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Digital Realness: Queer Intimacy in *ContraPoints*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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with a concentration in Film and New Media Studies
Department of Humanities and Cultural Studies
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Abstract

Digital media comprises a diverse ecology of creative genres, institutions, communities, platforms, and entrepreneurial businesses. Yet despite its practical association with variegated social forms, digital mediation *as such* is often theorized as a logic of homogenization, problematically obscuring its heterogeneously contested character. This article reconceives mediation as an irreducibly multi-scalar and heterogeneous infrastructure, recasting online activity as contested participation in wider social contexts. I am contributing to a counter tendency in media studies that methodologically treats digital forms as polysemic, ambiguous and contested, rather than necessarily homogenizing, in the context of specific cases. Drawing out the theoretical implications of this methodology for digitality as such, I gesture towards a more reflexive and empowering posture for digital media with respect to its social and political meaning. To do so, I examine the queer YouTube channel *ContraPoints* as a media case study that productively grapples with these stakes. *ContraPoints* creator Natalie Wynn consistently disavows digital forms as homogenizing, but this is in tension with her queer aesthetic modality, which opens these forms to ambiguity and collective meaning-making. The often theatrically mediated tension between Wynn's reductive arguments about digital media and the queer aesthetic logics of her channel validates a heterogeneous reading of digital media as such. Drawing out similarities between Wynn's aesthetic mode and the above counter tendency in media studies, I bring the insights of each to bear on digitality as such, articulating a more

reflexive orientation for digital media as contested participation.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The trans woman Natalie Wynn’s YouTube channel, *ContraPoints*, is famous for deradicalizing young, right wing white men. A 2018 headline in *The New Yorker* names Wynn “The Stylish Socialist Who Is Trying to Save YouTube From Alt-Right Domination.” A 2019 profile in the *Los Angeles Times* describes the “progressive liberal who can flay her enemies even as she seeks to understand their beliefs.” *ContraPoints*, as the name suggests, provides counterpoints to right wing political talking points that circulate on YouTube. *ContraPoints* videos run from 30 minutes to two hours, featuring logical deconstructions of conservative arguments in an essayistic form, or as Socratic dialogues between characters who represent opposing views.

It is not just the strength of Wynn’s logical arguments, however, that makes her approach socially meaningful. Scholarly treatments of *ContraPoints* have noted the ambiguity of its voice, which speaks variously through Wynn and her evolving cast of characters. Jessica Maddox and Brian Creech (2020) describe Wynn’s dialogic form as “ambivalent,” expressing concerns about its “discursive precarity... in trying to appeal to reactionary ideas whose arguments are, in part, based on marginalizing vulnerable people.”¹ In one sense, Maddox and Creech are right to note the ambiguous tension between the views held by Wynn and her various characters. But rather than attribute this ambiguity to Wynn’s dialogic form, I argue that it is constitutive of media in

¹ Maddox, Jessica, and Brian Creech. “Interrogating LeftTube: ContraPoints and the Possibilities of Critical Media Praxis on YouTube.” *Television & New Media*, vol 22, no. 6, 2020, p. 608.

general. Like many queer moving image texts, *ContraPoints* plays with characters, icons and personas to call attention to their constitutive presence in mainstream culture. Meagan E. Malone (2022) reads the ambiguities of Wynn’s form in a similar way, associating it with an emerging trans rhetoric that includes “explicit grappling with “the embodiment contradiction,” the unresolvable tension between the body-as-mediated and the body-as-mediating that gets expressed as a rhetorical oscillation between affirming and rejecting dominant norms of sexuality.”² In its queer modality, *ContraPoints* develops the embodiment contradiction by critically and playfully depicting right wing YouTube tropes as campy drag performances. This is tragically foreclosed at the level of argumentation, however, where *ContraPoints* frequently reduces Wynn’s own celebrity and iconicity to commodification.

In this thesis, I develop such critiques and insights in order to tease out broader implications about the politics of digital media. Malone’s insight about the polysemy of trans embodiment in *ContraPoints* opens up a related tension in *ContraPoints*, which is the polysemic relationship of digital content creators to digital platforms. In its logical argumentation, *ContraPoints* treats digitality as homogenizing and oppressive in a way that aligns Wynn with a dominant scholarly approach to theorizing digitality as such. On the other hand, the ambiguous, queer modality in which *ContraPoints* struggles with digitality as a question aligns her with a counter tendency among scholars that indexes digitality’s complex heterogeneity through specific cases. My reading of *ContraPoints* contributes to both conversations, bringing the theoretical implications of this heterogeneous approach to bear on digitality as such.

² Malone, Meagan E. “Expression of the Embodiment Contradiction in Natalie Wynn’s Contrapoints Video, Beauty.” *Computers and Composition*, vol. 63, 2022, p. 102696., <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2022.102696>.

The most common approach to theorizing digitality treats it as an artificial system of homogeneity and commensurability, imposed upon an essentially non-digital, or “analog” world. Figuring digital mediation as totalizing, this theory rules out the ambiguous coincidence between “the body-as-mediated and the body-as-mediating” that Malone describes. The only alternative to digital mediation, in this view, is the analog state of *non-mediation* that subtends it. The media theorist Brian Massumi defines this analog state of non-mediation as a “continuously variable impulse or momentum that can cross from one qualitatively different medium to another. Like electricity into sound waves. Or Heat into pain. Or light waves into vision. Or vision into imagination.” (Massumi, 135)³ Starting with the assertion that the continuous, analog movement of self-identical particulars across distinct mediums exists prior to and independent of any system of thought or representation, Massumi ascribes digitality to the latter. Alexander Galloway analogizes this binary opposition between analog and digital to the work of François Laruelle, who seeks to develop a self-identical mode of concept creation that he calls “non-philosophy.”⁴ In *ContraPoints*, I uncover a tension between this way of theorizing digitality, which is expressed in Wynn’s critiques of digital platforms, and an aesthetic of queer, subversive intimacy that reinstalls abstraction and representation at the origins of any technology or experience.

Without expressly citing this dominant theorization of digitality as such, Wynn reproduces the binary opposition between analog and digital in her characterization of YouTube, as well as her narrative account of *ContraPoints* as a developing project. In the story that Wynn

³ Massumi, Brian. “On the Superiority of the Analog”. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, edited by Stanley Fish and Fredric Jameson, New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2002, p. 135.

