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The occupants of the online world cannot typically see the physical attributes of other users and therefore embrace alternative methods to make sense of another person's identity. Through the process of assuming and assigning identity, users rely on and carry over offline racialized attitudes, actions, and beliefs into digital domains, thus further perpetuating racism. Racism persists in online spaces that are typically social justice oriented and populated by marginalized groups. Specifically, the Tumblr role-play community perpetuates both covert and overt forms of racism through out of character and fictional interactions. Through online ethnography, the content analysis of callout posts relating to the topic of race, and interviews with role-players of color, categories arose to reveal the extensive amount of racial exclusion, slur usage, reliance on racial stereotypes, and colorblindness that exists within a population reputed for its seemingly inclusive stance. This research invites further inquiry and examination of methods needed to interrupt the continuous trend of inequality as it occurs offline, online, and through fiction.

UNDERSTANDING RACE RELATIONS

WITHIN THE TUMBLR ROLE-PLAY

COMMUNITY

by

Ena Prskalo

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Approved by

_____
Committee Chair

DEDICATION

To my parents, Josip and Amna Prskalo.

Had it not been for you, I would not have made it this far, and for that I am truly grateful.

To the Tumblr role-play community.

Thank you for welcoming me, awakening my creativity, and entrusting me with your

stories and experiences.

APPROVAL PAGE

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PREFACE

When I first discovered the Tumblr role-play community, I wanted to understand the population and their practices. Upon entering it, I was blown away by the amount of creativity, engagement, and writing that took place within this digital space. However, the longer I remained immersed within the community, the more I witnessed continuous discussions around the topic of race. Much of the discourse around race shattered the illusion of "inclusivity" and "openness" that I had initially embraced, thus leading me to further explore the question of what race relations look like in the Tumblr role-play community. It is important capture the authentic experience of what it is like to exist within this community, especially for a role-player of color. To do so, I begin and conclude my thesis with excerpts taken from my ethnographic notes. These brief recollections or stories are meant to reflect my personal observations of racial discourse within the community and how members responded to it. I then integrate portions of my interviews with role-players of color who recall experiences of exclusion, avoidance, minimization, and animosity from fellow writers and community members. The combination of these stories is meant to communicate the very real issue of racism, how it plagues real people, and how it persists in digital and fictional spaces.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I see silence through my screen in a space that usually harbors so much noise. I can usually hear the way fingers flutter across a keyboard. I can hear the softened snickers that come with reading an amusing post. I can hear excited squeals or gasps that arise from reviewing a role-play response. I can hear the frantic clicking of someone trying to format a post. I can hear it all. It emerges when I talk to someone through IMs or when I see my notifications increasing in the corner of my screen. "You have 2 notifications, now 5, now 16, now 34, now 67." Each number represents a new voice spouting out new stories that are meant for the eyes of strangers to observe. I hear voices that belong to so many boisterous beings that have much to say and share about the characters that bring them comfort. But through the barrage of text, I feel what's missing and I see what's not said. So, it's safe to say that I know of silence and what it looks like.

I know silence is what comes when a user of color tries to communicate a concern. I know silence is what comes when a black user has just been victimized and is struggling to receive support. I know silence comes in the form of unrelated reblogs of posts about one's fictional endeavors. I know silence comes in the form of cluttering one's dashboard with text and images that drown out of the cries of someone bullied and attacked. I know silence; I've seen it. It comes when you'd rather write a role-play reply than even entertain the racial discourse on the screen. It comes when you try to reblog

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the call-out for awareness, but no one that follows you decides to share it. It comes when you try to advocate, but then you get unfollowed for "being too political." And I know noise doesn't appear until the attention shifts to those who chose to keep quiet.

A black user just received a slur when she asked users to stop reblogging a particular writing prompt that appropriated and made a joke out of black culture. Instead of siding with her concern, users embraced the anonymous feature on the platform and decided to send hate to those that were trying to interfere with their role-playing experience. "It's just role-play." "Can't we just have fun?!" "It's not that serious." "You're always trying to start some shit!" "Why do you always have to make things about race?" Upon reviewing the silence that came after the user's victimization, various black role-players turned their attention to the entire role-play community and called everyone out for their lack of engagement. When the attention was taken away from the black users experience and placed onto the perceived racism of the Tumblr role-play community, that was when the silence was shattered.

Suddenly, post after post emerged from white users that showed their outrage for what happened to their fellow writer. Many users were apologizing for reblogging the writing prompt that appropriated black culture and others simply deleted it from their pages without saying a word. Others were trying to rally up white-users into becoming more conscious of their actions, into standing up for black users, into always being involved in racial discourse. Suddenly, upon those posts immerging, my dashboard knew of noise again. Many were reblogging these community call-out posts to showcase any support they had for role-players of color. For a week these kinds of posts were being

created and shared and individuals were daring to out those who openly minimized or disagreed with the racial discourse. This was the largest reaction to a racial issue that presented itself to the Tumblr role-play community. A pity it would have never occurred had white users not been publicly berated for their lack of initial interest and engagement. One has to wonder – had the quiet continued, had white users not been labeled racist or had their fragility attacked, would anything have occurred?

Since then, the silence has been restored. There have been many call-out posts that reflect injustices imposed onto role-players of color, but they have not received the same attention or support as what was previously witnessed. Where are the white users asking other white users to step up and speak out? Where are the apology posts? Where is the continuous self reflection? Why return to silence? And more importantly, why was it easy to do so?

The online world is a relatively faceless space. Often unable to see who we are interacting with, we can assume that prejudices and assumptions based solely on appearance are less likely to manifest within a digital world (Daniels 2009). Some scholars have agreed that people within the online world can in fact quickly establish a common identity (Iacono and Kling 2001; Postmes and Brunsting 2002; Brodock 2010). However, while these observations indicate that the online world might be more cohesive due to its ability to erase (or ignore) physical attributes, I argue that online race relations are, or can be, reflective of offline race relations. Specifically, covert methods of racism such as claiming colorblindness flourish within digital spaces and ultimately contribute to a collective silencing of minority voices that can even be witnessed on platforms reputed

for their inclusivity. To unearth this information, I observed the Tumblr role-play

community with the intent of understanding what race relations looked like in a space

devoted to "playing" pretend and constructing fictional identities through text.

My research expands upon the literature on online identity and the way offline

presumptions and behaviors can be transmitted into a digital setting that is presumably

faceless and more inclusive. Although users take on a fictitious identity, occupy a space

reputed for its representation of marginalized groups (Jenzen 2017), and primarily

interact through text with other community members, we as researchers must still ask:

What do race relations really look like in the Tumblr role-play community? Is it as open

and welcoming as researchers and members of the online world claim (Oakley 2016;

Jenzen 2017; McCracken 2017)? Are behaviors from the physical world transmitted and

manifested within the digital world, even when taking on a supposedly different and

fictitious identity? By developing an understanding of the Tumblr platform and its users,

reviewing existing literature regarding fans, play, and identity, and using methods of

ethnography, content analysis, and interviewing, we can develop a framework that

assesses the answers to each of these questions.

What is Tumblr?

Figure 1. Screenshot of Tumblr Homepage[1]
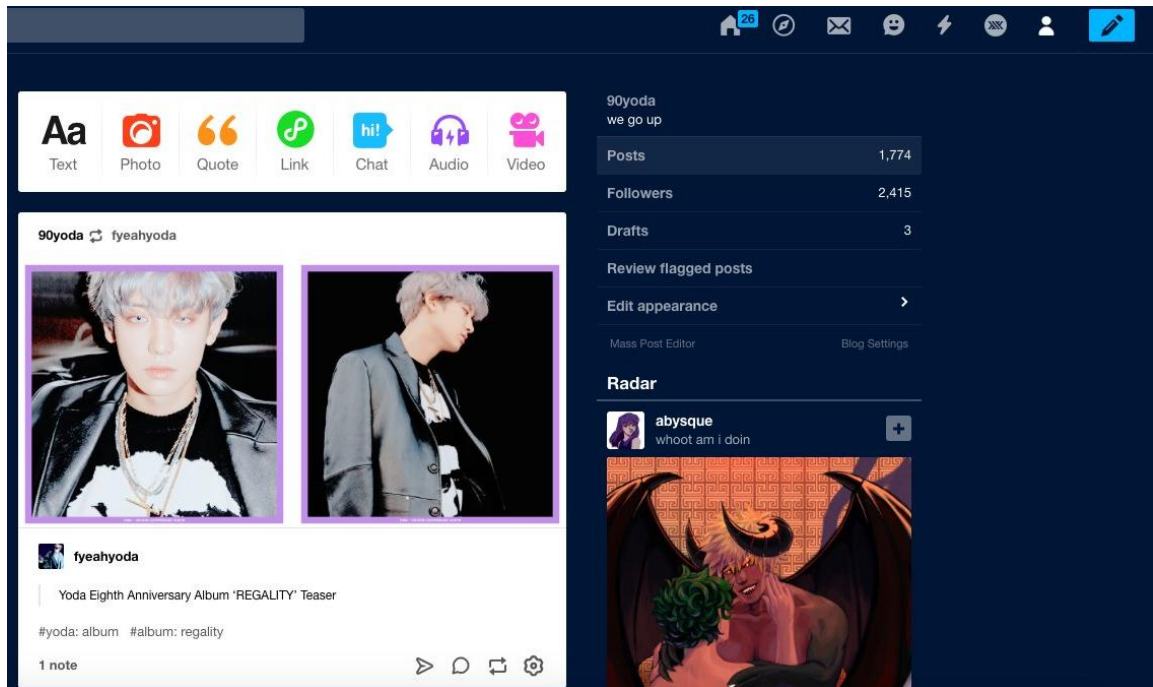
Tumblr is a microblogging platform that was developed in 2007. On this website,

users can post their own original content in the form of photos, videos, and text in their

individual blogs. They can also "reblog" from another person, which consists of sharing

someone else's content and having it presented onto a different blog. These initial posts

can be found using the tagging system (Oakley 2016: 2; Jenzen 2017: 1633). Tumblr

caters to an assortment of needs and populations. People are not given character limits on

their posts and the platform offers more customization options that allow for creative

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[1] Source: https://piunikaweb.com/2019/02/01/my-eyes-hurt-new-tumblr-update-gets-thumbs-down-from-many-users/

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exploration, the personalization of space, and the freedom to post and share content that reflects personal interests.

Aside from Tumblr's ability to host multiple forms of media and allow for multiple forms of communication, it is primarily used by individuals who view the website as an open and safe environment (Oakley 2016). Not only can one easily access material that reflects their hobbies and interests, but the population that occupies this website can bond over the same social issues and experiences they personally face (McCracken 2017). Little information is available regarding the exact demographic of Tumblr; however, certain studies suggest that many of the Tumblr users are low income, female, gender transitioning, young, and/or belong to a minority race (Pew Research Center 2015; GlobalWebIndex 2016; McCracken 2017). The site serves as a haven for identity exploration and it also allows individuals to bond and find common ground over fandoms (Oakley 2016; Jenzen 2017; McCracken 2017: 152).

Role-Play

On Tumblr, role-players (or "writers") take on a fictional identity and use graphics and text as a means of conveying to others how that adorned persona is understood. In this form of online role-playing, writers are relying on their verbal and artistic skills to construct and represent an identity that they themselves or a franchise have created. The "playing" aspect is evident through the collaborative and continuous back-and-forth between role-players who are each devoting portions of written text for the construction of a larger story. The story that both writers are contributing to reflects

worlds and plot devices that they consent to explore through the eyes of the characters they have constructed accounts for.

Tumblr Role-Play

Tumblr allows users to create blogs for themselves. Role-players construct blogs that both represent their character and serve as a space to engage in the act of role-playing. The writer uses the content available on Tumblr (the quotes, photos, videos, music, and text posts) to show others that this is how they personally understand the fictional character they have taken on. The content reflects their character's aesthetics, preferences, physical attributes, and other aspects of their identity. These users are engaging in a form of character building and are allowing an identity to be constructed and maintained through an assortment of media rather than solely in-character writing.

Whenever role-players write, they typically format their posts and use icons of the character they are pretending to be. To format a post, users typically play around with HTML coding in order to bold, italicize, strike through, minimize, and change the color of text. Icons serve as visual pieces (that are often highly edited) to reflect how the writer imagines the character is looking during this particular encounter with another character. Imagine someone is role-playing as Harry Potter and during a role-play, another person's character is making Harry Potter angry. To convey this anger beyond a vivid description, the role-player might include a small image, or icon, of Harry Potter looking mad in order to transcend that emotion beyond literary means. Overall, visual pieces are often highly

incorporated within the act of online role-playing, because it makes the experience all the more authentic for its participants.

