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The affective politics of Twitter

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Abstract

Given the increasing encroachment of Twitter into offline experience, it has become necessary to look beyond the formation of identity in online spaces to the ways in which identities surface through the formation of affective communities organized through the use of technocultural assemblages, or the platforms, algorithms, and digital networks through which affect circulates in an online space. This essay focuses on the microblogging website Twitter as one such technocultural assemblage whose hashtag functionality allows for the circulation of affect among bodies which “surface” within the affective communities organized on Twitter through their alignment with and orientation by hashtags which serve as “orientation devices” to direct some bodies towards some affective communities and not others. Thus, this paper contends that “Asian Twitter,” “Black Twitter,” “Academic Twitter,” and other such “twitter territories” can only be identified through the ways in which they circulate affect through the technocultural assemblage that is twitter, and are thus identifiable by an affect that circulates through the territories and sticks to the members of those territories. This affective politics of twitter can provide an inroad into understanding the formation of online communities as an affective construction mediated through the technocultural assemblages of the platform of Twitter.

Keywords: affect, twitter, race, identity, digital communities

Sharma (2013), advocates for understanding race in online spaces as a “digital-race assemblage,” whose “materiality emerges through how the bored of particular groupings of users machinically connect with the technocultural assemblages of twitter.” (Sharma, 2013, 55) Drawing on Saldanha (2006), Sharma argues that a machinic understanding of race, which treats race as emerging through its connections between bodies, serves to better enable critical scholars to understand the function of race in digital space. Thus, for Sharma, the question of race online is not one of the representation of “a-priori racialized categories,” but the way in which specifically Black Twitter users enter into “a process of becoming,” where by Black Twitter users’ subjectivity is both made and unmade through the process of becoming enabled by the ways in which they machinically connect with other users through the technocultural assemblage of Twitter.

Sarah Florini (2013) makes clear the processes whereby Black users engaging in Sharma’s machinic connection with one another through her deployment of “signifyin’,” or the collaborative practices of verbal and linguistic performances characteristic of Black American oral traditions. Signifyin’, in Florini’s articulation, “constitutes a set of epistemologies... that allows for the galvanization of the Black community against oppression, making performance a key arena for the individual and collective

negotiations and positionings that constitute “Blackness.”” (Florini 2013, 226) To this end, signifyin’ requires the performer to possess culturally specific forms of knowledge, competencies, and the means to perform those knowledges and competencies in interaction with other members of the community. For Florini, signifyin’, serves as the means whereby a Twitter user can mark their Black identity and therefore participate in the space of Black Twitter.

Bridging the two perspectives on the formation of Black Twitter is the hashtag, or the “Blacktag,” which allows for the formation of Black Twitter through the discursive use of the hashtag. Drawing on Wilson’s (2009) elements of Black discursive style on Twitter, the culturally relevant hashtag, participation via comment or retweet by a community of affiliates, and viral spread, Brock (2014) argues that the evolution of the hashtag into “an expressive modifier to contextualize the brusque, brief Tweet,” (Brock, 2014, p.534) enables its discovery by “mainstream” Twitter. Moreover, the hashtag, which marks “the concept to be signified, the cultural context within which the tweet should be understood, and the “call” awaiting a response,” (Brock, 2014, p.537) serves to enable Black Twitter to coalesce around culturally specific narratives mechanistically, such that Black Twitter becomes a “material space” with which to interact.

Taken together, the three perspectives above can serve to provide a technocultural understanding of the emergence of Black Twitter as a culturally mediated space. However, a failure of these three approaches lies in the limited way in which the approaches recognize the affective nature of the hashtag and, consequently, the affective nature of the communities that emerge through the circulation of hashtags. Here, understanding the affective nature of hashtags is informative. Ahmed (2004) argues, “it is through emotions, or how we respond to object and others, that surfaces and boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others.” (Ahmed, 2004, 10) In the context of digital assemblages like Black Twitter, it is how emotions are circulated through signifyin’-as-hashtag that allows for the alignment, or orientation, of bodies in the “space” of Twitter.

This work, therefore, treats the hashtag as an orientation device which serves to direct some bodies as digital-identity-assemblages towards or away from other bodies within the material space of Twitter through the alignment of affect. An orientation device is an object, a structure, which provides a direction for the body, and therefore a point from which a world can unfold. The concept of orientation, therefore, has crucial understandings for the way that Twitter “unfolds” as a technocultural space. If the digital-identity-assemblages which give rise to our engagements with the technocultural space of Twitter are viewed as points from which the “world” of Twitter unfolds, and the hashtag is the means whereby the digital-identity-assemblage is directed, then a more thorough-going interrogation of the circulation of affect through hashtags is warranted to understand how “Twitters” are formed.

