first time a progressive man has been called out for predatory behaviour, and it won't be the last; but watching this spectacle felt more like an episode of user-generated entertainment than an accountability process.

Terms such as community accountability and restorative justice were commonly used in R's (and her supporters') messaging, despite there being no clear community process laid out. For example, the host messaged R to suggest a mediated conversation to resolve the conflict, but R refused on the basis that mediation is a process rooted in white supremacy: this is in line with a cancelling pattern Clementine Morrigan (2020) has discussed, where "[a]ny attempt at dialogue on the part of the accused backfires, and multiplies the accusations, strengthening the case against them" (55). In this case the word "community" seemed to refer to the local community but it also included the community of the users' social media networks; in transformative justice process, community is central to the outcome of repair, but "[c]all outs now often happen at the scale of viral threads amongst strangers" (brown 2020, 52). There was a clear emphasis on capital; de-platforming in this case was equated with accountability, and R's call-out served to generate income from her followers for her emotional labour.

Much of the online shaming also seemed to be rooted in rigid binaries of identity, which Loretta J. Ross and Loan Tran (2021) identify as a common occurrence in online call-outs. Legacies of white supremacy, patriarchy and misogyny have made it possible for men to get away with actions rooted in these values. In the contemporary moment, however, these values are being disrupted and critiqued by movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo. This adds complexity to the power dynamics in online call-outs, where a he said/she said instance often contains inadequate information to assess a claim but on social media, the instance can be seen through the lens of identity. In this case much of the online shaming was rooted in what

Ross and Tran (2021) call *identity reductionism.* In my understanding, identity reductionism is a practice wherein a person's moral virtues, acts or behaviours are judged or assessed based solely on their identity. A white supremacist identity reductionism is the process by which a white person is deemed more capable, authoritative or trustworthy by virtue of their whiteness, regardless of their actions or behaviour. In social justice spaces, however, identity reductionism can also be a practice whereby truthfulness, capacity or authority is bestowed upon someone due to their historically marginalized identity such as being Black, queer, a woman, trans, etc. On social media call-outs where the narrative of a claim of harm conflicts with the narrative in the apology or response, onlookers may determine the "truthfulness" of the claim or the "guilt" of the accused according to the way they valorize that person's identity. Thus in online call-outs there is a complex and dynamic shifting relation of power, where "marginalized social media users are both influential and vulnerable in a landscape that distills identity markers into a public ranking system of social capital" (Lim 2020a, 2). This is just one of many examples of cancellation campaigns that seem to be rooted in demands for accountability but that still perpetuate harm.

Cancel Culture as *Pharmakon*

Pharmakon is an Ancient Greek term that, according to Jacques Derrida (1981) refers to a medicine "which acts as both remedy and poison" (70). Bernard Stiegler, a student of Derrida, considered technology to be central in "shap[ing] our social and individual existence from the beginning" (Abbinnett 2017, 6). Stiegler's work aimed to better understand how technology is used to "make the utilitarian economy of life endurable" (6). He understood technology to be a *pharmakon,* simultaneously a cure, remedy or philter, as well as a poison, giving rise to new symptoms. According to Stiegler, new media technologies are "the virtual and informatic systems through which social relations are staged, are now such that the reflective powers of all classes have been colonized by the calculative logic of the market" (7). Just as the human

discovery of fire or the invention of the wheel changed the trajectory of civilization (not just in terms of social life but also economics, politics, and culture), new media communications technologies are also changing us, and changing the way we operate within a capitalist society.

Considering new media technologies to be a *pharmakon,* it makes sense that cancelling has emerged from these new technologies. Discursive acts shared through communications technology can draw attention to social ills as well as individual and collective acts of harm. I see cancelling as both a cure for social ills and a poison, a solution that nevertheless produces symptoms and dis-ease. This word is related to the term *pharmakós,* which refers to the "ritualistic sacrifice or human exile of a human scapegoat or victim" (Wikipedia 2021) during times of crisis or disaster. Feminists have long used speaking out as a common method of resistance to exploitation, discrimination and oppression (Serisier 2018). However, survivor narratives of trauma are often commodified in a capitalist economy, often at the expense of the speaker (Alcoff and Gray-Rosendale 2018). This juxtaposition (speaking out as activism/trauma as entertainment) highlights a need to better understand the relationship between calling out as an authentic act and its morphing into a commodity in the capitalist economy. Just as a faction of feminism turned carceral in the 1990s alongside the expansion of the industrial prison complex in the United States (Bernstein 2012), cancelling has the potential to follow this punitive trajectory because of the carceral logic that often underlies it (brown 2020).

I will show throughout this thesis that cancelling has contested lineages; while Meredith D. Clark (2020) places cancelling in the lineage of Black oral traditional resistance practices, Ross (in Bastide 2020) sees cancelling as an age-old practice that began as early as the witch hunts. It is as if they are identifying two very different practices. Sometimes, cancelling is akin to a cultural boycott; at other times, it looks more like a pattern of behaviour that might even be understood as a ritual of purification, a collective practice wherein the ills of society can be projected upon an individual, who can then be cast out or exiled (either digitally from an online space, or literally – from a job, a city, or from life itself). Cancelling, then, is a strategy rooted in

a desire to enact social change and express intolerance for the status quo, but as it has become more common on social media platforms it has become unpredictable, unmediated, and enmeshed in a more punitive logic.

This desire for purification is perhaps a response to a hyper-connected world where inequality and environmental destruction are increasing and anxiety is ever-present. The contemporary moment is riddled with anxieties about anthropogenic climate change, inequality, political division, corruption, and war. Ross and Tran (2021) theorize this anxiety in a 2021 4-week seminar entitled "Calling In the Callout Culture." In this seminar they argue that the prevalence of online call-outs is due in part to heightened anxieties and inequalities that have been created by white supremacy, patriarchy, and neoliberal racialized capitalism. They argue that these ideologies, and the institutions that uphold them, contribute to instability, disconnection, competition, and binary thinking – not just across the political spectrum, but also among progressives, activists and people who might otherwise work to find solidarity across difference in order to work towards human rights.

I see cancel culture as being a timely and important discussion because it encompasses so many themes related to social justice. Cancel culture raises questions about inequality, accountability, justice and democracy. It seems to be a collective expression of changing social norms. It illustrates the innovative use of social media to enact change and demand the disruption of the status quo. It highlights questions about the relationship between personal beliefs and values and job security and the responsibility that institutions face to enact change in a neoliberal economy. Cancel culture also brings up the relationship between systemic oppressive norms – racism, transphobia, and other bigoted ways of thinking – and the individuals who express and embody these ways of thinking. Cancel culture takes up so much space in the attention economy through endless debates and media analysis – but as I will show in this thesis, sometimes it is hard to even identify what exactly it is that a person is referring to when they express their views on cancel culture. On an affective level, a cancelling spectacle

stimulates affects, compels onlookers to take a side, forces witnesses to adjudicate claims of harm with limited amounts of information that circulates, morphs and changes, like a message passed along in a game of telephone. For all of these reasons and more I am drawn to write about cancelling, cancel culture and online public shaming.

The first chapter is an overview of cancel culture in mainstream media. I draw from journalism, podcasts and the limited scholarship available on the topic of cancel culture. I show that it is a term that continues to take on politicized connotation as elites (many right-wing) misappropriate it in ways that undermine the purported aim of cancelling: to hold out-of-reach figures accountable for harm, exploitation or oppression. Recognizing that cultural norms and practices are not static but rather always in flux, Chapter Two looks at emerging critiques of collective practices of cancelling that are increasing in prevalence within and among progressive communities. This chapter illustrates the ways that claims of harm and calls for accountability can sometimes become justification for punitive acts of online shaming. In Chapter Three I take a step back from the interpersonal effects of cancelling and consider the significant influence social media platforms play in fueling cancelling and online public shaming practices. Drawing from Elisha Lim's (2020a) updated theory of identity economics, this chapter explores the ways that activists are being trained to bolster narratives of division and harm as a commodity in the attention economy. From time to time, I will draw from case studies to illustrate points in the thesis, but these should not be taken as a stand-in for all cancelling practices. Instead, I invite you, the reader, to consider the themes and arguments in this thesis and to reflect on the call-outs you may be seeing on your social media networks and to consider them in multiple different lights. Ultimately I hope you will come away with this thesis inspired not to take a side, but instead to wrestle with the ambiguity that emerges in the struggle of trying to achieve justice in a punitive, neoliberal and divisive world.

Chapter 1: An Overview of Cancel Culture in Mainstream Media

In 2021, the term cancel culture is everywhere in mainstream news media. Politicians are angry about it. Journalists love to write about it. Liberals argue it doesn't exist or that the term is used as a red herring to denounce cancelling as an accountability practice. This discursive act is hotly contested across partisan lines, with right-wing figures using the term to denounce leftists as authoritarian snowflakes (Barbaro 2020) and left-wing figures arguing that call outs are a powerful way for marginalized voices to enforce accountability upon elites who perpetuate oppression and domination. Although it is contested across partisan lines, understanding cancelling through a partisan lens can lead to a false binary, an over-generalization that pits progressives against conservatives. Concerns about censorship and free speech emerge from all sides of the political spectrum and inflame debates of cancel culture on university campuses and amongst elite American journalists. And in a hyper-connected world where the majority of people have instant and constant access to social media platforms and communications technologies, political polarization seems ever present with daily news headlines that enrage, shock, and upset (Phipps 2020); the attention economy thrives on user attention, and user attention is easiest to capture when the headlines fuel user rage. It is within this context that cancel culture, and the plethora of practices that fall under the term cancelling, has emerged.

Despite its increasingly common usage in mainstream media, scholarly analysis of cancel culture is very new. Cancel culture has been discussed in scholarship in relation to feminist and activist reclaiming of public spaces (Sénac 2021), fiction (King 2020), transformative body politics and the TV show South Park (Krebs 2020), as a polarized outcome of digital media participation (Ng 2020), as an expression of affective online communities (Bouvier 2020), as a term misappropriated by elites (Clark 2020), and as an effect of identity-based division (Lim 2020a; Lim 2020b). In this chapter, I will overview the many meanings, definitions, usages and understandings of the term cancel culture and its related practice of cancelling, showing the

variety of ways it has been used. The aim of this chapter is not to define the true meaning of cancel culture, nor to delineate what constitutes the "real" practice of cancelling. The aim is to illustrate how the term has come to describe a range of online call-out practices, including but not limited to accountability practices, cultural boycotts, public outcries for social and racial justice, and as a stand-in for debates about the difference between free speech and hate speech. Drawing largely from mainstream media journalism as well as Meredith D. Clark's (2020) "DRAG THEM: A Brief Commentary on So-Called 'Cancel Culture'", this chapter should be considered a snapshot in time of the mainstream debates and understandings of cancelling and cancel culture.

Section 1: What is Cancelling?

Cancelling someone is typically understood as "the withdrawal of any kind of support (viewership, social media follows, purchases of products endorsed by the person, etc.) for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic, generally from a social justice perspective especially alert to sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, bullying, and related issues" (Ng 2020, 623). To be "cancelled" is a discursive practice that became visible on Black Twitter in 2016 (Barbaro 2020; Romano 2020) but since then has become a mainstream shorthand term to refer to a wide range of online call-out practices including boycotting, protest, naming and shaming, calls for accountability, practices which sometimes lead to resignation or termination of one's employment, and de-platforming. This collection of online practices, and the variety of consequences these online practices provoke, are often (and contentiously) characterized as illustrative of a collective cultural climate known as "cancel culture."

Social Justice Roots of Cancelling

Cancel culture is sometimes identified as having evolved from "call-out culture", which refers to an increased social tendency for public denouncements (online or in-person) of a person's character, acts or behaviours deemed to be sexist, racist, or otherwise intolerable (CBC 2019). Trans YouTuber Natalie Wynn (2020) argues that cancelling is a form of vigilante justice that derived from call-out culture and online public disclosure practices of sexual violence popularized during the #MeToo movement. While the description of call-outs is similar to Ng's definition of cancelling, cancelling is an act that aims to remove a form of capital (social, economic, or institutional) from an offending person, and it differs from "calling in," a community- or activist-based practice that involves identifying and holding people accountable for harmful or intolerable behaviours with compassion and patience (Tran 2013). While I would describe calling in as a community accountability strategy that is rooted in an intent on educating the person who caused the hurt, calling out tends to be a public critique that aims to draw attention to the offending act or person. Calling out turns to cancelling when multiple voices join in a collective denunciation of the act or the individual. There is an element of community to calling in, whereas cancelling seems to be more punitive in approach (such as removing support, delivering consequences) and operates on the assumption that an individual should be held independently responsible to change.

Clark (2020) specifies cancelling as a practice "usually reserved for celebrities, brands, and otherwise out-of-reach figures… as a last-ditch appeal for justice" (89). Advocates of cancelling such as Clark see this practice as a moral punishment delivered by

> marginalized groups [who] engage in networked framing, a process by which collective experiences of an offending party's (or their proxy's) unjust behavior is discussed, morally evaluated, and prescribed a remedy–such as being fired or choosing to resign– through the collective reasoning or culturally aligned online crowds. (Clark 2020, 89)

On social media, cancelling has become a shorthand act of celebrity denouncement that circulates according to changing social norms. Perhaps the most (in)famous cancellation that

trended across new media and social media platforms in 2020 was that of J. K. Rowling, author of the *Harry Potter* book series, who posted (not for the first time) transphobic tweets which sparked a cascade of rage and ire across social media (Luu 2020). This is one example among countless others of celebrities who have been cancelled for anything from unsavoury to outright harmful behaviours (Bromwich 2018). Although cancelling is commonly used to denounce celebrities whom fans decide to no longer support, I believe Clark's definition is too narrow. Since Clark's publication, new critiques of cancelling have emerged (which I will overview in Chapter Two) that demonstrate cancelling as a practice not simply directed at elites, but also directed at historically marginalized people who participate in online activist and progressive spaces (Morrigan and Jay 2020).