Community

According to Weber and Durkheim, communities are founded on emotional ties that individuals have with one another and these ties typically inspire a sense of belonging (Weber 1922: 40). Within a community, members "think and feel alike" and experience multiple commonalities that allow for unification (Durkheim 1893). Members of a community are "undifferentiated" and are capable of "collective movements," meaning that seldom do individuals act independently within communities and many actions embraced by community members are done so on behalf of the collective and seldom for individual gain (Durkheim 1994: 115). The solidarity remains strong if the commonalities among community members are high and if members maintain a unified consensus about the set of shared beliefs, ideas, traits, and interpretations of morality (Durkheim 1893). Role-players on Tumblr belong to a community due to their emotional engagement and investment in a common activity. Because of the interactive nature of role-playing, users quickly establish bonds with the writers around them, thus allowing for a common formation of rules, values, and practices to manifest, dictate, and strengthen community life. Seldom do role-players act independently within the collective, as many users consider the community before embarking on certain fictional endeavors. For example, many role-players choose not to write about "problematic" or "taboo" content such as sexual assault, incest, drug abuse, or gore in order to avoid

triggering fellow community members. However, the rules and norms of the community are not known until an individual "messes up" or "breaks the rule." When this occurs, individuals learn the community's ways by either observing the reaction to the rule-breaking. In addition, the collective is heavily considered when members of the Tumblr role-play community callout problematic users and behaviors, because the offense is seen as an injustice against the community rather the individual victim.

Why the Tumblr Role-Play Community?

Tumblr is recognized as a platform that houses many members that promote social justice alongside their fan-related content (McCracken 2017: 151). Many of its users are attempting to acknowledge and discuss social issues, because many members have faced some form of discrimination, misrepresentation and oppression (McCracken 2017: 152). This kind of orientation towards social justice and representation spills over into the sub-communities that exist within this space, as role-players attempt to construct a sanctuary that allows them to engage in their desired fictional scenarios. Members of the Tumblr role-play community I have interviewed said they chose Tumblr as their preferred role-play platform, primarily because of its seemingly "open" environment, which allows for minority inclusion and unchained exploration. There is a sense of freedom that everyone is granted; fiction is being used as an escape from the trials of reality. However, the term "fiction" does not always protect, or allow, for every topic to be explored and written about within the community. Some material is seen as problematic to write about, such as sexual assault, abuse, and incest. The Tumblr role-

play community does not typically condone role-playing those particular subjects; however, those that choose to incorporate those themes into their written interactions are seen as fetishizing, romanticizing, and even condoning those problematic behaviors. Typically, users avoid writing about these themes; however, those that actively write about those problematic topics are punished through public outings.

Perhaps to maintain a sense of order and comfort among members, users engage in the construction of callout posts, which are posts that are meant to call attention to actions, behaviors, and individuals deemed as problematic by other community members. Callout posts are meant to be shared among role-players, regardless of what fandom they occupy. Typically, callout posts are constructed after failed attempts by a single or multiple community members to get an individual to stop engaging in practices deemed as problematic. These confrontations typically occur in private settings, such as IMs or through the "Ask" option on Tumblr. If a private discussion is not enough to stress the severity of one's actions, then publicly outing the individual for their problematic behavior is seen as the next "effective" step. In the callout post, users typically mention that they have tried to confront the offender privately about their actions to no avail. The callout post is meant to enforce standards held by the role-playing collective and it is meant to prevent certain behaviors from being replicated by others for fear of punishment and exile. However, despite the community's efforts (1) to appear open and respectful of multiple identities and (2) to call attention to problematic behaviors as they occur, racial issues are often neglected and minimized during the construction of a seemingly welcoming utopia. This negligence and minimization is witnessed through the comments

made by community members, offenders, and even the original constructors of the callout post.

If Tumblr is recognized for being a "counterpublic space for marginalized millennial communities" and a "progressives platform" that serves as a haven for "youth, especially girls, people of color, and LGBTQ-identified fans" (McCracken 2017: 151), then why might users experience certain race related issues and what exactly do they look like in a sub-community where people are taking on fictional identities? The Tumblr role-play community is ideal to observe the ways in which offline philosophies that make race matter seep into digital and fictional spaces. By analyzing the persistence of racial issues on a website heavily populated by individuals who have presumably experienced their own form of oppression, we can develop a deeper understanding of how inequality is maintained, especially in a digital age. In addition, this research allows us, as humans and scholars, to consider stronger methods of resistance that can better dismantle the continuous inequalities perpetuated by those that we expect to empathize with us the most.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

How can the discussion of race emerge in a faceless space among individuals who use fiction as a means of escaping the trials of reality? Before fully exploring this question, we must examine already existing scholarship about concepts important to this study such as: fans and fandom, play and the magic circle, online identity, and colorblindness and white fragility. I will begin with a section on fans and fandom to provide context behind who role-players are and how their sub-community functions. I will transition into an explanation regarding "play" and the magic circle to explain how the act of playing is traditionally understood in order to compare it to the ways role-players and fans engage. I will follow up with a section addressing online identity, its dilemma, and how topics such as race fit within this space. Finally, I will conclude with discussions of colorblindness and white fragility, as both concepts can be interwoven to reveal the ways in which the white majority utilizes actions that attempt to silence, trivialize, and ultimately kick out minority voices from various spaces – offline or online.

Fans and Fandom

Much of the literature implies that fans and the fan-spaces they create reflect a cohesive space where members congregate to discuss their common interests (Harris and Alexander 1996; Sandvoss 2005; Jenkins 2006; Hellekson and Busse 2006, 2014; Larsen

and Zubernis 2012: Booth 2010). However, not all fans interpret media material in the same way. How can a group exhibit harmony and fragmentation simultaneously?

Fans

Many scholars agree that fans are individuals who have an emotional investment within their franchise of interest (Grossberg 1992; MacDonald 1998: 136; Sandvoss 2005); fans invest time and energy "into thinking and interacting with a media text" and become involved with a media object (Booth 2010: 11). The emotional investment reflects an active and enthusiastic engagement with a specific interest that not everyone is able to conjure or maintain (Fiske 1989: 145). Role-players are not only emotionally invested in a material, they choose to embody it and replicate it through their activities with others. Role-players, as fans, interact with their favorite media by taking on the identity of fictional individuals in order to engage in scenarios that might replicate or go beyond what occurred in the original telling of the book, comic, movie, and animated or live-action television series. They live through their favorite characters and engage with the material in such a way that allows for the manifestation or continuation of a particular story that can sometimes challenge canon.

Most recently, Hellekson and Busse (2014: 3) have argued that there are two kinds of fans: affirmative and transformative. Affirmative fans are passive recipients of media; they witness, analyze, and discuss the material, but do not further engage with it. Transformative fans are more interactive, and intimately involved with their media of choice. While transformative fans do witness, analyze, and discuss the material, they also

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embody the work through activities such as constructing art, fan-fiction, and even through role-playing. Affirmative fans might have a degree of emotional investment that comes in the form of watching every new episode of a TV show as it airs, but transformative fans act upon their investment differently and through more performative means.

On Tumblr, role-players fall under the category of transformative fans, because they are analyzing the original source material in order to best represent and pass as the fictional identity they are taking on. Transformative fans primarily engage in "textual poaching", which is understood as raiding text and interpreting the original source material in such a way that can, and sometimes does, conflict with the original producers intended meaning (de Certeau 1984; Jenkins 2006a). In other words, a fan might borrow from the original source material, but place the characters in alternate realities or situations that were not explored in the original canon material; thus, the fans are going against the order and plot established by the original creator of the series. How fans and role-players "poach", explore, interpret, and even act out the material can be different among group members and because of this vast difference, conflict and fragmentation within the established fan-space can occur.

Fandom

Some argue that it is difficult to construct an all-encompassing term that accurately reflects the "emotional commitment" and "investment" of fans that belong to varying communal spaces (Sandvoss 2005: 6-8). In other words, while fandoms are

organized around a shared focus, their commitment towards the material and the items they construct to appropriate their favored content vary. Someone who is a fan of a sports team might be more likely to create custom shirts or paint their body to show support rather than writing fan-fiction of their favorite players. In addition, people within a television fandom might be more likely to role-play as characters from these shows than people who belong to fandoms related to sports or music. These differences within fandom must be acknowledged in order to showcase the various ways in which one can be considered a "fan," how "fandom" can manifest, and what activities can occur within these fan-centered spaces.

Fandom represents the practice of coming together and exchanging fannish goods and information. This coincides with Harris and Alexander's (1996: 4) interpretation of fandom as a "social and cultural environment." A culture forms through the materials this group produces and exchanges; what and how something is being shared illustrates an assumed system of shared expectations and values among the fan community. Role-players themselves have their own unique culture and environment within fandom as well. They have an established set of expectations, methods of exchanging resources, and unique ways they engage with one another out of character and in character. Henry Jenkins (2006a: 40), for example, argues that fandom is "a vehicle for marginalized sub-culture groups (women, the young, gays, and so on) to pry open space for their cultural concerns within dominant representations; fandom is a way of appropriating media texts and rereading them in a fashion that serves different interests, a way of transforming mass culture into popular culture." Because fandom is occupied by a diverse assortment

of individuals, the way in which these populations interpret the text varies and is reflective of that group's needs and unique social standing. However, such variation can cause rifts among occupants of fan-centered spaces, causing fandom to serve as both a battleground and sanctuary.

Through fandom, people create agreed upon expectations of how the material should be manipulated. Fans comment and revise one another's work through private messages, public discussions, and commenting on posts in order to preserve the boundaries they have established (Hellekson and Busse 2006: 6; Jenkins 2006a: 137). Role-players engage in this practice as well within their own role-playing sub-community, as individual members publicly address what topics to write about are condoned and not condoned. Although these rules are not always explicitly stated, the community makes these expectations known through the punishments they provide to those who break it. In other words, no one is aware of the community rules until they witness someone breaking them or end up breaking the rules themselves. When a rule is broken and the rule-breaker refuses to or does not sufficiently fix it, community members use callout posts to alert other members of the offense. While scholars acknowledge that fans are communities, these communities are not cohesive and have different rules depending on the fandom one occupies (Hellekson and Busse 2006; Larsen and Zubernis 2012). For example, writing about a gory murder in a Harry Potter fan-fiction might not be as well received or seen as acceptable by Harry Potter fans due to the series being for young adults. However, gory murder in a Game of Thrones fan-fiction is reflective of the mature and graphic themes evident in the series and thus does not conflict with the

expectations of Game of Thrones fans. In other words, what one could get away with writing or doing in one fandom does not easily transfer over into the other; therefore, it is important to consider the diverseness of fandom and how conflict can manifest if boundaries and interests are crossed.

Regardless of how it is understood, most scholars agree that fandom is a community and space for fans to engage with others and consume or construct fan-related materials. Much of the work on fandom draws on Bourdieu as a means of understanding how "hegemony and resistance are constituted not only in the relationship between text and reader…but in the social and cultural fields in which fan consumption is located (Sandvoss 2005: 44)." By incorporating Bourdieu to understand fandom, we can further see the ways in which fandoms appear cohesive and harmonious, but also serve as competitive and clashing spaces. Authors have attempted to address this dynamic by looking at a multitude of fandoms such as wrestling and even comic-book collecting (Erickson 1996; Dell 1998; Harris 1998). John Fiske (1992), for example, applies Bourdieu when he says that fandom has its own economy where fans attain cultural capital. While cultural capital can consist of knowledge, skills, and education, fans themselves are primarily exchanging knowledge and information about the franchise of interest with one another.

However, the interactions within fandom are not always utopian and fair. In fact, other scholars like Thornton (1995) argue that the habitus evident in subcultures embodies the same discriminatory practices found in the dominant habitus. In other words, although subcultures like fandoms are constructed because the dominant culture

does not acknowledge or place value on certain ideas or materials valued by the group, fandoms still replicate the hegemonic practices of discrimination in order to prevent certain individuals from participating or being fully immersed into group activities. Indeed, within the role-play community not everyone has the means of gaining a vast array of followers and not everyone can make beautifully edited images which are reflections of cultural and social capital. And consequently, not everyone is accepted or widely received by the community and outsiders have a difficult time stepping into the role-playing section of fandom to interact with others in-character.

Fandom thus becomes an exclusive practice and other fans might not be easily welcomed into the group due to a perceived inability to contribute to the fandom's economy (specifically pertaining to fandom knowledge). This seems to contradict fandom's intentions of being "antithetical" to the dominant cultures social norms (MacDonald 1998: 136). Although these fan spaces try to be more inclusive and equality driven they ultimately maintain the same hegemonic methods of exclusion and hierarchy. Brown (1997) makes the same observation within his work regarding comic fandom. There, fandom allows the fan to gain a "cultural status" that is unattained everywhere else. However, in the process of attaining this alternative cultural status they replicate the expectations of the dominant culture and apply it to the ways in which someone attains status within fandom. Suddenly, the amount of comic books one has, how old these comics are, what condition they are in, and how much money was spent to attain this material matters. This allows for the maintenance of discriminatory practices, which keep competition and the exclusiveness of fandom alive. The maintenance of discrimination in

fandom is an important factor to consider, as it serves as a guiding idea to explain the continuous negligence of racial minority voices in fan spaces that are meant to counter the exclusion and mistreatment found in the offline world.