This paper treats “Twitters” plural as the denotation of a specific quality of a material Twitter space given form through the circulation of affect via hashtag. In this context, and against “contagion” theories of hashtag circulation, a “Twitter” is denoted by the affective likeness that the material space has to a given identity made material through the circulation of hashtags. Therefore, “Academic Twitter,” “Tech Twitter,” “Political Twitter,” and “Left Twitter” are all defined by the qualitative and affective organization of the material space of Twitter through the circulation of hashtags whose

affective “stickiness” serves to align some bodies and not others with the material space through the perceived likeness of the digital-identity-assemblage with the community as defined affectively.

Twitter as technocultural assemblage, race as digital assemblage

Sharma (2013) and Langlois (2011) present technocultural assemblages as an arrangement of digital networks, communications platforms, and software processes “that not only organize the logics through which data becomes meaningful or meaning informational, but also distributes agencies and relationships between different categories of communicational actors, such as various classes of institutional and individual users, and software actors.” (Langlois, 2011, 10) Put another way, a technocultural assemblage is a mode whereby a subject participates in a wider culture through the technological apparatus of digital environments and software platforms. As subjects participate through technocultural assemblages, these assemblages serve to organize the horizons of the digital world through the ways in which their participation is mediated and articulated through the logics that make data meaningful and distributes agency within the digital environment across disparate agents.

In describing twitter as a technocultural assemblage, both Sharma (2013) and Langlois (2011) are relying upon Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s “assemblage theory” as presented in their text *A Thousand Plateaus*. Briefly, “assemblage theory” argues that bodies are not made up of stable, fixed relationships between their constituent parts: instead, the relationships themselves are subject to displacement and replacement by relations with other bodies. Here, body should not be taken in its strictest sense; rather, a body may be taken as a point of orientation, a positionality around which things are ordered. To this end, assemblage theory presents assemblages as proceeding through the processes of coding, stratification, and finally territorialization. Coding generally refers to the way in which matter is organized around a body to give rise to a form which serves as the prototype for a territory.

In the process of coding, matter is organized in a hierarchical structure: Deleuze and Guittari’s metaphor of the “constellation” provides a general understanding of how coding results in the hierarchical organization of matter around the body. Insofar as a constellation takes form depending upon the angle of the observer, so too is matter organized around a body. Thus, the orientation of the body towards the night sky determines what stars are included in the constellation by their proximity to other stars, and which stars are excluded due to the way in which the body is oriented towards the night sky. To this end, adopting a different orientation towards the sky brings some stars into relation with other stars, thereby producing different constellations, or different ways in which the world unfolds. It is thus the orientation of the body that gives rise to the emergence of the relationships between the objects that make up the constellation.

Finally, the process of territorialization serves to order the coded bodies that give rise to the assemblage through their relations with one another. As the process of coding determines the selection of the matter that gives rise to the territory, territories are not static existences: they are subject to processes of flux and change as the relations in and among the coded objects change. As a result, territorialization is subject

to deterritorialization and reterritorialization, processes whereby the connections established between matter which serve to articulate territories, the content within them, and the expressions of the bodies within the territories, are dissolved and new connections are made in and among bodies. As new connections are made in and among bodies, new territories emerge, and new meanings are made plain.

Twitter, as a technocultural assemblage, is a means whereby territories are assembled and disassembled according to the logics of the platform. It is to recognize the ways in which the nature of the platform, and the logics which govern the platform, enable the organization and presentation of territories through the ways in which the material of data are organized around bodies, and how some bodies have more access to the organization of material around themselves than others. It is further to recognize the ways in which the logics of the platform enable or impede the emergence of some territories and not others. Thus, as Langlois (2011) argues:

Rather than asking the question: ‘who speaks?’, it is better to ask the question: ‘What kind of technocultural assemblage is put into motion when we express ourselves online?’ ...We have to take notice not only of what users are saying at the interface level, but also of the involvement of different types of software processes in sorting and ranking information; not only the content of a message online, but the informational logics that make such a content more or less visible... (Langlois 2011, 3)

Thus, on twitter, it is less important to ask the question of *who* is tweeting, and more important to ask the question of how the platform of twitter enables us *to tweet* and how the logics of twitter as a platform enable some content, some material, to become more meaningful in its organization around bodies than other material. It is to ask the question of how tweets are circulated through the platform and by what logics those tweets are circulated. For Langlois (2011), such an approach to online platforms decenters the role of human users to make visible the invisible functions of the online platforms in mediating the kinds of information that is circulated within the platform.