The Zone of Abhorrence

In a May 2021 *New York Times* panel debate, "We Need to Talk About Cancel Culture" (Manjoo et al. 2021), Ezra Klein describes cancelling as an act rooted in clashing views about which speech acts should be categorized in the "zone of abhorrence." I found this to be an interesting take, because so often cancelling is a response to outrageous and sometimes awful things that people say – it is a dynamic cultural terrain that shifts according to social norms and relations of power. By way of example Klein said that whereas Nazi language is generally considered abhorrent, transphobia has not yet been successfully moved into the zone of abhorrence (despite being an abhorrent attitude). He describes cancelling in part as an attempt to move problematic and oppressive speech acts and beliefs into that zone. Jane Coaston (host of *The Argument*) added that this is a contested zone and advocates of free speech often try to remove those abhorrent speech acts from that zone in an effort to argue for free speech. The zone of abhorrence as an analogy illustrates the discursive nature of cancelling as a practice that seeks to enforce a shift in cultural and social norms.

Are there Consequences to Cancelling?

When a cancellation gains enough traction, it can indeed result in economic consequences such as termination from a job, publication, or contract, or forced resignation. Celebrities and public figures who have elite social status, exorbitant net worth and robust PR teams can effectively respond to (or sometimes ignore) a cascade of social media shaming and calls for accountability after they have done or said something harmful or oppressive. Due to the economic stability of many celebrities and elites, it is not uncommon to hear that "there are no real consequences to being cancelled." These economic consequences extend beyond celebrities and out of touch figures, however; call-outs and cancellations that go viral online can lead companies to terminate employees out of public pressure and out of concern for company reputation. For example, in 2020 a white woman named Amy Cooper was caught on camera during a racist outburst where she called the cops on Christian Cooper, a Black man bird-watching in Central Park (Hays and Kryska 2020). She was later fired from her job at an investment firm after the video went viral. Similarly, in 2018, another white woman, Kelly Pocha, was fired from her job at a car dealership after she was filmed shouting racist sentiments at a group of Syrian-Canadian men in a Denny's restaurant (Bouvier 2020). These are two examples of many online call-outs that have led to employee terminations as a response to viral video incidents that capture people enacting racist behaviours. While these acts of racism are no doubt harmful and egregious, Gwen Bouvier (2020) shows in an analysis of the responses to this viral video on Twitter that the call-out responses tended to see Pocha as an "individual bad apple"; there was no analysis or discussion of how a working class white woman came to embody racist sentiments, and no discussion of the collective, structural or systemic changes that need to take place in order for women like Pocha (and Cooper) to unlearn such harmful behaviours (8). Therefore, call-outs in these cases were effective in facilitating punishment (shaming, termination, and doxxing), Bouvier suggests that they do little to upend the social and

cultural production of racism in a Canadian context. In other words, these online call-outs treated the social symptom, not the root cause.

Misappropriation of the Term "Cancelling" by Elites

In "DRAG THEM: A (Brief) Etymology of So-called 'Cancel Culture'," Clark (2020) argues that cancelling is not a new practice, but one that is rooted in Black oral traditions. Clark points to similarities between cancelling and the call-out, the read, and drag, as well as blacklisting and boycotting (89-91), all of which fall into a lineage of Black oral traditions, some of which were used during the Civil Rights movement as counterpublics strategies for addressing social and economic inequalities. Clark argues—and seems to lament—that the term "cancel culture" has become a "reductive and malignant label" (88) because of its misappropriation by social elites and journalists, and that it has "devolved into journalistic shorthand wielded as a tool for silencing marginalized people who have adapted earlier resistance strategies for effectiveness in the digital space" (89). Her position is that journalists working to "draw readers/listeners/viewers' attention" decontextualize the term and don't provide enough cultural/historical context to explain the power and significance of canceling as a discursive act (90).

I agree with Clark's assertion that there is a growing tendency for elites to narrativize cancelling as "a moral panic akin to actual harm" (90). For example, in February 2021 more than six women accused New York Governor Andrew Cuomo of sexual harassment and misconduct. As he faced increasing calls to resign from his position, Cuomo resisted, stating that he would not bow to cancel culture (Callahan 2021). Cuomo was mocked in media for portraying himself as a victim of cancel culture (Bort 2021; Durkee 2021). This example is a clear illustration of Clark's argument of the misappropriation of the term cancel culture by elites. However, Clark's definition of cancelling is fairly narrow in that she argues that celebrities and elites are the only targets of cancelling. Because of this narrow scope Clark's argument seems to

suggest that targets of cancelling do not experience harm, which I think points to a limited understanding of just how common and prevalent cancelling has become.

It is not just elites who are cancelled. Politicians and public figures such as Cuomo have PR teams to respond to such criticisms, and they also have a responsibility to face criticism and resign when trust in their ability to serve in the citizens' best interests has been compromised. However online calls for individuals to de-platform after being caught saying something that is deemed socially inappropriate are becoming more common. I think there is a big difference between cancelling a celebrity or an elite and cancelling someone who is of a lower socio-economic class. Although not the focus of this chapter, it feels important to point out that there is a difference between speech acts that denounce celebrities and politicians, and shaming and ostracism of a middle, lower class or marginalized person who risks losing their employment (and, potentially, access to basic needs) as a punishment for saying or doing something harmful. By not discussing the prevalence of cancelling when it is targeted at everyday people, Clark seems to be trying to narrow rather than expand the scope of what constitutes cancelling in online spaces. As I will aim to show in the next chapter, cancelling more vulnerable people may be similar in practice but tends to produce very different outcomes – and some of these outcomes can in themselves be harmful when they move beyond accountability into punishment.

Section 2: The Harper's Letter Debate on a "Climate of Intolerance"

Clark points to the signatories of the July 2020 "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate" (also known as the Harper's Letter) as being an example of misappropriation of cancelling by elites. This letter, signed by 153 academics, journalists, and public figures, was a public response to what they see as a "new set of moral attitudes and political commitments that tend to weaken our norms on open debate and toleration of difference in favor of ideological conformity" (para. 1). The letter was written against what the signatories saw as a culture of censoriousness and "a

vogue for public shaming [wherein] hasty and disproportionate punishments" (para. 1) are delivered by institutional leaders to editors, researchers, and organizations for writing, sharing, or researching controversial topics. Clark (2020) argues that these social elites, among others, have exaggerated the repercussions of cancelling by "narrativiz[ing] being canceled into a moral panic akin to actual harm" (89). Although the cancel culture was not identified as the subject of the letter, some critics argue that this was the subtext (Ellison and Izadi 2020) of the letter. Arguing for a return to liberal values, the letter expresses concern that open debate is a necessary element of the maintenance of a democratic society and the loss of it could lead to an intolerant climate that they argue is already being exploited by "right-wing demagogues" (para. 1-3).

A counter-letter entitled "A More Specific Letter on Justice and Open Debate" (2020) critiqued the messages laid out in the Harper's Letter, arguing that the letter is a defense of transphobic and racist thinkers "under the guise of free speech and free exchange of ideas" (para. 27) that has a silencing effect on the voices of Black, trans, and otherwise historically marginalized journalists & thinkers while the "cis white intellectuals... have never faced serious consequences – only momentary discomfort" (para. 29). Although an entire paper could be spent compiling, analyzing, and commenting on the debates that ensued as a result of the Harper's Letter, the point I want to make here is that this debate is evidence of a clear divide on issues of free speech, economic and employment security, identity, inclusion, power and privilege, even across social groups that in theory share a desire for free expression and social justice.

This debate highlights several important questions about what it means to be living in this time period. This debate frames elites and marginalized people against each other and evidences changing social norms regarding "free speech" – its importance for democracy as well as the possible limitations of free speech. Too often "free speech" gets deployed as a defense of oppressive sentiments and language, and online call-outs and cancelling are a discursive

strategy that aims to disrupt such sentiments and put them into the "zone of abhorrence" that Klein described. These letters indicate a polarized disagreement of how best to respond to people and institutions whose views and speech acts are oppressive. At risk of sounding too moderate, both letters bring up valid points. I feel the Harper's Letter does articulate – albeit in a very generalized way – what many people have been feeling in recent years, about the speed at which people can be fired from jobs for anything from a misunderstood Tweet to uncovered evidence of Blackface from a party in 1997, to multiple acts of sexual violence. I can understand where academics, journalists, and writers are coming from when they make the argument that in a pluralistic society, everyone must be free to express dissenting opinions, even when they are unpopular or even controversial. I can also appreciate the counter-letter, which sheds light on the ways that dominant discourses are produced by elites while marginalized voices are excluded. It also provided detailed examples of some of the oppressive social stances harboured by some of the signatories. In doing so the counter-letter argues that the Harper's Letter was disingenuous because it argued for free speech even though some of the signatories have used their platforms and influence to encourage the silencing of marginalized people. They also argue that Black, brown, and trans people are at the forefront of these public calls for accountability, and that therefore the Harper's Letter is just an example of entitled elites feeling threatened by a changing status quo. This high-level debate seemed to exacerbate an already inflamed conversation about the boundaries and limits of free speech.

Contention, Debate and the Urge to Pick a Side

When people engage in these debates feel compelled to take a polarized stance, this may lead to missed opportunities to explore opportunities to work towards concerted efforts to simultaneously reduce oppression, allow for free speech and dissent, encourage job security, equity and inclusion, and work towards social justice goals. Debates about cancel culture often fall into a binary – whether it's good or bad, left or right wing, real or fake, accountability or

authoritarian – and when this happens it can become easy to over-generalize. In a podcast episode on shame and cancel culture, Klein (2020) sidestepped the binary approach to this debate by suggesting that one of the outcomes of an increased use of shaming as an online accountability strategy is its overuse; the more shame is used as a tool, the more it can overshadow or eclipse other possible strategies to negotiate dissent or to hold people accountable for harm. It seems Klein is pondering the possibility of cancel culture as emerging from a positive feedback loop – the increased prevalence of online shaming/cancellation leads to more outrage which in turn leads to more online shaming. Overusing shame as an accountability strategy, Klein seems to suggest, comes at a cost to our collective social imagination; harmed and outraged people begin to turn to shaming as a first resort instead of as the last resort. Klein's stance is critical of the potential overuse of shame as a disciplinary or punitive tool, without placing individual blame on the "cancellers," so to speak.

Misappropriation of "Cancel Culture" by Right-Wing Conservatives

Clark's assertion that the term cancel culture has become a "reductive and malignant label" (89) by elites was further confirmed in 2021 when Republicans in the United States took to using cancel culture as a derisive term to denounce those who disagree with their political opposition and to express outrage about political consequences they face for unjust behaviours. In Summer 2020 former US President Donald Trump blamed cancel culture as the motivation for protestors (whom he named "totalitarians") taking down monuments in response to racist police brutality during the COVID-19 pandemic. His supporters responded with overwhelming cheers (Barbaro 2020). In January 2021, Canadian Conservative MP Derek Sloan was terminated from his position for accepting a $131 donation from a white supremacist disguised under another donor's name. Social conservative headlines such as Rebel News and Real Women of Canada described his termination as an example of cancel culture, describing Conservative Party Leader Erin O'Toole as hypocritical and dishonourable (Real Women of

Canada 2021; Levant 2021). This same month, then-president Donald Trump was charged with impeachment on the basis that he incited a violent protest where thousands of pro-Trump supporters broke into the Washington Capitol Senate, leaving 5 people dead and over 140 people injured (Jackman 2021; Healy 2021). During the trial, Trump's defense attorney, Michael van der Heen, named the attempt at the historic second impeachment of then-president to be "constitutional cancel culture" (Smialowski 2021). These are a few examples of the ways cancel culture continues to be misappropriated so that it not only refers to cultural boycotts aimed to take away social or economic capital from a celebrity or an elite, but also to incite backlash against political processes that prevent abuses of power on the part of elected officials.

Section 3: Free speech and the culture of dissent on university campuses

In the last ten years, university campuses have been depicted by the media as spaces rife with contested debates of free speech, safe spaces, trigger warnings, and censorship. This environment is not direct evidence of cancel culture but points to heated debates about free speech and censorship, and the zone of abhorrence discussed earlier in this chapter, which underlies the debate about cancel culture. These debates seem to highlight the ways that rising intolerance of the status quo has also been expressed within universities, spaces that have long been proud to be seen as harbours for free speech, rigorous debates, and contested conversations.

The Chicago Letter

In 2016, the University of Chicago (in)famously pitted free speech against safe spaces when freshman students received a letter from the Dean of Students John Ellison that stated one of the defining characteristics of the university environment is "our commitment to freedom of inquiry and expression" (para. 2). The letter states that the university sees "Diversity of opinion and background is a fundamental strength of our community" but that they "do not

condone the creation of intellectual 'safe spaces' where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odd with their own" (para. 3). This letter received both praise and criticism from students, faculty, university administration, and the media. One of the critiques is that the letter unfairly "distorted programs on which many students rely, ignored the hostility many students feel on campus, and belittled the sincerity of faculty members who work to make higher education more inclusive" (Jaschik 2016). Columbia University President Lee C. Bollinger's (2019) response to the letter argues that the "free-speech crisis on campus" isn't real and that campus incidents are "sometimes manufactured for their propaganda value" and that "[t]hey shed no light on the current reality of university culture" (para. 17). This debate (real or constructed) may be another example of how complex conversations get decontextualized and propagandized in the "public sphere" in ways that generate profit while also unfairly belittling the concerns of marginalized voices.

While this letter pre-dates the widespread use of the term cancel culture, there are similarities between the two debates (that of free speech and that of cancel culture), both of which center around the question of freedom of expression, with advocates of marginalized voices highlighting that the "public sphere" has been a space that has historically been free for some, and less free for others (Clark 2020, 89). Those who "cancel" others (whether by boycott, protest, public shaming, etc.) are doing so in response to the blurring lines between "free speech" and "hate speech." Student protests have invigorated mainstream debates about the importance of, and possible limits to, free speech on university campuses in instances where public talks have been cancelled due to safety concerns for speakers ranging from far-right polemicist Milo Yiannopoulos (Park and Lah 2017) to Black Marxist scholar Adolph Reed Jr. (Powell 2020). In May 2021 Idaho lawmakers passed a bill to ban critical race theory from being taught in public schools and universities across the state (Asmelash 2021), a monumental and devastating decision that highlights the ways that "free speech" is often deployed selectively, according to the biases and perspectives held by those in positions of power.