⁴ Laruelle, François. *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*. Univocal, 2013.

tells about the origins of *ContraPoints*, the show's original purpose was to subvert YouTube's role as a catalyst for right wing radicalization by hijacking key words and concepts of the far right to redirect viewers to her videos deconstructing them. Wynn describes her creative trajectory as an independent, or "analog" movement across multiple mediums, from a philosophy Ph.D program to the crowdfunded world of YouTube. At first an empowering change, Wynn's account turns bleak as the alienating commercial logics of YouTube seem every bit as oppressive as the academy. The likeness between this story and Galloway and Massumi's argument about analog and digital is unmoored, however unintentionally, with attention to the constitutive role of representational and iconic ambiguity at every step. Wynn's transition from philosopher to content creator was never a hard and fast movement, as the presence of *ContraPoints* is felt in academia, and vice versa. Wynn's legibility as an icon in academia and YouTube, high and low culture, imbues her intimacy with social meanings that are irreducible to a direct or "analog" experience. Additionally, Wynn's public transition from male to female unfolds at the same time as the breakout success of *ContraPoints*, adding an additional layer of ambiguous meaning to her intimate engagements with right wing audiences, mediating a conversation between trans and cis identity.

In comparison to the broader history of subversive intimacy in queer media, Wynn's hypocritical disavowals of commercial infrastructures are a departure from the more ambivalent attitude held by queer filmmakers towards infrastructures of financing and exhibition in previous eras. This is reflected not only in the forms of these works, which often transvalue mainstream icons of success to highlight their irreducibility to capitalism, but also in related campaigns against their censorship. In my discussion of the *ContraPoints* video, "Transtrenders," I offer a

reading of its drag and pageantry aesthetic that is in tension with the narrative conclusion of the video. I argue that, rather than dismissing the question of what it means to be a woman as a waste of time, the video's drag aesthetics implicate the audience in an ambiguous "production" of gender as an ongoing question.

In bringing the insights of this ambiguous drag aesthetic to bear on Wynn's pessimistic conclusions about digitality as such, I draw on a counter tendency in media studies that variously affirms a heterogeneous view of digital mediation in specific case studies. Digital media scholar André Brock affirms "Black Twitter" in these terms, describing multiple "libidinal economies"⁵ of Black experience that index diverse social imaginaries, distinct from resistance to capitalism. Wendy Chun and Alex Barnett make a similar move in *Discriminating Data: Correlation, Neighborhoods, and the New Politics of Recognition*⁶, which critically examines unreflected commitments to eugenic methodologies in contemporary approaches to algorithmics and modeling. An emblematic example is their treatment of "homophily"—social bonds rooted in similarities—which Chun and Barnett demote from social axiom to neutral observation, alongside its opposite, "heterophily." This variability among kinds of social connections redirects our critical attention from identity as an interior subjective position to its collective maintenance and conditions. Media scholar Angela Xiao Wu makes this shift explicit in "The Ambient Politics of Affective Computing" (2022), which reorients affective computing around this field of polysemic contestation, theorized as "ambient politics." Like Brock (2021) and Chun and Barnett (2021), Wu (2022) situates her case study in a variously mediated and polysemic world. I

⁵ Brock, André. *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*. New York University Press, 2020.

⁶ Chun, Wendy, and Barnett, Alex. *Discriminating Data: Correlation, Neighborhoods, and the New Politics of Recognition*. The MIT Press, 2021.

elaborate on the impulses of these texts in my reading of *ContraPoints* to develop a view of digital mediation as irreducibly multi-scalar and heterogeneous, and hence more like the ambiguity of Wynn's queer drag aesthetics than her explicit argumentation.

Yet as I have suggested, the promise of this ambiguous, queer aesthetic is foreclosed when Wynn inquires directly into the nature of social media as a technology. The dominant impulse in the literature on such technologies is to integrate them into a single, homogenizing, economic infrastructure. Benjamin Bratton, Wendy Brown, and even Wendy Chun, in her earlier work, reduce the social meaning of digital activity to resistance against capitalism. A resulting irony that plays out in the *ContraPoints* video, "Canceling," is that these descriptions of a fully-immersive digital capitalism reduce all events to the motion of individuated particulars within a single medium. In this literature, we therefore find variable impulses and momentums celebrated as analog in some contexts and condemned as digital in others.

In what follows, I show how Wynn ambiguously develops both approaches to digitality in a close reading of the opening scene of "Transtrenders," in which a mysterious figure named the Digital Messiah introduces a parodic YouTube debate show about transgender identity. The ambiguity of this "video within a video" structure gestures to both Wynn's implicated position as the editor and our implicated position as the viewer, which folds various outside spheres into the video's maintenance. I find that the editing cut at the end of this opening sequence, which seems to be motivated by the Digital Messiah's decision to show us the video, resonates with Alexander Galloway's description of digitality as a subjective "cut"⁷ over the real. But since the Digital Messiah is an abstract creation of Wynn and the various cultural references she is drawing upon,

⁷ Galloway, Alexander. *Laruelle: Against the Digital*. University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

the “cut” does not correlate to a subjective decision, but to an opaque, collective past. I draw out several important threads in the history of queer film to develop an analysis of the aesthetics *ContraPoints* uses to subvert arguments and tropes in right wing internet culture that disavow familiarity with queer experiences.

Returning to “Transtrenders,” I show that Wynn’s intimate queer aesthetic reveals a way forward from reductive approaches to theorizing digitality, even as her argumentation largely concedes the dominant framing of the digital as essentially homogenizing. The tension between aesthetics and argumentation is heightened in “Canceling,” which reduces celebrity and iconicity to commodification, despite Wynn’s own work showing this not to be the case. Reading Wynn’s confessional intimacy as an invitation to transvalue the commercial personas of content creators and consumers, I insist on the potential of Wynn’s aesthetic mode to redeem *ContraPoints* as a heterogeneously meaningful mode of contested social participation.

Chapter 2: “Transtrenders” and the Digitizing Cut

A 2019 *ContraPoints* video titled “Transtrenders” contrasts two conversations interrogating what it means to be a “real” trans woman. The video counterposes a parodic YouTube debate show with a more productive discussion that supposedly occurs “offline,” though both scenes are mediated by a mysterious figure who is introduced as the “Digital Messiah.” Replete with tangles of wires connecting the Messiah’s hair to an old school Macintosh desktop computer, the mise-en-scene reveals the supposed physicality that subtends digital abstraction. As the Digital Messiah declares, “I am truth, I am light, I ended capitalism, and everything I tweet is woke,” her human form and physical integration with technology suggests that she is no less imperfect than the “mortals” that she is introducing.

The integration of the Digital Messiah’s hair with her computer in the mise-en-scene thematizes the relationship between digital technologies and human users, which is the point of contention in theorizing digital media as such. At first, the Digital Messiah’s position outside of her computer screen suggests that she exists offline and prior to any digital phenomena. Though the Macintosh computer is technically a digital technology, its inanimate placement on the Digital Messiah’s desktop more resembles an analog technology waiting to be used than an ensconcing digital medium.

We are ushered into the next diegetic layer by the Digital Messiah’s decision to press “play,” at which point Wynn’s camera zooms in on the display and cuts to a full screen view that displaces our view of the Digital Messiah’s room. This displacement of the analog by the digital

suggests a trade-off between analog and digital positions, with each inaccessible to the other. Yet although the Digital Messiah seems to motivate the cut to her digital world by pressing “play,” both the camera zoom and the cut itself are digitally constructed in ways that the Digital Messiah’s decisions do not account for. The cut occurs at 00:43, but there is no time-stamp for the moment Wynn’s editing and production processes. Editing and production occurs off-screen, through a temporally ambiguous process that cannot be disaggregated into isolated decisions. In this way, the multi-layered diegetic structure of “Transtrenders” reflexively situates it within its own production processes.