It is this point that enables Sharma (2013) to posit a thesis of a “digital-race assemblage,” or an interrogation into the ways that race functions in online networks. Here, Sharma draws upon Saldanha’s (2007) understanding of race in “machinic” terms. Much like the process of territorialization and deterritorialization, a “machinic” conception of race emphasizes the way that race emerges from the interrelations among bodies and the socio-cultural processes that organize those bodies. To this end, for Sharma and Saldanha, “what is identified or known as re-presentable racial identity is when the potential of race is arrested, and difference becomes stratified and bounded via social mechanisms of power,” (Sharma, 2013, 54) race only becomes present in a social context where the processes that give rise to the emergence of race are held static, rather than allowed to remain dynamic and responsive to changing social situations.

In considering race in this mode, Sharma argues that we must focus on what race does and the ways that it connects to other assemblages, including the technocultural assemblages that mediate our interactions in digital environment. Thus, for Sharma, “a digital-race assemblage can be understood by considering how race

works in online networks," (Sharma, 2013, 54) or how race is produced through the connections of users machinically with one another through the digital assemblage of twitter which gives rise to the phenomena of "black twitter." As a digital assemblage, race is no longer simply a representation or an *a priori* category: race is a product of the connection of assmeblages with one another, and the race of a given user is always in an ongoing process of being made and unmade through the deployment of the logics of the technocultural assemblage that is twitter and the logics that give rise to the organization of material around bodies and the meanings that emerge within them.

"Blacktags" and the territory of Black Twitter

Sharma (2013) grounds the concept of twitter as technocultural assemblage and race as a digital assemblage in the investigation of the formation of Black Twitter. Following Sharma, Black Twitter will be used as a point of departure to explore the ways that affective communities form on twitter as a digital assemblage. "Black Twitter," as a designation of a phenomena on twitter, rose to prominence in 2010 and 2011 primarily through online reporting of the activities of late night African-American twitter users (Manjoo 2010, Sicha 2011). Like Sharma (2013), Florini (2013), and Brock's (2014) later works, the focus of these articles was on the circulation of "blacktags," or affectively charged hashtags whose intensive use by "Black Twitter" enabled them to dominate trending twitter's trending topics, often displacing more mainstream trending topics.

Sharma (2013) describes "blacktags" as "a particular type of hashtag associated with Black Twitter users (mainly African-Americans), because the tag itself and/or its associated content appears to connote 'Black' vernacular expression in the form of humour and social commentary. Blacktags take the form of concatenated American-English words and slang, expressive of everyday racialized issues and concerns." For Sharma, the "blacktag" enables the development of "Black Twitter" through the alignment of the "blacktag" with African-American cultural performances, products, and concerns. The "blacktag," as part of the technocultural assemblage of twitter, allows for the connection of some users machinically to other users which allows for "blackness" to emerge through the connections of users with one another:

Rather than pre-constituted racial subjects merely acting on Twitter, racial aggregations or clusters emerge in relation to dynamic network structures of interacting users, and these are articulated by systemic software processes (that is, other assemblages) such as the trending algorithm... That is, popular Blacktags are not only attributable to the idiosyncratic behaviours of a sub-set of African-Americans – they arise from the array of machinic networked relations, algorithmic operations and differential information flows of Twitter. (Sharma 2013, 59)

The "blacktag" therefore, is not simply the result of the behavior of an *a priori* black subject engaging with the technocultural assemblage of twitter, it is the result of the ways in which race emerges as an assemblage from within the technocultural structures of twitter. Black Twitter, therefore, is a territory that is articulated through the

technocultural assemblage of twitter through the circulation of “blacktags” that serve to give rise to a form through the coding of hashtags as “blacktags” which therefore enables the territorialization of “Black Twitter” within the space of twitter itself. As “blacktags” circulate throughout the assemblage of twitter, the territory of “black twitter” changes in response to the new relations established among users who are included within the territory of “black twitter,” and thus the shape of “black twitter” changes.

While the above does offer an articulation of the formation of “black twitter” through the treatment of twitter as a technocultural assemblage, Sharma’s account does not adequately engage with *how* “blacktags” function within the technocultural assemblage of twitter. In contrast, Florini (2013) and Brock (2014) point to the “blacktag” as a mode of what Henry Louis Gates describes as “signifyin’.” Florini (2013) describes signifyin’ as “a catch-all term for various Black American oral traditions such as woofing, marking, playing the dozens, sounding, loud talking, and others.” As such, signifyin’ allows for the performance of “blackness” in such a way as to demonstrate the possession of a body of cultural knowledge and competencies that serve to align the performer with a Black identity, broadly construed. This alignment allows the communication of an affective likeness, which Ahmed (2007) treats as form of inheritance. To “inherit” the body of knowledge that enables successful signifyin’, in Ahmed’s sense, would be to inherit a proximity to blackness and an entry into the “familial space” of blackness and therefore a likeness to blackness.