Jordan Peterson's Influence in Conversations on Gender and Free Speech

Conversations about free speech and censorship on universities were made infamous in Canada in 2016 when McGill University Professor Jordan Peterson expressed his concern that free speech was under attack after the passing of Bill C-16, which amended the Canadian Human Rights Act to include gender identity and gender expression as prohibited grounds for discrimination. This provoked polarized opinions about the term "free speech" and Peterson was put in the spotlight, eventually becoming praised as an icon of the "alt right". His position on gender identity, expression, and pronouns drew ire and scrutiny from leftists whom he calls "postmodern neo-Marxists" – a universalizing label that posits everyone on the left as illiberal perpetrators of censorship intent on shutting everybody down – and praise from conservatives and moderates who "just feel like political correctness has gone too far." This inflamed debate seemed to have the effect of pushing the concept of "free speech" further right; just as the phrase and ideal of "personal responsibility" has been tainted by the individualizing and self-responsibilizing narratives of neoliberalism (also championed by Jordan Peterson), the term "free speech" tends to inflame progressive, left-wing people, and radicals, often because it can be used to justify and defend transphobic, Islamophobic, homophobic, racist, or misogynist sentiments. Alt-right commentators tend to uphold free speech as a crucial element of society in order to defend views that are seen to be controversial or outright harmful. This recoding of free speech is entwined in conversations about cancel culture, because cancelling can often involve condemning someone based on something they say, believe, or do, or a political perspective they adhere to, or other perspectives deemed problematic.

Section 4: Racial Justice, #BlackLivesMatter and Accountability Culture

In May of 2020, amidst the crisis of the COVID-19 global pandemic, Black American George Floyd was killed at the hands of Minneapolis police. A video of his cruel and untimely death was captured by an onlooker, which went viral, stimulating a global, much-needed

reckoning of ongoing police brutality in the United States and abroad. This provoked outcries for racial justice just after Breonna Taylor had also been unjustly targeted by police and killed in her own home (BBC 2021), particularly since these are just two high-profile examples of the ongoing racist police brutality that is embedded in the criminal punishment system in the United States, Canada, and other countries. In this context, digital technologies and social media platforms played a huge role in bringing awareness of racist police brutality and organizing protests calling for police reform, among other important goals. In Edmonton, Alberta where I live, a protest for racial justice took place that drew over 15,000 attendees (Caley and Heidenrech 2020). Not only have protesters taken to the streets in Canada, the US and elsewhere to take down "monuments to white oppressors" (Kornhaber 2020), social media platforms have also been hosts to cascades of outcries to call out racist and otherwise hostile behaviours perpetuated by CEOs, journalists, actors, chefs, and more. During this reckoning, broadcast-style social media platforms have been used as a space where call-outs and public sentiment are used as a political strategy to hold individuals, corporations, and institutions responsible for making changes to harmful or exclusive policies, practices, or environments (Clark 2020, 89).

Many brands and corporations have faced public pressure to revise their workplace policies, hiring strategies, pay gaps, logos and brand names. Aunt Jemima, a well-known pancake syrup brand, came under fire for the 130-year-long use of a racial stereotype in their branding (Hsu 2021). They have since rebranded to Pearl Milling Company and made a $1 million commitment to "empower and uplift Black girls and women" (Hsu 2021.). In Edmonton, Alberta, the city's football team, which was named the Edmonton Eskimos, also faced public pressure to remove the slur against Inuit people from their name, and as of February 2021 they are now inviting fans to vote for alternatives (Staff 2021). Widespread public protest initiatives were strengthened through what Elisha Lim (2020b) calls the "radical algorithmic literacy" of grassroots activism through activist hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter and #ICan'tBreathe,

though is critical of the performative nature of corporations who perform solidarity online without making substantial changes to policies and practices that contribute to inequality. The sheer emotional force of the summer's events has acted as momentum in holding businesses, brands, and corporations accountable; thus, journalist Stephen Kornhaber (2020) argued in *The Atlantic* that the political climate of summer 2020 should not be understood as evidence of cancel culture (as Trump did when denouncing protestors), but as an "accountability culture." These examples highlight the way changing social norms can be disseminated on social media as a strategy to direct public pressure toward brands, corporations, individuals, and institutions to revise their policies, logos, or cultures, or to put a stop to harmful practices.

Conclusion

Cancel culture can be a difficult phenomenon to discuss because it continues to take on more and more meanings, connotations, and political baggage. It has undergone a process of "semantic bleaching" (Holliday in Kurtzleben 2021) in which a word or phrase undergoes a change in meaning or evolution due to its usage in society. Whereas both Clark and Ng define cancelling as a form of "cultural boycott," its widespread use in debates on free speech, accountability, and political division has led to an expansion of its meaning. Therefore, it can be hard to adequately or accurately define cancel culture or to identify what it means to be "cancelled." This is well-illustrated in a podcast episode of The New York Times *The Daily:*

> Cancel culture has been called a suitcase term, where people end up packing a whole variety of disparate terms and ideas into this one phrase. It can refer to things that are quite different, everything from having adversarial civil society, people being mean to each other, people being ousted from organizations for doing things to each other, boycotts, resignations. And this is a problem because when people debate cancel culture it's a moving target and it's hard to know what someone's referring to when someone else is talking about it. People can be using different definitions and then in effect be intentionally or unintentionally straw-manning each other. (Zeeshan Aleem in Barbaro 2020b)

This quote sums up the expansion of connotation that cancel culture continues to take on. Not only does it seem to have undergone semantic bleaching, it also seems to have become a floating

signifier: it has multiple and contradictory meanings and it "functions primarily as a vehicle for absorbing meanings that viewers want to impose upon it" (Oxford Reference). This can make it increasingly difficult to have informed conversations about cancel culture.

As I write this conclusion in May 2021 the meaning of the term "cancel culture" continues to morph and change, and the practices associated with cancelling continue to expand. Clark (2020) placed cancelling in the lineage of Black oral discursive resistance strategies which have served to put public and economic pressure upon people, institutions, and otherwise out-of-reach figures as a way to instigate social change by intervening upon racism, sexism, transphobia and other forms of bigotry. I have shown in this chapter, however, that cancelling and its overarching term, cancel culture, have been used to describe a host of online call-out practices covered in mainstream media, as well as debates on contemporary social issues. Sometimes, "cancel culture" is used by right-wing and conservatives to denounce legitimate critique and consequences enacted by the public and by democratic institutions. Recent tensions about free speech, hate speech and safe spaces on university campuses have been incorporated into discussions of cancel culture. In 2020, calls for racial justice in the United States and globally were also incorporated into the term cancel culture. While cancelling can be fairly accurately described as an online practice that calls for accountability after an individual or an institution has said or done something deemed hurtful or problematic, cancelling encompasses a wide range of discursive strategies that take place in online spaces such as Twitter and other social media platforms. The prevalence and intensity of debates surrounding cancel culture illustrate the contested and polarized nature of what it means to cancel someone, and raises questions about what it means for individuals to be held accountable through online discursive practices in a polarized and hyper-connected world where intolerable norms continue to be confronted in North American society.

Chapter 2: Affective, Collective, Punitive: Exploring Critiques of Cancelling Beyond the Mainstream

In 2020, just as the debates on cancel culture seemed to reach a fever pitch in mainstream media, new and prominent critiques also became more visible from activists, scholars and artists who identify the ways that call-outs and cancelling are being used *within* activist (brown 2020), socialist, leftist, social justice (Morrigan 2020; Ross in Chakrabarty 2020), and marginalized identity (Wynn 2020) communities to draw attention to harm, hurt, disagreements and violence alike. Black feminist Loretta J. Ross, trans advocate and philosopher Natalie Wynn, ecosocialist writer Clementine Morrigan, and Black feminist adrienne maree brown are a few of the writers who have begun to question and even denounce practices of cancelling that are being used *within* social movements and activist communities. These critiques draw either from personal experiences of being cancelled, or from observing their colleagues, friends, and comrades being cancelled, and identify the punitive ethos that underlies cancelling as a practice used amongst communities who are meant to be aligned and working towards solidarity.

As illustrated in Chapter One, the terms "cancelling" and "cancel culture" have both expanded significantly in their meaning and therefore refer to a host of online discursive practices and usages across the political spectrum. While mainstream debates about cancel culture persist, cancelling is becoming a more common term to describe online accountability call-outs in social media networks, particularly among online communities that share progressive views. I argued that discursive acts of cancellation of celebrities, public figures, and corporations have been understood as a "cultural boycott," an act that places public pressure upon out-of-reach elites to change intolerable behaviours. In this chapter I draw from emerging critiques of cancelling practices to make the case that when cancellation is used as an accountability strategy within activist and progressive communities, it can exacerbate (instead of resolve) conflict, and perpetuate (instead of address or intervene upon) harm. By overviewing

some of the practices of cancelling used within activist and progressive online communities –
including the use of shame, exile, and removal of material and social supports – I aim to
highlight the challenges that arise when online call-outs are used to address conflict,
misunderstanding, hurt and harm. Recognizing that "the way we treat each other is at the heart
of our movements for change" (Morrigan 2020, 16), these critiques illustrate the underlying
punitive ethos that often emerges in online activist and progressive spaces, and show a potential
need for a revival of resilience and solidarity while also addressing the harm, trauma, and pain
so often faced by historically marginalized communities. Overall, this chapter raises questions
about the possible limitations of cancelling as an accountability strategy at a time when online
public shaming has become prevalent in online spaces.

Section 1: Emerging Critiques of Cancelling

Contested Lineages

In the first chapter I used Meredith D. Clark's (2020) definition of cancelling which she
describes as a discursive resistance and accountability strategy rooted in Black oral traditions to
deliver public scrutiny and consequences to elites who do or say intolerable things. In Clark's
understanding, cancelling is a clear form of "punching up," wherein a marginalized collective
takes aim at an elite or otherwise out-of-reach public figure. However, cancelling as an online
practice is not limited to that trajectory; in fact, cancelling very often happens within
communities of aligned groups (i.e. among a group of activists, members of a Trans community,
or within a network of cultural workers, for example). Trans advocate and YouTube philosopher
Wynn, for example, likens cancelling to the feminist practice of what Jo Freeman (1976) called
"trashing," a form of "character assassination" used against other feminists "not… to expose
disagreements or resolve differences" but "to disparage and destroy" (in Wynn 2020). Ross, a
Black feminist, human rights scholar and activist, sees cancelling as a form of public shaming

and argues that it is a "long standing strain in human behaviour to be judgmental about people" (Ross in Bastide 2020). Ross does not point to a unified lineage to cancelling; instead she says that on the one hand, "original cancel culture was started by the Puritans, with the witch hunts," and on the other, cancelling has been used as a successful tool to address abuses of power. Moreover Ross points out that during the Civil Rights movement, in cases where people in movements made call-outs that were excessively divisive in intent, "we needed to figure out whether they were just naïve or really, an agent provocateur" (Ross in Chakrabarty 2020); this heightened suspicion was due to the infiltration of the FBI counter-intelligence program, COINTELPRO, "whose job... was to infiltrate all the organizations on the left." brown (2020), a Black feminist and transformative justice practitioner, argues that while call-outs can be powerful in intervening upon individuals or institutions who perpetuate patterns of abuse or exploitation, call-outs can also be "an incredible modern tool for those who are not committed to movements to use against those having impact" (53). In this quote brown is suggesting that an activist strategy (i.e. a call-out) can also be appropriated by counter-intelligence workers seeking to create division in solidarity movements in order to maintain the status quo. These three writers each place cancelling in a different lineage or tradition, but they share a recognition – that cancelling is a practice not merely directed at public elites, but used within communities of activists, students, identity groups, or a group of otherwise aligned people to exclude, shun, and divide.

Emerging Definitions

These alternative lineages to cancelling also lead critics to alternative definitions of cancelling. Whereas Ng (2020) and Clark (2020) see cancelling as a form of cultural boycott enacted by aligned and social justice-oriented communities online, Wynn and Clementine Morrigan define cancelling as more of a collective, punitive online practice of targeting individuals who are deemed problematic for their acts or behaviours. For example, Morrigan

(2020) defines "[c]ancellation [as] the process of being subjected to a campaign of harassment which extends to your friends and supporters" (28). This definition is very different from Clark and Ng's in that it identifies a pattern of collective shaming (that Morrigan refers to as harassment) that can emerge when a person is identified online as being problematic. Wynn's (2020) definition of cancelling is similar to Morrigan's: "…canceling is online shaming, vilifying and ostracizing of prominent members of a community by other members of that community." Wynn, a Trans woman who has been repeatedly cancelled and publicly shamed in online spaces as she rose to prominence as a YouTuber, sees cancelling as a collective process of exile that emerges within aligned communities. Both these definitions suggest that cancelling is at least as affective, if not more, than it is logical or rational. In the affective flow of social media call-outs, there is often a moral alignment among users who "pile on" to the person being called out, creating an us/them dichotomy that exacerbates ideological division (Bouvier 2020). These definitions and genealogies illustrate the variety of ways that cancelling is understood. Seeing responses to online call-outs as an affective flow sheds light on the ways that cancelling is not solely an accountability strategy or justice-seeking activity; cancelling also becomes an affective social practice where individuals, through a lens of moral superiority, impose punishment upon people in online spaces in an act of "gleeful vengeance" (Bouvier 2020, 9).

