

STALKING WITH INSTAGRAM: HOW SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS UTILIZE LINGUISTIC
TOOLS TO TELL MORAL NARRATIVES SURROUNDING VOTING

by

Emma Jane Strange

Honors Thesis

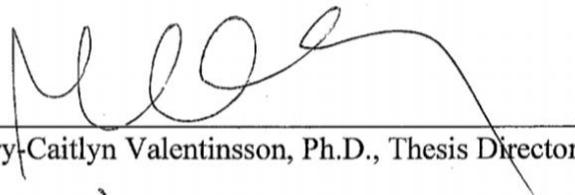
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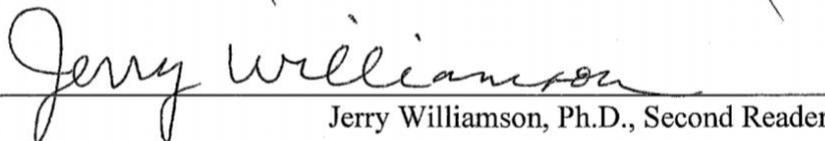
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Approved by:



Mary-Caitlyn Valentinsson, Ph.D., Thesis Director



Jerry Williamson, Ph.D., Second Reader

Jefford Vahlbusch, Ph.D., Dean, The Honors College

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	2
Table of figures	3
Abstract	4
Introduction	5
1. Literature Review	6
2. Methods and Ethnographic Background	13
3. Analysis	16
a. Ethnographic setting, subjects, and initial narratives	16
b. What is real work?	20
c. “Liberals,” stance taking, and real work	22
d. Electoral work and “real” issues	27
e. The spectrum of stances on voting	30
f. Negotiating different tools for work and ambivalence	32
4. Conclusion	34

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Figures

1	Screenshot Boone Community Relief’s Instagram Story Aug. 2020	24
2	Screenshot Boone Community Relief’s Instagram Story Dec. 2020	26
3	Screenshot WCDP Staff Member’s Instagram Politics Highlight Reel	28
4	Screenshot WCDP Staff Member’s Instagram Story Aug. 2020	30
5	Screenshot Black in Boone’s Instagram Story Oct. 2020	33

Abstract

The following thesis concerns digital ethnography focused on semiotic tools used to produce moral narratives concerning whether or not it is morally permissible to vote. Drawing from Keith Basso's chapter "Stalking with Stories," this thesis discusses how moral narratives can be used to strike at the consciences of 'viewers' of social media pages on Instagram and Twitter.

Specifically, the research is focused on politics in Watauga County during the 2020 General Election cycle and the social media platforms Instagram and Twitter. In this research, the argument will be made that social media users can produce moral narratives using semiotic tools to personalize their own stances on voting and to try and influence others' positionalities as well.

Introduction

It is 7:30 pm. The staff meeting went over by nearly an hour, but that's normal when our political director comes and talks. The Dem Party staff is scattered around the room passing computers and chargers to each other and cleaning up snacks. A crowd of student staff is forming around our political director sitting in one of our wooden chairs. The older staff and I know what is about to happen. There are some new staff members and the political director is about to tell a familiar story. Anyone who has been on staff for longer than two weeks knows it. It's been told so many times it's been raised to the status of a myth at this point but our political director has always found it important that we understand this history.

Our political director starts by setting the scene: Five years ago the Board of Elections moved the polling site off the campus to the Agricultural Center. The Agricultural Center was so far away and inaccessible that Rachel Maddow's show on MSNBC did a feature on the egregious voter suppression. A senior staff member prompts her to go on by asking "What did you do?" Even though we all know how it ends, we participate in the performance. Our political director goes on to explain, "Well we sued, didn't we? We took them all the way to the Supreme Court and won. And we will sue again if the Board of Elections ever tries it another time." She ended the story as she always does with an intensity in her eyes. The threat of the voting site being taken away, the threat of voter suppression is why we have to get as many votes as possible cast in the Student Union and that's why every student has to know the history of their rights being threatened.

Through my time working as a staff member with the Watauga County Democratic Party, I became well versed in the art of moral storytelling. I told the story of the voting site which was taken away and won back to every young voter on campus I encountered. I made quarter sheets (small paper flyers) telling the students on App State's campus to "Use it or Lose it." At the

same time, I also learned of alternative ways to create change outside of electoral politics and met people who identified themselves as anarchists. With a foot in both circles, I was always aware of this tension between those who participated in electoral politics and those who found value in alternative methods of care outside of the state. The apparent dichotomy became more apparent to me on social media platforms in the wake of Covid-19 and I saw how people used their social media posts on Instagram and Twitter to assert their own personal views on whether or not it was moral to vote at all.

In this project I analyze social media posts on Twitter and Instagram by accounts from both organizations and individuals who post about politics in the Watauga County area. The structure of the thesis is as follows. First, I will explain the literature that inspires the theoretical background and framework for my analysis before discussing in more depth my role in the Watauga County Democratic Party and the background of my research. In my analysis section I will look at how accounts/individuals utilize semiotic tools such as erasure, fractal recursion, iconization, and characterological figures to produce moral narratives and positionalities which stalk the viewers and form the poster's stance on voting as a moral action. Ultimately I argue that the moral narratives being told on social media served to personalize the user's politics and also fulfill two main objectives. The first being that moral narratives help a social media user to formulate their own stance on voting, even through negotiation. The second objective is to convince others (the viewers of their posts) that their stance is the morally correct one to take.

Literature Review

This project draws the definition of moral narratives from Keith Basso's foundational work titled "Stalking with Stories," a chapter in the ethnography *Wisdom Sits in Places* (1996), which discusses Western Apache moral story telling through short historical oral narratives. Basso details how these historical oral narratives are deeply connected to specific land and time,

and these narratives are told by Apache elders to the younger generations to influence their behavior. For example, a moral narrative can be about “trying to act like a Whiteman” or “chasing after women,” actions that are deemed as immoral in the Apache cultural context, so telling the story influences the younger generation to live within the moral code. From Basso’s work, moral narratives can be understood to be stories which influence someone to live within the traditional norms of Apache society. Morals are defined by culture and staying within those cultural norms; to be as close to what Apache society dictates is the right way of living and maintains traditional Apache culture. For this project, moral narratives are stories which are told to influence people to live within a moral code, but that moral code shifts depending on who is telling the story, because their morals are personalized. Social media then becomes a way for people to personalize their morals.