In Brock’s (2014) estimation, in the process of signifyin’, “The hashtag serves triple duty as “signifier,” “sign,” and, “signified,” marking as it does the concept to be signified, the cultural context within which the tweet should be understood, and the “call” awaiting a response.” (Brock, 2014, 537) In so doing, the blacktag orients the tweeter towards the community of “Black Twitter” through their display of the culturally mediated modes of performance of identity shared by the members of the community. This performance not only demonstrates their access to a body of cultural knowledge, it also determines the context of the conversation to follow and the modes whereby the conversation will be had. That is, the blacktag as a mode of signifyin’ demonstrates the ways in which the user has “inherited” their likeness to blackness and acts as an invitation into the “familial space” of “black twitter.”

While the above has articulated the function of blacktags in the formation of Black Twitter, it should be noted that the circulation of blacktags and the role they play in the formation of Black Twitter should not be taken to imply a monolithic “Black Twitter.” Instead, we should take from Florini (2013) and Brock (2012) in conversation with Sharma (2011) that the nature of Black Twitter as a “territory” necessarily implies a non-monolithic or essential construction of black twitter as indicated by the processes of territorialization and reterritorialization. Because the shape of black twitter changes in response to the relations between bodies and the blacktags that organize those bodies. Further, as Florini notes:

Historically, signifyin’ has created a space for social critique in Black communities and frequently serves the same function on Twitter. On Twitter, signifyin’ often speaks to the shared experiences of Black Americans as raced subjects and can be a resource for encoding and expressing experiential knowledge about Black identities. (Florini 2013, 227)

In this mode, Florini (2013) presents the use of the blacktag in the mode of social critique as a means whereby diverse experiences of blackness can be incorporated into the “territory” of Black Twitter. Florini’s example of the blacktag #BlackNerdsUnite indicates the ways in which signifyin’ allows for the performances of blackness through the articulation of an inherited likeness by virtue of the demonstrated experiential knowledge about Black identities. By using the blacktag to push back against the construction of a universal, or monolithic black experience, signifyin’ as social critique allows for the demonstration of the ways that the “territory” that is Black Twitter expands and contracts through shifting relations of blacktags.

Twitter as “contested territory.”

Florini (2013), Sharma (2013), and Brock (2014) all characterize Black Twitter as being “discovered” or “revealed” as a result of the ways in which participants in the territory of Black Twitter disclosed its existence through their use of blacktags. Brock (2014) specifically argues that the increasing domination of Twitter’s trending topics by Black Twitter through the Blacktags resulted in the revelation of Black Twitter to a mainstream public which treated Black Twitter as an intervention on “white space.” While I do not dispute Brock’s analysis, specifically his presentation of Twitter as a “white public space” through Hill (Hill, 1995), it may be valuable to turn attention towards the way in which Twitter, as a technocultural assemblage, allows some identities to go unmarked in their activities, while others are made hypervisible through the activity of participating in the space of Twitter.

As described by Sharma (2013), it is the “unexpected” appearance of the “blacktag” on Twitter’s trending topics that revealed the existence of “Black Twitter” to a mainstream journalistic and academic audience. It is this displacement of “mainstream” trending topics by “blacktags” that is of import here: I would like to posit that the appearance of “blacktags” on Twitter’s trending topics was unexpected only due to the ways in which the habitual nature of Twitter, as a technocultural assemblage, in its reproduction of whiteness, do not call attention to the whiteness of Twitter. That is, in keeping with Brock, it is not only the “intense monitoring of non-White speakers, along with the invisibility of almost identical signs in White discourse,” that enables the construction of Twitter as a “white public space,” but the habitual nature of the circulation of hashtags in contrast to Blacktags that enables the emergence of Twitter as a “white public space” or “contested terrain.”

To make this point clear, we must return to the concept of orientation briefly discussed in the initial articulation of Twitter as a technocultural assemblage, specifically, we must articulate the orientation of Twitter itself to discuss Twitter as contested terrain. Ahmed (2007), in her discussion of the phenomenology of whiteness, presents whiteness as an orientation that emerges from the organization of the world around whiteness through the colonial project. As a result of the remaking of the world in the image of whiteness through the colonial project, white bodies feel “at home” within the world due to their affective likeness towards a world made white. For Ahmed, through Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, a body is “at home” when that body does not call attention

to itself in the execution of its actions. These bodies are also habitual, insofar as a habit is not simply an action repeated, but an action that does not call attention to itself in its execution. In contrast, non-white bodies are *not* habitual in a space organized around whiteness: they call attention to themselves in the execution of action and, in so doing, are often stopped in the execution of that action.