Affective Online Communities

Online spaces have in some ways made it easier for a vocal consensus to align on social issues and to denounce the words or actions of individuals, corporations and institutions who enact harmful practices or policies. Clark's (2020) commentary on cancelling (summarized in the first chapter) aims to maintain the integrity of cancelling as an accountability strategy by defining it as a practice that is *separate from* "[t]he noise of online harassment, doxxing, and bad-faith piling on that has evolved from the callout, the read, and the drag" (91). Clark drew primarily, however, from co-ordinated hashtag activist campaigns such as

#BeingBlackatMichigan or #ConcernedStudent1950, both of which fit her description of cancelling as an organized act of resistance against institutional racism facilitated by networked connectivity and culturally aligned communities (89-91). However, cancelling can also (or perhaps alternatively) be understood as an affective flow that emerges within clusters of online social media users, what Bouvier (2020) calls *affective communities*. Bouvier defines an affective community as a group of people who share ideological and political views grouped together in a "highly insular and nodal" (2) environment created by social media platforms. These affective communities are not necessarily "characterized by coherent rational discussion, but more by floods of emotion and affect, based around highly simplified narratives comprised of clear polarities of good and evil" (2). Bouvier's description of online responses to call-outs shows that social media users do not always engage in the rational, collective process Clark describes; many users may be engaging in an act of "bad-faith piling on" without making attempts to assess and deliver suitable consequences relative to the alleged harm. This bad-faith piling on can quickly lead to unmediated and dehumanizing flows of affect directed at an individual by an unlimited number of users, and can be ephemeral or sustained for months or even years.

Horizontal Hostility and Solidarity in Social Movements

Ross (in Chakrabarty 2020) refers to the increasingly common practice of call-outs as a form of "horizontal hostility" which she argues can be detrimental to social movements. Movements that work towards social, economic and cultural equity include but are not limited to gay, lesbian and trans rights, civil rights, reproductive and racial justice, environmental justice and climate change activism, disability rights, economic justice and feminism. Human rights activism is rooted in related and even parallel goals and outcomes, but sometimes methods and philosophies used by people within these movements to achieve these goals will differ, which inevitably leads to interpersonal conflicts, disagreements, biases, and conflict

which are bound to arise among empassioned activists. As Mariame Kaba, Stas Schmiedt and Lea Roth discussed in a Transformative Justice livestream discussion in 2019, conflict is a normal, healthy and generative aspect of social life, particularly among aligned communities that seek to improve the lives of equity-seeking groups. brown (2020), a mediator and transformative justice practitioner, shares this perspective, but observed in 2020 an increase of call-outs being used as an alternative to conflict resolution within aligned communities (54). For brown, this lack of ability to resolve conflict is underlaid by a tendency for individuals attuned to social change to interpret interpersonal relations and experiences through a "lens of violence, abuse, and victimization" (brown 2020, 26-27). brown attributes this lens in part to the role that oppression, discrimination, and marginalization often plays in the lives of the activists working towards social change; these experiences have been exacerbated in recent years in the United States by the racist, white supremacist and exclusionary, harmful rhetoric forwarded by the Trump Presidency as well as by the anxiety, fear, and isolation faced by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, brown (2020) argues that seeing through this lens can make it increasingly difficult to "discern between comrade and opponent" (2), which can lead to an increased likelihood of using call-outs as a method of responding to even minor conflicts. brown interprets cancelling and call-outs from a trauma-informed lens, a perspective similar to Morrigan's (2020) in the self-published zine *Fuck the Police Means We Don't Act Like Cops to Each Other*.

Section 2: Three Cases of Cancelling

Although call-outs and cancellations can be used to address and intervene upon harm, call-outs are being used not only to name perpetrators who enact sustained patterns of egregious abuse but also to ostracize people who may have made a mistake, disagreed, dissented, or been otherwise involved in minor conflict with another person (brown 2020, 18-41). This habit of conflating conflict with abuse is being identified as a pattern in leftist online spaces, where "[a]ccording to cancel culture a serial rapist, an organized white supremacist, and

a leftist who made a tweet you slightly don't agree with all deserve the same treatment"

(Morrigan 2020, 54). It becomes difficult to assess claims when even minor conflicts are being

called out online, and as Wynn (2020) notes, cancellations are "thrown around so frivolously on

social media" as a way to "escalate conflict instead of promot[ing] understanding." This section

draws from three diverse examples of cancelling ranging from minor to severe (in both alleged

harm and intensity of cancellation). I chose these cases because each case is an example of the

ways that cancellation is used *within* aligned communities (while recognizing that community

can be digital or physical, or a combination of the two).

Case 1

In November 2020, a queer-polyam-sex-educator who goes by the online alias Shrimp

Teeth wrote a blog post entitled "Cancelling Cancelling" where they cited a week's worth of

actions that led to them being publicly shamed or cancelled online: "Not being vegan enough for

vegans" (due to "occasionally eating clams"); "Inducing gender dysphoria for ALL trans people"

and accused of being a TERF (for using the acronym WET folks which is a shorthand for

"women, enby/non-binary/gender-nonconforming, and transgender people who've experienced

misogyny under the patriarchy"); posting a picture of "Going to the beach with my girlfriend"

instead of political content prior to the 2020 election; "Charging money for my work which

proves I'm a 'typical shitty white woman'"; being called to de-platform for "blocking folks who

were verbally abusive and attacked myself and other followers for having a difference in

opinion than them"; and last, but not least, "Refusing to TAKE ACCOUNTABILITY for my

atrociousness, thus further proving the validity of the accusations, by daring to turn off my

comment section to a mob of aforementioned vegans" (para. 6). Although these examples may

seem odd or even humorous, the cumulative effect of these discursive call-outs or cancellations

on social media led them to experience daily spirals of "genuine self-hatred leading to panic

attacks believing these random people I had never even laid eyes on with their private profiles

could entirely rip my life away" (para. 4). This is a clear-cut case of call-outs being used to coerce someone into believing or expressing certain views. It shows more of an economic angle where the users who endorse Shrimp Teeth do so on a conditional basis, and are quick to remove their support for even minor disagreements such as a language choice or food politics.

Case 2

In a blog post entitled "My Experience of Accountability Abuse," cultural somatic healer Tada Hozumi (2020) self-identifies as a survivor in a narrative summary of his years-long experience of ostracism, loss of friendship, public naming and shaming, and performative accountability call-ins that stemmed from an interpersonal conflict he experienced with another activist while living as roommates in co-operative housing in Vancouver, B.C. Hozumi describes accountability abuse as "the manipulation of social justice discourse on accountability to propagate harm" (para. 1). Hozumi's narrative illustrates the harm that can come from accountability processes, including the material consequences (chronic fatigue, loss of income, loss of reputation and isolation), and shows how quickly someone who is labeled "harmful" can also be subjected to harmful behaviours from community members who claim to be working towards social justice. According to Hozumi, he was publicly denounced in Facebook groups, cancelled from speaking events and workshops, and ostracized by friends and community for a rumour spread that said he "had a very problematic past in the form of physical and sexual assault, directly and indirectly related to one of our members back in Vancouver" (para. 40). Hozumi takes the identity of survivor because he writes that he does not have a past history of physical or sexual assault; he speculates that this claim seems to have arisen from the earlier conflict with his former roommate. Hozumi's account shows that each time he faced consequences (such as being removed from a Facebook group or having his workshop cancelled at an event), he asked community organizers to detail the specifics of the claim made against him, but none brought the specifics of the claim forward. This is an example of the ways that

claims of harm can circulate in increasingly vague ways through social media networks and aligned communities, creating an environment of exile for the accused party that can have long-lasting consequences, including the loss of financial supports that may be necessary for healing and repair.

Case 3

Call-outs are also used on social media to respond to more serious incidents of harm. In 2017, for example, a Black queer non-binary anarchist, educator, and leftist propagandist named Gem was accused of sexual assault by someone they had been on a date with 6 months prior. According to Gem's response essay published on their blog ("an essay" 2021), a friend of the victim reached out to Gem to tell them the victim experienced a breach of consent by Gem during their sexual experience. In a reflective account of the night's events, Gem grapples with this claim as they attempt to reconcile their experience of what they thought was consensual sex with the experience of the survivor:

> Even though I didn't remember a change in body language or a communicated withdrawal of consent, my life up until that point had taught me that my memory wasn't worth trusting. It didn't matter what I remembered or what I believed about myself. We believe survivors. (2021, para. 9).

Gem, who also identifies as a survivor of sexual assault, admits that "[they] don't remember a consent conversation. Or a discussion of boundaries," followed by the admission that "[b]eing a bisexual masculine-leaning person is such a confusing state to exist in" and asked, "Was it my sole responsibility as the 'top' to initiate and foster that conversation?" (para. 8). After these reflections Gem expresses willingness to "silenc[e] my own experience as a survivor in favor of my new identity as a harm doer" (para. 11). According to the essay Gem was told the survivor did not want an accountability process – they just wanted to not share space with Gem in the future. It seems that Gem agreed to this request.

On June 30, 2020 a community accountability process was held on Instagram live hosted by another community member on Instagram, whose relationship with the survivor was

unclear. This accountability process on Instagram live was part of a process Gem describes in

2021 in their essay where they write:

> The mob is loud and angry. I follow the rules and choose to stay alive. They burn me at the stake over and over and over again. I keep hoping the last time was the last time but I'm learning it'll never end. "Call yourself a rapist." "Admit your harm." "Center the victim." "Take accountability." Nobody can tell me what that means. I read through the comments. From what I gather accountability is silence. It's hiding my face and voice as punishment for this unforgivable sin against an undefinable, ever-growing "community." It is starting every new connection with my tail between my legs, flashing my scarlet letter and praying for clemency. It's not enough to apologize and demonstrate a change in behavior. My punishment must be perpetual. (para. 12)

In this public Instagram live video (which as of May 2021 had been viewed more than 106,000

times) the host, a Black femme who identifies as an abolitionist engaged Gem in a conversation

about accountability. Gem was first asked to take accountability for Tweets they made at age 17

in 2012 which made light of rape. Gem apologized and took total accountability. Then Gem was

told that their use of the expression "breach of consent" in their essay was harmful and a form of

minimizing, Gem responds by explaining that their use of this expression – "breach of consent"

– was mirroring the language of the survivor but then takes responsibility by naming what they

did – "I admit it, I raped, that's what I did."

During this video the host says that "accountability isn't pretty" and that the

"accountability process is not friendly," and calls Gem a "symbol for rapists everywhere,"

labeling them "sickening" and "disgusting" multiple times. In this accountability process Gem is

questioned as to why more accountability measures weren't taken by Gem who responds by

explaining that they believed they were following the requests of the survivor which were 1) to

not contact the survivor; 2) to not share physical space with the survivor and 3) to protect the

survivor's anonymity and not speak publicly about it:

> I've had a really hard time balancing the survivor's request with the request for transparency around this... I believed at the time when I was originally called out in March of 2019, I believed that by releasing the statement that I did and taking the six months I was asked to take out of community, I believed that that was accountability... I did not know what else could be done in that moment to take accountability... The survivor's request was anonymity... I never hid from this, I showed up the way I was

asked to. I listened to the survivor, what they asked me to do was to shut the fuck up and stay away from them and that's what I've done.

During the accountability process Gem is given multiple new accountability measures including the need to de-platform completely and furthermore, disperse their social media followers to other Black social media users, give all the money Gem received from Patreon to the survivor and to other Black accounts, and to not show up in community spaces. When asking about Gem's creation of a different Instagram account, what the host called "re-branding," the host says they are "sickened and disgusted by people who change and morph, that's so deceitful." Although Gem agreed to these accountability measures, the response from the host and others were that Gem was "lying," "gaslighting" and "minimizing" the survivor's harm.

This accountability live was described as what the community wanted to see from Gem, and wasn't initially labeled as transformative justice. However, it was described afterward as "informative as a model of what transformative justice and accountability might look like going forward" (Oehmke 2020, para. 2). From a transformative justice (TJ) perspective, however, this accountability process does not resemble a transformative approach to addressing harm. Miriame Kaba and adrienne maree brown have very explicitly stated that from a TJ perspective it is dangerous to coerce someone to publicly admit to a criminal offense (brown and brown 2020); forcing another community member to admit on video to a criminal offense could, in this instance, act as proof of prosecution of up to a 14-year jail sentence. For Gem, their vulnerability due to this admission could arguably be enhanced due to their identity as a Nigerian immigrant in the United States, where Black and people of colour are disproportionately criminalized. The goals of transformative justice are not to perpetuate harm upon a harm-doer, but to create the conditions necessary for the harm-doer to take responsibility, including looking at the conditions within the community that may have enabled this harm to take place. In this accountability process, the focus is on removing Gem from community (both online and in-person) in an act of exile as just punishment for the harm that they caused (regardless of intent).

The demand to de-platform is not just a removal from community but also a blocking of financial income which is a removal of basic needs for self-sufficiency.

Although this accountability process was described as rooted in abolition (presumably prison abolition), the online shaming Gem faced and the shaming and proliferation of demands is nevertheless punitive as they are asked to be held accountable to "an ever-growing community" (an essay 2020, para. 12) on social media. From an outsider's perspective, watching this process unfold looks more like what Molly Frances describes as an entertainment spectacle than an intervention upon harm:

> A person is publicly accused of some type of violence or harm by another(s) through a social media post. Attention is drawn to the spectacle, perhaps by tagging others in the post or asking the audience outright to "signal boost." Then, those in the audience spread the word, decrying the accused's bad language or behavior, or contacting them demanding "accountability." What that "accountability" looks like is variably, and not always clearly, defined. Games of telephone ensue. Often, these accusations reappear after a time, decontextualized, and the cycle continues. (Frances 2020, para. 27).

> Frequently, in the time following the call out, the cancelled is assigned epithets such as a "known transphobe," even after they have publicly apologized and tried atoning, which follow them indefinitely. Unfortunately, in this ideology, there is no true path for redemption. Weeks, months, years of continued harassment and repetition of the addressed or dispelled claims are considered "the consequences of one's actions," and something one must accept because one's "ego" matters less than "justice," which demands "a lifetime of doing the work." (Frances 2021, para. 13).

Frances' description of the accountability spectacle mirrors many of the elements of Gem's call-out, particularly the perpetual punishment Gem faces despite their repeated apologies, descriptions of growth and learning, and continued acceptance of more consequences. What I will add to this description of the accountability spectacle is the monetization of this call-out, because this community accountability process became entwined with capital gains. In the accountability live the host made requests for online payment for the emotional labour of this event. It is unclear why the host imposed multiple new demands on Gem – only one of them was mentioned as being a demand of the survivor. This proliferation of accountability becomes monetized so that it is not only about Gem's punishment but also about the flows of capital that can be shifted through this spectacle – to shift Gem's followers to other accounts, to gain likes

and shares, to transfer money from Gem to others, for the host to make money in exchange for their emotional labour. Thus, the accountability process itself becomes a commodity, and scapegoating a harm-doer on social media becomes a form of capital exchange.