Nick Thompson, an Apache elder Basso interviews, describes being told one of these stories as a younger person as comparable to being struck with an arrow. In his words, if you are not behaving correctly, “someone stalks you and tells a story about what happened long ago. It doesn't matter if other people are around -- you're going to know he's aiming that story at you. All of a sudden it hits you! It's like an arrow, they say. [...] But when it's strong it goes in deep and starts working on your mind right away” (Basso 1996, 42). The implication is that the moral narrative will stalk you for the rest of your life and affect your actions due to the wounds the arrow leaves (1996, 43). For the rest of your life you will be “stalked” by the story you were told and it will teach you a lesson on how to behave yourself. Stalking is the feeling of your conscience following you, compelling you to act in a morally “correct” way.

The narratives discussed in Basso’s piece were told in person and were oral narratives with a particular history. Here, I extend the idea of a moral narrative with the ability to “stalk” people to online interactions and ask how people can utilize their social media platform to tell

narratives of their own. I believe that narratives do not have to be told in person to have the effect of “stalking” people. The similarities come where the social media posts are being made to also stalk people and to imbue them with their own sense of conscience and moral code. In Western Apache narratives, elders will influence the younger generation to behave in a way in line with Western Apache culture and to reject the culture of white colonizers. In my data, I saw broad trends of people using moral narratives to encourage people to reject ideas of colonialism with voting being part of a colonial system, but I also saw that moral narratives were an important part of establishing one's own positionality and moral code in regards to voting. The moral narratives in this project will center around how people negotiate their own moral positionalities and compel others to agree with them, striking them with a metaphorical arrow through social media posts which will then “stalk” the viewers of their posts.

When we tell narratives either orally or over social media, we can utilize specific tools to make our ideologies and our moral positions known. Judith Irvine and Susan Gal wrote about the semiotic tools which can shape ideologies in the chapter “Language Ideology and Linguistic Differentiation” (2000). Ideologies are relevant to voting and morality as what we think of as “moral” or to what we assign a value of goodness constitute our ideologies and worldviews on voting. Some of the most relevant tools that will be useful in analyzing social media narratives regarding voting will be erasure and iconization. Erasure is what happens when “ideology ... renders some persons or activities invisible” (Irvine and Gal 2000, 38). In the case of moral narratives surrounding voting specifically, when one action of political participation is elevated as the “most moral,” it can dismiss or make invisible alternative modes of political participation which may have just as much validity. Iconization results in the “transformation of the sign relationship between the linguistic features and the social images with which they are linked” (Irvine and Gal 2000, 37), meaning a sign such as voting can be made an icon of something

larger, for example, the inherent opinion of the larger morality of the United States as a whole. Lastly, Irvine and Gal discuss fractal recursion which is “the projection of an opposition” (Irvine and Gal 2000:38) and involves the projection of difference from one level to another. The creation of an opposition and an “other” is very useful for creating a dichotomy and distinguishing one side as morally good and another as morally bad. The “levels” here are unequal and ascribes value to one level over another. Irvine and Gal use these tools to explain how language ideologies are formed, whereas I will be using them to discuss other forms of semiotic data, specifically how they can be used on social media posts to produce moral narratives.

Social media platforms can be sites for debate among groups as well, and these debates bypass the gatekeeping handled by mainstream media platforms such as television and news. Social media provides avenues to engage with politics previously unavailable to individuals. According to Ralph Schroeder in his book, *Social Theory after the Internet: Media, Technology and Globalization* about media systems, “people can participate in activism on their own terms, sharing issues with distant others beyond boundaries of groups or ideologies that may be required in offline activism” (Schroeder 2018, 39). Social media allows for everyone to engage in some kind of political activism. Schroeder also notes that not only are there opportunities to coordinate activism and social movements online, but people can personalize their politics by posting on their own social media pages and relating their personal experiences to the political events happening in the world.

Instagram and Twitter are two platforms where discussions about the morality of voting have been taking place in my data. On these platforms a kind of mediatized public can form, enabling people to disseminate information, such as a hashtag, and ideas to a much broader audience than they would be able to by word of mouth. Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa

(2015) studied how social media became a site where people could engage in what the authors called “hashtag activism” to document and challenge instances of police brutality and racist violence. In the wake of the murder of Michael Brown by the hands of the police, people took to Twitter and utilized the hashtag #Ferguson (the site of the murder) to disseminate information about the murder and to organize protests around police brutality. Here, hashtags did important linguistic work by telling the story of a Black teenager who was wrongfully murdered.

Concerning how social media propelled political action, Bonilla and Rosa said, “by propelling Ferguson into a broader, mediatized, virtual space, social media users were able to show that “#Ferguson is everywhere”—not only in the sense of a broad public sphere but also in the sense of the underlying social and political relationships that haunt the nation as a whole (2015, 12).” Being able to use social media to discuss social movements allows for people in real time to personalize their social media pages around what social issues they care about. By viewing Twitter posts, Bonilla and Rosa have been able to see what issues “haunt” the United States, but they have also been able to see how people can communicate with each other about issues that matter through social media. In the data I will analyze, I show how the social media posts made by those involved in activism in Watauga County are used to expose what issues they find important and center their moral positionalities around those issues. These social media posts are also able to be used for organizations and individuals to negotiate their moral stances, particularly on issues such as voting, and share those stances with others who ‘follow’ them. The moral narratives that are produced are an essential part of that negotiation process as well as being able to “strike” at the hearts of their followers in very personal ways.

One of the criticisms of “hashtag activism” is that it is a poor substitute for “real” in person activism. One of the arguments for the insignificance of online activism is that it has no real staying power and is only capable of creating fleeting news stories (Bonilla and Rosa 2015,

8). However, in the case of #Ferguson, social media memes or trends (such as people circulating images of themselves wearing black hoodies, the outfit Michael Brown was wearing when he was killed) bring attention to the way Black people are more endangered by police. This then led to marches of people wearing the same black hoodies, taking the virtual world to the “real” world. A variety of hashtags were used such as #NoAngel and #HandsUpDontShoot which connected people’s personal lives to larger narratives about systemic injustice in the U.S. Social media allows for people to actively participate in not only the dialogue surrounding movements but the movements themselves (2015, 8). I observed this in my own experience working in electoral politics in the 2020 election. Because of COVID-19, in--person campaigns in Watauga County for the November 2020 election were largely suspended along with some operations for getting out the vote. Simultaneously, left leaning activist groups proliferated on social media platforms as well, and Watauga County residents utilized their own social media to discuss their opinions on the 2020 election, politics as a whole, and whether or not they would vote. The debate over what constitutes real “work” or real activism as discussed in Bonilla and Rosa’s article reflects some of the initial observations of the data from social media posts made in Watauga County and constitute some of the moral narration that will be analyzed later.