This sequence goes even further in its deferral of the precise moment where the digital comes into being, citing an earlier video titled *The Aesthetic* that begins in a similar way. There, the Digital Messiah’s role is filled by a veteran drag queen named Tracy Mounts (also played by Wynn), and instead of pressing “play” on a Macintosh computer, she pops in a VHS tape. This citation to an earlier *ContraPoints* video—itsself a citation of earlier queer culture—implicates both characters and *ContraPoints* in a ongoing archive of citational queer media.

Thus, while the “Transtrenders” opening sequence gestures towards a standard reading of digital media as fully interior to a digitizing decision, its playful deferral of the decision as a singular moment to the many off-screen infrastructures and processes that condition it call this reading into question. Wynn undermines the Digital Messiah’s self-image as the sole source of truth and knowledge, but in the same gesture affirms her participation in queer media and public life.

Chapter 3: Philosophical Realness

The tension between analog and digital technologies expressed in *ContraPoints* plays out through a similar tension between everyday life and philosophy. In her argumentation, Wynn often dismisses metaphysical inquiries into the nature of gender as fruitless philosophical exercises with no real stakes. As with digitality more broadly, however, Wynn's ambiguous queer aesthetics present a more complicated picture. *ContraPoints* videos are open-ended explorations of "gender metaphysics," demonstrating the irresolvability of gender as an "essence," while nevertheless fruitfully interrogating its mysteries and ambiguities. In its resonance with drag and ballroom culture, Wynn's ornate costuming, set designs, and scripted dialogues conjure a host of playful and critical social forms that have historically mediated important social conversations from within queer and trans communities.

Wynn is attentive to this history, and *ContraPoints* cites and contributes to longstanding queer discourses that develop an imprecise "realness" of gender rather than an essential reality. This is traditionally done through ballroom competitions, which take collective responsibility for the performance and reception of gender identities. Though Wynn cites this history, her logical argumentation reduces realness to an individualized achievement of passing, which leads her to jettison the concept in favor of a hopeless opposition between gender as a metaphysical "essence" and gender as an unsupported experience in the real world. Nevertheless, I affirm Wynn's queer aesthetic mode for interrogating realness in ways that her argumentation disavows.

The dominant approach to theorizing digitality in media studies puts forward a similar critique of metaphysics and philosophy. In this approach, digitality and philosophy are both conceived as unrelated to the objects they purport to name and describe. Following the French continental philosopher François Laruelle, Galloway argues that philosophy is constituted at its origins by a mental division of the real, so that it may be considered conceptually through generalizing representations, which he calls “the digital.” Put simply, Galloway defines “the real” as what would remain if subjective meanings and interpretations were subtracted from the world. Under this definition, “the real” cannot be considered directly, and any attempt to do so would be to substitute an unrelated essence in its place.

The task of Laruelle’s *non-philosophy*, as opposed to philosophy, is to *undo* the act of digitization and recover the real as unconsidered and unreflected. Galloway calls this non-philosophical posture the “prevent,” a portmanteau referring to “what comes before the event (pre-event) and what hinders the event (prevention). To think the prevent is to think a universe... without both philosophy and digitality.”⁸ The “prevent” is thus inherently difficult to describe, but linguistically it amounts to the removal of any implied subject, for example shortening “it is” to the infinitive “is.”

It is especially notable for this analysis of *ContraPoints* that Galloway’s “prevent” manifests as a rejection of pronouns. To consider the prevent, Galloway writes, “one might strip the third person singular by removing its implied subject. So from “it is” to simply “is.” The challenge is to deprive language of its transcendental aspects, leaving an immanent core, which itself will gradually fade away once the transcendental policeman has been silenced.” (Galloway,

⁸ Galloway, Alexander. *Laruelle: Against the Digital*. University of Minnesota Press, 2014. p. 16.

17)⁹ On this reading, “he,” “she,” “they,” and “it” are transcendental constructions, identical only to themselves and otherwise inconsequential to the real. In the context of trans identity, the “prevent” is a sort of detransition, though not towards more conservative forms, per se. Nevertheless, I argue that in practice, the “prevent” is a flat, digital construction that mirrors exactly those constructions that it wishes to undo, installing itself in an imagined primordial moment before mediation.

Beginning instead from mediation as an irreducibly multi-scalar and heterogeneous infrastructure that eschews both absolute enclosure and absolute externality, I read the “prevent” as symptomatic of a deep misreading of one’s own life as the site of an antagonism between particularity and universality. Performatively careless and self-destructive, the “prevent” aligns sociality with domination and ambivalently asks us to choose between ourselves and the real.

In “Canceling,” Wynn is resonant with Galloway’s “prevental mode” in her interpretation of her experiences of being “canceled” on social media for *ContraPoints*, pondering the future of the project and whether her trauma is the result of YouTube’s innate commercial logics. In my reading of “Canceling,” I return to this question and gesture toward a redemption of the liberatory potential of digital media and *ContraPoints*. To do so, I develop an aesthetic reading of Wynn’s queer aesthetic modality that first situates it historically, and then traces how it functions in “Transtrenders” to critically and playfully mediate social identity across multiple registers of social meaning.

⁹ *ibid.* p. 17.

Chapter 4: Production is a Production

Following Wynn's editing cut to a murky past at the beginning of "Transtrenders," I now turn to historicize the queer media forms and conventions in *ContraPoints* that implicitly trouble homogenizing theories of digital media. Citations of this kind are as creatively determined as cinematic cuts, and the historical connections they highlight are not mutually exclusive with what they may leave out. Here, my purpose is to highlight significant contributions to queer moving image history that can help make sense of what *ContraPoints* is doing. In particular, I aim to develop an aesthetic of queer subversive intimacy, through which familiar heteronormative figures and rituals are presented in ambiguous and contradictory ways. Unlike *ContraPoints*, however, these early works extend this queer subversive impulse to the public and commercial infrastructures undergirding the production and distribution of digital productions. While Wynn brings these subversive forms to bear on far right internet subcultures, she consistently reduces digital infrastructures such as YouTube to a homogenizing, commercial essence.