Overall, fandom includes multiple interpretations and a multitude of interests. However, researchers agree that fandom is a "community", but one with constantly shifting rules, expectations, and constructed materials. The space is conflicting and yet harmonious, allowing for people to bond over shared interests, but clash when their appropriation of media conflicts with personal interpretations and boundaries. This kind of clash can also be witnessed within role-playing, as the idea that everything is protected under the argument of "it's just fiction" is constantly under debate. When examined through a theoretical lens, fandom integrates the same expectations and discriminatory practices evident in the dominant culture, but only because it seeks to ascribe status and give value to the unique forms of cultural capital a fan has. All of this can be used to further examine the unique ways in which fandom treats the topic of race and how discrimination remains prevalent in the role-playing sphere.

Play

According to Johan Huizinga (2014: 46), the act of playing is a form of engagement that ultimately reveals the way society interprets and understands the world around them. Culture can arise through play; how others interact and what they choose to act out reveals aspects and the inner workings of life around the players. Other authors would even say that how someone designs the game being played reveals interpretations

by the player according to the players' environment and social functions; thus, play always has unique meanings to those involved in the various processes of its construction (Sutton-Smith and Avedon 1971: 493). According to Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2003: 4), authors of *Rules of Play*, games are ultimately "products of human culture" that fulfill an assortment of needs and desires for those involved. Playing is simply a function that many, if not all, individuals engage in and although it can be difficult to explain "logically, biologically, and aesthetically" it is still possible to identify characteristics affiliated with the activity (Huizinga 2014: 7). Play can be understood as a voluntary act that is "not ordinary or real" and it is distinct in its "locality and duration", meaning that play can begin and end at the players convenience (Huizinga 2014:7-9). Play creates its own order, its own rules for fun interaction; no profit can be gained for playing; and the process of playing "promotes social groupings" that attempt to distinguish themselves from the world and its normalcy (Huizinga 2014: 10-13).

During play, a "magic circle" arises where everything occurring in the game being played is claimed to be disassociated and unaffiliated with the real world (Huizinga 2014). There are thick lines drawn that help to establish the notion that actions committed within the circle do not reflect how one would act or think beyond the pretend borders. Salen and Zimmerman (2003: 105) expand upon this notion of the magic circle by acknowledging that players have to rely on their "intuition" instead of hard proof to know when playing officially begins and ends. In other words, despite the boundaries of the circle being established, the lines themselves are not clearly defined. Participants make assumptions based on specific cues to determine when reality and fiction immerge. Even

the participant's psychological state and attitudes impact the beginning, duration, and end of the game (Salen and Zimmerman 2003: 97). Jesper Juul (2008) adds that the illusion constructed by participants at play is maintained through rules negotiated and established by players. The structure of these established expectations and the players engaged work together to keep the influences of the real world out of the interaction.

How can we apply Huizinga's analysis of play to the digital world? Edward Castronova (2005: 147) argues that within the digital world, the lines of the magic circle are not as clearly defined; in fact, the circle itself has holes that allow reality and fiction and aspects from offline and online worlds to intertwine. Scholars like Xiaoli Tian (2017: 191) validate the seepage of online into offline encounters, as individuals typically rely on digital artifacts, such as statuses on social media, left behind by occupants of an online domain to decipher aspects of the others identity and to determine their interactions with them. However, online artifacts (statuses, pictures, shared posts, and other forms of media one can post on social media platforms) might not reveal enough or accurate information needed for a stable interaction, thus emphasizing the haziness associated with online boundary making. When Salen and Zimmerman (2003) and Juul (2008) address the idea that players negotiate the boundaries of play, they primarily focus on how the magic circle is constructed and maintained in the physical world. However, the online world makes it difficult to negotiate expectations and lines, because the cues for play within the digital world contrast with how the player uses their intuition offline. For example, if individuals are engaging in the act of role-playing on a platform such as Tumblr or an IMing system, they might use quotation marks to symbolize that they are

(1) beginning the construction of a story and (2) are taking on the identity of a fictional persona, thus immersing participants within their pretend world but through clearly established means. However, not everyone defines the boundaries so clearly; some individuals are constantly "in character" without the use of quotations and are thus providing no direct clues that play is occurring. This might cause the individual who is interacting with this person to provide out-of-character responses, because they assume it is an out-of-character conversation.

Other authors like Ingrid Richardson (2010) also focus on the porous nature of the magic circle; however, she implies that "ludic" or playful experiences that individuals might encounter from digital devices actually leak into everyday life, thus further eroding boundaries (432). When games such as Pokemon Go for smartphone devices make it possible for people to see and catch animated monsters in their bedroom and on the street (in public and private spaces), the lines of the magic circle begin to thin or break apart due to the immersion of fiction within physical places. Matti Lahti (2003) further elaborates on this fusion of reality and virtual by stating that the body and playing device work together to develop continuity between the physical and virtual worlds.

Play involves the construction and maintenance of boundaries. However, the way in which these elements manifest in reality are not so easily identified within the digital world. Although scholars have addressed the fluidity and thinned boundaries belonging to the magic circle online, they have unearthed an important observation regarding the porosity between pretend and reality. With this in mind, we must understand how identities can be understood within digital environments. If aspects of the real world seep

into an online space, does this imply that we are always a version of ourselves even if we are hidden by text, code, or fictional virtual characters? Can philosophies that we abide by in the physical world dictate the way we play online? More importantly: Do our understandings of race bleed out into an online setting, further making race matter in a faceless space?

Identity

There is an assortment of interpretations towards understanding identity and the dimensions of identity. Identity is depicted as developing through interactions with others (Tretheway 1999; Howard 2000; Talamo and Ligorio 2001; Jenkins 2004; Abbas and Dervin 2009), as something that is constantly negotiated and validated (Goffman 1969), as something constructed and requiring socialization (DeVos and Romanucci-Ross 1982; Spencer and Markstrom 1990), as emerging through self identification (Rotheram and Phinney 1987; Spencer and Markstrom 1990), as established through power relations (Hacking 1990), and as something comprised of a vast array of dimensions (D'Augelli 1994; Gatz and Cotton 1994; Charmaz 1995; Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1995; Nagel 1996; Lindstrom 1997). Despite the debates of how identity is constructed and who has influence over its construction, the term can ultimately be understood as multidimensional, fluid, and "personalized" by "social constructions" (Howard 2000) that reflect specific contexts an individual is directly or indirectly exposed to. While it is important to understand the discourse associated with identity as a whole, I will primarily address identity as it is understood online. In addition, the critique will provide insight on

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the ways certain identities are potentially validated, while others remain dismissed. This discussion of online identity will serve as a gateway to understanding how race relations function and remain persistent on particular digital platforms.

Online Identity

Do people adopt different identities within the digital world or do they retain their offline identity? This is the primary question asked by scholars exploring the topic of online identity. During the 1990's, the online self was understood as being constructed through digital text. Through this medium, individuals could project themselves into the simulations and situations they were involved in (Turkle 1995: 31). Turkle (1995: 184) concludes that despite the fictional engagements among users, individuals are placing aspects of themselves into their newly constructed roles. This can be understood as a form of "identity tourism," where individuals "try on for size the descriptors generally applied to persons of another race or gender" (Nakamura 2002: 8). Through identity tourism, an individual is attempting to construct a persona that differs from their offline self, but despite this supposed change in appearance, they are still exploring different categories of their own identity due to a new social environment (Turkle 1995; Cerulo 1997). All at once, therein lays the conflict of identity tourism, especially on a platform such as Tumblr. If taking on an opposing identity allows you to learn more about yourself, what is it doing for the identity being worn? Is it a form of privilege to be able to take on and take off a racial identity without completely committing to the struggles

and cultural understandings that come with it? What does identity tourism further reveal about race relations within the Tumblr role-play community?

The contemporary online world is no longer constricted to text; users can continue constructing their digital selves through multiple media and resources. The online world allows for people to be exposed to certain scenarios that might not be attainable in real life; thus, being subjected to a new space with new people allows for the expansion and development of one's identity (Turkle 1995: 190). Kendall (1998) aligns with this observation, but also argues that despite one's attempt to construct an alternative identity, the offline self is still grounded into the creation of a different persona. Thus, regardless of what mask someone attempts to adorn in a faceless space, they inevitably integrate aspects of themselves from the physical world. By understanding the ways in which off and online identity intertwine, we can better understand the discourse among Tumblr role-players and why multiple forms of racism remain prevalent in the community and act of role-playing itself.

Contemporary research supports the claim that online individuals are not perpetuating an idealized and fictional identity, but rather an honest reflection of who they are (Gosling et al. 2011; Ivcevic and Ambady 2012). However, these articles reflect research on online profiles created on social media platforms that allow for individuals to be in direct contact with those they know in "real life." There is significant research that implies social media settings encourage the adoption of impression management strategies (Miller and Arnold 2003; Boyd 2006; Dwyer 2007; Gosling, Gaddis, and Vazire 2007; Mehdizadeh 2010). In other words, on social media platforms that contain

members that users know in real life, users are more likely to monitor what they post, share, and how they present themselves. In a more anonymous setting, Pinto et al. (2015: 406) believes that avatars, which are digital and customizable humanoid models, allow for self extension; however, the scholars primarily address the way this is achieved in role-playing games and through the accomplishment of activities (Mittal 2006), accumulation of materials (Belk 2013), and engagement with fellow members, thus allowing the broadening of self.

Schultze (2014) addresses the integration of self online by explaining how embodied identity is performed in virtual worlds. If an individual is occupying a cybernetic space that requires the use of avatars, the construction of this online being will ultimately resemble aspects of the user behind the screen (Schultze 2014: 92). Schultze's work implies that there exists an "entanglement" between avatars and users, such that while the individuals are placing aspects of themselves into the avatar, they are ultimately exploring new aspects of their identity through the way the avatar is received in an alternative setting. This newfound identity can then be transferred over into other websites and even in real life, thus showing that the alternative space has allowed for one's personal identity to expand.

In contrast to the previous works addressed, Kendall (1998) primarily discusses the way race, class, and gender are revealed online and within a setting that is completely devoid of photographs, avatars, or any digital images or models that are meant to reflect a person. Her examination of a purely text based community shows the way identity dimensions become assumed and how dismissive users can be of opposing identities the

same way they are in real life. In regards to race, many white participants within this faceless community stated they never thought much about race and felt that it ultimately had no effect on how they interacted with other users (Kendall 1998: 145). This colorblind behavior online coincides with the way white people might address race in reality (Bonilla-Silva 2013). However, a racial hierarchy can arguably avoided within this setting, because no one knows what anyone looks like; thus, racial minorities can "pass" as white and attain the same privileges within an online space (Kendall 1998: 148-149).

Even gender becomes assumed and those that attempt to take on an opposing gender through an online fictional identity often times take nothing away from the role they have temporarily embodied (Kendall 1998: 141). Despite Turkle's (1995: 213-223) attempt to argue that embodying a different gender online allows for individuals to learn about themselves and their identity, most people are simply playing themselves in a different body and are learning nothing about the contrasting identity they occupy online (Kendall 1998: 131). The same argument might be applied to race. Are those that take on a fictional identity with a race opposite to their own walking away with an understanding of another group's culture and struggles? Other scholars argue that certain groups, such as female fan-fiction writers, are actually challenging the heteronormative narratives and hegemonic masculinity through their adoption of masculine identities (Lamb and Veith 1986; Bacon-Smith 1992; Penley 1992; Cicioni 1998; Salmon and Symons 2001; Kay 2002; Jones 2002; Woledge 2006; Hellekson and Busse 2014). They place these fictional male characters in situations that allow for emotional growth, close connections, and the ability to take on feminine characteristics (Cicioni 1998). Because role-players are also

taking on fictional identities and constructing stories with others, they have the potential

to engage in this activity of shifting gender norms rather than perpetuating stereotypes.

However, can the same argument be made about the way one represents race in a

fictional setting? Are norms being broken or encouraged when people incorporate race

into role-play or is there a more complicated way that race emerges in the Tumblr

setting?