The moral narratives analyzed in this project all concern the morality of voting as a form of political participation within left-of-center political ideologies. Before looking at the narratives themselves, it's important to understand the two main sides: why should you vote? Why shouldn't you? The question of *who* to vote for is not important here, but whether voting at all is a moral good. In an article titled “Why People Vote: Ethical Motives and Social Incentives” authors Nageed Ali and Charles Lin argue that one of the main motivators for voting is to make a utilitarian decision on which candidate will enact the most good if elected despite the voter’s being aware that their one vote does not have significant sway in who wins (Ali and Lin

2013:92). Some voters see voting as a civic duty or tradition that has moral implications for how much one values the democratic process; others may see it as a prosocial behavior and wish to be seen as an “ethical citizen” (Ali and Lin 2013:87). While the vast majority of people agree that their one vote does not have power on its own, it seems that they are still able to find the incentive to vote through a variety of motivations, be it through social pressure, a pragmatic decision of who can do the most good, or a moral obligation to a democratic process.

These arguments for voting, however, are not effective for those already disillusioned with the American political system or those who have been the most disenfranchised. For the arguments regarding why one should not vote, I will only be looking at arguments on the left side of politics because I want to examine people who generally have similar political orientations but may disagree on whether electoral politics is the tool they wish to use. Social media brings up questions of what counts as real activism and what counts as leftist “work,” but these debates are not new.

One popular narrative surrounding whether or not one should vote is the idea of harm reduction. According to the National Harm Reduction Coalition, harm reductionists are those who “imagine a world where people who use drugs and engage in sex work have the ability to do so safely and without fear of judgment or criminal consequence. (Gonzalez 2020)” The National Harm Reduction Coalition argues that voting for the person who gets them closer to that goal is itself harm reduction. According to this coalition, harm reduction is taking the actions which lead to the least amount of harm overall. This argument sounds close to the pragmatic approach detailed in Ali and Lin’s article, but not all people agree voting counts as harm reduction. According to a zine titled “Voting is not Harm Reduction,” by a group called Indigenous Action, voting can never be harm reduction as it still acknowledges a settler colonial state which oppresses people. The zine proposes that the “so called left” in the United States appropriated the

radical term harm reduction to convince people to vote when the argument to vote for the lesser of two evils no longer was effective (1). Indigenous Action argues, “If voting is the democratic participation in our own oppression, voting as harm reduction is a politics that keeps us at the mercy of our oppressors” (1) and to vote at all is a compromise not worth making as the goal is total liberation. As an alternative, they propose direct action, arguing that voting doesn't accomplish anything communities cannot provide for themselves (3). Direct action, according to Indigenous Action, includes any activity/activism for the community by the community done outside of the state's mechanisms. In this thesis, when I refer to direct action, I am referring to those forms of activism which do not rely on the state and actively take place outside of government constraints. Mutual aid food sharing and protests are examples of this. The dialogue in this zine pertains specifically to the voting practices of indigenous people in the United States, but the language used in it is reflected in some of the social media posts by political groups in Boone and is used to tell their own moral narratives regarding voting, as we will see in later sections.

I will now turn to an investigation of social media data from August 2020 up until January 2021. I will explain more of the background behind the gathering of this data as well as how I came to this topic of research before going into the analysis of moral narratives at play among Watauga-centric social media profiles in and around the 2020 election.

Methods and Ethnographic Background

From April 2018 up until the present day, I have worked as a staff member with the Watauga County Democratic Party. The Watauga County Democratic Party is the Watauga County chapter of the North Carolina state Democratic Party. Throughout my time working there I have seen a variety of methods implemented to try to compel young people (ages 18-22 roughly) to vote. One of the most common methods I observed that we would use is to appeal to

someone's moral value systems through appealing to a sense of civic duty or upholding a tradition of voter participation which we are known for. For example, one may argue that voting is important because it contributes to a larger good; or in the case of my time at the Watauga County Democratic Party, we try to foster a sense of moral responsibility around maintaining the right to vote. We did this mainly through in person methods such as canvassing (knocking on doors), registering people to vote on campus, and through distributing campaign materials in the form of paper handouts.

The summer of 2020 was a big year for national politics: COVID-19 was exposing large inequities such as poverty and concurrently activism against police brutality against Black people in the U.S was on the rise. All while people were trying to care for themselves and their communities during a historically challenging time, the 2020 presidential election was on the horizon. During this period in Boone, Instagram platforms centered around community care and mutual aid such as Black in Boone and Boone Community Relief began proliferating. As these grassroots groups began their online presence, the Watauga County Democratic Party was also moving their operations online and utilizing social media to enhance "Get Out the Vote" efforts. As someone who was involved heavily in the social media branding of the Watauga County Democratic Party at the time, as well as someone who uses social media to engage with people my age about politics "on the left," I see the posts of people who are in the same political circle I am in. The Instagram account for the WCDP Democratic Party does not interact directly with the organization accounts aside from following them; the party Instagram is mostly used to promote events and occasionally interact with questions through direct messages. However, by virtue of being involved in these circles in my professional and personal life, I have been able to follow multiple political social media accounts through my personal social media profiles.

I began to notice there was a dynamic emerging between those who believed voting is a moral good and those who believed voting is not a moral good. There were those who believed voting was a right under attack that should be protected and that it can produce meaningful change. On the other side, there were those who argued that voting was ineffective and that those who engaged in work surrounding voting were not doing work which was valid. Through a preliminary examination of the social media posts from Boone Community Relief, Black in Boone, and individuals involved in Watauga County politics, I noticed there were several main recurrent moral narratives. In order to analyze these more closely I decided to begin a digital ethnography of the narratives told in these social media posts.

I collected data from several key publicly available social media accounts. Specifically, I collected data from the Instagram pages of Boone Community Relief (having since rebranded to an educational account), the Watauga County Democratic Party, and Black in Boone. I also collected data from individuals aged from 18-22 who posted about politics centered in Boone specifically. I found these individuals either from my own involvement in politics (I know the WCDP staff members personally) or they are people whose work I have been familiar with through my time in Watauga County. These individuals I had either already been following on my own private accounts (meaning their posts regularly showed up on my social media page) or I found through the posts that the individuals were reposting on their stories (Meaning I saw a repost and then looked at the original account the post came from).