To this end, Ahmed (2007) treats orientation as a matter of inheritance, or the ways in which we take up the histories that precede our arrival in a given space. In her discussion of whiteness as orientation through the work of Frantz Fanon, Ahmed argues that the history of colonialism, a history inherited differently by different bodies, serves to structure the corporeal schema, or the ways in which bodies are shaped through their interaction with other bodies and other histories. To this end, for Ahmed, race is not simply a matter of something that emerges through the interaction of bodies, it is something we inherit through the ways in which we inherit our histories: a Black body inherits a history of hypervisibility through oppression, whereas a white body inherits a history of colonialism that eases movement through space. Moreover, as the colonial project was a project of remaking the world in the image of whiteness, then the colonial project is one of making a world “ready” for some bodies and not for others. To this end, it is the white body that inherits the world, and orientations towards the world that put some objects in reach and not others.

However, for Ahmed (2012), it is not simply the case that individual bodies are the sole bearers of orientations: institutions and structures can be oriented around whiteness through the participation of white bodies in those institution. For Ahmed, institutional spaces take on the shape of the bodies that participate in them and extend themselves through the space of the institution. In a world made white through the colonial project, it is white bodies that predominantly participate in the organization of our institutions, and white bodies around which our institutions are organized. By institution, Ahmed does not merely intend what we might call “social institutions;” rather, Ahmed intends the broad collection of our social and cultural structures, including our digital communities and the platforms that enable their organization. To this end, we may extend Ahmed’s thesis to include Twitter insofar as Black Twitter’s framing as an intervention on white public space demonstrates how the Blacktags *disorient* the predominant bodies which emerge through the digital assemblage.

In light of this, we can rethink the concept of orientation in twitter as a technocultural assemblage: it is not simply the case that the technocultural assemblage of twitter is “neutral” with regards to the territories that emerge within it. Rather, as part of a world made white through the inheritance of the history of colonialism, a history which structures the habitual practices of user interaction through the technocultural assemblage, we can think of the orientation of the technocultural assemblage of twitter as a result of inheriting the orientations of the world broadly construed. Put another way, “hashtags” are viewed as affectively neutral within the overall territory of Twitter as white space until they are “affectively charged” by the participation of black bodies: “blacktags” are made “black” by the ways that black users transact with the technocultural assemblage and are not “black” prior to this transaction. To this end, the orientation of twitter as a territory is not only governed by the logics of the assemblage itself, but the logics of whiteness insofar as the territory appears white by virtue of the body around which the material of the assemblage is organized. As a result, there is no

identifiable “white” territory on twitter as the place from which the assemblage of twitter unfolds is itself whiteness. Twitter is therefore contested terrain insofar as the formation of non-white (or non-normative) territories emerge in tension with the habits of Twitter itself.

It is on this basis that we might describe twitter as “contested territory.” By describing twitter as “contested territory,” the intention is to indicate the way in which the digital assemblage of twitter itself is both an invisible territory and a contested one. The territory of twitter becomes visible to some bodies and not to others as the technocultural assemblage is deployed to “stop” the action of some territorial formations and not others, as some hashtags call attention to themselves in ways that others do not, as some hashtags are allowed to circulate freely and not others, and some territories are more scrutinized in their emergence and not others. To describe the territory of twitter as contested is to point out the ways in which twitter only appears as a “neutral territory” to those bodies that are at home within the digital assemblage of twitter. It is to point out the ways that some territories *require* the use of hashtags to become visible, and others are simply assumed. Thus, to fully understand the nature of twitter as territory, we must turn to the nature of hashtag as orientation device.

Hashtags as Affective Orientation Devices and the affective formation of Black Twitter

The nature of twitter as contested territory, as a digital assemblage where some bodies are at home and others are not explains the hyperfocus of analysis of twitter publics on “black twitter” both within academia and within popular discourse: Black Twitter’s domination of the trending topics interrupts the habitual action of twitter as a technocultural assemblage by calling attention to the ways in which “white twitter” does not call attention to itself. Indeed, it is the very capacity for Black Twitter to interrupt the whiteness of twitter that Sharma (2013) notes:

The intensive, imitative repetition of Blacktags has the potential to interrupt the whiteness of the Twitter network. In this respect, Black Twitter can be more than an aggregation of Black users manifested as a stratified racial group. That is, it can form a becoming-Black block – a deterritorializing crowd - fashioned by a series of technocultural processes and practices. (Sharma, 2013, 62)

That is, the blacktags, in this sense, function as what Ahmed calls “orientation devices,” or objects in the world that orient not simply what can and cannot be reached for, in the sense articulated above, but how those bodies form through the encounter with the orientation device as a consequence of the history of that device. This point is crucial to the argument advanced above, that “blacktags” are not a pre-given object within the digital assemblage of twitter, but the result of how the engagement of black bodies orients and is oriented by the use of the blacktag. To this end, the interaction of the black body with the hashtag, and the subsequent transformation from hashtag to blacktag through the interaction with the hashtag enables the blacktag to function as an orientation device within what Ahmed (2004) calls an “affective economy,” or a structure

in which affect circulates to give rise to the boundaries of not only communities, but the bodies within those communities.