In many ways therefore, online identity is a rendition of offline identity. In

addition, both realms are interwoven – offline foundations, behaviors, and philosophies

can manifest and impact the creation of online spaces and online interactions can impact

the actions taken offline. The online environment that users occupy allows for further

exploration of the self and through this exploration of self comes the expansion of one's

identity, thus further solidifying the fluid nature of identity. But if the online world allows

for an individual to take on another identity, what is being done to that appropriated

identity? Does online role-play further complicate the way race is negotiated,

experienced, and understood offline? What exactly do race relations look like on this

platform where identity is so easily adorned, discarded, and used to further the self rather

than someone else?

Colorblindness and White Fragility

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003) coined and popularized the term "colorblindness"

to refer to the ways in which white people appear or claim to be intolerant towards racial

injustice, yet at the same time reject forms of legitimate and progressive action and policy

that could serve as mechanisms for deconstructing racial inequality (Jayakumar and Adamian 2017: 915). Within the colorblind ideology exist four frames: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization. Abstract liberalism is meant to reflect the foundation of colorblindness and involves using the language of contemporary liberalism to appear reasonable and invested in racial concerns, all while opposing practical ways of dealing with racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva 2013: 28). In other words, an individual might claim to be supportive of people of color, but opposes laws, social movements, and practices that would allow people of color to progress or receive the same benefits as white populations. Naturalization is the process of assuming that racial phenomena is a natural occurrence to excuse certain actions such as segregation (Bonilla-Silva 2013: 28). Cultural racism is the act of relying on culturally based arguments to explain racial phenomena and the social stance of minorities (Bonilla-Silva 2013: 28-29). Finally, minimization refers to the process of declining the significance of race (Bonilla-Silva 2013: 29-30). This can occur through a multitude of ways such as embracing indirect strategies of denial, directly downplaying the experience and relevancy of racism, and arguing that racial minorities make everything "look racial." According to Bonilla-Silva (2013: 30), whites interchange these frames and seldom utilize a single frame "in its purest form." Through these frames, whites are "shielded from acknowledging institutional racism and white privilege" because each category serves as a mechanism for justifying a racial minorities place within society (Bonilla-Silva 2013; Jayakumar and Adamian 2017: 915).

While colorblindness attempts to prevent whites from confronting race, there are moments when the shield cracks and individuals are met with claims of racial injustice. Through this sudden exposure to a topic so desperately avoided, individuals reveal their white fragility. According to Robin DiAngelo (2018: 104), white fragility emerges when a minimal amount of racial stress is present and thus becomes enough to trigger a range of defensive responses such as anger, guilt, and fear which often leads to arguments, silence, and a detachment from the situation. In other words, whites are incapable of confronting race and therefore respond with an assortment of emotions that ultimately end up taking attention away from a racial minority's concerns (DiAngelo 2018: 112-113). The exposure of fragility is meant to inspire others within the room to cater to the offended, outraged, or upset white person's comfort. With all this in mind, it is safe to say that white fragility and colorblindness go hand-in-hand. Once whites are forced out of the bubble that once protected them from entertaining or acknowledging the existence and prevalence of racial discourse, they are met with a wave of emotion that is meant to be so excessive and unbearable to others, that it forces the shield-breakers to rebuild what they have broken or back off entirely (DiAngelo 2018: 113).

CHAPTER III

METHODS

For this research, I incorporated a grounded theory approach rather than allowing

an initial theory or perspective to guide my analysis. When I first began this project, my

goal was to understand what race relations looked like in the Tumblr role-play

community. The data collected focused on the kinds of behaviors or actions that users

were calling out, how community members typically responded to the racial discourse,

and what racial minorities personally experienced or witnessed within the role-playing

community. The data revealed any racial phenomena occurring within this space, thus

allowing us to see the potential prevalence of racism, what it looks like, and why it exists.

Online Ethnography

For almost two years, I submerged myself into the Tumblr role-play community.

When I first joined, I was primarily interested in the norms, values, and beliefs held by

the role-playing collective. I constructed two accounts for two completely different

characters to see if there was a difference between those who role-played as animated

characters and those who took on characters from a live-action series. I have accumulated

a mass following of over 1,000 users on my animated blog whereas my most recent live-

action blog is at 500. Because there is no formal data about the exact number of role-

players on Tumblr, my immersion into the community has allowed me to understand that

there are thousands of users who engage in this activity. In addition, my presence within

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the community has provided me with an assortment of knowledge such as how

individuals use the Tumblr platform for role-play, how users establish boundaries, and

what topics typically inspire discourse among users. Through role-playing, I have also

been able to establish strong connections and trust among users which has allowed me to

gain access to informants and interviewees. Although the Tumblr platform is public and

anyone can find and have access to certain posts and users, I saw it as vital to be a part of

the community in order to become familiar with the role-playing process and

terminology. In addition, by maintaining an active presence within this space, I was able

to be present for community discourse and observe the ways in which members respond

to and circulate information meant for the role-playing collective. Observing how

members of the community responded to discourse is an essential part to understanding

what race relations look like and what this ultimately says about a space that prides itself

on creative freedom and inclusivity. Without my ethnographic immersion, the data

collected would be missing vital context and gaining access to interview participants

would have proven to be a challenge.

Content Analysis

To develop an understanding of what race relations looked like in the Tumblr

role-play community, I analyzed callout posts constructed about race by role-players in

2018. In that year, only 38 callout posts incorporated topics of race. Within the Tumblr

role-play community, race is initially defined as physical differences in appearance, such

as skin color. Upon noticing these physical differences, the community constructs

dialogue over ethnicity, geographic location, speech, and culture to give context to a particular racial category and explore the multiple ways in which one's racial identity can manifest. I identified posts as callout posts by looking for the words "callout" in the title, text, or tags of each post. I selected callout posts that incorporated race by looking for keywords "race" and "racism" in the title, text, or tags of the initial post. I took these terms into consideration, because I wanted to see what the community publicly perceived as a race-related topic or racial issue. Role-players typically include these words somewhere in the post for other users to be aware of the content they are about to be subjected to. For some users, topics such as racism can be triggering, so role-players tend to tag or list any topics that might invoke panic or discomfort out of respect to their fellow community members. Through callout posts, I was able to see what kinds of actions or behaviors warranted community outrage; how offenders, victims, and community members responded to these posts; and what this ultimately revealed about how race was perceived and treated within this online space. The callout posts addressed topics such as white-washing, erasing a character's race or ethnicity, faking a race, slur usage, and even reverse racism.

To begin and acquire the necessary data for this research, I had to accommodate the concerns of the IRB regarding user privacy and protection. I was not granted permission to use any screenshots from the callout posts or direct quotations. Any data that was gathered has been deidentified upon collection and any references to specific phenomena are all paraphrased.

Interviews

A total of nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the Tumblr role-play community that self-identified as a racial minority. Of the nine interview participants, six of them have personally constructed or engaged with callout posts themselves. Each interview lasted 70 to 90 minutes. To attain participants, an advertisement was posted on both the animated and live-action role-playing blogs and shared amongst members of the community through reblogs. The advertisement specifically looked for participants that (1) were over the age of 18, (2) identified as a racial minority, (3) used the Tumblr platform to role-play, (4) had an account specifically for the character they role-played as, (5) experienced misrepresentation and/or exclusion, (6) and were willing to conduct audio interviews through Discord or Skype. Members were asked to fill out an interest survey that allowed them to write out their race and contact information. A total of 35 responses were gathered. However, only 17 answered all of the required questions. Of the 17 responses, only 7 met all of the requirements. The majority of individuals that answered failed to include their contact information for an interview. Of the 35 responses, 19 individuals reported experiencing and observing some form of exclusion and misrepresentation within the Tumblr role-play community. Four respondents said they did not have these experiences and 12 did not answer the question.

In addition, 6 participants were recruited through snow-ball sampling. Upon completing the interview, participants were asked if they knew of anyone else that might be interested in being interviewed and were provided with the principal investigators contact information. Participants were provided with a consent form to review, but their

signature was not required. Members of the Tumblr role-play community typically use aliases amongst one another and to protect their privacy, they could provide oral consent. Despite users already having aliases for themselves, it was important to provide an extra pseudonym in order to prevent further identification from users within the Tumblr role-play community. Every name selected for each interviewee reflects an intersectional artist that best reflects the user's race or writing style. In addition, the purpose of these names is to communicate the idea that role-players are artists in their own right and they create content and characters that challenge the mainstream method of fan appropriation. The participants consisted of Picasso, Sappho, Clifton, Lorde, Plath, Morrison, Basquiat, Walker, and Acevedo.

Picasso is a Hispanic role-player of Nicaraguan descent who stated he enjoys taking on positive and uplifting characters because they serve as a beacon of light for other writers on the platform. He first experienced exclusion through Facebook role-play, because writers on that platform assumed that he could not speak English well enough to interact with others due to being Hispanic. When moving to Tumblr, he felt more comfortable about disclosing his race, but the moment he introduced the idea of his character having darker skin, he was met with aggressive community backlash. **Sappho** describes herself as ethnically ambiguous as her family is comprised of individuals that identify as Asian, black, European, and Native American. She is an artist that describes herself as striving for authentic representation of Asians, Indigenous populations, and Native Americans within the community. However, despite her attempts at personally confronting certain individuals for imposing stereotypes or erasing race, many of her

efforts have gone ignored by the community. **Clifton** is a black role-player that maintains an account for an assortment of characters to choose from. Although she prefers to keep a low profile online, she becomes vocal the moment individuals attempt to impose problematic behaviors through in-and-out of character interactions. **Lorde** is black role-player with a passion for representation. She speaks about the community's discomfort the moment she decided to explore her own character's blackness and how the community began to minimize their interest the moment she made race a relevant topic. **Plath** is a black role-player who has been a part of the Tumblr community for years. Although she typically explores topics deemed as taboo by the community, she does recognize the struggle to access resources for certain characters of color. **Morrison** identifies as a black role-player that unleashes her creativity through the construction of original characters. Her passion manifests beyond fiction, as she strives to maintain an inclusive space by spreading awareness of certain problematic practices and individuals within the community. **Basquiat** also identifies as black and has been a part of the role-playing community since the early days of Tumblr. He recounts struggling with his identity and how the Tumblr role-play community occasionally contributed to that turmoil because he never saw people writing as characters that looked like him and whenever he did, they were either light skinned or did not self-identify as a racial minority. **Walker** is a black role-player that frequently speaks of race and attempts to stress the topic and its prevalence within the role-play community. However, their efforts to discuss race and point out problematic actions by community members has led to their exclusion within certain fandoms. Finally, **Acevedo** identifies as black and Spanish and

carries with her an enthusiasm that goes beyond any written interaction. Although she is very welcoming to those taking on characters of color, she addresses the phenomenon of white writers not wanting to think through, discuss, or acknowledge certain realities that come with belonging to a particular racial category.

At the end of each interview, participants were compensated with a $20 Amazon gift card as a thank you for their participation. Each interviewee identified as either black, Hispanic, or belonging to one or more marginalized races and ethnicities. The interview protocol primarily addressed themes regarding experiences of exclusion and misrepresentation; experiences with taking on characters of color; motivations to write and/or share callout posts; and experiences as a person of color within the Tumblr role-play community.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

I find silence in snow. It is winter and whiteness seems to shroud the world I see outside my window. It is invasive, it engulfs, it keeps things covered, keeps things quiet, makes you not want to leave the comfort you currently confide in. The life I once knew remains frozen and frosted – suppressed by something so aggressive from the skies.

And, like the outside world that begins to wither from winter, so too are the words of the online world reduced to a whisper. I wonder if fingers are trying to be warmed before they type. I wonder if someone is sick and that's why their presence remains so passive. I wonder if pealing dead skin from dried hands warrants more attention than what's to see on this site. I wonder often about the source of this silence and how it easily emerged among the coming of the cold. The quiet is supposed to be comforting, but I ask - for who? It has become harder for me to see the same amount of advocacy, and energy, and intensity so reflective of summer. And if there is any, it's not for people that don't look like us.

I know there are voices calling out from the mounds of white posts. I know there are bodies within the never-ending avalanches of writings and reblogs we contribute to the dashboard. I know they are squirming to reach the surface, striving to be heard by those safe around their hearth. I know distractions in the form of pictures and preachings

are so much prettier to look at, but we seldom think about the life that has been leeched

beyond that white blanket.

But I've stuck around for enough seasons to know – winters coming, and

consumption, and attempts to eat away the occupants of this earth is never enough to

suppress the summoning of spring.

Throughout 2018, a total of 38 callout posts regarding the topic of race were

collected. From January until June, an average of 5.5 callout posts was constructed per

month. However, in July the pattern suddenly ceased, and callout posts steadily declined

into the winter months. This does not imply that callout posts have stopped being

constructed; rather, callout posts specifically relating to race have declined.