To collect data I viewed Instagram posts, stories, and Tweets and screenshot them, noting when they were posted and by whom. Instagram posts were time stamped by date whereas “stories” are posts which only stay up for 24 hours at a time, unless they were put in a highlight reel on the user’s page. One of my subjects, for example, had a highlight reel on his Instagram page labelled “Politics” where he had posts from 2018 to present which pertained to his specific

work in Democratic politics. Instagram posts often involved a photo accompanied by text whereas Twitter was usually text only. After screenshotting these posts I kept them in a secure password protected online folder and organized them by platform and then by account. I had a separate spreadsheet documenting important information about each post including the account, platform, date posted/accessed, and initial observations about each post. When analyzing the data I looked for emergent themes in posts related to moral positioning and storytelling. I found that most posts focused on activism, authenticity, voter suppression, and shame, so I coded my data based on how many of those themes were apparent in the post and organized them according to that content. Overall I documented 36 posts. In the analysis that follows, I focus on an in-depth investigation of posts that are particularly emblematic of the major themes of moral narratives/storytelling I observed. Using tools such as stance and iconization from linguistic anthropology, I will demonstrate how the main themes of “real” versus “not real work”, shame, and icons for privilege, emergent in the social media posts I collected, illustrate how individuals and organizations have the ability to personalize their own politics and justify their own stance on the morality of voting through narratives.

Analysis

Ethnographic Setting, Subjects, and Initial Narratives

Working for the Watauga County Democratic Party for three and a half years, I have learned a lot through observation and practice about the political work that is done in Watauga County. As a staff member for the Watauga County Democratic Party, I was “brought up” in a political environment that emphasized the importance of voting rights. Before my time living in Watauga County, the local Board of Elections (BOE) denied Appalachian State University’s Student Union as an early voting site for the 2016 general elections and the Watauga County Voting Rights Taskforce (VRTF) sued to win it back (VRTF is oftentimes used as a nonpartisan

arm of the WCDP). The site was taken by the BOE again in 2017. Again the VRTF sued and won it back, this time having to go all the way to the North Carolina Supreme Court and setting a statewide precedent for on-campus voting sites. The way the political director of WCDP would tell the story of VRTF and the BOE would make any listener believe it was the most epic court battle in North Carolina history. These court battles formed a main narrative that the WCDP, and I, told when trying to compel people to vote. The intent behind our messaging was to make sure students knew that if they did not vote at the Student Union, the Board of Elections would take that voting site away just like they had before using the reasoning that it was an unused voting site. Often our goal was more focused on getting the student union to “beat” the other main polling site in number of votes simply so the BOE could not justify taking the union site away. We did this through social media and through small paper flyers we called “Quarter sheets”. The phrase I was often instructed to use on social media posts I would make for the WCDP Instagram page or for flyers was “Use it or Lose it.” The moral impetus and responsibility for not losing the voting site was placed by us the Democratic party onto the individual voter, with the ominous threat: We did not vote once and the site was taken away, we sued and won, but we cannot risk it again. In this narrative we have a specific place (student union polling site) where the moral action occurs, and we have specific actors (the voters vs non voters). The implication is that in order to prevent voter suppression of young college voters (assuming voter suppression is a moral wrong), the voters *must* vote at the student union to maintain a strong presence. It was this experience with the WCDP where I was first introduced to doing “work.”

From April 2018 to March 2020 I was taught how to organize canvasses, phone banks, and voter registration drives with a large focus on “get out the vote” which includes all activities geared towards encouraging voter participation while also learning about direct action and mutual aid in my classes. Throughout my experience in the political atmosphere of Boone and

the greater Watauga County, I heard people say voting did not make a difference. The sentiment was not unique to any political affiliation, age, or socioeconomic status; many people believed voting simply didn't work to create change. I understood and still understand this perspective as someone who has seen some of the most impactful change on people's lives come from local government, mutual aid groups, and direct action coming from smaller groups of organizers. I also saw how voting rights had been under threat for years in Boone specifically and wanted to maintain the activism around that as well. Throughout my time in Watauga County trying my best to do "work," there seemed to be two worlds: electoral work and direct action. When things were pushed online, the moral narratives around voting began to develop between the two sides, as stances were negotiated and disseminated on social media.

Finally before discussing the data itself, I will explain how the cast of characters came to be in the wake of the pandemic and how the social media scene developed. The actors we will discuss in the following paragraphs include the Watauga County Democratic Party doing electoral work, Boone Community Relief and their direct action and educational work, Black in Boone and its work in racial justice in Boone work, and finally Black at App State and its specific racial justice work on campus.

When Covid-19 "hit" in March of 2020, WCDP moved their operations online and we focused on things such as grocery shopping for seniors and petitions on social media advocating for voting rights when the voting site was going to be moved across campus (a move that was considered voter suppression). At the same time, Boone Community Relief (BCR for short) first began posting on Instagram in March of 2020 specifically establishing themselves as someone who did mutual aid and food distribution in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In a transparency post, BCR explained that the account was controlled by one primary person who was white, nonbinary transgender, and a community member, not a student at Appalachian State University.

Recently they have changed the name of the Instagram account to sweetleaf161; according to them this is due to Instagram as a platform targeting accounts centered around mutual aid and that are supportive of sex work. (For the sake of continuity I will be referring to the account as Boone Community Relief or BCR). Throughout their posts I have observed that their work is centered around mutual aid, education, and occasional supply distribution. Specifically, BCR coordinated food drops (now coordinated through a local Food Not Bombs group), created merchandise and zines, and raised money to purchase an RV to continue this work. Boone Community Relief established themselves as a mutual aid based in Boone specifically. As of now, BCR is centered around educational materials, death care, and harm reduction for drug users.