Queer subversive intimacy works by exploiting the polysemy of heteronormative icons, showing their social meanings to be multiple and contested. Wynn's portrayals of fascists and conservatives as drag queens are evocative of Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963), a significant work of New York's underground film movement that mixes original and found footage to reveal aesthetic similarities between mid century American biker subcultures, Nazism, Christianity, and homosexuality. *Scorpio Rising* enlists images from these seemingly distinct

symbolic economies in order to destabilize the mainstream American culture's claims to liberalism, secularism, and heteronormative gender relations. Kenneth Anger not only demonstrates the vulnerability of mass culture to subversion through the avant-garde, but also retrospectively shows its polysemy to be constitutive from the outset. By the end of *Scorpio Rising*, we see that multiple readings have been covertly advanced, from start to finish. Likewise, Anger's use of found footage retrospectively participates in the contested meaning-making of Classical Hollywood cinema, despite its original commercial context and conservative production codes.

Kenneth Anger's subversive use of mainstream iconography is emblematic of similar practices of 1960s underground filmmakers, an important starting point to understand later queer moving image works that take on ballroom competitions as sites of queer subversion and contestation. The film scholar Juan Antonio Suarez writes, "the fascination with mass culture characteristic of some underground directors (especially Jack Smith, Kenneth Anger, and Andy Warhol) must be related to the articulation of gay subcultural identities, desires, and fantasies. In this respect, the underground cinema created a politicized and embattled version of postmodern aesthetics which differs from the apolitical views held by the most famous defenders of the "pop" or (in Susan Sontag's phrase) "new sensibility." (Suárez, 89)¹⁰ Suarez's intervention is crucially important for understanding the politicized meaning of queer intimacy, and in this respect dovetails with my reading of *ContraPoints* as irreducible to Wynn's opinions about digital media as such.

¹⁰ Suárez, Juan Antonio. *Bike Boys, Drag Queens & Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema*. NetLibrary, Inc., 1999. p. 89.

Unlike Suárez, the Marxist cultural theorist Fredric Jameson sees no subversive potential in popular commercial icons, describing the underground filmmaker and multimedia artist Andy Warhol's subjects as "themselves commodified and transformed into their own images."¹¹ I affirm Suárez here and would argue that Warhol's scandalous confrontations with commercial iconography lay bare their persistent ambiguity in a similar way as Anger's work on mainstream masculinity. Jameson's refusal of this reading in favor of one that subsumes mass culture into the logics of "Late Capitalism" resonates with descriptions of digitality as essentializing and flattening, though theorists such as Galloway would surely reject Jameson's dialectics of class conflict in favor of non-philosophy. Turning later to platform-based digital media, I will argue that this early critique of postmodern aesthetics as unconsciously reproducing capitalist logics gets brought to bear on contemporary digital media projects such as *ContraPoints* in problematic ways.

As I have suggested, these earlier queer moving image works extended their ambiguous deconstruction of dominant patriarchal forms to the financial infrastructures through which they are organized. Put simply, if patriarchal institutions can be shown to harbor queer meanings and potentialities, their organizing infrastructures can as well. Andy Warhol took on the commercial provisioning of art in countless ways, but funding and exhibition were creatively dealt with and politicized by underground filmmakers across the board. *Scorpio Rising* was among the first experimental films to receive financing from the Ford Foundation, but corporate funding would be supplemented by the creation of the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1965, as well

¹¹ Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke University Press, 1992.

as the proliferation of college film studies programs, which provided stable work and funding opportunities for many filmmakers.

Whether the various structures of affordance for the production and exhibition of underground films were nominally public or private, they were politicized as cultural infrastructure by the filmmakers themselves. Another early touchstone of experimental queer cinema, Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963), became a cause célèbre of the underground film movement when it was seized by police and banned in the state of New York for its sexual content. The subsequent unavailability of *Flaming Creatures* solidified Smith's celebrity status and the film's importance, as well as prompted organized demonstrations against its censorship by others in the movement. Benefit shows were held from the "Flaming Creatures Defence Fund," uncannily resembling the private crowdfunding structure of *ContraPoints* and other YouTube creators, which also blurs the boundary between community and commerce.

The controversy surrounding *Flaming Creatures* and the politicization of its place in public life points to a more capacious definition of social meaning than a straightforward reading of the film's content or its infrastructures would suggest alone. Like *Scorpio Rising*, *Flaming Creatures* defamiliarizes sexual roles and identities by showing their reliance on unstable symbolic economies and figural associations. Likewise, Jack Smith's subsequent celebrity status highlights the porous boundaries between what is celebrated and what is condemned in mainstream culture, an unstable boundary that drag and ballroom culture will also instrumentalize to creative ends.

The queer transvaluation of heteronormative icons is a throughline in this history up to *ContraPoints*, but the ambiguous ways in which icons are simultaneously sustained and

subverted through socialization are developed most explicitly in Marlon Riggs's 1989 film, *Tongues Untied*. Working in a lyrical documentary mode, Riggs combines poetic verses and interviews, with a poetic attention to the temporal rhythms of interpersonal imitation and variation. This technique allows him to critically hold in tandem the most exclusionary and reparative sentiments, suggesting that they occur in the same moment. *Tongues Untied* turns these singular moments into sites of communion between what is most intimate and what is most remote, as these patterned social behaviors are ultimately compared to the regularity of Riggs's pulse. In the context of the AIDS epidemic, the pulse offers associations with life and death in the uncertain intervals between each beat.

The ambiguous intimacy of the human pulse in *Tongues Untied* turns this queer subversive modality inward, opening one's personal identity to multiple registers of contested meaning. This is essential to understand how intimacy functions in *ContraPoints*, especially when Wynn is reflexively playing *herself*, as she does in "Canceling" (2020). An early forerunner of Wynn's ambiguous confessional mode is Shirley Clarke's *Portrait of Jason* (1967), which thematizes the instability of power, identity and status through an intimate depiction of Jason Holliday, a self-styled nightclub performer and hustler. Cut from 12 hours of raw conversational footage to form a feature-length series of stories about Holliday's life, told directly to Clarke's camera, *Portrait of Jason*'s avant-garde and cinéma vérité documentary style implicates our relationship to Holliday as spectators in Clarke's position as the film's director and producer. Holliday is performing *with* us as well as *for* us, and these ambiguous social dynamics of performance and exploitation are thematized in Holliday's stories about charming and hustling white patrons. The intimate, direct mode of address yields a "portrait" of Jason Holliday that

implicates not only Clarke and her audience, but society writ large in its production. Holliday's performance charms viewers even as the film suggests that they are being hustled, and these two seemingly contradictory realities are not resolved.

As I have suggested, intimacy in *Portrait of Jason* is anything but simple. With self-reflexive comparisons between multiple scales and moments of the film's production and reception, *Portrait of Jason* summons distant infrastructures of race, gender and production in an abstract communion with the performance at hand. The transvaluation of immediacy in *Portrait of Jason* correlates with the transvaluation of "analog" media relationships that I advance through my analysis of *ContraPoints*. Though Wynn grounds her critique of "canceling" in the essentializing logics of digital platforms, her confessional mode of address similarly eschews essentializing thinking by casting audiences as a jury, hearing a case without resolution. The staging of these open-ended confessions on YouTube, moreover, undercuts Wynn's claims about the dehumanization of digital abstraction.