To say that Black Twitter arises through the circulation of a “Black” affect through Blacktags is not to imply or reify a universal “black” affect, rather; it is to recognize the affective formation, or surfacing as Ahmed puts it, of communities through the circulation of orientation devices. To clarify, for Ahmed (2004),

Affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an affect of the circulation between objects and signs (= the accumulation of affective value over time).

Some signs, that is, increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more they circulate, the more affective they become, and the more they appear to “contain” affect. (Ahmed, 2004, 120)

While Ahmed draws her examples from hate speech, and the ways in which hate speech allows bodies and communities to form, her theoretical structure may be applied to the structure of the hashtag, specifically insofar as hashtags allow for the affective alignment of twitter users with communities, threads with larger narratives, and larger narratives with ongoing experiences. For Ahmed, as an affect does not reside within a given subject, the affect does not treat that subject as the source or its destination.

Instead, the affect slides among objects and signs, sticking to some signs or object as a consequence of the histories that these objects and signs inherit. To this end, the object is oriented by the orientation it inherits as well as the ways in which affect is circulated by those orientations: in her analysis of fear “sticking” to the Black body, Ahmed notes that the fear of a Black body does not reside in the Black body, but is a consequence of how the histories of race and racism allow for the circulation of affect such that the black body “becomes” fearsome through the ways that the affect sticks to the body. It is through the inheritance of histories that affect circulates and sticks to signs and bodies, thereby orienting those bodies. This point of history is important given the previous discussion of the Blacktag as emerging from the history of black communication.

To articulate this point, we might turn back to Brock’s (2014) discussion of signifyin’, though with some modification. Through the process of signifyin’ specifically the call and response pattern, the blacktag becomes affectively charged such that the tag, and the content indicated by the tag, may circulate and be circulated freely among individuals who demonstrate the proper response to the “call” initiated by the tweet. In so doing, the blacktag orients the tweeter towards the community of “Black Twitter” through their display of the culturally mediated modes of performance of identity shared by the members of the community. Insofar as these displays are not merely discursive, but affective, the affect allows the community of Black Twitter to surface through the circulation of the blacktag by enabling some “bodies,” by which I mean digital race assemblages organized affectively, to surface as part of the community. Again, as this performance not only demonstrates the user’s access to a body of cultural knowledge, determines the context of the conversation to follow, and the modes whereby the conversation will be had, the blacktag allows a given user to become affectively aligned with the “body” of Black Twitter. Through the circulation of affective alignments of the blacktag as a mode of signifyin’, articulated through the digital assemblage of Twitter,

the territory of Black Twitter emerges from the background of Twitter due to an affective perception of the territory as distinct from the background of twitter.

In discussing the emergence of Black Twitter through an affective organization, it is important to note that there is no “universal” Black affect circulated among users through the Blacktag which results in a monolithic “Black Twitter.” Rather, the circulation of the Blacktag through the practice of signifyin’ results in what Ahmed calls an affective “likeness” which binds users together in looser or stronger affective ties. Put another way, the practice of signifyin’ allows for a circulation of a familiar affect, in the sense that users circulating the affect are familiar to those who may embody those affects.

Through the participation in signifyin’ through blacktags, the user indicates their shared attributes via their access to a body of cultural knowledge and thus their “likeness” to those identified as “black.” To this end, the digital race assemblage of Black Twitter functions in line with Ahmed’s “family model” of race, described below:

It is no accident that race has been understood through familial metaphors in the sense that ‘races’ come to be seen as having ‘shared ancestry’ (Fenton, 2003: 2). Race in this model ‘extends’ the family form; other members of the race are ‘like a family’, just as the family is defined in racial terms. The analogy works powerfully to produce a particular version of race and a particular version of family, predicated on ‘likeness’, where likeness becomes a matter of ‘shared attributes’. (Ahmed 2007, 154)