In June, in the wake of many Black Lives Matter Protests and the police brutality against Black people, groups representing Black people in Boone and at Appalachian State University also proliferated on social media and in the political scene in Boone. Black in Boone is mainly based on Instagram and focuses on issues of racism that Black people in Boone face. Black in Boone's work focuses around crowd sourcing funds, amplifying Black voices in Boone, and education. Black at App State is centered around sharing the experiences of Black students at App State, holding panels via Zoom, doing profiles on Black at App State activists. Black at App State has also been very active on App State's campus through coming out against the Chancellor of the University and engaging in direct action through crowd sourcing and also staging a sit--in at the administration building. Black at App State also advocated for the resignation of a Board of Elections member in Watauga County after it was publicized that the BOE member had requested there be more police presence on campus on election day under the guise of protecting the polling place from Black protestors (in reality, Black at App State said this was to intimidate Black voters). The Watauga County Democratic Party focuses on electoral work. Boone Community Relief focuses on direct action and mutual aid. Black at App State

focuses on work against voter suppression, mutual aid, and advocacy for Black students at App. Lastly, Black in Boone focuses on education, mutual aid, and advocacy for Black people in Boone

What is Real Work?

There are many different ways to do “work” as demonstrated by the organizations I have discussed. When I and my research subjects refer to “work” it means any activism that pushes for improving the material conditions of people’s lives, specifically marginalized groups within the United States. Throughout my data there are references to work and what it can and cannot do. For example, an activist with Black at App State in a tweet says “There’s still SOOO much work to do. Voting for president is not the “end all be all” and is not going to get us free.” In her work with Black at App State she is involved with many activities in Boone including voting rights as well as mutual aid, and her activism is documented on Twitter. Another word that can be used for “work” is activism and I saw that both were used in similar contexts with similar meanings; therefore I will use them interchangeably throughout. When thinking about the discourse surrounding voting on social media, it is important to remember that all of the accounts I extracted data from consider themselves to be doing “work” for causes they call progressive, left leaning, or aimed towards liberation by their own assertion through social media posts. The tension oftentimes arises when trying to differentiate between authentic work and inauthentic work and we can see how these tensions are articulated through stance taking and other semiotic tools.

Next, I will be going over some vocabulary which will be useful to the analysis and to understanding the two main “sides” of the discourse happening on social media: leftists and liberals. Both leftists and liberals engage in taking stances and constructing positionality, which “may refer to a speaker’s role vis-à-vis her own utterances, whereas positionality encompasses a

speaker's role with respect not just to what she says, but what others say, and the values that these utterances take up in certain sociocultural contexts" (Valentinsson 2018:220). Stance is more momentary and while it is going to be tied to larger sociocultural contexts, it is fleeting. Stances are taken by individuals in actions to establish a narrative or make a point whereas positionality is the packaging of these stances taking moves in a larger context, taking into account factors such as societal and cultural values. The stances people take will help make sense of their larger moral positionalities.

There are two basic positionalities I will be analyzing in regards to how people tell moral stories surrounding voting. One of these is the approach which does work through electoral politics. Those who engage in electoral politics consider real activism to be that which is in person, surrounding voting rights, and overall working within the system of government we have. The other positionality is that of the "leftist" for whom real work is anarchist, anti voting or ambivalent towards it, and that real work involves mutual aid/harm reduction. These positionalities are made up of stances, some of those on voting, that are taken on social media posts. I will explain later how these positionalities are presented on social media and how users can use moral narratives to explain why their stances are more "morally good." First, I will go more into depth about what each positionality believes is real work later, but first I will discuss one of the most important characterological figures (Agha 2005) to these narratives: the liberal.

"Liberals," stance taking, and real work

"Liberals" are often made synonymous with what is called "the brunch crowd." The origin of the brunch crowd can be traced back to one specific post from the 2019 women's march which said "If Hillary were President We'd all be at Brunch" (Nguyen 2020). This political stance implies that had a centrist Democrat been elected, there would not be the same activism and mobilization. The "brunch crowd" became a meme and "a stand-in for complacency and

centrist indifference, for the insular mindset of Trump-era liberal activism” (Nguyen 2020). The idea is that liberals pack up and go to brunch after a centrist Democrat is elected rather than doing “real work.” In Terry Nguyen’s article about the subject, they recalled a story of people actually going to brunch after Biden was elected, with their Biden pins on. Brunch is an activity associated with upper-middle class white women waking up late and day-drinking at a restaurant having a late breakfast. These upper-middle class white women having brunch are also “white feminists” and are associated with the idea of luxury and only caring about activism as a hobby. This crowd is synonymous with liberals in the context of the data I analyzed and the terms were used to refer to the same characterological figure in a moral narrative about who did ‘real work.’”

The use of characterological figures as ways to “stalk” people in moral narratives is not new. In Keith Basso’s work, he wrote about how Apache elders used characterological figures in moral narratives in “Stalking with Stories.” In one story Basso recounted, an Apache man killed a white man’s cow and was arrested by an Apache police officer. The police officer intended on turning in the Apache man who killed the white man’s cow, but when he went to do so, his mind was blank and forgetful (Basso 1984:38). The reason for this is that someone had done witchcraft on him for trying to be too much like the white man by policing other Apache people and the police officer looked ridiculous and was humiliated (Basso 1984:38) . This moral narrative told by the Apache elder uses the man who acted too much like a white man as a characterological figure: if you act the way this man did, you will not only be committing a moral wrong but also will be a laughing stock. The intent of the story is to get the offender to “Act right.” The brunch crowd fulfills a similar role as the warning against being a laughing-stock and as a symbol for who is doing harm and being morally incorrect. The threat is mockery on a social media platform. Even if you are not the one specifically being called “the liberal” or the brunch crowd, you know that if your activism is performative or if you are expressing views

which align with simplistic electoral politics, you are the liberal and will be the subject of internet memes and ridicule. Then, the liberal as a figure of personhood is used as a stance-taking device to define moral positionalities,

One of the first posts I will examine engaging in this kind of story telling about the liberal was posted by Boone Community Relief (BCR for short) who in addition to posting about their work, also post about their views on voting and take stances on what it means to vote or to be liberal. In an Instagram story, Boone Community Relief reposted a graphic with a quote by author Blair Imani which states that marginalized people cannot lose interest in politics. Instagram stories stay available for only 24 hours before they are deleted automatically as opposed to regular posts which stay available on a user's page until they are deleted by the user. Instagram stories also allow for users to "repost" the regular posts from other users. Figure 1 is a screenshot of one such Instagram story by BCR. The smaller white square is the part of the post which is reposted; the small white square in the upper righthand corner of the Blair Imani quote indicates it is a repost. BCR provides their own commentary in black text above it saying "people have to fight to exist and be alive every day. "I'd rather be at brunch" crowd really need to stop telling people "to vote" their problems away." Ending white supremacy, racism, or genocide isn't on the November ballot."¹ By saying that ending white supremacy isn't "on the November ballot" there is a projection of a second level: voting versus not voting being the first level, and not ending white supremacy versus ending it (respectively) on the second level in a kind of fractal recursion.