The transvaluation of the intimate, confessional mode that we find in *ContraPoints* works in tandem with a similar transvaluation of judgment itself that we find in the American drag and ballrooms subcultures of the 1980s and 1990s. Though cross-dressing masquerade balls have existed in the United States since at least the 19th century, the particular ballroom scene of 1980s Harlem and its related "House" structure is a contemporary cultural touchstone for queer culture. Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning* was instrumental to this end, and a short gloss of some of its key terms and concepts will furnish this analysis with a way of reading these aesthetics in *ContraPoints*.

The most important concept in *Paris is Burning* for this paper is “realness,” which playfully deconstructs debates about the essence of identity. When “realness” is referenced in *ContraPoints*, it is treated as a synonym for “passing” within mainstream, normative gender categories. (“The Aesthetic” 7:42)¹² In the context of ballroom culture, however, realness is not just a flat imitation of mainstream categories. Rather, the categories themselves are chosen by the community in order to give each person a different way to participate. Balls regularly introduce new categories of competition and retire old ones, playfully imitating the cyclicity of the fashion industry, while grounding them in collective caretaking rather than the carelessness of market trends.

The repurposing of cultural categories towards communal rather than commercial ends can be extended to the mock-judicial structure of the competitions. The playfully antagonistic structure of ballroom belies another communal function they serve, as sites of conflict resolution. Unlike the winner-takes-all logics of gang violence or the essentializing logics of legal determinations of guilt and innocence, balls allow grievances to be aired ceremonially and without reducing any of the contestants to particular “reads” or “shade” that may be thrown at them. The “losers” of the ball continue to participate and compete in new categories, in contrast to the experiences Wynn describes of being “canceled” by the trans community on Twitter and YouTube. In this respect, Wynn’s use of abstract essayistic forms, created personas, and confessional dialogue function more resembles ballroom pageantry than a competitive trial.

¹² Wynn, Natalie, *The Aesthetic*. 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1afqR5QkDM>.

Chapter 5: “Transtrenders”

“Transtrenders” continues at the beginning of a parody YouTube debate show called *The Freedom Report*. Modeled after YouTube shows that offer neutral venues for debate between representatives of different ideologies, *The Freedom Report* implicitly undermines this image with its campy costuming and makeup. The show’s host, a cis woman named Jackie Jackson, is done up with red, white and blue makeup and heavy contouring, suggesting that liberal neutrality is itself a kind of drag persona. A matching American flag draped behind her suggests that the word “Freedom” should be understood in its nationalistic resonance rather as a universal value. In this way, YouTube’s self-image as a neutral platform is destabilized, as the platform is implicitly situated in a social world of contested meanings and association.

As stated above, this dialogue interrogates the question of what it means to be a “real” transgender woman. The more conservative position is represented by Tiffany Tumbles (played by Wynn), a YouTube makeup vlogger who advocates an assimilationist approach to trans politics called “transmedicalism.” Seeking an unambiguous answer to the question of what a transgender woman is, transmedicalism reduces trans identity to a well-defined mental illness characterized by feelings of dysphoria that can be cured through medical transitioning. Applying the transmedicalist framework to her debate partner, a non-binary person who calls themselves Baltimore Maryland, Tiffany labels them a “TransTrender,” a term of disparagement suggesting Baltimore is following a trend.

The ironies of this slur are multi-layered. Tiffany's large blonde wig and blue colored contact lenses suggest that she is seeking the conservative audience's approval too, rather than being her pre-mediated, authentic self. Tiffany's performance of white womanhood ironically resembles some of the costumes in *Paris is Burning*, where these same props are playfully and critically transvalued to subvert the conventional inaccessibility of white womanhood to queer people of color. This identity performance complicates the narrative that non-binary people are trend-followers, since Tiffany is clearly keying her appearance to fit in to the heteronormative standards of the show. And perhaps more significantly for *ContraPoints*, the reduction of imitation to following trends is the same reduction that Wynn turns on herself as a creator caught up in the commercial logics of YouTube, even as her queer aesthetic mode undercuts this.

The other guest explains that "Baltimore Maryland" is "among" their names, nodding to a multiplicity of identities that thwarts the essentialism of the debate's premises. For the most part, Baltimore is presented as the winner of the debate and the more sympathetic character overall. Interrogating the scientific basis of Tiffany's gender dysphoria, Baltimore gets Tiffany to admit that her diagnosis is derived from her "feelings," revealing a double standard that Tiffany does not extend to Baltimore. As Baltimore chastises Tiffany for this, however, their platitudes about "being yourself" turn into a religious prayer to a "Goddess," and Baltimore begins praying for Tiffany's "wellness." This undermines Baltimore's claims to the moral high ground, suggesting that they are no better than the Christian fundamentalists Tiffany is appealing to, who would likewise say prayers for LGBT people to be healed. And while Tiffany repeatedly tells Baltimore, "I am nothing like you," this is a way in which they are not only alike, but alike in ways *Baltimore* would disavow. This foreshadows the conclusion of the second dialogue, which

is that both sides are “full of shit.” Indeed, Tiffany’s line can also be interpreted as “I am nothing, like you”—a good paraphrase of Wynn’s paradoxical rejection of identity discourses. We will see in “Canceling,” however, that by refusing to entertain the question of what means to “be” trans in any form, Wynn throws the baby out with the bathwater and disavows the more ambiguous queer traditions of exploring these questions that her channel still relies on.

The debate ends with Jackie Jackson declaring Tiffany the winner on spurious grounds, saying, “my brain has an easier time processing you than [Baltimore], so congratulations; you’re the winner. That was some excellent free speech.” Comically declining any rational scoring system for this arbitrary choice, Jackie resembles a ballroom judge, putting rational debate into relief as a performance trope. Indeed, rational argumentation on both sides served a more similar purpose to ballroom “reads” than scientific evidence, airing the grievances of both sides and transcending the conflict. Unlike ballroom competitions, however, *The Freedom Report* problematically passes itself off as a rational process of deductive reasoning. Thus, *The Freedom Report* disavows any further responsibility for the treatment of its guests, even as it is responsible for abstractly mediating relations between the communities that each character represents.

The Digital Messiah introduces the next dialogue, a private conversation between Tiffany Tumbles and her trans friend, Justine. Following her appearance on *The Freedom Report*, Tiffany visits Justine for tea. Without the pretext of debate, this conversation is portrayed as more authentic and productive. Ironically, this seemingly “offline” conversation is digitally mediated in the same way as *The Freedom Report*: not only are they both digital productions of *ContraPoints*, but even within the diegetic world of this video, both dialogues are screened by Wynn’s Digital Messiah character. If this irony is deliberate on Wynn’s part, it signals an

intention to redeem digital infrastructures as irreducible to the caricatures and personas of *The Freedom Report*. There is reason to believe that this is a generous reading, however, since Wynn distances this second dialogue from pageantry aesthetics.