Finally, the subtext of these ongoing calls for accountability also imply that Gem cannot change. This accountability process seems to be reliant on a strict victim/perpetrator binary that reduces the complexity of the incident and of the experiences of both parties:

> This restrictive narrative does not allow the full humanity of the victim/survivor or the abuser/perpetrator, and labeling people as one or the other perpetuates the cyclical nature of abuse. It dehumanizes one set of people ("predators") as a way to superficially address the needs of another set of people ("victims").

> Calling out abuse can be a powerful act for an individual, but without support beyond this act, it's difficult to locate a place of power or "justice." The shunning, isolation, and in many cases, incarceration of people who fall into the "perpetrator" category does not solve the problem of sexual violence, and often overlooks, if it does not outright ignore, the fact that the person's behavior is possibly, even likely, part of a familial or generational cycle. Opportunities for healing on an individual level, let alone a community level, are lost. (Ortiz n.d., para. 6-7).

The host responds to Gem in the accountability live that "there's no growth, there's no change" after they say they have been reading, learning and self-reflecting on the harm they caused. I come away from the accountability process with the characterization of Gem as being forever exiled, which does little to create the conditions for repair. Despite Gem's continued admissions and descriptions of willingness to change, this accountability spectacle seems to ensure Gem's isolation and ostracism, leaving onlookers with the impression that Gem is unable to repair, atone or change.

Section 3: Harm, Punishment and the Gleeful Delight of Ostracism

The use of online call-outs to resolve conflict and harm can be ineffective because they can exacerbate division, harm, and provoke trauma for the accused in cases where the conflict might have been more effectively addressed by alternative methods, such as conversations to resolve the conflict, boundary setting (Morrigan 2020, 40), mediation, or other processes of

community accountability (brown 2020, 55). In cases where two community members, for example, have a disagreement, a cancellation often leads to a "blocking [of] resolution by overstating harm" (Morrigan 2020, 20) instead of a reconciliatory process. The consequences of cancellation include but are not limited to: shaming, threats and humiliation (often sustained over a period of time, meting out of punishments (brown 2020, 49), demands for an immediate apology (with no option to respond otherwise), withdrawals of community support (Morrigan 2020, 31), as well as the loss of job, community, reputation, and platform (brown 41), housing, income, and sense of self (Morrigan 2020, 9). As brown notes, call-outs sometimes use public shaming and calls for the accused to "disappear completely to be accountable" (45) which in TJ principles is a contradiction because exile (whether physical or digital) is a removal from a community which brown states is the "worst form of punishment" (45).

Several recent examples of online call-outs have led to severe and sustained online cruelty and harassment which have resulted in suicidal ideation (Frances 2020; Morrigan 2020; Rose 2019) and even suicide (Wynn 2020). Not only do these responses not have at their core a survivor-centered focus, they are forms of punishment that do not cultivate the conditions necessary for the accused to take responsibility (Morrigan 2020, 32); instead they may pressure someone to apologize out of fear, in order to "escape further exile rather than to genuinely repair" (32). These forms of punishment (even though they are called "accountability") can blur the lines between victim and perpetrator – where the perpetrator becomes subjected to sustained campaigns of harassment, this begins to look more like cyberbullying than accountability.

Cyberbullying

On Episode 11 of the podcast *Fucking Cancelled* (Morrigan and Jay 2021a), Black trans photographer from Toronto Jah Grey talks about his ongoing experience of being cancelled over a three-year period. Reflecting upon this experience, he observes that there is an ethos of

dehumanization present in the cancellation of people who have done harm: that although bullying, abuse, and harassment are intolerable actions, these actions become justified once a cancellation campaign begins – even if and when these behaviours inevitably lead to more harm. Cyber-bullying is defined as "use of the internet, cell phones, texting and other technologies to send cruel, untrue, or hurtful messages about someone or to someone that causes harm" (Brown, Cassidy, and Jackson 2009, 70). Bullying behaviours include "intentional harm to a victim," "a repetition of harmful behaviours," and "a power imbalance between the victim and the perpetrator(s) of the bullying behaviour" (Olweus in Cassidy, Faucher, and Jackson 2013, 578). Cyberbullying behaviours include "Rumours, gossip, exclusion, and attacks against reputations and relationships" (578) and these are often integral components of cancellation campaigns, particularly when claims are false, exaggerated, taken out of context, and circulated through social media.

Although cyberbullying has been identified as a prevalent issue among school-aged youth (578) and adults of all ages (Vogels 2021), cases of accountability call-outs are not commonly understood as cyberbullying. It is as if the alleged harm justifies the consequences delivered by the reach of social media. And while consequences can and often are a response to harm, in online spaces the consequences are largely unregulated and unmediated by the platforms. Therefore, there is no limit to who can join in by circulating claims (real or exaggerated) and no limit to how much hate mail, doxxing, and harassment someone can be subjected to online. While celebrities who get cancelled have PR teams and are more likely to experience cancelling at an emotional distance, regular people who face sustained campaigns of cancellation can experience a cancellation not as accountability but as bullying, and some of the outcomes of this experience include "depression, poor self-esteem, anxiety, suicidal ideation and psychosomatic problems like headaches and sleep disturbances" (Olweus in Cassidy, Faucher, and Jackson 2013, 581). These consequences are often dismissed as the price one pays for doing harm; however, they do not remedy the behaviour in question; and converting a harm-doer (a

perpetrator) into a victim of cyberbullying not only perpetuates harm but re-entrenches division and cultivates a culture of compliance (Morrigan 2020).

Wynn's "Tropes of Cancelling"

In order to better understand how public calls for accountability can evolve into cyberbullying on social media networks, I will draw upon Wynn's January 2020 video critique of cancelling as it is enacted within online spaces. In this video, Wynn identifies seven prevalent patterns of behaviour in online cancellations, which she labels "The Tropes of Cancelling." These 7 patterns include: 1) The Presumption of Guilt (of the accused); 2) Abstraction (where the specifics of the alleged harm are replaced with a generic statement of the harm); 3) Essentialism (where the focus moves from the critique of an alleged harm-doer's actions to a critique of them as a person); 4) Pseudo-Moralism or Pseudo Intellectualism (where audience members act as if they are "concerned citizens" while piling on attacks that take on gleeful qualities of revenge and moral superiority); 5) No Forgiveness (where even a sincere apology will be dismissed as insincere); 6) The Transitive Property of Cancellation (where those associated with a cancelled person can also be cancelled); and 7) Dualism (where the cancelled's actions become proof of their essential "badness"; "if a person says or does a bad thing, we should interpret that as the mask slipping; as a momentary glimpse of their essential wickedness"). Wynn's in-depth analysis, which incorporates lived experiences of witnessing and experiencing multiple cancellations from the trans Twitter community (of which she was a part before "being cast out forever"), is candid and as entertaining as it is informative. Wynn argues that cancelling in online spaces is not a form of constructive or collective criticism, but a spectacle of online public shaming.

Online harassment can be provoked when a claim of harm goes through a process of abstraction and essentialism (Wynn 2020), wherein the original claim of harm by the accused can instead become a critique of the accused's inherent nature. For example, if someone is called

out for saying something transphobic, the specifics of the claim can quickly get lost and the accused then becomes essentialized. Instead of a critique of one's action, it can morph into a critique of the person themself. So instead of the claim that "Tom said _____ which is a transphobic statement," the claim can become abstracted as follows: "Tom *is* a transphobe." While this may be dismissed as simply discursive shorthand, Wynn shows that it can significantly inflame online cruelty; those engaging with the post may use their imagination to conjure up all the transphobic dehumanizing things Tom said or did (which, as Wynn argues, may be more extreme than the original offense). Or, the claim may be vague and abstracted to begin with. As brown (2020) notes, this can lead to a "piling on effect," a "feeding frenzy" of online public shaming that leads to "instant judgement or punishment" (43). Such online shaming can have long-lasting consequences including "loss of reputation, job, platform, or community" (41). Through this process, the "[d]etails of the offense blur or compound as others add their own opinions and experiences to the story" (41). Once someone is marked for cancelling (Morrigan and Jay 2021a), they often become susceptible to what Wynn (2020) calls the "collation of crimes," where prior (perceived or real) offenses from their social media are dug up and compiled via "suspicious trawling behaviours aimed at 'uncovering the truth' of one's 'badness'." Wynn argues that this pattern is "very similar to techniques used against trans people by internet fascists." The tendency toward essentialism in online claims (Tom *is* a sexual predator) can dehumanize the accused and justify a piling on of more claims that need not be assessed for their validity (Morrigan 2020, 54).

Wynn's analysis ultimately shows the process of abstraction, essentialism, and subsequent dehumanization of accused individuals online. Morrigan (2020) similarly argues that call-outs are not rooted in accountability, but in "a culture of disposability" which "promotes fear and shame" (12). brown (2020), Morrigan (2020), and Wynn (2020) have all argued that online cancellations feed into and inflame divisive dichotomies (good/bad, us/them), which can justify the dehumanization of the accused, in turn provoking name-calling,

threats, ostracization, and physical or digital exile. These behaviours seem like an over-reach of social justice aims. Ross, a human rights activist, has argued that fighting for human rights by violating another's human rights is a contradiction (Ross in Chakrabarty 2020). But in online spaces these behaviours become possible to justify if they are directed at a harm-doer, despite the unlikelihood of these behaviours leading to the harm-doer taking responsibility. That being said, if an accused is essentialized there is no way to identify whether they are truly a sex predator – and who wants to be seen publicly defending one of society's most repulsive characters?

Shame

Shame is a key element used in this type of cancellations, which critics of cancel culture and cancelling argue is not a useful technique to promote change. As Morrigan (2020) argues, shame creates "a deep belief that there is something wrong with me" and it "results in defensiveness and denial, or compliance and submission" (33) but does not provide the conditions necessary to "do the really deep and hard work that taking actual responsibility requires" (31-32). Wynn also argues that shaming can provoke the accused to double down, get defensive, and lash out (in Bastide 2020), which may lead to further proof of what a terrible person the accused really is. Proponents of cancel culture rightly argue that it is not the survivor's or victim's responsibility to create or facilitate the conditions necessary for a perpetrator to address and change their behaviour. However, when call-outs provoke intense episodes of collective public shaming from a broader audience, the lines between victim and perpetrator can be blurred, especially in cases where the call-out is a result of a misunderstanding, mistake or difference of opinion.

Exile

When accusations are publicly disseminated through social media, the validity or accuracy of the claims are not assessed and the consequences and the forms of punishment are not mediated. brown (2020) observes that these demands for accountability often encourage the "need to disappear completely to be accountable" (45), the creation of a form of virtual or physical exile that exacerbates division instead of creating the necessary conditions where repair, responsibility, reconciliation or healing could take place (Morrigan 2020, 31-32). In addition, brown, Morrigan, and Wynn have observed that the demand for an apology must "accept the framing that the person calling you out is putting forward, and accept whatever consequences this person thinks you deserve" (67). Attempts by the accused to respond, explain, or even refute the accusations often act as further evidence of the accused's wrongdoing. brown argues that the demand for a "coherent apology from someone who has been forcibly removed from power or credibility feels like a set up" (brown 2020, 49), and that even sincere apologies can act "like blood in the water, escalating the feeding frenzy instead of satisfying our hunger for justice" (49).

The Collective Effect of Cancelling

A Tweet share or Instagram story that name-calls, shames, or even demands accountability may seem easy to ignore or justify, but the collective response to a call-out can feel incredibly overwhelming: "as a collective, they have a terrifying power that they don't seem to be aware of as individuals" (Wynn 2020). Often the accused is identified as holding a position of power (either by being a prominent member of society, by having more followers, a larger measure of success, or by virtue of their identity position) which justifies the harassment; but in cancellation campaigns, the power of the masses isn't accounted for (Morrigan 2020, 68).

Conclusion

Although cancelling is often described as a strategy to rectify injustices, correct bad behaviour, and even dole out consequences to those with power, the lines of *who* holds power are increasingly being blurred in cases where cancellation, as shown earlier, is being used to escalate conflicts among community members who in theory share common goals. Ross refers to this as "horizontal hostility," an action involving members of a group targeting others of the same group in what she colourfully describes as "a sadistic festival of hatred" (in Chakrabarty 2020). In these cases, instead of receiving constructive criticism, one can become "the target of an angry, bullying mob for something that may not have even been a mistake, it's maybe just a difference of opinion, or a bad joke that didn't land right on somebody" (Ross in Chakrabarty 2020). For Ross, who has decades of experience in civil rights, feminist, and reproductive justice activism, this horizontal hostility is a form of behaviour that is not new in social justice movements. Ross argues, however, that this climate of intolerance can slow or compromise the desired goals of social justice movements—which, as Ross points out, are plural, diverse, and require solidarity, dissent, and difference in order to be successful.

This chapter has been an overview of some of the harmful effects that have become common in online cancellations among social justice minded people and social media users. It has illustrated the complexity of cancelling as an accountability strategy and demonstrated that sometimes, this accountability can evolve (or devolve) into campaigns of cyberbullying which blur the lines of perpetrator and victim. On social media platforms it is difficult or perhaps impossible to mediate or mitigate the extent of the reach of a cancellation. Although public pressure can be a useful strategy for a corporation or a celebrity to take accountability or responsibility for harm they have caused, this strategy can quickly become harmful when it is enacted upon individuals. Too often cancellation leads to rumours, exclusion, shaming and humiliation, exile, and the loss of material, physical or communal supports. As brown and

Morrigan point out, these behaviours are not in line with the kinds of relationships necessary to effect collective change.