¹ Throughout this analysis I will be quoting the social media posts exactly as the text appears in the posts

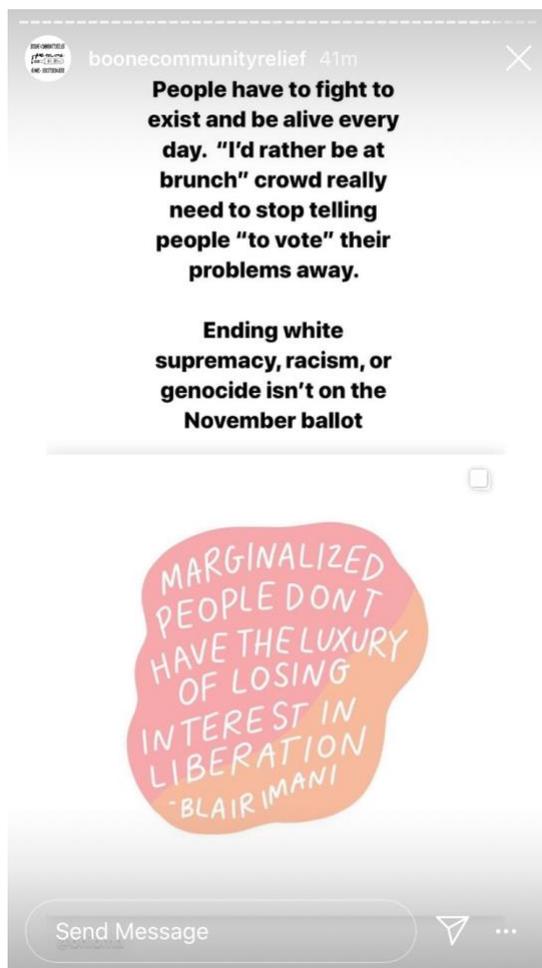


Fig 1. Screenshot Boone Community Relief’s Instagram Story from August 26th 2020

BCR is positioning themselves on the side of marginalized people who cannot ignore politics when it is convenient for them. They make several assumptions. Firstly, they assume liberals (the brunch crowd) wish people to vote their problems away. Secondly, they assume issues such as racism, white supremacy, and genocide are not “on the ballot.” They also position themselves against the brunch crowd and use the Blair Imani quote to bolster their position. Blair Imani’s quote that marginalized people don’t have the “luxury” of abandoning activism pairs well with BCR’s statement. Simply going to brunch after an election is a luxury which marginalized people cannot afford when they are trying to survive under racism and white supremacy as Boone Community Relief points out. The reminder that “ending white supremacy,

racism or genocide isn't on the November ballot" is a stance that indexes what counts as important work in the eyes of BCR. BCR is enacting a kind of fractal recursion by delineating two groups. Fractal recursion involves "the projection of an opposition" (Irvine and Gal 2000:38) in which someone can create an "Other" through linguistic ideologies. In the case of BCR, there is the brunch crowd (using brunch as a signifier of privilege) and there are those who want to end racism, white supremacy, and genocide, the ones who do real work. By taking the stance that is for ending large issues such as racism, BCR is assuming a position of moral high ground. Creating two clear and seemingly opposing stances also is helpful for telling a moral narrative similarly to the image of people going to brunch after Biden's election and giving up on work. Fractal recursion involves projection of levels. The first level in this instance is voting versus not voting as a moral action. Through this post, BCR is projecting a seemingly simple act of voting onto much larger issues, in this instance supporting white supremacy or not supporting white supremacy. The projection ends up being that voting is then indicative of if you are complicit in a system that oppresses marginalized people and supports white supremacy.

The brunch crowd and liberals are stance taking objects which BCR implements to contrast their own stances against. The liberal is a characterological figure which plays a crucial role in these moral narratives. In a post made in December of 2020, after the results of the 2020 election, BCR reposted a meme to their Instagram story seen in Figure 2. In this meme two women are seen hugging each other, one labelled "liberals" and another labelled "virtue signaling and weaponizing marginalized identities while doing nothing to improve their lives." The meaning of the post is that liberals are a group which purports to be virtuous while in reality does nothing to improve the material lives of marginalized people, and even does harm by weaponizing marginalized identities. The characterological figure of "the liberal" is essentially interchangeable with the "brunch crowd" here and both serve as tools in the larger moral

narrative as through iconization they become icons for the moral narrative BCR wants to push about voting. Iconization is the transformation of the meaning of a word to make it indicative of something larger in scope and meaning. While the word on its own without context may mean nothing, iconization means that the icon refers to a larger issue or phenomenon. In this case, the brunch crowd and the liberal become icons of how privileged people can participate in activism like a hobby and return to their leisurely activities once they are tired or have successfully fulfilled a sense of moral good doing or virtue signalling. Invoking the icon of the liberal does a lot in getting across BCR's stance on voting as it points to who BCR believes does electoral work (privileged liberals) and what BCR believes voting can do (virtue signal).



Fig 2. Screenshot Boone Community Relief’s Instagram Story from December 2020

The liberal is an icon for the group of activists who go to brunch after the election is over and leave marginalized groups in the dust. In the context of this research, the term liberal constitutes a characterological figure that serves as a way to “stalk” the viewers of Boone Community Relief’s Instagram posts. It is made clear through memes and the words of BCR themselves that it is not a good thing to be a liberal and if you do certain actions such as vote, you are a liberal who virtue signals. Virtue signaling also has associations with inauthenticity as it is a practice where someone will publicly state a disingenuous statement to appear moral. To accuse liberals of virtue signaling is another way of creating a positionality for liberals and further constructing a “liberal” as something one does not want to be, potentially influencing them to try to not be a liberal. In Keith Basso’s article about stalking with stories, Apache elders would use characterological figures to stalk the listeners to their stories; for example, telling them not to be like the indigenous man who tried too hard to be similar to the white man (Basso 1984:39). The characterological figure of the liberal is made into an icon of immoral personhood; by positioning their own actions, beliefs, and values as contrary to this figure, BCR establishes a leftist positionality with a stance that is against voting. Through Boone Community Relief’s posts they have established a positionality and stance on voting through linguistic tools. Here we see how Instagram posts can create narratives and personalize the politics of BCR.