In contrast to Tiffany's highly stylized, airbrushed look, Justine's lipstick and makeup are messy and she looks disheveled. Though she begins by chastising Tiffany for projecting her self-loathing onto Baltimore for not following the normative social script, Justine eventually admits that she is following a script too, which she doesn't fully believe either. Tiffany interrupts Justine's lecturing by pointing out that her eyelashes are becoming unglued, to which Justine responds that her life is becoming unglued. The conversation becomes more productive as their argumentative personas are dropped, which seems to allegorize a movement away from digitality and philosophy towards analogicity and the real. This reading is corroborated by multiple details, though in each case there is space for redemptive readings.

Midway through the conversation, Justine appeals to Judith Butler's concept of performativity, which she describes primarily in individual terms. "Through transitioning," Justine says, "we habituate to the gestures of womanhood, and socially that makes us women." Tiffany easily refutes this argument by pointing out that it excludes many trans people who are unable to perform their gender for circumstantial reasons. Tiffany rules out performativity, but her objection can also be read as a gesture towards the *reliance* of any individual performance on an *audience* for its success. Reducing the collective underpinnings of performance to individual actions externalizes the question of the audience's reaction, rendering it inaccessible and hence irrelevant. But as we have seen, earlier traditions of ballroom performance bring this collectivity into view, adjusting competitive categories to the needs and limitations of community members.

And similarly, Wynn's effort to humanize Tiffany in this scene rather than reduce her to a hateful caricature speaks to the same impulse to take responsibility performance as mediation. Tiffany's character still represents trans-medicalism, but her sympathetic depiction prevents her from being othered or excluded *as a person* from the trans community.

Pressing Justine on her explanation of performativity, Tiffany asks how one can perform a non-binary identity. When Justine begins to give a jargon-filled response, Tiffany interrupts her: "Girl, shut up." She says. "This is too much philosophizing, I can't stand it anymore. Why don't you tell me what's really going on with you? ... Why are you suddenly so obsessed with white-knighting for non-binary people?" Justine responds that she is actually non-binary herself, which seems to be the reality that her "philosophizing" is covering up. This again seems to counterpose philosophy and the real, but it can be read differently. Justine's abstract critiques of Tiffany's trans-medicalism have underlying emotional stakes related to her non-binary identity, but she was triggered in particular by *The Freedom Report*, a digital media production. Justine's concerns about Tiffany's appearance on *The Freedom Report* implicitly take the show seriously as a mediating institution in LGBT politics. Likewise, the ordering of these two conversations implies an ongoing connection between online and offline spaces, or the digital and the analog.

By the end of the video, Tiffany and Justine seem to have disproven each other's theories, and Tiffany begins to panic that she cannot rationalize her identity. The video concludes with Justine responding that "maybe the most important things in life can't be logically proved. Can you logically prove that you love your own children? No. And the attempt to prove it is as degrading as it is futile." This response seems to counterpose real emotions such as love with emotion-less abstractions, but a corollary counter-reading could emphasize that the love a parent

feels for their children implicates more remote social orders such as education systems and urban planning, and hence takes responsibility for contesting their form and identity. Likewise, Justine's closing thought, that, "at the end of the day, maybe it's just not as important to have logical proofs as it is to be empathetic, open-minded, and compassion" can be reread as a call for these values to be developed at scale, by making better shows than *The Freedom Report*. To this end, "Transtrenders" models the most problematic modes of digital mediation that it critiques.

Chapter 6: Risk Mediation

As I have suggested, the dominant critique of digitality *as such* does double work as a critique of “neoliberalism,” the economic complement of postmodernity that digital platforms emblemize. Used interchangeably with Fredric Jameson’s “late capitalism,” neoliberalism describes an intrusion of abstract economic logic into non-commercial spheres, often with the aid of digital technology. If digitality is a subjective flattening of heterogeneous objects into homogenous, symbolic representations, the abstract economic logic of neoliberalism is an originary digital infrastructure with which the digital technologies they organize are integrated. In other words, digitality and neoliberalism are the same case for most theorists of digitality as such. Yet as I have also suggested, a counter tendency that implicitly treats digital infrastructures as *heterogeneously organized by other digital infrastructures* can be gleaned from case studies. Like Wynn’s intimate confessional mode, close examinations of specific digital forms reveal ambiguities that those forms themselves disavow. For viewers of *ContraPoints*, it is often the *digital* connections they forge with Wynn’s iconic characters that provide a space to think and exist outside the essentializing expectations of *analog* connections with conservative family members.

Across the literature on digital platforms and neoliberalism, we find that Brian Massumi’s description of analog technology, “variable continuity across the qualitatively different:

continuity of transformation,” (Massumi, 135)¹³ is often condemned in market contexts as digitally rendered and then affirmed in ostensibly non-market contexts. Of course, it is not my contention that there are no positions outside of “the market” as a digital system. My claim is two-fold: First, I am claiming that the digital mediation of markets and platforms under neoliberalism is not homogenizing as this mode of theorizing digitality claims. Economic logics are heterogeneously mediated and contested through the polysemy of language, politics, and other abstract infrastructures. Second, I argue that a position outside of markets is being conflated with a position outside of digital and symbolic mediation, such that analog variable impulses are imagined to be mediated only by contiguous analog mediums.

Taking stock of contemporary digital studies, Alexander Galloway proclaims that we are in the “Golden Age of Analog.” By this, Galloway is referring to the intensification of the post-structuralist impulse described above, though he describes it as a departure of sorts. Against “the age of *écriture* (*writing*), of Jean-Joseph Goux and the theory of symbolic economies in Freud or Marx,” Galloway poses “the shift into full-fledged Deleuzeanism”¹⁴ of the mid-1990s through today. According to Galloway, the post-structuralists of the 1970s held lingering attachments to digitality in their emphasis on textual analysis. “By contrast,” Galloway writes, “consider the mid-1990s through to today, the shift into full-fledged Deleuzeanism, the rise of new empiricism, new materialism, pragmatism and the various arguments “against method,” or even the “how we read now” debates in literary criticism. This represents peak analogicity, *the golden age of*

¹³ Massumi, Brian. “On the Superiority of the Analog”. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, edited by Stanley Fish and Fredric Jameson, New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2002, p. 135.

¹⁴ Galloway, A. (2019, March 22). *Peak Analog*. Retrieved from <http://cultureandcommunication.org/galloway/peak-analog>,

analog.”¹⁵ This turn to analogicity takes immediate contact between distinct mediums as its starting point, limiting the scope of analog mediation to the immediate realms of sensation and affect that are so central to contemporary theory. The discursive movement towards affect and sensation that Galloway describes is helpful to contextualize the present discussion.