**Figure 2. Callout Posts per Month**

2018 CALLOUT POSTS PER MONTH
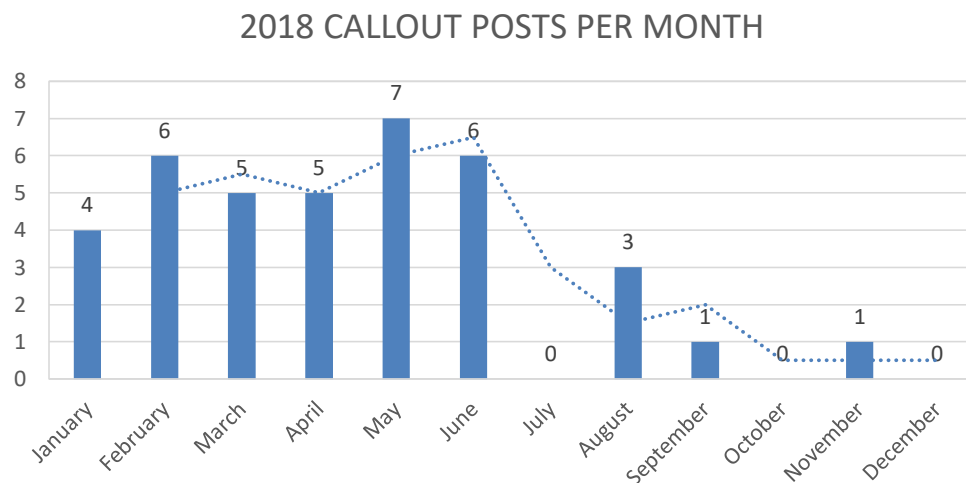
Through the process of coding, transcribing, and analyzing field notes with an

open identification process, multiple themes emerged from the data that coincide with

categories of colorblindness established by Bonilla-Silva (2013) and reveal the white

fragility held by users who are confronted for their insensitivity towards race. In addition, the categories reflect covert racism, overt racism, issues of race seldom standing alone in callout posts, the use of one's race to establish a platform, and a desire for offenders to make their mistakes and confrontations private to avoid public outings. Alternatively, these categories can be restructured and reorganized to reflect how to callout, how people respond to being called out, and how users handle being called out. However, the utilization of the following categories are meant to emphasize the way in which racial issues manifest, how role-players of color respond to these racial issues, and how race is typically treated in the Tumblr role-play community.

Figure 3. Callout Categories
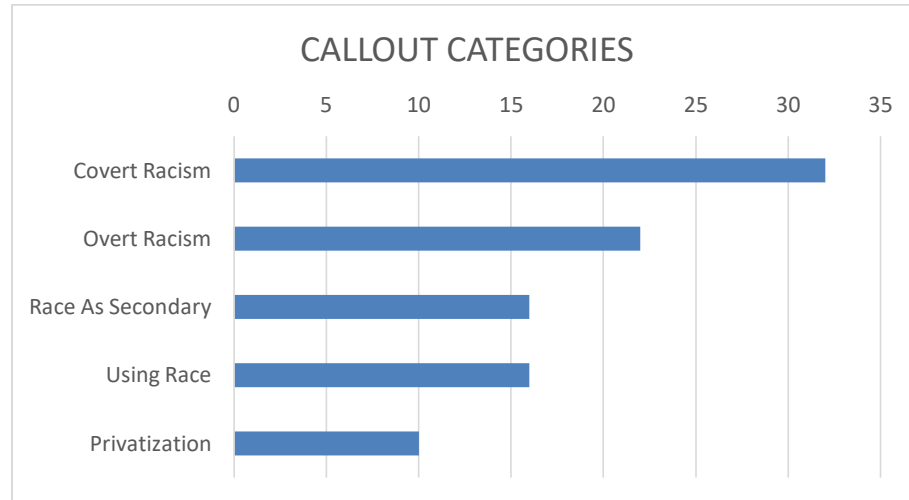
Covert Racism

The category of covert racism contains acts of minimization, dismissal, white fragility, avoidance, users deciding what constitutes as racism, and abstract liberalism. Of

the 38 callout posts collected, covert racism appeared in 32 callout posts on more than

one occasion. To reiterate, any statements used to explain the contents of a particular

category reflect paraphrased accounts of what users have said and done within the callout

posts.

It is also important to mention that although Bonilla-Silva (2013: 30) points out

that whites typically combine the four frames of colorblindness, the findings reveal that

individuals within the Tumblr role-play community mostly utilized two: Minimization

and Abstract Liberalism. Although there were smaller findings for statements that

coincided with abstract liberalism, this particular concept is deeply embedded within the

Tumblr role-play community and Tumblr platform in general. As previously stated, the

website is reputed for housing an assortment of oppressed groups such as racial

minorities, gender minorities, and LGBTQ+ members. However, despite prevalence of

these groups, their social justice stance, and their own unique experiences with

oppression and discrimination, both covert and overt acts of racism exist within this space

and are perpetuated by these groups to shatter the illusion of pure inclusivity.

A large portion of covert acts of suppression consisted of minimization. This does

not imply that naturalization and cultural racism are not utilized by whites, but it does

reveal that these categories do not arise within the public sphere of the Tumblr role-play

community. In addition, rather than utilizing cultural racism to explain a minority's

standing within the fictional setting being constructed, users instead rely on stereotypes to

either discern desirable characteristics within their character or to guide their interactions

with characters of color. This behavior was identified and called out by users within the

community who have personally experienced or witnessed the stereotyping occurring within role-plays and against their own characters. The following themes contain paraphrased examples of covert and overt racism. As previously stated, no raw data or direct quotations could be utilized in order to protect the privacy and ensure the safety of Tumblr users.

Minimization

Minimization appeared 24 times out of 38 callout posts. Through minimization, users would make the following claims: *the callout post was ridiculous, the actions of the offender were not hurting anyone, the post is just petty drama, the user is easily offended, the user would be happier if they stopped letting race get in the way of everything, this issue should not be about race, and users need to stop holding racial slurs to such a high standard*. To solidify my observation of minimization responses, I interviewed nine role-players of color about their experiences or observations of other users down-playing the severity of issues that mattered most to them. Of the interviews completed, all 9 participants experienced forms of minimization. Specifically, Lorde discussed moments of trying to bring up the topic of race to members of a role-play group she belonged to on Tumblr. However, despite her attempts at voicing specific concerns she had, many of her fellow group members would attempt to universalize her experience and make it applicable to "everyone" thus making her issue with the current racial discourse seem out of place, irrational, and unordinary since it "happens to everyone."

Me being the only black woman in there, I felt so uncomfortable. And, at first, I wasn't gonna say anything, because I know it wasn't gonna go anywhere. But, you know me, like… I don't have a filter. So, at first, I was just like 'this shit isn't funny, it makes me uncomfortable.' And I eventually got gaslighted out of the chat. They were saying shit like, 'oh, like, it's not racist', 'oh, Latino people get made fun of too,' 'people make fun of my accent all the time; I don't know why you're so upset', 'just stop taking things personally.'

In many of these situations, Lorde and other role-players would be the only voices of color within these spaces. Upon attempting to address certain topics that they took issue with, other users would attempt to normalize the issue or to strip it of its severity by making the role-player of color seem as if they were making something out of nothing. Through a defeated sigh, Walker recounts a similar experience of attempting to address racist behaviors shared by certain white users, but the white users responses challenged and minimized the severity of black struggles by claiming another white group faced far more hardships.

Well, two people made some very...not cool jokes about how African people would speak, which, like, was the straw that broke the camel's back, really. They also brushed off how, like… how bad slaves had it because the Irish had it just as bad or even WORSE than slaves in America? And really, like, they kinda got mad at me for not agreeing with them about that.

To avoid accountability, users who engage in minimization attempt to strip away the relevancy of race and chose to place severity on discourse belonging to another ethnicity that they had more autonomy over. By bringing to light the struggles of another group and depicting those experiences as harsher, the users are downplaying the harm that comes with their words and, in the process, shift the blame onto the black user.

Dismissal

Dismissal appeared in 19 out of 38 callout posts relating to race. Users who engaged in acts of dismissal would do the following: ignore messages that highlighted concerns belonging to people of color, stay silent and/or not involve themselves in racial discourse, and make claims like: *this is my character and my blog, so I can do what I want* and *if you don't like it, then just don't look at it*. Eight of the nine role-players I interviewed shared moments of other users completely ignoring their comments, suggestions, and concerns when regarding a racial issue. Sappho describes trying to talk to others about not erasing a person and characters ethnicity; however, despite her attempts to reach out, many of her comments go ignored.

> I'll sit down and be like, 'hey, yo, I'm Japanese born. This isn't right. Um… We don't act like that.' And then they'll be like, 'okay!' And then they'll continue… I'm in the position where… I have outspoken about this stuff, I've tried to bring it to the light, but… Even with my popularity, it's such a subject that people will actively try to go around it or ignore it. And whenever somebody does try to do something about it, it gets shoved down completely into the back of the stove. And I'm just sitting here like…it's fucked. It's just fucked up. …Whenever someone else tries to come in and talk about their problems or the problems that their race, or group, is having… They get… Shoved off.

Through Sappho's words, it is apparent that even private confrontation from a directly affected party is not enough to cease the actions of certain individuals. Although people like Sappho attempt to turn encounters into teaching moments, many writers dismiss those personalized pleas and privatized corrections in favor of their own understanding of how another group behaves. However, dismissal can also come in the form of changing topics when initially addressing the topic of race. Picasso explains how

members of the community have successfully adverted from the initial racial discourse by interjecting into posts and shifting the conversation. By changing the topic and dismissing it entirely, users are dismantling the initial agency applied to race and are further preventing the discussion from gaining traction among other role-players.

> I would say that… When, when it's [race] brought up, the discussion is open, but with a platform like Tumblr, it really does only take one person before it's derailed and…swept under the rug. Sometimes when there is a discussion about racial issues on the community, it really does just take one person to make an off-handed comment before the topic's changed and it's swept under the rug. Sometimes someone will disagree, and, and the topic just stops right there? Or… They try to change the topic with something unrelated and then the conversation takes off from there. It happens… It happens quite a few times, actually.

Finally, sometimes dismissal comes in the form of ignoring any posts or comments made by role-players of color. It can come in the form of certain posts receiving no likes, reblogs, or comments and it can come in the form of silence when trying to speak to other users about specific racial issues. Walker brings up the way she recognized the obvious dismissal of her posts regarding race. Although the other content on her blog received massive and favorable attention, any media relating to race was avoided by users and followers.

> I used to bring up how odd it was that I never...saw black people in moodboards[2] or stuff like that? And no one really seemed to notice that or care. …And, people in that fandom, back then and now, are happy to like the shit posts[3] I make and

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[2] Moodboards are picture posts that contain a series of images that reflect what a user associates a particular character or label to. For example, if I am constructing a moodboard for Harry Potter himself, I might include images of deer, lightning, the Gryffindor logo, glasses, and a wand as all of these symbols reflect, are interwoven into, and/or remind me of that character.

[3] Shit posts are posts that are not meant to be interpreted as in character, are not relevant to the role-playing that occurs on the blog, and/or does not reflect the user's actual interpretation of the character. Shit posting

the funny stuff. But if I brought anything serious or racial to the table… I was very quickly ignored.

White Fragility

White fragility appeared in 18 of the 38 callout posts. Many users who were called out displayed white fragility by making claims that *role-players of color hated white role-players, making posts that said it's okay to have a white character, threatening suicide when confronted about actions perceived as racist, getting upset and using that anger to make discussions of race seem annoying or infuriating, attempting to change the subject to topics where the user has more agency, and showing discomfort when talking about race*. Seven of the nine interviewees mentioned the ways in which white fragility emerged in conversation, taking attention away from the race related issue and refocusing on the white user's feelings. Basquiat speaks to me about a time when he role-played a black character and because he was describing the character's skin tone in his role-plays, certain users felt uncomfortable and intimidated by the presence of someone with a darker complexion.

> I think I got an anon once that said they felt… it was too… racially coded? Or all my writing was too "heavy". Right? And I was like, "do you mean stylistically or do you mean tone?" And they were like, "well, you just, you know… it's very apparent, word for word, that your character is black." And I'm like, why is that the… the thing that dissuades you? Like… is there not every fucking role-player out there that, at some point, describes how pale someone's skin is? Like… There's a lot of pale skin motherfuckers out here! Right? Like, that's not to too much for you… But like, someone's blackness is?

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takes many forms such as making the character say something silly or reblogging/posting non-role-play related content.

In this instance, assumed white users are placing more value on their own feelings

of discomfort in speaking about black skin color and using that as a means to pushback

against those who are trying to make their own identity visible through their characters

and interactions. Even though users frequently describe skin tone in their role-plays,

incorporating darker shades serves as an anomaly that immediately invokes a deep

unsettlement within assumed white users and it is that emotion that matters more than the

presence of black people in fiction. Acevedo discusses a similar experience. When

wanting to discuss how her character of color experienced racism, she had to first address

her white friend's discomfort because that was preventing her from being able to

continue speaking in greater length about race.