Electoral work and “real” issues

Who are the liberals in Boone? Going off of the assertions BCR has made in their posts, it is fair to place some of the other subjects of this research in the “liberal” category. One such subject is a Watauga County Democratic Party (WCDP) staff member who I have known for several years. He has worked with the WCDP for nearly four years and uses his social media platforms on Instagram and Twitter to promote voting rights, housing rights, and Democratic

politics. To see what the WCDP staff member considers “real work,” I was able to look at a highlight reel on his Instagram account labelled “Politics” and find one post from early on in the election cycle where he had reposted from someone else’s Instagram account. Instead of sharing something to his story like BCR’s post, he posted a screenshot from another WCDP staff member’s Instagram story seen in Figure 3. Figure 3 is a photo of an online phone bank (calling people to tell them to vote) with text over it saying “Also reminder that social media activism isn’t activism :-). If you care enough to post about it, care enough to go out and do shit.” The staff member didn’t add anything else to the original top white text, he just credited the original poster. Here we see taking the stance that social media activism is not real or valid in comparison to “doing shit” as the original poster put it.



Fig 3. Screenshot from WCDP Staff Member’s Politics Highlight Reel on Instagram

Based on the content of the post, it can be inferred that the posters believe real activism consists of electoral work. Specifically in Watauga County, the main focus of electoral work is centered around voting rights and accessibility to voting. Electoral work includes registering people to vote, phone banking, and knocking door to door to remind people to vote. The original poster asks people to go out and “do shit” as a moral impetus to compel people to change their

behavior. There is no specific characterological figure here, but there is still a narrative being told and a stance being taken. The stance is that electoral work, getting out the vote, is real work. In contrast, “social media activism” is not real work and there is also the moral implication that if you just post about something on social media, you must not care that deeply about the issue. The idea of “caring” is also an important element to these moral narratives. Implying that doing social media activism (posting about an issue or an action to do with social justice is what we are defining as social media activism) rather than engaging in electoral politics is indicative of someone not caring about a topic, and is not valid activism, performs erasure. Erasure is one of the ideological tools defined by Irvine and Gal. It is the making invisible of one activity through promoting an ideology (Irvine and Gal 2000). In this case, through the ideology this post is making (that electoral politics is the only real activism), the impact that social media activism can have and the activities done through social media are erased. Looking at Boone politics specifically, this language erases the impact of online crowdsourcing, mutual aids that are run online, and even the impact of sharing educational posts. This poster is implementing erasure as an ideological tool which erases elements of the semiotic landscape (being the meaning of mutual aid as a way to help people) in favor of pushing another element (electoral work) to the forefront.

From all of the data analyzed so far, it may appear that there are two well defined sides in the online discourse in Boone surrounding voting among young left leaning social media accounts. The two sides seem to be those who do electoral political work versus those who engage in direct action. However, this distinction is much less a binary and much more a spectrum. In the next section I will discuss the gray area between the seeming opposing sides.

The spectrum of stances on voting

Figure 4 is a screenshot of a post made by the WCDP staff member. The post is an Instagram story made in August of 2020. It is a photo of the staff member's forehead with text added by the staff member around the selfie. The difference between this Instagram story versus the one the staff member made in figure three is that it is an original post by the staff member and it is very informal. Figure 4 comes off as more authentic and a more true representation of the staff member's attitude towards activism because it is an original post rather than a repost. The fact that it is an informal picture of only a forehead with lots of text written around the image of the head also signifies authenticity as well to the viewer.

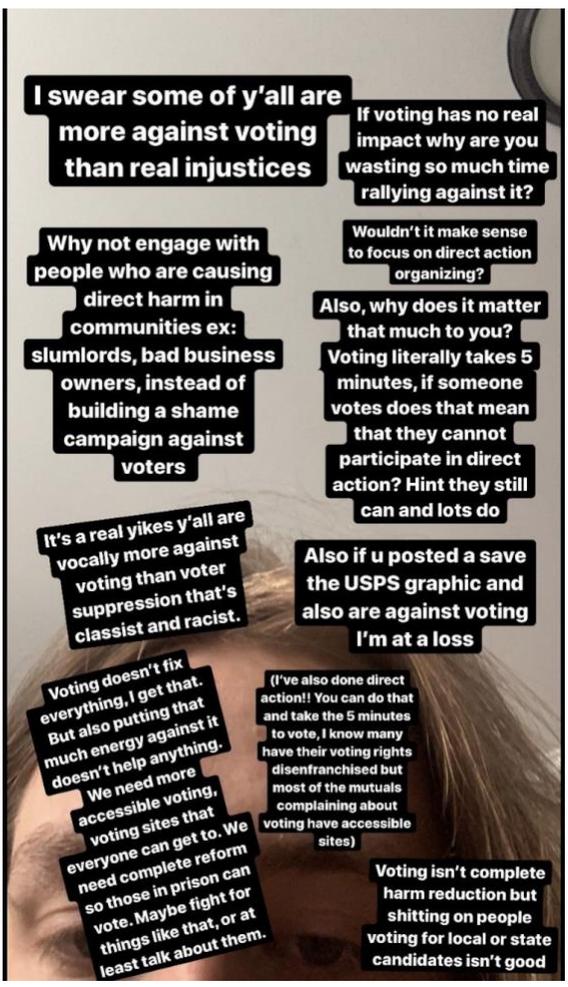


Fig 4. Screenshot of an Instagram story made by the WCDP Staff member in August 2020

As for the text in the post, the staff member expresses frustration with people who “rally against” voting. When I asked this staff member why he made the post, he told me it was an indirect response but targeted to some of the posts made by Boone Community Relief. He explained that while he personally identified with Boone Community Relief’s beliefs, he was frustrated with the attitude they took towards voting.