Chapter 3: Identity Economics, the Commodification of Harm and Social Media Algorithmic Production of Division

Chapter One presented an overview of mainstream debates of cancel culture – as it is depicted, debated, and denounced by media, journalists, celebrities, politicians and elites and in media and communications technology. I demonstrated that the term "cancel culture" has become enriched with multiple meanings due to debates in mainstream media about inequality, free speech, racial justice and changing social norms. In Chapter Two, I took a different perspective, analyzing the ways in which cancelling is becoming a common phenomenon within and among activist and progressively aligned communities. By drawing from new critiques of cancelling and in particular the harmful effects of this collective online shaming practice, I raised some questions about the limitations of this type of justice-seeking strategy which is often described as a form of accountability, even when the practices used involve punishment. Originally, my intent in my thesis was to find a way to understand the ways that online call-outs not only respond to claims of harm but also perpetrate harm. In the process of witnessing call-outs I have found myself feeling perplexed by a compulsion to "weigh out" one person's harm against another, compelled to find out the "truth" of the harm and the "truth" of the accused's badness. At times, it feels like call-outs are made in bad faith, but this feeling is in deep conflict with the feminist tenet to believe survivors. If I had doubts about the call-out's validity, I must be a victim-blamer, a rape apologist, a white supremacist, or any other number of labels that are not aligned with my values nor practice. In some call-outs, the harm provoked in online shaming (mental health, financial and social repercussions) can seem at least as harmful as the harm disclosed in the call-out. This observation causes me discomfort because it may sound like victim-blaming; however, it's not necessarily the disclosure in itself that causes harm, but the affective flow created by users on social media.

I have felt continuously unable to articulate the way in which identity plays a role in these call-outs, as well; often when people participate in the "cancelling" process of a targeted person, they are doing so on the assessment of the marginalized status of one person's identity vs. another – when the harmed person's identity checks more boxes than the harm-doer's identity. This observation is difficult to grapple with because it feels at times like a cynical and structuralist approach to identity politics is taking place on social media platforms, but that feeling is hard to articulate without falling into a dismissal of the importance of identity politics. Call-outs become not only a form of speaking out, but also a spectacle, a car wreck in slow motion – once you start watching, you can't turn away. This cycle of questioning and confusion led me to wonder what all of these call-outs, and my feelings of anxiety surrounding them, have in common. And the answer was: social media. More specifically, though, is the attention economy that powers social media. Within these spaces we post our most intimate stories, confessions, and successes. We experience a whole host of human emotions and affects that are directly facilitated, curated and even generated (within our bodies) by these platforms.

Social media platforms play an integral role in our social, economic, political, and psychological lives. These innovative platforms facilitate new and existing connections with friends, family, and intimate partnerships. They make marketing and self-entrepreneurialism more accessible, so one can promote their brand, products or services. They can be curated in such a way as to support the promotion of artists and cultural producers. They have also been useful in raising awareness of political issues and facilitating connections among aligned communities, and are a common space for online call-outs. Embedded in these possibilities is the pressure to create *oneself* as a "brand" – and this brand is enmeshed in complex ways with one's subjectivity and identity. These are just a few of the ways in which social media has become an integral influence in social, cultural, political and economic life for billions of people worldwide.

Posting personalized content on social media is a practice that illustrates users' "imperative to share" and "push to be connected" (Rainie and Wellman in Jordan 2015, 122). Sharing personal content on social media is not only an act of immaterial labour but also an act of self-making, where "users enthusiastically respond in the affirmative to the call: 'become subjects!'" (Coté and Pybus 2011, 170). This self-making, this production of subjectivity is affective, where the content we produce is influenced by our desire to share our interests and experiences (184). But this production of subjectivity is not neutral; as we post personal narratives of our identities, motivations, cultural and political affinities, our desires are being translated into data (what is now called Big Data) and ultimately into a commodity to be sold (Lim 2020a, 3) to advertisers looking to reach their target audience to sell products, services, and even political influence. This production of subjectivity, and some of the outcomes of that production of subjectivity (of activists), is the focus of this chapter.

Media platforms are hegemonic for-profit enterprises governed by tech giants who have prioritized profits over ethics, and this is becoming increasingly clear as more scholars take to analyzing and critiquing the ways that these platforms exploit users for profit in a myriad of ways. Elisha Lim (2020) forwards a sophisticated critique of the ways that social media and their profit-driven algorithms are contributing to an appropriated form of identity politics, what they describe as identity economics. This updated theory (first conceptualized by George Akerlon and Rachel Kranton (2011)) describes how social media influences the way we think, act, and believe. In other words, social media plays an influential role in the production of subjectivities – including activist subjectivities – which is itself playing a role in the increasing prevalence of the harmful cancelling and call-out practices I overviewed in Chapter Two. Lim's theory is useful for shedding light on the impact of algorithms on social life, and it also offers an opportunity for activists and progressives to understand call-outs differently: away from the interpersonal conflicts and towards a greater picture of the technological infrastructure that facilitates these call-outs. I argue that not only does this theory help shed light on the

commodification and circulation of harm in the attention economy, but it also allows for social justice activists to "zoom out" from the individual conflicts being battled on social media and to consider the strong possibility that (as Lim compellingly argues) social media is exploiting the outrage and revenue generated from political and ideological division.

Part 1: Immaterial Labour and Revenue Model of Social Media Platforms

In order to better understand the ways that call-outs operate economically in social media platforms, it is first necessary to better understand the underlying infrastructure and algorithms that facilitate user engagement online. Drawing from information politics scholars this section describes the following concepts: immaterial labour, Web 2.0, the attention economy and the outrage economy. Through an overview of the attention economy, this chapter also points out that user-generated posts on social media are not neutral but operate within an environment that prioritizes and valorizes user attention, which in turn leads to the valorization of attention-grabbing emotions and affects including outrage. This is relevant to an understanding of cancel culture because outrage is one of the by-products and emotions fuelling cancel culture, but it is being produced in intensified and siloed ways on social media platforms.

Thomas Aichner et al. (2021) describe social media "as an umbrella term that describes a variety of online platforms, including blogs, business networks, collaborative projects, enterprise social networks (SN), forums, microblogs, photo sharing, products review, social bookmarking, social gaming, SN, video sharing, and virtual worlds" (215). Although the definition of social media continues to expand as new communications technologies develop, Aichner et al. defined social media in 2019 as "any online resource that is designed to facilitate engagement between individuals" (219). For the purposes of this paper, my use of the term social media refers primarily to large scale platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and Twitter. Many of the concepts I discuss in this paper, however, may also be applied to the wider range of social media platforms listed in Aichner et als.' description. Although e-mail and

texting, for example, are forms of communications technology that facilitate engagement between individuals, this paper focuses on the social media networks that involve outward practices of self-making as they are enacted in public or semi-public networks.

Facebook, which began in 2004, is the most prominent social media platform known to the contemporary world. According to Statista's "Social media: Statistics & Facts" (Tankovska 2021) report, by 2011 Facebook had grown to 500 million active users (MAU); in the first quarter of 2020, Facebook reported 2.6 billion MAU. A very similar trend is visible for Instagram, which had 90 MAU in January 2013 and as of June 2018, has reached 1 billion MAU (with 500 million daily active users using the Stories feature). These are two of the most popular social networking apps, but between Twitter, Snapchat, WhatsApp, TikTok, and a plethora of other apps, users spend an average of 144 minutes per day on social media networks. Humans have always used technologies to shape and impact social, cultural, political and economic life; however, the massive social impacts of contemporary forms of online social networking and hyper-connectivity are just beginning to be uncovered by critical media studies, information technology, queer and critical race scholars.

Social Media, Labour, and Self-Making

Social media platforms are used for leisure, entertainment, and self-making, and these forms of user engagement on social media are also immaterial labour, what Coté and Pybus (2011) refer to as Immaterial Labour 2.0. The Marxist concept of immaterial labour (IL) was developed by Maurizio Lazzarato (1996) and built upon by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004). IL includes three aspects of labour; the "informational content" of the commodity, recognizing the increase in cognitive and creative labour necessitated by post-industrial capitalism (Lazzarato 1996, 132); the "cultural content" of the commodity (132), which involves "a series of activities that are not normally recognized as 'work'—in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes,

consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion" (132); and, finally, the production of affects or what Hardt and Negri (2004) call "affective labour" which involves the performance and manipulation of affects (108).

Activists and social justice-oriented people engage in social media platforms to disseminate this work, which is not solely activism but can also become intimately enmeshed in capitalist processes of profit generation. Although it may feel like we have a choice of whether or not to use social media platforms (in other words, to "log off"), they have become "ubiquitous infrastructures that increasingly determine how we treat each other" (Lim 2020b). In an information economy (cognitive capitalism), avoiding social media and the production of subjectivity that emerges from this labour is extremely difficult. The consequences of not participating in the immaterial labour and self-branding on social media platforms may include decreased access to professional and marketing networks, friends and family, dating, and the sharing of information and research (Aichner et al. 2021, 217).

Web 2.0 and the Delivery of Personalized Content

Coté and Pybus (2011) build on the concept of immaterial labour (Immaterial Labour 2.0) to describe a "more accelerated, intensified, and indeed inscrutable variant of" (170) immaterial labour that has been cultivated by social networking platforms of Web 2.0. One of the defining features of Web 2.0 is that users are simultaneously consumers and producers, they "do not play a merely passive role as consumers of information but are active participants in the constitution of the web's content" (Bueno 2017). In order to optimize searches and content delivery in a period of information overload, search engines embedded in social media networks use managerial algorithms to deliver more specialized content to users (Jordan 2015, 52). The accumulation, archiving and collection of user engagement (i.e. "posts," searches, and content production) becomes the information that guides user experience (Coté and Pybus 2011, 189). This is facilitated by highly-specialized algorithms that optimize search functions (Jordan 2015,

52) according to one's demographics (age, location, race and ethnicity, gender, etc.) and psychographics (personal preferences, habits, political leanings, interests, and desires). These algorithms are not visible or even comprehensible to the average user (57). The technological innovations that led to Web 2.0 have drastically changed and enhanced user experience on the Internet. This optimization of algorithms makes it possible to deliver content and related posts based on one's values, and this contributes to the creation of the echo chamber effect.

The Echo Chamber Effect

The echo chamber effect on social media is broadly defined (Cinelli et al. 2021) as "environments in which the opinion, political leaning, or belief of users about a topic gets reinforced due to repeated interactions with peers or sources having similar tendencies and attitudes" (1). Several interacting factors to this effect have been noted by information technology scholars, including but not limited to: online polarization, which may foster misinformation spreading; specialized algorithms, which predict user's interests, desires and online behaviours; users tend to favor information that adheres to their beliefs, values, and shared narratives (Cinelli et al. 2021, 5). These echo chambers may also be further cultivated through selective exposure and confirmation bias (1). The creation of the echo chamber effect is facilitated by algorithms that cater the content to suit the user's desires and interests, and these siloed networks have a material impact not just on individuals but may also "influence policy making, political communication, and the evolution of public debate, especially on polarizing topics" (5). The echo chamber effect is one of the defining characteristics of the post-truth era (McIntyre 2018) – an era in which "objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (5) due to several factors including the rise of new media and the decline of traditional, centralized media. These echo chambers lead to group dynamics, where performing shared values in order to belong is a guiding principle of engagement (Lim 2020b). Although these spaces have been shown to provide a sense of

community to people who may otherwise be socially isolated, they can also foster group dynamics that can lead to polarization, intolerance, and a difficulty relating to people outside one's affinity group(s).

Reflection on Echo Chambers

I have had conversations with friends who have expressed concern that the echo chamber effect on social media fuels and invigorates social conservative and even oppressive sentiments such as racism, sexism, fascism and populism. I too am concerned about this echo chamber effect, but I believe that this effect also plays a role in division amongst progressives. I have curated my feed so that I only see content that is politically appealing and similar to my interests and values. This is useful to me insofar as I can continue to educate myself from users who make specialized content (such as on polyamory, trans advocacy, environmental justice, etc.). For the most part I feel validated, supported, and safe to share my perspectives with my Instagram network. However, I have also noticed that over the years that I have become less comfortable in situations where I am speaking with someone who completely disagrees with me politically. This might be on any topic: feminism, oil and gas, cancel culture, food politics, relationship styles. Through these echo chambers this intolerance has been validated, because of the common practice of casting out or removing someone from a network for expressing a dissenting opinion.

The Attention Economy

In the attention economy, vast amounts of knowledge and information circulate and the way in which this information gets valorized is through human attention (Bueno 2017) which "becomes a scarce and hence increasingly valuable commodity" (n.p.). Claudio Celis Bueno argues in the introduction of his book that the more a society produces, distributes, and consumes information, "the poorer it becomes in terms of human attention" (n.p.). Therefore

social media users – be they individuals, businesses, institutions, corporations, or otherwise – are in constant and increasing competition for attention from their desired audience. In order for businesses (which includes small businesses and individual entrepreneurs) to succeed in this economy, they must be skilled at grabbing and keeping the attention of their audience members for long enough to secure purchases. There are many individuals and businesses who use social media platforms as their primary space of income generation, but this requires the capture of human attention, which is becoming increasingly scarce as information overload increases.

In an age where social media networks capture increasing amounts of users' attention, human attention has become monetized in more advanced ways. As Bueno (2017) notes, in the field of communications studies, critical scholars have theorized "paying attention" as a new form of labour (n.p.). Sut Jhally and Bill Levant (1986) for example, point out the ways in which media networks make a profit from capturing audience attention, collecting that data, and selling it to advertising agencies. Jonathan Beller (2006) argue that the attention of users is not simply a form of labour, but "a new territory of capitalist exploitation, which alienates the spectator from his or her own vision" (Bueno 2017, n.p.). Every time a user makes a post, comments on a friend's feed, or updates their profile information on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, they are also labouring in the form of creation of data points which are then sold as data sets to advertisers (Coté and Pybus 2011, 171). In other words, social media platforms profit from users by "generating surplus value from the harvesting of consumer preferences, interests and habits" (Bueno 2017, n.p.). While this is not a new phenomenon – TV audiences were categorized and advertised according to demographics as well – what is different about the relationship between the attention economy and social media is that users are not only "watching" (as in the case of TV), but contributing both "user-created content" (which must compete for the attention of other users) and "user-generated data" (a form of unpaid labour) sold by tech companies who host us (Andrejevic in Hesmondalgh 2018, 285). Therefore, as Jordan (2015) notes, "[s]ocial media networks are free to use but not free in consequence. Users

rent their social relations and identity to access spaces in which their social relations are then commodified" (135).