> I brought up the issue, because I wanted to open a discussion up on Tumblr for
> black muns[4] with black muses[5], like how does their muse deal with racism,
> because shit, we all deal with racism. Like, how does that apply to role-play?
> Because I think about it… And I wanted to know what other people's thoughts of
> it were as well. So, I tried to tell my friend about it once. I tried to describe what
> [my character's] experience with racism would be, you know what I mean? And
> she was very uncomfortable. She was really uncomfortable with the subject. She
> was like, 'uhhh, I don't know…' And I was like, 'I'm not asking you for your
> opinion. I'm just telling you about it.' And she was like, 'oh, this kind of makes
> me uncomfortable…' But we had those conversations where we kinda collide that
> way and I always tell her, 'it's going to be uncomfortable for everybody. I just
> bring it up, because I have experiences with that too and if it's uncomfortable for
> you to HEAR about it, then imagine how uncomfortable it is for me to experience
> it.' So whenever I bring up those issues, I always remind her that it's okay to talk
> about it.

Before Acevedo could speak in greater detail about her character's experience

with racism, she first had to give attention to her friend's state of fragility. However, this

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[4] Mun is another word for role-player or writer.
[5] Muse is another word for character.

is not the first time she has had to temporarily set aside her desire to discuss race to appease the unsettlement of her white friend. This interruption prevents racial discourse such as deeper discussions about the prevalence and meaning of racism from taking off or gaining traction, because a white user's feeling of unease about race forces them to become the center of attention and takes away the focus and drive necessary to confront race as it exists within and out of the fictional world. However, white fragility is not always soft spoken and does not always invoke the image of someone squirming in their seat, or looking away, or being nervous. White fragility can be aggressive and the outrage alone can invoke fear which acts as an incentive to stay silent in order to avoid hostile backlash. I leave you with the words of Sappho and Walker as they reveal less-gentle components of white fragility such lack of accountability, self-reflection, and anger.

> They don't…put themselves into someone else's shoes or think about how somebody else would actually feel and they go straight to being offended. Because they're used to having things, kind of, pitied and handed to them. So, instead sitting back and being like, 'I'm wrong, this is wrong'… they blow up. – Sappho

> People don't want to face the fact that the thing they like and are defending has some racial issues with it. One person in the fandom said they love it even MORE after they saw the racist things. But, like… Not many people really took a step back and said… 'Yeah… This is really bad we should maybe support black voices more in the fandom.' …The second person threw a fit, got their friends involved, and sent folks anon hate. They had their friend's gang up on my friend and said some really...horrible shit that I won't repeat. I don't know if they're still around, but they didn't handle it well at all. – Walker

Avoidance

Avoidance occurred 14 out of 38 times in callout posts and was mentioned by all nine interview participants. Through avoidance, users blocked those that confronted them about actions perceived as racist and some even vanished upon being called out or questioned. Morrison mentioned the prevalence of users simply leaving when they get called out. She attempts to communicate the mindset behind why people choose to vanish rather than atoning for or confronting the accusations made against them.

> It is more common, because they're just like, "I don't wanna deal with this anymore. I don't wanna be with these people who are just going to constantly bring up what I did." And so, they just leave and forget about it.

Instead of owning up to their mistakes or wanting to make things right with the victim, certain offenders leave the Tumblr role-play community, because they assume that they will constantly wear the stigma of their actions. The user no longer wants to be associated with the injustice that they imposed upon another user, but instead of openly admitting to and rectifying their wrongdoing, avoiding the issue and community is seen as the only valid option since it does not require them to place blame upon themselves. In addition, other users embrace avoidance because they reduce the situation to "drama" and do not want to be involved in discourse that is seen as not having enough value. Plath describes her personal reluctance to get involved in heated events that she happens to witness on her dashboard. It is through her detachment that we understand why other users might also embrace the same method of separation. The current discourse is not

seen as having relevancy or severity; the user does not feel personally involved with the issue; and it is seen as an annoyance for disrupting the role-playing process for others.

> I've mostly stayed silent, 'cause I don't like drama. I don't like getting into drama. If drama happens and I wasn't directly involved in the first place, I will stay as far away as possible from it, as long as possible. Like, I'll be vocal about it in private to my friends, but… to the public world? No. No. I'm like, no. That's not happening. I don't know what you're talking about if you try to drag me into what I wasn't involved in originally.

Individuals see a disconnect between the content and themselves, and because a person cannot (or does not) want to relate to the matter at hand, the racial issue becomes easy to avoid. Be equating the current discourse to "drama", users minimize its prevalence, thus making it easier to stay away from certain topics or entertaining public discussion.

Decider

Some users will be "deciders," who determine what constitutes an act of racism and an appropriate method of resistance. This phenomenon occurred 13 times out of 38 callout posts and three of the nine interview participants mentioned having experiences with these particular users. Users who acted as deciders claimed that *the concerns voiced by racial minorities in the Tumblr role-play community were not legitimate or reflective of actual racism, users were asked to use their voice when it mattered, and users were told how they should handle racism*. Picasso explains the frustration that emerges when other users attempt to pick and choose what racial issues carry more weight or severity, as evident in many callout posts and within Picasso's own posts that allow for user

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commentary. "It, it just gets frustrating when one person suddenly just thinks they're right by saying something like… 'but isn't it more racist if you do blank?'" Even Sappho mentions the backlash she received by certain users for trying to bring issues of Asian representation within the role-play community to light. "They basically said I had no right. I had no right to reblog things like that or to try to correct people." When users are picking and choosing what issues deserve discussion or representation, they are immediately engaging in a form of minimization that allows for severity and responsibility to be removed. This allows for users to maintain an image of what an "ideal racial issue" looks like and if certain concerns do not come close to or cannot be compared to that issue, then it is immediately discarded or seen as not worth representing.

Abstract Liberalism

Abstract liberalism appeared in 9 of the 38 callout posts, but all nine interview participants recounted multiple incidents of this phenomenon. In the callout posts, users attempt to separate themselves from certain problematic actions *by claiming to have black friends, claiming to be liberal and productive members of society, and claiming to role-play as black characters which presumably excludes the user from having the potential to engage in racist behaviors*. It is through this abstract liberalism that individuals claim support for marginalized groups; however, the moment these groups require assistance, acknowledgement, or validation via reblogging a callout post, these users avoid the issue or neglect to see it as relevant. For instance, Walker would make or reblog certain posts that advocated for the support of black characters and other

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marginalized characters and although people would share these posts, they would

continue to ignore these kinds of characters.

> Like, spur of the moment, I made a post about ACTUALLY interacting with black muses and not just, you know, trying to look good by reblogging a post saying you do and things like that. That post blew up and now has… I think, 500 notes. Which… I didn't expect. It's kinda comforting to know so many people are willing to write with a black muse, though. But in my role-play fandom? Nah, I don't feel supported at all. Like, I made that post because of my role-play fandom, and, not shockingly, besides close friends, no one in that fandom touched the post. I talk about racial issues in my fandom sometimes and I think people might read them, but… I don't know for sure and don't feel really supported. That is actually why I made the post that kinda blew up recently. 'Cause I see this not just with black muses, but I always just see people saying 'Yeah, do this! I do this!' and they... They don't. With communicating, supporting muses of colors, or muns with mental health issues? A lot of people will just say shit to look good. Like, role-playing a trans muse, supporting other trans muses and the like, and being trans… But somehow… You're still being transphobic? Because you don't like someone and you know being a dick about their gender is a way to get to them. Like, if you do that, you clearly don't believe in the words you reblog or say. You just wanted brownie points.

In addition, individuals attempt to be perceived as inclusive by taking on

characters of color, but according to six of the nine role-players of color I interviewed,

these users do not put forth enough effort to accurately depict the qualities that come with

being that race. For example, Lorde shares how role-players will neglect to describe a

character of color's skin tone, hair texture, and other physical identifiers that indicate that

the character belongs to a different race. By focusing on other aspects of the character

and neglecting to incorporate words that describe and actively acknowledge the race of

the character, users are ultimately erasing the character's racial identity for a more

convenient role-play experience.

They don't focus on-, they never focus on, like, the character's identity in regards to their race within their writing. They're always focusing on the things that they think are cool about the character. Like this one [female character] for example… They focus on the fact that she is hella smart and can make cool inventions and can do this and do that, but they never focus on, like, um… How she does her hair as a black girl, for example. They don't focus on her cultural background as an African woman.

Picasso also discusses witnessing individuals taking on characters of color to simply appear inclusive and invested in issues of representation, but their efforts seldom go beyond adorning that digital skin. This action often indicates that the writer is not the same race as the character due to a lack of attentiveness towards acknowledging the racialized experiences of that character of color.

I can't exactly remember who it was, but it happened a couple months ago. There was this one white mun of a role-play blog who specifically played a darker skin character just so that they would be praised for being a "woke white person." And it was one of the most frustrating things I've ever seen in my life. Like, people of color are not just a race you can play on the weekend.

Much of these statements and actions in effect silence role-players of color and reduce the severity of the actions against them all while maintaining an illusion of inclusivity. It is through these instances in the role-play community that users adopt a colorblind philosophy and it is through white fragility that this way of seeing race is protected. Users are more likely to shift their attention and cater to the emotional response of another user rather than the initial concerns belonging to a role-player of color.

Overt Racism

Overt racism occurred within 22 of the 38 callout posts and it reflects actions of slur usage, anonymous hate, stereotyping, and racial / ethnic erasure.

Slur Usage and Anonymous Hate

Of the 38 callout posts collected and of the nine interviews conducted, slur usage appeared five times for both. Slurs were typically sent through anonymous messages and primarily came in the form of calling black users the n-word. Morrison explains to me that even though she engages in the most mundane practices on the platform, she will receive a slur whereas white users do not receive the same negative attention for engaging in the same action. "There's been so many occasions where I've posted a picture and I've gotten a slur. Like I've gotten anon hate with a slur." Lorde also explains how black users who are outspoken about racial issues will also receive anonymous hate and racial slurs for simply voicing a concern. "I kid you not, a majority of the black people that I role-play with have gotten anon's calling them n-words and all types of shit. 'Oh, delete your blog, you stupid n-word.' 'You're an ugly n-word, you're this, you're that.' And stuff like that. It's bad. It is, it is…" The anonymous hate and slur usage serves as an intimidation tactic to make other users feel unsafe. The aggressive usage of slurs is meant to silence role-players of color and to make their contributions to the community seem unwanted and so abysmal that it warrants a verbal attack.

Stereotyping

Stereotyping occurred in 12 of the 38 callout posts and was mentioned in seven of the nine interviews. Through stereotyping, individuals hone in on a racial generalization and embed that into interactions or discussions. Some users place characters into stereotypical situations in role-plays such as assuming the black character would be aggressive towards another character, making a Japanese character bow excessively, hypersexualizing the body of black men, or fetishizing Asian identities. As Acevedo describes, users might rely on generalizations to guide their interpretations of certain characters and justify it as creative expression:

> There was this one blog that I kinda found out from my friend. They were misogynistic against black women and they were saying like, "oh, this black character that I'm role-playing doesn't like black females because of this, this, and that." And would list all the stereotypical things. …With Asian muses, I feel like there's a lot of fetishization towards them being "pale" or "slender," and they have long beautiful hair, or they're really submissive and shit or they're fuckin' exotic. And with black people, I feel like people are like, "oh…they have big dicks!" Or they're thick, or the women are thick, or the women are angry, but men are hypermasculine alpha types with no emotions. There's those types of stereotypes people cling to. They kind of sexually fetishize them as well, which is where it gets a little uncomfortable.

While Acevedo emphasizes the physical stereotypes role-players can impose onto their characters, Basquiat describes subtle ways that role-players imposed the belief that black people were inherently violent into written interactions with him. Despite his character being in high school, fellow writers seldom set the scene to explore a mundane and gentle activity. Instead, role-players always seemed to put their own character in a situation of danger where Basquiat's black character was in the position of the offender.

Having people…assume certain things about [my character] in that thread, it would always happen, and it was always wild. An example would be… Like, I describe [my character] as like an athlete, so she had a muscular build with defined muscle. She wasn't, like, rowdy, or ready to fuck people up or whatever, but she was like, "I'm down to protect what's mine", but, like, kind of had that thorough edge to her, but you could never see that unless you got up close to her. And… I literally had people say things about her that always threw me off. They would talk about, like… I had people reply to an open[6], ASSUMING that [my character] was going to, like, mug him… It was weird. And they either tried to cut her out or jump in by assuming, like, the short, like…white kid was helpless and needed saving and that the taller dark-skinned black girl was a threat of some form. Threads[7] with her were, like… Violent, always. No one ever wanted to do a thread of, like… Our fucking muses go get frozen yogurt. I don't know. Let's go to Jamba Juice and talk about school. That never happened. They were high schoolers. All these muses were in high school, because I was in high school. But with Jack, it was always combat threads.