Thus, the Blacktag, through its connection with the familiar affect of blackness, allows for the surfacing and territorialization of “Black Twitter,” not as a unified monolith, but as a space organized through the affective structures of digital race assemblages which align some users with the space and others away from the space. Insofar as the alignment is affective and grounded upon a likeness to a community, a likeness which is a form of inheritance and thus orientation, not all participants in the space of “Black Twitter” will be identical, nor will they have identical articulations. Thus, as Florini states, “Just as there is no “Black America” or single “Black culture,” there is no “Black Twitter.” What does exist are millions of Black users on Twitter networking, connecting, and engaging with others who have similar concerns, experiences, tastes, and cultural practices.” (Florini, 2013, 225) It is on the basis of this similarity, articulated as a likeness through the digital race assemblage of twitter, that affect is enabled to circulate through and among the bodies interacting with the platform. As a result of this circulation “black” bodies emerge and disappear, they participate in and depart from Black Twitter, given the unique affordances of the platforms and the ways in which affect moves among those bodies.

Blacktags as signifyin’ in combination with Ahmed’s affective economies provides a powerful tool to articulate the affective emergence of Black Twitter as a territory within the digital assemblage of Twitter. Moreover, while it is the intensity of the circulation of the Blacktags which brings the Blacktag and consequently Black Twitter visibility through the trending topic algorithm (Brock 2012), it is the ways that the affect circulated by the Blacktag sticks to users that enables the organization of Black Twitter as “Black” in a meaningful affective sense. To this end, it should be noted that while the blacktag is a culturally specific mode of circulating affect through the digital assemblage of twitter,

other territories, other affective communities emerge through the circulation of similar kinds of affects which articulate a likeness and therefore align bodies towards and away from communities as bodies.

Other affective Twitter territories

While Black Twitter might undoubtedly be the most well-known “Twitter Territory,” the affective organization of twitter territories sketched above may also apply to other affective communities that emerge through the deployment of the technocultural assemblage that is Twitter. Lopez, Clark, Jackson, and Freelon’s 2018 Knight Foundation Report provides some insight into the formation of other affective communities organized around hashtags. Specifically, the report identified “Asian Twitter” and “Feminist Twitter” as “online subcultures” on par with Black Twitter through an analysis of “community related” hashtags. While it was not the intention of the report to define these communities, and none are studied with as much depth as the existing research on Black Twitter, the report’s analysis of the ways that hashtags aligned users with spaces is illuminating, specifically in the context of “Feminist Twitter,” the subject of this section. In describing “Feminist Twitter,” Jackson states:

When asked to define “Feminist Twitter,” members of this community disagree about whether it can be bounded because of historical tensions within the feminist movement. In particular, community members distinguished what they call “mainstream feminism” or “white feminism,” a category that is described as often excluding or marginalizing the concerns of women of color, immigrant women, queer and transgender women, disabled women and fat women, from “Black Feminist Twitter,” which is described as including all of the above as well as issues related to racial justice that are not generally categorized as feminist issues (e.g., prison reform)... Thus, the nature of Feminist Twitter’s boundaries seems to fall somewhere between those of Black Twitter, a community that sees itself as clearly bounded in a common identity and set of experiences, and those of Asian-American Twitter, in which cohesiveness is strategic but not necessarily constant. (Jackson, 2018, 51)

Of note is the organization of “Feminist Twitter” around a set of ideological commitments that emerge from, but are not necessarily identical to, the experiences of the members. That is, while the members of “Feminist Twitter” identify themselves as such, not all members of Feminist Twitter may share in the lived experiences of its membership or the experiences that give rise to Feminism. Put another way, while Black Twitter emerges from shared cultural and social experiences that emerge from the experience of being Black in the world, Feminist Twitter does not appear to share in this quality. Instead “Feminist Twitter’s” affective organization appears to emerge from the ways in which users take up “Feminism” through the technocultural assemblage of Twitter and the orientation of a user by the ways they take up the history of feminism. As that is, the ways in which an individual identifies as a Feminist and inherits a history of Feminism directs the user towards the deployment of the technocultural assemblage of Twitter

through the practice of using its hashtags. To this end, if we consider the history of Feminism as an “inheritance,” specifically an evolving inheritance of a history of the struggle for the equity of women, the strategic emergence of “Feminist Twitter” as a territory becomes clear: one’s uptake of a history of Feminism may commit one to taking action in line with some bodies oriented towards Feminism and not others.