The Contagion of Outrage

In order to capture human attention, the content posted to social media must be compelling, and strong emotions are an effective way to increase user engagement (Greening, Mennie, and Lane 2021, 59). Simon Terry (2020) argues that the attention economy has become, relatedly, an "outrage economy" where outrage produced and circulated in media garners more attention than more mundane content. In the networked echo chambers of social media, group dynamics form which produce outrage according to shared or similar values on social media platforms on all sides of political issues. Therefore, paying attention as a form of labour becomes not simply a question of time, but also of affect as users are mobilized by the rage, shock, trauma, and outrage generated across media platforms. In *The Guardian,* Rafael Behr (2017) illustrates the pull of the outrage economy as follows:

> Rage is contagious. It spreads from one sweaty digital crevice to the next, like a fungal infection. It itches like one too. When sitting at the keyboard, it is difficult to perceive wrongness without wanting to scratch it with a caustic retort. But that provides no sustained relief. One side's scratch is the other side's itch.
>
> And so the cycle of provocation continues. It is hardwired into the network. We customise our news feeds to partisan taste, digging information trenches along the contours of our bias. Then we hurl pointless barrages of disbelief at the enemy trench. This has become part of the media business model, what has been called the "outrage economy." (para. 7-8)

For Behr, outrage is stimulated by instant and constant access to media and is provoked along partisan lines, and the provocation of outrage is what generates profits in the attention economy. In *Me, Not You: The Trouble with Mainstream Feminism*, Alison Phipps (2020) writes about the use of outrage by right-wing conservative media to generate likes, re-tweets, shares, and ultimately profits through the generation of shock, spectacle, and rage (85). Phipps' analysis looked primarily at the ways right-wing conservatives use the politics of outrage to

garner support to repeal human rights. For example, Phipps discuss the ways that Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) use the politics of outrage to stimulate backlash to repeal transgender rights in the UK. Phipps, however, does not extend her analysis to the ways that outrage is also cultivated and forwarded by marginalized, activist, or progressive users on social media.

Reflection on Outrage and Division in My Personal Life

Behr colourfully illustrates the experience of engaging affectively on social media and across news platforms (the two of which are increasingly intertwined through trending stories, the Facebook feed, and personalized responses to news on personal social media accounts). This description captures the relationship between media and outrage. Seeing and engaging with upsetting or offensive news stories and posts seems to lead to a positive feedback loop, where this engagement can produce rage which can produce more rage-filled engagement. I have noticed this affective cycle amongst friends, peers, and family over the past several years both on and offline. Specifically, I have seen, observed, and also experienced a heightened sense of intolerance and alertness to threat on political and ideological issues. This is complicated because in a globally connected world, the simple fact is that stories of individual and mass inequality, oppression, chaos, and harm *do* circulate and staying informed on political issues leads to more informed citizens; but it seems that this can also lead to a mental burnout that may be heightened for people attuned to social justice. While outrage is undeniably a generative and necessary emotion, to express intolerance for oppression and inequality, I sometimes feel call-outs in part emerge as a symptom of the climate of outrage and intolerance that occurs in varying degrees of intensity on one's (limited, polarized, and curated) news feed. I have noticed a change in my own sensibilities and mental health constitution in the past five years – the more attuned and passionate I became about social justice issues, the more my newsfeed transformed so that the majority of the content I consumed was on issues of inequality, oppression,

discrimination, harm and ultimately, outrage. My intention to stay informed – like so many others – was rooted in a desire to understand the world, to truly and thoroughly be attuned to social justice issues. As my Instagram page became increasingly populated with politically-driven content I found this to affect me more and more. I found myself enraged, despairing and hopeless.

Reflection on Division Within Facebook Forums

Over the years I have sought out Facebook forums on specialized topics, including but not limited to anti-racism, feminism, polyamory, and environmental justice. Within these groups I have noticed that although these spaces are created to be a safer place to learn, share, and educate, they also seem to be spaces of lateral violence and intolerance. Posts made within these affinity groups often devolve into mass disagreements, name-calling, blaming, ostracism and ultimately division. Lateral violence within these groups is probably influenced by a number of factors including exhaustion from an output of emotional labour, lived experiences of marginalization and trauma, and exasperation with a heteronormative and racist society. But this violence also seems to be a symptom of a divided climate, where users are quick to categorize other users either as "insiders" or "outsiders."

For example, in my time spent on polyamory forums, I have seen users seek out advice, sometimes out of curiosity, other times out of acute challenges they are facing in new or long-term relationships. Despite these spaces being designated as support groups, I have seen many well-intentioned people aim to explain their interpersonal challenges to the group, leaving themselves vulnerable to an anonymous forum which sometimes leads to call-out behaviour. I have seen accusations of a speaker being toxic, manipulative or controlling for asking, for example, for guidance on a reasonable way to negotiate a curfew for his wife's first date. I have also seen regular call-outs for the improper use of language, such as when a new member refers to polyamorous relationships as open relationships. It is not uncommon to see projections by

other users upon the speaker seeking guidance, such as being accused of "unicorn hunting" when someone expresses interest in pursuing a threesome. I have seen similar situations in the anti-racism group, and also experienced this (both online and in-person) in a social justice reading group forum I co-facilitated in 2015. I don't believe in overly polite speech – I recognize that tone policing has been a strategy to silence or dismiss the concerns of marginalized people – but I do think the attitude of hostility and intolerance commonly displayed in these forums raises some important questions. I believe these are illustrative of a climate of division even "within" groups that are meant to be aligned. These examples of division also suggest that misunderstanding, mischaracterizing or even dehumanizing another person might be more easily done in an online space than in person; without face-to-face interaction, many nuances of communication can be lost (tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, body language, and more). Social media forums, therefore, seem to both expose and exacerbate interpersonal group dynamics that may not be conducive to solidarity. This is a relevant and important consideration particularly for marginalized and activist communities; we are being told that Facebook builds community (Lim 2020a; Lim 2020b) but it seems that these platforms too often undermine and divide us instead.

So far in this chapter I have provided an overview of the hyper-presence of social media in the every-day lives of billions of people. I have also drawn from Coté and Pybus (2011) who see participation in social media platforms as what they call immaterial labour 2.0. In the attention economy, the immaterial labour 2.0 of users is what fuels networked connectivity, while user-generated content is also a form of unpaid labour for tech companies whose business model is dependent on the revenue generated by users' likes, desires, preferences, and interests. Web 2.0 is characterized by highly specialized algorithms that lead to personalized content delivery – this is why Google searches deliver personalized search results – and social media platforms also use algorithms to deliver content aimed at capitalizing off user attention. These specialized algorithms are being shown to facilitate an echo chamber effect where groups of

politically aligned people become siloed which can lead to misinformation spreading and confirmation bias according to the political affinities of the group. In this environment, attention is a form of labour and a means toward generating profit; this attention economy tends to valorize and prioritize strong and polarized emotions such as outrage. This overview aims to provide a basic understanding of the infrastructure of the algorithms that billions of people engage with every day, not only to share content, advertise products, but also ultimately to produce their subjectivities.

Part 2: Elisha Lim's *Identity Economics*

This background sets the stage to summarize and discuss Elisha Lim's (2020a) "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Facebook: Updating *Identity Economics*." This article builds upon George Akerlof and Rachel Kranton's theory of *identity economics* and applies this theory to a critique of social media platform profitability models, the algorithms that uphold these models, and the behaviours, values and division these platforms produce. Using critical race scholarship, Lim describes the way identity politics was distorted and subsumed in emerging neoliberal policies and frameworks in the 1960s and 1970s, and argues that a similar, though intensified, appropriation also guides social media platforms. Situating their critique from the position of an activist who theorizes their self-branding as a marginalized identity on social media, Lim describes this form of capitalist appropriation on social media platforms as *identity economics,* and traces the origins of this lineage back to Christian and capitalist values of piety, hard work, and the renunciation of sin.

Lim draws from critical race theory, information sociologists, economic theory and lived experience as a queer, Asian social justice activist to describe not only the ways that personal data is collected and monetized by social media platforms such as Facebook, but also the ways that personal identity becomes commodified on these platforms. Lim draws from information politics scholarship to describe social media's influence in fueling political division in recent

years, including the Cambridge Analytica scandal where Facebook sold the data of millions of users to the company. Cambridge Analytica then used highly sophisticated algorithms to profile the psychographics and demographics of Facebook users in order to identify the "persuadables" (Amer and Noujaim 2019). Once these users were identified, Cambridge Analytica delivered propagandistic, divisive content prior to the 2016 US Presidential election, including "fake news" that dissuaded them from voting for Hilary Clinton. Cambridge Analytica also used this data to influence the divisive populist election campaigns of 200 countries, including the Brexit campaign (BBC 2018). This scandal brought to the forefront ethical questions about the relationship between social media use, privacy, democracy, and the influence of social media on increasing political polarization. Lim (2020a) cites this scandal as a legitimate and ethical concern but is also and perhaps more interested in understanding what leads to this propensity for division. To better understand this, they look at the ways these platforms influence the production of activist and marginalized subjectivities. Through engagement on these platforms, Lim argues that marginalized identities can become "both influential and vulnerable in a landscape that distills identity markers into a public ranking system of social capital" (2), through an economization of identity that Lim traces back to Christian and colonial roots (2).

According to Lim, social media platforms have a dramatic and as of yet not well understand impact on our values, beliefs, behaviours, and actions (2). Facebook hyper-categorizes us according to our personal desires, beliefs, values, and affinities (as well as our physical attributes such as age, race, gender, ability, etc.). In this process, already existing identity divisions can become exacerbated through the "unprecedented granular calculation of the individual" (2). On social media, "Activist issues are an especially valuable currency as [they provide] a virtuous and meaningful sense of expertise and self-enhancement in line with group values" (2).

This hyper-categorization of identity (and the hierarchy and division it produces) is rooted in a colonial and imperialist business legacy rooted in Christian values in at least three

ways. First, Lim draws from Max Weber's "Christian sociology" to show that Protestants were often the most successful capitalists when they displayed and performed virtuous behaviours such as hard work, piety, restraint, and painstaking capital management (4). Through the combination of values of Christianity and capitalism, salvation could be achieved by a select few, and sinners would be condemned – this mindset, despite being a religious perspective, was woven into "the speeches of the founding fathers and the foundations of the American dream – that hard work leads to salvation" (5). Lim shows that, just like the early days of capitalism, individual success and profitability on social media is reliant upon the performance of Calvinist virtues of piety, restraint, "painstaking capital management" (5) and hyper-individual and alienating forms of productivity. Second, Lim argues that hierarchy based on identity is built into the history of capitalism which relies upon the renouncement of sin, entitlement of the few, and dehumanizing attitudes that fueled the industrial revolution and TransAtlantic slave trade (5). Third, Lim theorizes that the "formula for a winning Facebook status update" (5) resembles the Christian storytelling arc, "the story of conflict, suffering, and a triumphant reunion with what was once lost" (5).

This astute theorization of the relationship between Facebook's profitability model and the influence of algorithms on social justice narratives is important for a discussion on cancel culture. Here we have the creation of an endless mass of super-siloed, super-niche networks of users who are connected into rhizomes according to their values – the echo chamber effect. The function of the algorithms is unknown to users but we learn intuitively and through repetition – any seasoned Instagram or Facebook user can provide their observations as to which posts garner the most attention, and which ones fall flat. Those who rise to the top of their network (which is becoming increasingly necessary for self-branded activists and entrepreneurs who use social media to sell, network, and connect with fans, customers, and/or fellow activists) do so by expressing their alignment with their group. Those who express political beliefs that conflict with a user's interests are often deleted, blocked, or unfollowed. For me, this was clearly

illustrated during the 2016 Presidential election; the day after Donald Trump won the

presidency, my news feed was filled with friends fervently posting expressions of hatred and

disdain toward anyone who supported Trump. More locally, I saw this same phenomenon

during Alberta's 2019 Provincial Election; after the United Conservative Party (a socially and

fiscally conservative party) won a majority of seats, my news feed was once again full of personal

posts insisting that anyone who voted for the UCP immediately remove themselves as a friend. I

do not see this as a partisan or even solely left-wing or progressive phenomenon; this is the case

across the political spectrum. I am not making a moral judgment on this; I think it's an

interesting phenomenon and I have certainly been a part of this network culling for various

reasons. It can become tiring and exasperating (and sometimes even unsafe) to share a network

with people who are ideologically opposed to you. As more and more people are removed from a

network in order to avoid disagreement, dissent, and even harm, a user's network (and political

sphere of difference) can also become narrowed.

Expanding upon Lim's argument, it seems that when activists self-brand effectively, they

can experience a swift and exponential increase in followers. Their success then becomes

directly dependent on the approval of their followers. In Chapter Two I overviewed a

(somewhat) humorous example of Shrimp Teeth's exposition of the demands they received

within one week from followers. The demands placed on Shrimp Teeth by their followers

included everything from dietary changes to outrage about using outdated language on gender

inclusivity. These call-outs could be theorized, as is commonly the case, as a form of democracy

where the network has a direct say over the success of the people they endorse. However, it

seems more complicated than that. Because these platforms are governed by profit-based

models, it seems more likely that this direct influence is a neoliberal practice of de-regulation

where the market (social media platforms) operates under the illusion of authenticity and

choice, but they are actually hyper-free-market spaces and we are the commodities. There is a

general assumption that our personal modes of expression on social media are authentic but as

Lim argues, this authentic expression is actually influenced by the algorithms that determine our reach: "in an unprecedented way, even intimate gestures on social media enter a personal profit matrix" (2). On social media, individuals, "like corporations, are rewarded for calculating their identity in terms of its economic value" (2).

Lim (2020a) writes of their own experience as a marginalized person to describe the ways that they used identity politics "to exploit a new and virtuous public authority to access scarce resources, like jobs, speaking engagements or endorsements (6). They argue that this production of activist subjectivity was based on a virulent identity politics that capitalized upon their anti-racist activism, described by their "personal brand tagline: 'celebrating the beauty of being neither straight nor white nor cisgendered" (4). This led to what Lim described as being "queer famous" – which translated to capital gains in the form of acceptance to university and artistic publishing and academic success. This was not a "free" form of capital gain – their success required Lim's (conscious and unconscious) renouncement of the sins of other people based on group dynamics of identity-based belonging (6). Lim argues that this "fuell[ed] the 'callout culture' that ranks and establishes group expertise" (6).