These subtle and not so subtle stereotypes originate from the offline world and are embedded into "fictional" interactions. This reveals a projection of offline assumptions of race onto characters that exist within a written and illusory world. Therefore, although individuals want to embrace minimization tactics that claim their actions are "just fiction" or "just role-play," they are instead further perpetuating offline ideologies into fictional interactions online. It is not the character that is making a stereotypical statement; rather, the way the character is being constructed, interpreted, and appropriated is guided by the writers stereotypical understanding of that race.

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[6] Open or open starter refers to pieces of in character text written for anyone to respond to. It is a way for people to begin role-playing even if they have not formally discussed a plot.
[7] Thread refers to the role-play interaction. The word thread is meant to reflect the continuous way a story can unravel as role-players contribute pieces of text to a larger plot.

Racial / Ethnic Erasure

Racial and Ethnic erasure appeared in 19 of the 38 callout posts and in seven of the nine interviews. Through racial and ethnic erasure, users would replace or completely dismiss the relevancy of a character or person's race or ethnicity. For example, some users assume that it is okay to replace a Japanese character with a Korean live-action face claim for reasons such as "they look prettier," and "they're all Asian so why does it matter?" Sappho articulates the way role-players assume identities can be interwoven and interchangeable because it serves as a convenience for them.

> And, the thing, of course, is for the community a lot of people will tack on a Korean face-canon[8] or completely change the ethnicity of the character, without thinking of about how it effects the Asian population in the community. …People just don't want to listen to me at all, from like, the Asian perspective, because to them it's like… 'Well this character or this portrayal is Asian…so I can give them an Asian face-canon that's different.' No, friend. That character's Japanese. You gave them a Korean face-canon and no one's saying shit about it.

Clifton and Plath seemed to concur with these generalizations, despite the initial hesitance displayed through their responses. When it comes to interchanging Asian identities, Clifton does not see the issue and described the need to distinguish ethnicities as "nitpicky."

> I think that's okay, because it's, you know… it's still technically within the Asian group and people wanna get nitpicky and say that, 'no, that Japanese character is not Korean', then by that standard, that's incorrect. When being nitpicky, like you're really, you know, separating by race and stuff like that. You know, they're not doing that to be disrespectful and they're not doing it on purpose, but I think that shouldn't be a problem.

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[8] Face-canon is another word for face claim.

Plath, on the other hand, attempted to justify the interchanging of ethnicities in order to appease a specific aesthetic that a user was going for.

> I know it's hard to find face-claims that fit what you think. I get [this character] is definitely one of those characters that's, like, you can easily find enough Japanese people that play him, but if you find that one Korean guy who fits your headcanon a lot better… Okay… I'm glad you're at least sticking to Asians as a whole rather than going entirely off the grid into a white guy. But… At the same time, I'm also like, 'I kinda wished you went into the plethora of Japanese men, but… At the same time, I get why you would've chosen someone that was Korean,' because, like… Korean men, I've noticed, have… Either, like, some of them have rounder faces than Japanese… And [this character] has a pretty round face, especially when he was younger. But if they're going by [an older version of this character], that's when he gets a lot of his angles and, like, sharper cheekbones, because he's older; he's lost all the roundness, but he's definitely gotten more angular, so like… You can go back to Japanese, but at the time, sometimes I get it... I don't mind if you keep it within the same, overarching, kind of, big group. Like, you're playing someone Japanese, but you went Korean, and I'm like, 'okay, that's fine, because at least you're sticking with Asian.' But… Like I do prefer if you would try to at least dig hard enough to what is closer, but if you have to go off, then go off. As long as you don't go completely off.

Although both role-players were attempting to justify their views and soften their rationale behind erasing and representing certain ethnicities, these reasonings reflect a logic that values the role-play experience over the representation of another identity. It is through these statements that we see the fluidity of fictional interpretations and how many of these preferences are absent of representation or consideration of others beyond our immediate offline experience. However, interchanging identities is not the only way racial and ethnic erasure can occur. Some role-players prefer to leave characters racially ambiguous and frown upon those who impose a racialized identity onto a fictional being. Lorde talks about how she is one of the only individuals on the platform that dared to discuss the race of the character she was writing as. Other role-players that portrayed the

same character as her refused to even consider race as a topic of exploration within the

role-play world.

> It's really not so much what they write, it's more like, what they aren't writing or what they are not saying. With [my character], you have a character who is racially ambiguous point blank mothafuckin' period. You look at [her] and you cannot tell, at all, what ethnicity she is. You can guess? But it's not mentioned. It's not mentioned at all. And the way the creator has it set up…is that he gave [her] white parents. Parents who don't look nothin' like this girl. And they say, you know, that she grew up in poverty in a mountain. But it's like, nobody looks like her. Nobody looks like her. None of the role-players that I see talk about her ethnicity. They don't talk about it. They don't say, 'Oh, [she's] a black woman. Oh, [she] is Indian. Oh, [she] is from this place.' They ignore it and they just focus on shipping[9] with her. They're just focusing on aspects of her character that have nothing to do with her background. They don't do anything to build up on that.

Some would argue, hence, that role-players have allowed the identity of a

character to become erased through silence. By actively ignoring race as it appears within

characters, one can avoid acknowledging the existence and prevalence of racial issues as

they exist in fictional and cyber spaces. In addition, their ignorance to the struggles that

come with certain identities is seen as a necessary sacrifice to maintain the ideal

characteristics of the faux world being built through written interaction.

Users would also engage in editing practices that dramatically lightened the skin

of dark skinned animated and live-action characters. This practice was acknowledged in

ten of the callout posts regarding racial and ethnic erasure. This action reflects a

preference for lightness and whiteness and ultimately erases the prevalence of darker skin

populations existing within various racial categories. Although certain individuals within

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[9] Shipping refers to the process of allowing two fictional characters to develop a romantic relationship within the role-play.

the role-play community recognize the existence of this issue, their efforts to combat it are not seen as enough. Picasso explains how even certain editing techniques meant for characters of color would end up lightning the skin dramatically, despite individuals wanting to provide resources for those with darker complexions.

> Even then, the resources for people of color kind of end up whitewashing their skin color which…is kind of depressing, actually. Because these people want to hand out resources, and yet they… They essentially whitewash the icons.

In addition, users would switch out a character's canon appearance for another visual representation of the character that was much lighter. Many of these actions were justified by users through comments like *it's just role-play*, *this makes for a good aesthetic*, and *well, it makes me happy*. Basquiat tells me about his extensive presence within the Tumblr role-play community and although he has frequented the space for some time, users still hold a preference for lightness through the characters they take on and through the visual representations of these characters they select.

> Go into the Tumblr role-play tag, who do you see? You don't see brown people. You certain don't see brown female bodied people and if there are, they're light skinned or they're that one girl from, like, Vampire Diaries, or like, Pretty Little Liars. Um, the only… Mid-level, like, known…Black and… Non-white woman you see is like Shane…Something? From, um… Gossip Girl or whatever? Like, that was the only face-claim that was adopted from what I've seen. This was also a kid, I was also a kid who grew up deeply involved in fantasy literature and manga. And those are two other places that I never saw anyone look like me, unless it was a troll or a goblin, or someone with dark hair or dark skin, but like not actually black! … I was raised mostly in California suburbia and I also wasn't allowed out of the house when I wasn't going to Christian events, so I was in a very white-based kind of congregation in a very white part of the school. When I went on the internet for friendship and comradery and creativity, I was still in those all white environments.

Although the role-play environment allows individuals to take on any identity of their choosing, many users place preference on characters with a white or light appearance. To maintain this lightness, some individuals even embrace editing practices that white-wash the characters appearance. However, once again, the erasure of one's skin tone is ultimately justified and minimized by users who care more about the way their graphics are constructed over the representation and authentication of a marginalized skin tones.

Race Related Issues Seldom Stand Alone

Of the 38 callout posts that were collected, 16 of them were calling attention to other issues alongside race. The offender had committed multiple offenses than just a perceived act of racism. Some of these actions included harassment, theft, manipulation, and writing concerning content such as rape, pedophilia, and incest. These injustices carried more weight and received more attention from Tumblr role-players, because these issues affected "everyone" rather than a particular population within the community. Users had more agency over issues that affected the entire collective, thus causing racial concerns to not be met with the same amount of attention and investment. The collection of cases against the offender are there to establish a strong argument and serve as a form of "inclusivity" where "everyone's" issues are being represented.

Stating Race

In addition, 16 out of 38 callout posts contained users that frequently stated their race as a means of establishing a platform and credibility for their argument. All nine of

the interviewees also stated their race as a means of established authority and ownership over their own experiences and opinions. In the callout posts, users would say things like: *as a black woman, this is how this hurts me*, *I'm Korean and let me explain why this action is problematic*, or even *as someone who is Mexican, I can't agree with what you just did*. These statements are meant to give the offense weight and severity, as the presence and voices of role-players of color actualize the issue and reveal the ways in which problematic commentary seeps into people and spaces that exist beyond a fictional realm. Yet, despite whatever claims of race individuals make, the fact that certain offenses are being repeated by other users reveals that the actualization of their identities is not being taken into consideration.

Privatization

Finally, privatization is meant to reflect (1) offenders requesting to handle an issue in a private setting and (2) attempts to handle the situation privately, but the offender refused to acknowledge, apologize, or stop their actions. This particular phenomenon occurred in 10 of the 38 callout posts. The situation was either minimized, dismissed, or completely avoided all together, thus allowing for the continuation of problematic actions until the offender was publicly outed by another user. Regarding the effectiveness of callout post outreach, 24 of the 38 callouts had more likes than reblogs. This kind of preference for liking over sharing reveals a lack of outward support that would allow other users to know one's immediate stance on a certain issue (Rotman et al. 2011; Halupka 2017: 132). While likes reveal a form of compliance, it is a more subtle,

private, and less aggressive way of agreeing, because one would have to manually look

through the notes to see who supports the argument (assuming the callout post finds its

way onto their dashboard in the first place). Even though callout posts are meant to bring

community awareness and impose activism on a large scale, the act of simply liking a

post but not sharing it disrupts this process of awareness and activism. Likes may convey

compliance, but they do not help with spreading the original post and its message.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Overview

Upon first entering the Tumblr role-play community, I anticipated a social justice-oriented space that maintained inclusion and representation through both in and out of character interactions. As stated before, the website is reputed for its marginalized occupants who treat the platform as a counterpublic from which unique discourses arise (Oakley 2016; Jenzen 2017; McCracken 2017). Tumblr, and the role-play community that exists within it, intends to operate as a safe space for minority identities and attempts to attend to the needs of a collective that is constantly discriminated against and oppressed by the larger, offline society in various shapes and forms. With these seemingly nurturing and considerate elements in mind, I initially did not anticipate finding any problematic behaviors within the Tumblr role-play community. However, as my findings show, there is evidence to suggest that the Tumblr role-play community perpetuates both covert and overt acts of racism. Even though users construct call-out posts as a means of calling attention to problematic actions, behaviors, and individuals with the intent of ceasing the injustices, the efforts prove to be ineffective.

In fact, while members of the Tumblr role-play community are successful in stopping the problematic actions committed by *individual* users, it is not enough to deter the entire community from embracing racist behaviors. There are a multitude of racist

actions and statements that go unchecked or unacknowledged by the community. Much

of the negligence is evident through the tags and comments of race-related callout posts.

In many cases, if the race-related callout post happens to include an additional offense

committed by the original offender, users are more likely to comment and shame the

offender's non-racial offense over the racial injustice. Although certain users are

attempting to be progressive allies within the Tumblr role-play community by calling out

an assortment of harmful behaviors, the collective is still dismissing the relevancy of race

and are choosing to place severity on other offenses seen as "harmful to everyone" (ex:

users stealing, engaging in manipulation, lying for monetary gain, etc.) rather than

additionally catering to the unique harms imposed onto marginalized groups. Basquiat

further solidifies this phenomenon when he speaks of callout posts and the current topics

they attend to. Users are more likely to focus on issues arising in writing romance in role-

play, protecting underage characters, and preventing users from writing taboo topics.

While these gestures of protection are meant to envelop everyone in the community,

users are still leaving out the concerns of racial minority role-players who deal with

additional injustices than majority users.

> I feel like I don't really see… Race called out that much? Yeah, I'm surprised too.
> Out of all that, I think people would acknowledge them more, because I think it
> happens a lot, but I think it's one of the things most easily dismissed among the
> concepts or the topics of things that come out of the community. Like, right now
> the big thing is… What are you shipping and is it problematic? Um, and kind of
> like… 'How old is your character?' 'What are you role-playing?' 'Are you
> whatever, whatever, are you… Whatever, etcetera.' And I think race has always
> taken a backseat to those things in the community. So, I think people legitimately
> don't think it's that important.