In the above, members of “Feminist Twitter” distinguished “mainstream” or “white feminism,” from “Black Feminist Twitter” through the ways in which members of those groups took up the history of feminism to orient their activities towards the concerns of those bodies that the history of feminism did not include. Insofar as we may take up Ahmed’s thesis that an institution or a space emerges through the contact of the bodies within it, and thus takes on the shape of the bodies that participate in it, it is possible to present the formation of multiple “feminist twitters” as a consequence of how the inherited history of feminism, and its relationship to colonialism, position these users as they interact with the technocultural assemblage of Twitter. In this context the hashtag may function to align participants in Feminist Twitter affectively with some bodies and not others through the uptake of hashtags that do not originate within the “feminist” context. As an example, the Knight Foundation Report indicated the uptake of #blacklivesmatter as central to the organization of the Feminist Twitter network, thereby indicating an alignment with the issues and concerns of Black women and indicating the somewhat porous boundaries of Feminist Twitter as a territory. However, what is unclear is *how* the uptake of the hashtag served to orient a user as part of the territory of Feminist Twitter.

Insofar as “how” one takes up a hashtag in this context is organized by how one inherits the history of Feminism, and which Feminist history one inherits, the inconsistency in the cohesiveness of Feminist Twitter is not unexpected. Considering this, we might recast Sharma’s (2013) concept of the digital race assemblage as a “digital identity assemblage.” Briefly, a “digital identity assemblage” is the emergence of an identity as the consummation of a process of identification through the machinic interactions of Twitter users through the platform. As such, a user’s identities become apparent through the ways in which they interact with other used through the platform, including their deployment of hashtags in line with the identity that has emerged. Identity, in this framework, is constantly undergoing a process of making and unmaking as the user interacts with different territories, different affective communities. Thus, identity on twitter is not static: it is fluid, it is machinic, and it is variable depending on the user’s interactions and movements through different territories. However, it should be borne in mind that this movement, and the “how” of the interaction of users will always be subject to a history inherited prior to their interaction with the platform: a history of Feminism, for example, may commit a user to interacting with other users in ways that their Feminist identity becomes apparent through the interaction. Thus, to return to Jackson above, a user’s identity as part of “Black Feminist Twitter,” but not “Feminist Twitter” through the ways that the user takes up the history of Black Feminism in opposition to “white feminism” or “mainstream feminism,” through their circulation of hashtags at the intersection of their identities.

For the purposes of the present work, “Feminist Twitter” is valuable insofar as it enables the possibility of the emergence of other “Twitter Territories” grounded in ideological commitments which are then translated through the user’s interaction with

the digital assemblage of twitter to give rise to machinic identities. To this end, we might describe “Left Twitter,” “Academic Twitter,” “Philosophy Twitter,” or “Science Twitter” as communities that emerge through the movement of bodies whose digital identity assemblages are aligned affectively with the subjects they name. To this end, these nascent twitter territories are defined by a quality of interaction among users organized by an inherited history or an inherited body of scholarly knowledge. However, even these inheritances are structured by the intersections of a user’s offline identity as well as the histories at play in organizing the digital assemblage of Twitter, and the ways that those histories structure the logics of the algorithms that enable the emergence of digital identity assemblages. Put another way, while digital identity assemblages, and the spaces that emerge through the interaction of these assemblages, do not assume a pre-given identified subject, the logics governing the interactions that give rise to these identity assemblages and the platform through which they are embodied are still subject to these histories which in turn structure how our digital identity assemblages emerge.

A thousand Twitter plateaus

This work seeks to advance our understanding of the formation of online communities by calling attention to the ways that said communities form through the circulation of affect that aligns some users with some communities and not others. In this context, the ongoing study of Black Twitter provided a useful mechanism to demonstrate the way in which Black cultural discourse, and the affective and aesthetic styles that structure it, allows for the circulation of affect that enables inclusion into the territory of Black Twitter. As affect varies depending upon the ways that it is circulated, an affective understanding of twitter communities can push back against the assumption of a homogenous online community, or an online community that represents the totality of an identity group as a monolith: because of the ways in which affect is circulated, and the histories of affective economies inherited by users, it is not the case that all participants in Black Twitter identify as Black in the same way, nor is it the case that all participants in Feminist Twitter identify as Feminists in the same way, or may be identified as Black or Feminist in an essential sense.

While an affective understanding of Twitter communities allows for a recognition of the diversity of Twitter territories or “affective online communities” through the ways in which they circulate affect through the affordances of the platform, our capacity to recognize an affective twitter community itself must be viewed through the lens of the algorithms and the logics of the platform that enable it to rise to the attention of “out-group” members. Within an affective understanding of twitter communities, those communities that are made “visible” through the intensity of their circulation of hashtags bearing the affect of that community may not be the only such community affectively organized on the platform: they may simply be the community whose deployment of the affordances of the platform have enabled the community to interrupt the ongoing processes of “neutral” Twitter. To this end, an affective understanding of twitter presents the possibility of a myriad of twitter territories, a thousand twitter plateaus, each bounded by the ways that it deploys the affordances of Twitter as a platform.

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