As stated above, the movement towards “peak analogicity” coincides with the progression of the neoliberal era. Neoliberalism typically refers to the political economic order from the 1970s to the present, but retrospective scholarship is comparatively recent. Perhaps the best known contemporary scholar of neoliberalism in the humanities is Wendy Brown, whose work elaborates Michel Foucault’s earlier writings at the outset of the period. Following Foucault, Brown writes about a particular kind of economic rationality that is hegemonic during the neoliberal period. According to this view, neoliberal rationality analogizes all human decision-making to entrepreneurial risk-taking and investment.

Though Brown does not invoke the digital per se, her critique of neoliberal logics resonate with Galloway’s critique of the homogenizing digital infrastructures. “Within neoliberal rationality,” Brown writes, “Human capital is both our *is* and our *ought*. What we are said to be and what we should be.”¹⁶ Here, Brown is lamenting the limits and boundaries set by neoliberal rationality on those who operate *within* it. At the same time, she is describing a philosophical unity between *being* and *becoming*—*is* and *ought*—that Galloway affirmatively associates with “full-fledged Deleuzianism.” Whereas digital infrastructures attempt to detain “being” within fixed qualitative parameters, analog mediums facilitate constant change and “becoming.”

¹⁵ *ibid.* <http://cultureandcommunication.org/galloway/peak-analog>

¹⁶ Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*. 2015. p. 36.

I note striking similarities between Brown’s sentiments above and statements made by Benjamin Bratton in the context of digital platforms specifically. Eschewing essentializing statements about what platforms *are*, Bratton insists we adhere to the specific *events* that platforms facilitate. Bratton says simply, “Platforms are what platforms do.”¹⁷ Although this statement is simple, its implications are important to unpack. If the analog is “becoming” rather than “being,” this amounts to an admission that the digital is a particular form of the analog—albeit one with delusions of grandeur and exclusivity with respect to users. From this perspective, it is not clear where the analog stops and the digital begins, or what is to stop analog mediums from taking on homogenizing digital features. Alternatives to neoliberal rationality based on such problematic foundations naturalize a notion of immanent, potentially zero sum risk that circularly characterizes neoliberal rationality in the first place. Along these lines, the media theorist Patrick Jagoda describes non-digital reality as requiring “an ambivalent sensitivity to the *riskiness* and complicatedness inherent to all intimacies.” (Jagoda, 180)¹⁸ [emphasis mine]

An alternative approach to theorizing digital and analog technologies would not subsume digital technology users into the “preferred reading” of neoliberal technologies as homogenizing, nor reduce heterogeneous forms of life and meaning to a mode of resistance against the digital. Drawing W.E.B. Du Bois’s theory of “double consciousness,” which describes multiple forms of alienation that Black Americans experience as members of their own communities and a hostile white society, André Brock (2020) insists on deferring a definition of Black digital embodiment to the unfolding, heterogeneous worlds of which it is a part. Starting from embodiment and

¹⁷ Bratton, Benjamin: *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*. The MIT Press. 2016. p. 41

¹⁸ Jagoda, Patrick; McDonald, Peter. “Game Mechanics, Experience Design, and Affective Play” from *The Routledge Companion to Media Studies and Digital Humanities*. Routledge, 2018. p. 180

identity as a heterogeneous and open question, Brock writes that “the digital is a mediator of embodiment and identity, not an escape from it.”¹⁹ For Brock, identity and embodiment are the site of complex interplays between multiple “libidinal economies,” corresponding to different contested social imaginaries. This emphasis on libidinal economies points to a view of embodiment as ambiguously mediated by wider infrastructures, which I would compare to the queer intimacy of *ContraPoints*. And as with *ContraPoints*, I read in Brock’s rejection of digitality as enclosure and redefinition an implication of the widest scales of infrastructure and mediation in the persistent availability of other orders.

It is in this rejection of absolute externality or enclosure at any scale, that my reading of digitality as such contributes to this counter tendency in media studies. Though it is not the primary purpose of his text, I argue that Brock’s methodology aligns with my insistence on nesting digitality within an infrastructure of heterogeneously cohering orders. Wendy Chun and Alex Barnett (2021) are more ambivalent on this point, though their pushback against the axiomatic principle of homophily in data science installs ambiguity and polysemy at the individual level in a helpful way. The stakes of their intervention and its shortcomings are clear in a critical comment they make about the political theorist Carl Schmitt’s conception of politics as hinging on distinctions between friends and enemies, which they transvalue by offering “neighbors” as a neutral third term. “If, as political theorist Carl Schmitt puts it, the political hinges on distinguishing between the friend and the enemy, the neighbor “supplements”—and thus makes inadequate—the political theology of the sovereign.”²⁰ Rejecting the binary logic of

¹⁹ Brock, André. *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*. New York University Press, 2020. p. 20

²⁰ Chun, Wendy, and Barnett, Alex. *Discriminating Data: Correlation, Neighborhoods, and the New Politics of Recognition*. The MIT Press, 2021. p. 236

antagonism, Barnett and Chun insist on heterogeneous social orders as prior to any digital enclosure. Their definition of neighbors, however, is locally rooted and seems to leave more distant orders inaccessible and irrelevant at scale. The limitations here are greater than with Brock, but this work nevertheless contributes to a counter mode of theorizing digitality.

Whereas Brock, Barnett and Chun tease out digital heterogeneity at the level of embodied individuals encountering technologies, Angela Xiao Wu (2022) does so at the level of the technological and social infrastructures. Writing about affective computing, whereby technologies purportedly identify human emotions based on social activity recorded online, Wu's intervention shifts the focus from a pre-mediated liberal subject with innate emotion to the polyvalent social infrastructures through which emotions are interpreted, called "emotionology." "Attending to emotionology," Wu writes, "may productively reorient our analysis away from a preoccupation with individual subjects or disciplinary bodies to the construction of conditions of collective existence."²¹ Resonant with my critique of the dominant mode of theorizing digitality as such, Wu argues that pre-mediated individuation (individual subjects) and mediated individuation (disciplinary bodies) are two sides of the same coin, and gestures instead towards wider scales of collective life. It is this impulse to redeem heterogeneous collectivity as prior to digital individuation that I bring to bear on *ContraPoints*.

²¹ Wu, A. X. (2022). The ambient politics of affective computing. *Public Culture*, 34(1). p. 21

Chapter 7: “Canceling”

The problems of the binary between analog and digital media are laid bare in “Canceling” (2020) moreso than any other *ContraPoints* video. “Canceling” is a meditation on the social media phenomenon of the same name, where totalizing criticisms about a celebrity or public figure are circulated with the effect of exiling them from a community. Wynn plays herself in this video, as she recounts several recent stories where she was canceled on social media.

“Canceling” features multiple set designs, but in each one Wynn speaks directly to the camera in a confessional mode of address reminiscent of Shirley Clarke’s *Portrait of Jason*. Also as *Portrait of Jason*, Wynn is drinking alcohol, adding a layer of intrusiveness and discomfort to our spectatorial position. The intimacy of the confessional mode allows Wynn to guard her complexity as a person from the essentializing critiques of social media. Ironically, the refuge from digital canceling that this intimacy enables is mediated by other digital technologies.