The staff member makes several points in his post: 1) Voting and direct action are not mutually exclusive, 2) Voting does not have a huge impact, 3) shaming people for voting is not good and 4) voter suppression is a big issue. In the post the largest text is “I swear some of y’all are more against voting than real injustices.” This statement assumes there are injustices which are “real” and some are not. The poster asks the reader “Why not engage with people who are causing direct harm in our communities ex slumlords, bad business owners, instead of building a shame campaign against voters.” In this statement, the staff member makes several claims. First, he proposes that the reader do a different kind of work by engaging with those causing harm, and he offers examples (slumlords, bad businesses). These are examples of what he considers to be the real injustices that are more deserving of energy than what he claims is “building a shame campaign against voters.” The moral narrative here is that Boone Community Relief is spending their energy on something that is not real versus the “real” injustice, thereby not doing real work. The shame campaign that the WCDP staff member is speaking against is those who try to say that voting is a moral wrong. In this case, we see the staff member deflecting the moral narrative told by BCR and arguing that the moral narratives BCR is telling are shame campaigns. When looking back at the Basso piece, there was an explanation of the moral narratives as arrows striking at the hearts of those listening to the stories (Basso 1984:31), but perhaps there can be counter moral narratives acting as shields against those strikes at the conscience. The stance on voting here is that we should vote while also doing direct action. Throughout this post, these

stances make up the staff member's positionality for wanting to fight against injustices such as voter suppression and using voting to make meaningful change as I will discuss next.

The staff member is positioning himself on the side of what he views as real injustices when he discusses voter suppression saying, "We need more accessible voting, voting sites everyone can get to. We need complete reform so those in prison can vote. Maybe fight for things like that, or at least talk about them." While he positions himself as arguing for work against what he views as real injustices, he also makes appeals to the "other side" of the argument by asserting that he has also done direct action and also concedes "Voting isn't complete harm reduction." The moral narrative here is being built to create an image of "the other side" as hypercritical or misguided, focusing on the wrong issues in his eyes. His moral positioning is on the side of addressing injustice such as bad businesses and landlords as stated in his post. In a direct response to the narratives told by BCR, the staff member made his own positionality clear and attempted to deflect those claims made by BCR. Through his social media he was able to personalize his politics around a positionality focusing on electoral work and what he views as injustice.

Negotiating different tools for work and ambivalence

Many of the points the staff member made are similar to those made in an Instagram story post by Black in Boone. Figure 5 is a screenshot of a repost made by Black in Boone of a tweet which reads "It would be cool if those with massive platforms encouraged people to engage in direct action, protests, and join socialist organizations too instead of leaving it at 'vote.'" I think this post breaks down the two binary sides previously mentioned. That of those who are opposed to voting versus those who believe voting is a moral good. It encourages "those with massive platforms," most likely those who have large followings on social media, to add direct action and other forms of activism to the list of activities they promote in addition to

voting. There is an additional tone of moral condescension added by the “It would be cool” and by putting the word vote in parentheses. The condescending tone does imply that only encouraging people to vote and not doing anything else with your “platform” *is* wrong whereas promoting other tools would be the right thing to do. In another post by Black in Boone, the organization described voting as “one of many tools” which makes the action sound morally neutral and less charged. Black in Boone’s moral position on voting seems to be one of ambivalence: not enthusiastic about the power of voting, or about voting for a sense of civic duty, but as a tool in a toolbox alongside direct action, harm reduction, and mutual aid.



Fig 5. Screenshot of a Instagram story repost made by Black in Boone on October 24th 2020

The data shows how social media posts can allow a reader to tell moral narratives to position themselves in their own stances about whether or not it is morally right to vote. Social media accounts are sites of telling each other stories to strike a message into their hearts. For

Boone Community Relief, it was to use icons of the liberal as a threat. Vote at all, and you are the icon for privilege and someone who does not do real work. For the Watauga County Democratic Party staff member, the moral narrative was to try to get the viewers to do what he saw as “real work”: fighting voter suppression or encouraging voter turnout, among other things. The ways he did this was to directly address arguments made by those with views similar to BCR and to deflect against what he saw as a “shame campaign” against voting. Lastly, Black in Boone takes an ambivalent stance on voting as one tool and in comparison to the others, one that can be fairly weak in terms of things which provide immediate material change to those in need. To conclude, I will discuss what this analysis means for what social media posts accomplish in relation to their ability to tell moral narratives and to establish personalized positionalities on politics.

Conclusion

In the case of moral narratives told by Western Apache elders, the moral narratives were told in order to enforce a larger social norm of maintaining Apache tradition in the face of pressure to assimilate to white culture. Moral narratives “stalked” people and struck at their hearts, following their conscience and influencing them to change their behavior. The ways the moral narratives were able to do this was oftentimes through characterological figures which provided a threat of what kind of person you could be if you did not behave in the correct way. The methods and the purpose of moral narratives as found in Keith Basso’s research is similar to that of the moral narratives examined in this project. Specifically, both the narratives told by Western Apache elders and the narratives told by individuals on social media utilize similar tools such as characterological figures in order to fulfill their intention: striking at the heart of the viewer/listener to stalk their conscience and potentially influence them to change their behavior. In the case of the moral narratives examined in this research, the characterological figure was

“the liberal” which was utilized to show how one could look ridiculous or shameful for focusing solely on electoral politics. The contrast comes when analyzing Figure 4 where it was shown that the WCDP staff member used moral narratives to “deflect” arrows/moral narratives from other social media accounts and defended against what he interpreted as “shame campaigns” against voters.

From this research, I would like to see more investigation into the use of the “liberal” as a characterological figure and model for moral personhood. I believe there is more to investigate concerning how the threat of being perceived as a “liberal” can affect someone’s social media presence and maybe even what they decide to post. From looking more closely at the use of “liberal” I think one can also look more into the effectiveness of social pressure and performance. Social media posts are an extension of an online presence and ultimately a performance. In a political context, people on social media are performing their activism and performing their personal politics on a public sphere where people can freely watch and comment on whether or not you are performing the “correct” political views or identity. Particularly I would think examining the “left” versus the “liberal” dynamic more would add more nuance to this project specifically. From what I saw in this limited data set, the perceived dichotomy between voters and non-voters on the left side of the political spectrum seems to be a false one. However, I think with more data we can gain insight into the intersections of moral storytelling and political actions such as voting.

For the social media posts analyzed in this project, moral narratives were less about trying to get people to conform to a larger social standard around voting like how the Western Apache moral narratives were about social standards for an entire cultural group. The moral narratives told by the individual posters were personalizing their politics and trying to a) formulate their own stances on voting, sometimes even through negotiation, and b) convince

others that their own stance was the morally correct one to take. Overall, the data I analyzed fits into Basso's framework of how moral narratives can be used to stalk people, but it also adds another dimension of how social media can be incredibly individualized as people fashion their own perspectives rather than reiterating the perspective of a larger agreed upon societal moral code.

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