In the process of striving for prosperity in social media platforms (which is clearly an economic pursuit, as we can see from the self-entrepreneurialism, social, cultural and political capital that these platforms produce through *identity economics*), activists may be performing heartfelt activism while not being able to articulate that the success of their activism is due to the appropriation of identity politics into capital gains. The use of social media platforms in general is free in cost but not free in consequence (Jordan 2015) and Lim explores some of these consequences through the lens of identity economics, a capitalist appropriation of division along the lines of race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and more. Lim (2020a) states that their capital gains came at a cost:

> I became defined by who I hate. Millions like me coagulate into radical group dynamics and a banal daily fear of saying the wrong thing. The hostile cultural landscape that has emerged since 2004 is not the result of new bad actors, but of amplified storytelling – a

lucrative business of good versus bad that looks less like the digital science fiction of *Necromancer* and more like *The Holy Crusades*. (7)

Lim points to both the individual and collective consequences of these algorithms. On a personal level, users are encouraged to categorize themselves into ever-smaller boxes of identity and to categorize and valorize others this way as well. On a collective level, these group dynamics encourage fear, compliance and competition because dissent, disagreement and mistakes can be the impetus for a call-out, an act that can be understood through Lim's lens as both activism and commodity.

Online Call-Outs and Cancellations as Commodification of Harm

Lim's assessment of the use of social media to benefit from identity economics is important to include in a thesis on cancel culture, because it sheds light on the ways that personal claims or disclosures of harm – which is often at the root of calling out – is appropriated into a commodity or economic exchange. The commodification of harm is not a new commodity but one that has been used to exploit survivors of harm for entertainment purposes in media. Speaking out has been a form of feminist activism but it was commodified in media to generate profit (Alcoff and Gray-Rosendale 2018). Following this lineage, I argue that this commodification has been internalized and intensified because as self-branding activists we are encouraged to "produce" our subjectivities through a lens of harm, marginality and conflict in order to brand ourselves as experts of lived experience and thus gain attention in the outrage economy. In other words, harm – through identity-based experiences and the narratives that circulate on social media – has become commodified. This is not an argument about false consciousness, but a recognition that our subjectivities are integrated with social media algorithms. This is not dissimilar to the impact of pop culture, media representation and Hollywood films. We are what we consume – this is why the unlearning of heteronormative, patriarchal, imperialist and violent norms are difficult but necessary to disrupt through critical education and media literacy. Similarly, yet in a more insidious and entwined way, social media

has become a hyper-present form of popular culture, but it is intensified because we are not simply consumers but producers and commodities, made possible by the authentic expression of our inner-most desires, greatest successes, and most difficult challenges. This is not a false consciousness but a neoliberalization of authenticity. A call-out feels like a personalized narrative that emerges from authentic experiences and feelings; and while this *is the case,* once the narrative is posted this simultaneously transforms our experiences into a commodity to be shared, and this can lead to accumulation of social, cultural, or material capital.

Personal narratives as commodity have become our reality, so much so that it can feel like common sense, or even obligatory. A small business owner celebrating 42 years in business writes a nostalgic, heartfelt and triumphant post about the success of their business and the loyal clientele who have supported them. A professional musician draws from his long-held love and inspiration for his favourite band when posting about the release of his upcoming album. A sex ed columnist writes openly about their lived experience of polyamory because they know this will be more effective than speaking about it at arms-length. A local clothing company makes t-shirts with feminist slogans of empowerment. All of these experiences are both personal narrative *and* advertising. In the act of expressing ourselves, our hopes, dreams and desires, we cash in on that expression by trading it in for likes, re-tweets, and sales.

But in an outrage economy, personal narrative as advertising gains more traction when it is based in claims of harm. A young female solo artist breaks out with a hit debut album that deals explicitly with themes of triumph after extricating herself from an abusive relationship. Two queer fitness instructors use their narratives of experiencing racism and transphobia at a former company to crowdfund and open a new non-profit fitness company. A nutrition coach self-brands as having overcome a life-threatening eating disorder as proof of her expertise and authority. A person who has been cancelled draws from their experience of ostracism and shunning to sell books on Instagram. A group of silence breakers speaking out against sexual violence earn spotlight on the cover of TIME magazine. These stories all begin with the starting

point of confessions of harm and follow the "Christian storytelling arc" that Lim (2020a) refers

to. They are examples of the ways that "even intimate gestures on social media enter a personal

profit matrix" (2). They are commonplace and are all examples of what Lim is describing: that

not only does social media influence our actions online but it also influences the way we feel and

the way we tell stories. We write and confess narratives of harm and triumph *and* self-brand as

having overcome hardship. This is the internalization of marketing; although identity has long

played a role in advertising products, social media invites us to internalize the commodification

of our own selves in a decentralized way, and in doing so creates competition based on

hierarchy, competition and exclusion.

When personal narratives of harm also name the individuals who cause harm, the

complexity of the posted content increases because personal empowerment (speaking out) and

self-branding can become entwined. Speaking out as a form of resistance has long been central

to feminist politics. Recognizing that the personal is political, speaking out has been a feminist

act because it is the process by which people who experience oppression, injustice, exploitation

or discrimination can speak to these experiences and be supported and validated, and learn that

they are not alone in their experiences. Using one's voice to identify these patterns can pave the

way for feminists and other resilient groups to forge new social connections and form collectives

of resistance, and on a more personal level, speaking out is an act that empowers women to be

subjects of their lives (Ahmed and Stacey 2001, 4). Therefore, many scholars see public

disclosures as forms of activist resistance even while recognizing that these disclosures often

have negative consequences for the speaker, including but not limited to backlash, humiliation,

re-traumatization, and even legal repercussions (Alcoff and Gray-Rosendale 2018; Phipps 2018;

Powell 2015; Serisier 2018).

In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction,* Michel Foucault (1978)

theorized that confession as a practice has become deeply embedded in the bodies of people

living in a Western society due to the use of the confession as foundational to the development

of modern institutions; in short, "Western man [sic] has become a confessing animal" (59). Foucault wrote that "[t]he obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, 'demands' only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation" (60). In 2001, Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (2001) echo this theory when they argue that "the desire to testify now pervades contemporary culture" (1) and this desire "to speak out and tell one's story operates across the traditional boundaries of public and private spaces" (1). The process of speaking out as a form of activism is complicated by the ways victim narratives and testimony have been used as forms of entertainment in North American popular culture within late capitalist society.

As Lim shows, speaking out as activism can be subsumed by the commodification of confessional testimonies as forms of entertainment to generate revenue for media outlets in late capitalist society. Testimony continues to be a popular form of expression in both pop culture (confessional TV, talk shows) and mainstream politics (biographies and confessions of public figures) (1). These examples of testimony in public spaces are entwined with both the production of subjectivities (in the course of writing, speaking, or releasing the testimony) and the economic role entertainment plays in global capitalism. Alcoff and Gray-Rosendale (2018) point out that the feminist practice of speaking out against sexual violence was "capitalized upon" in day time television shows of the 1980s and 1990s, where "Survivors' stories were sensationalized and exploited by the media, in both fictional dramatic reenactments and 'journalistic' forums" (4). These re-enactments left the speaker vulnerable to being pathologized, analyzed and caricatured by "experts" brought on to the show, and these were curated in ways that would boost ratings and bring about profits for the media outlets. Telling one's story in a public forum, then, can become enmeshed in the flows of capitalism so that it is not solely an autonomous act but one

that produces circulation and is tied to economic outcomes. According to Alcoff and Gray-Rosendale (2018) speech can become a "media commodity with a use value based on its sensationalism and drama" where the speech circulates as a commodity and incites "little to no effect on the effort to reduce sexual violence" (n.p.). In 2021, speaking out has become even more visible across media outlets in an age where social media networks have become extraordinarily present in the lives of billions of people. And it seems that the relationship between the speak out as a form of activism, and victim narratives as a form of entertainment, has become an even murkier and entrenched one in the capitalist economy.

Conclusion

In their TedxTalk "Social Media's Algorithms Make Us Turn on Each Other — Here's How," Lim (2020b) argues that the ways activists self-brand and self-produce according to profit-driven algorithms is a pressing and timely issue, and cites the many ways in which people are encouraged to shun, divide, and exclude each other based on claims of identity and marginalization. By expanding on this argument, this chapter shows that new activist strategies of intervention may be required in order to identify and disrupt the influence of algorithms on the way we think, feel, act, behave, and value one another and ourselves. In essence, it is a question of whether it is possible to achieve some distance from the all-encompassing reach social media plays in governing our subjectivities and facilitating group dynamics that seem to be leading to division, both on an interpersonal and mass scale. After years of engaging on social media and feeling burnt out by the perpetual need to confess in an effort to gain likes and shares, I ask: how do we turn rage into enthusiasm, and how do we do so without commodifying it in the process?

Conclusion

Cancel culture is a perplexing and multi-faceted phenomenon that raises many questions about how best to strategize and work towards a world with less oppression, discrimination, and harm. I have shown, however, that cancelling as a practice is a contentious and conflicted strategy for social change; it can be a method to hold institutions, individuals and corporations responsible for harm, but it can also become a practice that itself leads to oppression and harm. When I began writing this thesis in January 2021, it still felt incredibly taboo to write a critique of cancelling. I was certain I would be characterized as a member of the intellectual dark web. This is not a paranoid fear, but a fear based in an intimate understanding of the call-outs one can face when questioning the limits or the potential harm of cancelling practices.

Montreal-based writer Clementine Morrigan, for example, has faced significant harassment for theorizing, expressing and exploring anti-cancel culture views. Morrigan, who writes and self-publishes zines on ecosocialist, penal abolitionist, and trauma-informed sexuality topics, has faced consistent and sustained call-outs, most recently for her podcast *Fucking Cancelled*, where she and her partner Jay interview people from social justice and leftist communities who have experienced cancellation. Morrigan's zine, *Fuck the Police Means We Don't Act Like Cops to Each Other* (2020), discusses the punitive ethos underlying cancelling within social justice communities. This zine discusses the fear, shame and compliance culture Morrigan sees as having developed from consistent online cancellation campaigns stemming from intolerance, trauma, hopelessness, and political division. Morrigan's critique is also generative and aims to "build a left that is kind and compassionate, that allows for disagreement and dissent, and that does not rely on coercion and punishment" (Morrigan 2020, 11). She has a vision of "communities that are profoundly dedicated to change, grounded in the present moment, communities that are flexible, curious, responsive, and open to different strategies, communities we can depend on, communities where we keep each other safe" (18).

Although the podcast interviews and her writing shed light on firsthand narratives that discuss the harmful practices of cancellation, one needs only search for the #ClementineMorrigan hashtag on Instagram to learn how risky it is to question cancelling as an accountability strategy online. Morrigan has been routinely called anti-black, anti-Indigenous, ableist, anti-survivor, sanist, an abuse apologist, and a white supremacist. These labels and critiques are one of the consequences of critiquing leftist practices of cancel culture: if one critiques in any way or for any reason the cancellation of a person accused of a particular form of prejudice, one is automatically assumed to embody that prejudice oneself. Sustained online bullying has taken a toll on Morrigan's mental health and she has lost publishing deals from book publishers who see her as too risky to take on as a client. Despite this harassment, Morrigan continues to document and disseminates firsthand stories from people who have experienced cancellation, and the effects of these cancellations on their mental and existential health, safety, income and employability.

Morrigan (2020) calls for a new ethic of the left, one that is rooted in "creativity and curiosity." As she writes, "we need the ability to try new things, to make new connections. We need our imaginations to be active and working so that we can dream alternatives to the way things are" (14). This call is mirrored in the words of Irshad Manji, the author of *Don't Label Me: An Incredible Conversation for Divided Times* (2019), where "she calls for a dialogue that's basically the opposite of cancel culture – instead oriented toward curiosity, listening, and the affirming of individuality, dignity and respect" (Henley 2021, para. 28). Loretta J. Ross and Loan Tran (2021) have begun to teach online seminars entitled "Calling In the Callout Culture" which explore

> building solidarity within our immediate communities to take on white supremacy across different experiences in race, class, and gender. This series addresses internalized powerlessness. We replace it with purpose, joy, and connection to others to be part of the human rights movement. (Ross and Tran 2021).

These are just a few examples of writers who are identifying and responding to the divisive ethic that upholds cancel culture by exploring strategies to address inequality and harm without perpetuating a cycle of harm.

I see this as a difficult but also incredibly generative time, with lots of possibility for a renewed enthusiasm for curiosity, connection, compassion and friendship. Calls for accountability are also being critiqued by transformative justice practitioners including Mia Mingus, Miriame Kaba, adrienne maree brown, and more; these critiques are not an attempt to intervene upon real accountability but to contribute a nuanced and informed understanding of what accountability means in a punitive society. On an interpersonal level, I am seeing changes amongst friends and community members, people who are also sharing in feelings of burn out from an environment of tolerance and fear. In the midst of what sometimes feels like total chaos, globally-connected networks also seem to provoke a collective hyper-awareness of all the harm, violence and inequality embedded in institutional, cultural, social, political and economic systems. The words of adrienne maree brown come to mind: "Things are not getting worse, they are getting uncovered. We must hold each other tight and continue to pull back the veil." What stands out most to me in this passage is the call to *hold each other tight*. Looking out for one another, treating each other with kindness, generosity and respect, across difference, disagreement and dissent, is perhaps the most difficult project at a time when these kindnesses are not afforded to everyone in equal or equitable measure. Cancel culture has exposed not only political division and the patterns of harm, abuse and exploitation continuing to be enacted by individuals and institutions; it has also exposed the potential obstacles to solidarity everyday people face in a neoliberal capitalist environment where commodifying oneself is easier and less problematic than building bridges to solidarity and collective resilience. Perhaps, then, the most radical things activists can do is remain aware and attuned to harm, inequality and exploitation, while also developing a critical understanding of the news ways capitalism and communications technologies exploit our desires, identities, differences, and weaknesses.

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