“Canceling” plays out this irony as a profound resignation that canceling will happen again and again, as each time there is nowhere to go but other online platforms. Drawing on several of Wynn’s own observations about the differences between YouTube and other platforms, I argue that the fact that YouTube enables Wynn’s confessional form is evidence of its irreducibility to this pessimistic description.

“Canceling” opens with Wynn climbing into an empty bathtub fully-clothed, surrounded by piles of trash. This particular set bookends the video, with the tub suggesting some kind of cleansing or purifying process. The piles of trash behind the tub invoke the threat of being

discarded, but Wynn's position inside of the tub rather suggests several layers of ambiguity. At one level, it is unclear if Wynn is caring for herself or if she is the last piece to be discarded: the proverbial "baby thrown out with the bathwater." The confessional mode of address implicates the audience in this question too, which suggests at the very start that our spectatorial relationship to Wynn could be viewed through other lenses than the logics of commodification and canceling that she is going to critique. Wynn's sweatshirt is imprinted with a giant graphic of a Queen of Hearts, suggesting cultural iconicity and familiarity. In drag and ballroom performances where the circulation of categories and icons is managed as a collective production, a Queen is a persona that people assume on their own terms. Indeed, even in the context of a card game, the Queen of Hearts has a function that is enacted collectively by the players.

Despite these ambiguous visual cues in the opening *mise-en-scene*, Wynn describes the origin of canceling as a once communal process that fell to the impersonal force of abstract commercial logics. "It started out as this vigilante strategy for bringing justice and accountability to powerful people who previously had been immune to any consequences for their actions," Wynn says. "It's, in a way, the 21st century version of the guillotine—the bringer of justice, the people's avenger. But, also like the guillotine, it can become a sadistic entertainment spectacle." The process of this "[becoming] a sadistic entertainment spectacle" is explained logically, as a natural function of social media's commercial logic. But while this quasi-evolutionary story of the emergence canceling may flow logically from the worldview of YouTube's developers, it does not necessarily follow that YouTube unfolds in this way. Indeed, as the above discussions of ballroom performance suggest, the economic valuation and distribution of social categories is

transfigured through collective performance. Likewise, whereas a strictly commercial analysis of YouTube would reduce Wynn's various "cancellations" to the market preferences of viewers, an analysis that takes into account the cultural influence of ballroom as an institution could see that not only are these preferences backed by heterogeneous social infrastructures, but *ContraPoints* itself is a participant in this shifting landscape.

To define what she ambiguously calls the "tropes" of canceling, Wynn uses the canceling of another YouTuber named James Charles as a case study. Wynn tells a story in which a quotation from a rival YouTuber claiming that James was "trying to trick straight men into thinking they're gay" was twisted into the essentializing accusation that he is a "sexual predator." Gesturing inadvertently to the diverse cultural institutions underpinning the legibility of this social media claim, Wynn plays an iconic sound effect from *Law & Order: SVU* each time she says "sexual predator." Nevertheless, she goes on to logically narrate the evolution of the claim, "Tati accuses James of 'trying to trick straight men,'" first, to "James tried to trick straight men," and then, finally, to "James is toxic and manipulative." In what could be described as two digitizing cuts, Wynn shows that Tati's subjective beliefs were *first* substituted for James's real actions, and *then* further substituted for James's essential identity. However, like the ambiguous production processes and queer film history behind Wynn's editing cuts, these abstract projections onto James are irreducible to a single philosophical decision or cut. Their legibility and impact is a similarly diverse and contested production.

After Wynn details six tropes of canceling, all of which are different forms of abstraction and projection, she moves on to her own story of being canceled on Twitter. For this scene, Wynn is drinking a screwdriver out of a plastic cup with a sheet of translucent blue bubble wrap behind

her. Ambiguous lighting reflects off of the texture of the bubble wrap, calling to mind the shimmering silver walls of Andy Warhol's "Factory." Her shirt, a graphic tee with panels of stylized photographs of anonymous women—transformed into celebrity icons—next to various striped patterns, seems to cite Warhol as well. Famous for transforming drag queens and other marginalized people into stars, the Factory was a mimetically subversive intervention into the culture industry of the 1960s. I have already suggested that Warhol's work has been read uncharitably by Marxist theorists such as Fredric Jameson, who sees his intermingling of high and low art as a symptom of postmodernity and late capitalism. But if Warhol can be read differently, as a self-reflexive and subversive participant in a tenuously "commercial" industry with its own rules, this citation opens up a similar reading here. The corollary of an alignment of *ContraPoints* with The Factory is an alignment of social media canceling with the commercial provision of celebrity and stardom, which Warhol playfully subverted.

But despite the redemptive possibilities hiding in plain sight among Wynn's cultural references and citations, her argumentation falls short of this promise. Rather than call on content creators to intervene subversively, as *ContraPoints* does, Wynn calls on them to toughen up. After painstakingly recounting a story of looking to the online trans community for acceptance, only to be trashed and discarded, Wynn reflects that, "In retrospect, I think this actually may have been good for me in a roundabout way, because I was kicked out of the safe space, and I dropped that mentality. I was thrown into the deep end of reality and forced to sink or swim. And I don't know if my transition or my channel would be where they are today if it hadn't been for that trial by fire." Wynn drags us through the pain of this "sink or swim" lesson when she reads abusive messages she has received for five minutes straight. This scene retrospectively suggests

that the bathtub from the opening shot is not a space for care at all, but the site of a kind of ritual self-mortification to cleanse herself of weakness and social dependence.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

“Canceling” concludes with Wynn celebrating the New Year in the same bathtub, suggesting that the traumatic experiences we’ve watched have been reset, rather than resolved. But as I have tried to show, *ContraPoints* exemplifies a mode of digitality that can transcend these paradoxes of commodification and commercial thinking. Though Wynn has been hurt and let down by online communities, her videos digitally furnish the seemingly “analog,” interior realms of emotional processing and self reflection, for thousands of fans and viewers struggling with the questions she takes on.

Today, as digital technology companies increasingly purport to immerse and “gamify” all aspects of everyday life, treating social identity and meaning as meaningfully contestable can feel naïve and anachronistic. Though common theoretical approaches to digitality as such often validate such cynicism, the contested ambiguities of digital identity re-emerge in case studies. This examination of *ContraPoints* contributes to a growing list of scholarly cases that index heterogeneous and contested infrastructures underpinning digital media phenomena. Despite Natalie Wynn’s frequent disavowals of digital abstraction, the ambiguous intimacy of *ContraPoints*’s queer aesthetic mode is a model of responsibly mediating this tension. Wynn’s vulnerable gaze challenges us as viewers to take responsibility for our role in her videos, as a collective “production” in its own right. Turning this gaze towards digital media as such, I pose a similar challenge to Wynn, myself, and digital media theorists to attend to digital media as a shared problem in which we are inalienably—and inescapably—caught up.

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