Offline, Online, and Fictional Identity

But how can this be? How can a website reputed for its inclusive stance and members ultimately perpetuate racism? To understand the answer, we must refer to the literature. Many scholars (Castronova 2005; Richardson 2010; Tian 2017) argue that the offline and online world often converge instead of existing as separate and objective spaces. Because people often occupy the physical world, they take the values, attitudes, and behaviors learned within this space and carry it over into an alternative, digital setting. As Bourdieu implies, one does not leave behind or dispose their initial understanding and consumption of the world around them once they enter an unfamiliar setting. Rather, a person takes much of what they have learned throughout the life course and use that knowledge to interpret their roles and locations. Role-players, therefore, are not leaving behind the identities they have developed from the physical world; instead, they are bringing themselves into both the digital and untouchable fictional worlds they are creating with other role-players.

Many role-players I interviewed verify this experience of projection and speak of its prevalence within the community. According to Clifton, many people "…project their affections and their personal opinions onto the character and 'it's just a headcanon' is no longer an excuse." In other words, although canon might leave behind gaps in a character's backstory, and although role-players attempt to fill in those gaps with their own unique interpretations of a character's history, likes, dislikes, etc., much of their inferences come from their own personal preferences. In addition, how the character interacts with other characters also depends on how the role-player feels about that

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opposing character. If the role-player likes the opposing character, they are more likely to

have their character pursue a romantic interest or if the role-player has complete

disinterest and disdain for another character, they might have their character react with

hostility. Lorde openly admits to projecting onto her character. Originally, Lorde

projected blackness onto her character to give her a relatable racial identity seldom seen

in both the original canon and role-play community. Additionally, she chose to

incorporate her regional dialect into how her character speaks.

> I let my character be, like-… You know, I'm from [the south], and you know, the
> way that I talk is the way that I talk. And… So, I project a lot of that into the
> characters that I play. That's what's real. I don't give a fuck. If I want [my
> character] to be someone who was born in [ancient times] to speak like [this]…
> Then so be it.

Although not everyone is as open about their projection, it is evident that many

users use aspects of their own identity to create, fill in, and even morph fictional

characters and the paths they pursue.

Included within this constant transference of offline into online (and vice versa) is

the relevancy of race. Although individuals often cannot see who they are interacting

with online, they can make inferences based on a user's writing style, location, and even

emoji usage (Brock 2011). Users are relying on skills learned from the offline world to

infer someone's identity online; therefore, this reveals the continuous process of

racialization and gendering. Certain behaviors are aligning with another person's

understanding of how racial, ethnic, and even gender groups function, thus allowing them

to unconsciously (or consciously) allocate a specific type of treatment towards that newly

identified individual. The way in which an online identity becomes inferred or validated can often stem from offline stereotypes, generalizations, and inferences. The same can be seen through role-playing – as one's offline understanding of a particular race impacts how they perform or interact with that character of color.

The online world produces a level of anonymity that allows for a level of freedom to do and become whoever and whatever. Alternatively, the act of role-playing intensifies this freedom, because it allows individuals to become unchained through fiction. Yet, despite the ability to transform into anything, no one is completely detaching from their original identity. Some scholars (Turkle 1995; Cerulo 1997; Gosling et al. 2011; Ivcevic and Ambady 2012) argue that through identity exploration, we are validating already existing aspects of ourselves. However, others (Kendall 1998; Nakamura 2002; Schultze 2014) argue that by adorning another identity, we are not only relying on our personal understandings of how this race, class, gender, sexuality, and other identifier / group function, but we are having this (mis)interpretation validated through our interactions with others. Through role-play, individuals are actively adorning the identities of characters that are seemingly nothing like that person.

However, when aspects of a user's identity do not align with the character they are taking on, role-players fill in the blanks of how that identifier functions or is brought into relevancy through the role-player's own understanding and experiences. This leads to problematic interpretations, such as having an Asian character "bow" excessively or applying hypermasculine traits to a black male character, because these characteristics are always associated with and tied to the way we have been conditioned to understand these

groups offline. Walker validates the prevalence of stereotyping and its harmful

manifestations within the role-play world. Although these stereotypes did not emerge in

the canon, role-players that adopted a certain character as their own used generalizations

and their own understanding of what encompasses "blackness" as a means of "filling in

blanks" through fiction.

> I do see some racial stereotypes. Not in my fandom, but in the RPC period. Woo!
> We… have had some issues with people writing Black Panther muses and…
> making them the stereotypical Black guy. You know, hyper sexy man with a big
> dick. Which…pissed a lot of people off.

Role-players are only reinforcing how they understand a particular race instead of

expanding their knowledge when they adorn that new identity. The problem then

becomes normalized, because role-players ignore or do not initially spot the racial

generalization. They instead continue to reply to that generalizing role-player, praise that

role-player's writing, and continue to interact with that role-player. All these actions,

whether consciously or unconsciously exerted, prevent users from seeing issues with their

(or another person's) written interpretation of a character, thus allowing the cycle of real-

world generalizations to prosper and flourish within both a digital and fictional setting.

Consequently, when someone does attempt to call attention to the problematic

misinterpretation of another's identity, it becomes easy for role-players to become

defensive and to see it as an interference with their ability to "have fun" and "be free." In

addition, some users even change the topic to shift the subject from race to another matter

they have more agency over. Basquiat provides an example of when his friend attempted

to confront a user for racial erasure. Instead of owning up to her actions, the offender

became angry, claimed the other writer was suppressing her creative freedom, and made the issue about gender rather than race. Through this display of fragility, the offender was able to make herself into the victim, reduce blame, and prevent the issue from going any further.

> So, basically, the writer chose a white actress from a very specific movie…She's writing a woman, who… doesn't have these sort of facial features and race as [the white actress], or, you know, hair color, or body type… Like none of it was the same. So, no one… understood why she had chosen her? And so when someone I know who is Asian reached out and messaged them and said, 'I'm not okay with this. I can help you find faceclaims that would fit her better. Um, I don't know why you would do this, but can you consider not doing this?' The other writer kind of… Lost their shit about it? And was like… 'You can't make me change!' And they made it somehow about… People hating women being beautiful in older age? Because apparently she had chosen that faceclaim in order to portray this character as, like, a beautiful older woman and that faceclaim was a beautiful older woman in that movie. And I was like, 'these are the most ludicrous reasoning skills I had ever seen.' What?! And I-… I did undergrad, I've seen that shit… I think that also ties to, a lot of people really don't see themselves as racist? When, they are perpetuating racialized beliefs. Because they tend to interpret it as, oh, you know… 'You just want me to be like everyone else' or 'you're not letting me have creative license.' Or… 'I don't see why it really matters. It's not that big of a deal. This is a fictional world.' Yadda, yadda, yadda… And the place it comes from, not just white writers, but like… white women in the RPC who… very quickly, I see, make it a matter of gender and sex rather than race, which is where they feel they have authority.

Role-players believe that they are channeling the character and because role-playing requires one to get into the headspace of an alter ego, it becomes difficult for users to see how much they project onto their fictional others. This, therefore, leads to a level of defensiveness that inspires both a passive and aggressively active response towards those who are showing concern for the way their identity is being appropriated and misunderstood by their fellow role-player. If everyone else is validating the writing

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and heavily racialized interpretation of a fictional character, then the concerns of individual users serve as anomalies that do not coincide with the collective's silent understanding of creative freedom.

Dominant Habitus vs. Role-Playing Habitus

According to Bourdieu, habitus is understood as built-in abilities, customs, and constitutions attained through the primary institutions of socialization (family, school, friends) that ultimately impact how someone sees and responds to the world around them (Bourdieu 1980: 53). Habitus produces generalities, regularities, and anything we (both personally and as a collective) typically understand as common sense. Groups have their own habitus and they produce a unique set of conditions that ultimately "harmonize" collective practices and help to establish norms (Bourdieu 1980: 58). Each group engages in unique practices and has a unique set of values and this, in turn, implies that knowledge and culture vary widely among collectives. While one collective might value collecting, owning, and maintaining the mint condition of comic books, other groups might not hold that practice to the same standard and therefore place importance on alternative items, actions, and even routines. When it comes to Tumblr role-players, this group places value on creative freedom and expression through the act of adorning a fictional identity and writing with others as that character. However, although role-players are attempting to construct a space that separates itself from the standards, expectations, and values of offline society, they are still perpetuating discriminatory practices typically enacted within the physical world. In other words, for a practice,

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action, or specific material to receive and maintain value amongst a collective, the collective must be exclusionary in order to communicate the idea that not everyone can (and has the means to) belong, especially if they do not conform to the groups established values, beliefs, and practices (Fiske 1992; Thornton 1995; Erickson 1996; Brown 1997; Dell 1998; Harris 1998).

When individuals are creating role-play communities that are meant to prioritize the endless possibilities of fiction and freedom, they are still borrowing from the dominant culture that presides over their offline lives in the physical world. The role-play community and the fictional world that comes with it do not serve as detached utopias, because they are perpetuating the acts of discrimination typically found in the physical, offline world necessary for group belonging and cohesion. In other words, while role-players have established a space that allows for creative exploration through writing, they will exclude those that attempt to interrupt the role-playing process. Interruptions, in this case, can manifest in the form of racial discussion within the role-play community. Because the topic of race is seen as an issue exclusive to the physical world and not prevalent within fiction, role-players will then exclude, neglect, or even attack those that attempt to impede upon their desire to escape aspects of the physical world through fiction.

Lorde spoke to me excessively about this issue and comments on how fellow role-players immediately began to treat her and others differently the moment they attempted to even acknowledge race or other offline issues. "That's the thing about racism within the RPC...," she begins, "You know, it's… It's not until you start talking about racist shit

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and talking about it how it affects you, as a black person, that people start treating you different." Sappho also spoke of her experience regarding discussing the topic of race. She recalls attempting to discuss her own race and how certain issues of representation within role-play affected her but was met with vicious backlash by a particular community member. Although that role-player apologized to her for their actions, their behavior left Sappho concerned, distrusting, and too scared to speak about race since then. "It's still something that gave me bad anxiety. It's still something that made me scared to talk to people on Tumblr about anything that involved, like, race or… The way certain things are portrayed." Because the collective is more invested in (and places value on) the act of role-playing itself, it leaves little room for successful discussion about offline topics that still affect certain marginalized populations regardless of the offline and online spaces they occupy and groups they associate with. The Tumblr role-play community has not made space for racial minority role-players or racial discourse, because the collective is more concerned with role-play related offenses (such as stealing content) over offenses from the offline world that have now leaked into their online haven. By excluding role-players that attempt to integrate issues from the physical world into role-play, the values and practices of the Tumblr role-play community can be maintained. However, by neglecting, avoiding, and minimizing race, role-players are only further perpetuating the same offline forms of discrimination against racial minorities into the digital (and fictional) world. In addition, through an outlet like role-playing, users are relying on internalized understandings of race to guide their characterization, and this further allows offline powers and influences that suppress race

to be introduced, reign supreme, and remain constant in alternate settings. We see these

moments of exclusion emphasized through the words of Walker, who discusses the

struggle of receiving role-play interactions because of her offline and in-character skin

color.

> I stated people don't get interactions all the time. It's just more likely to happen to black muses, you know. Especially very dark skinned ones, like my muse. And I tried to figure out if it was my writing style, my icons-… But everyone seemed happy to write with...anyone no matter what. The only difference I could really pinpoint was… My race and my muses race, for that matter.

We see it through Picasso's experience of attempting to incorporate the relevancy

of race into his character, only to receive anonymous and hateful backlash. Although he

embarked on the same path of expressing creative freedom, his efforts intruded on the

collectives desire to keep aspects of the offline world (in this case, race) out of the role-

play experience.

> It was… it was actually a bunch of anons coming in every now and then saying 'you shouldn't make people darker skinned, even if it's just head-cannoned you can't do this, because it's racist.' Or even something like,'"hey, you can't make your character an n-word.' And I was… Quite appalled by that actually, because… I'm here minding my own business, having fun with my interpretations, and… people… still want to combat something entirely innocent with just blatant racism and hatred.

We also see it through Acevedo's recollection of her own friends' active dismissal

of race. When her friend was corrected for misrepresenting a race and ethnicity, they

immediately dismissed the impact their offense had, because the correction interfered

with their "creative freedom" and personal interpretation of the character.

I also had a friend who was role-playing a Japanese character, but had a Korean face-claim, and then they got a few anons and people coming at them saying, 'you're not supposed to be doing that.' Which, you know, you're not. But… They kinda took it as a brush off their shoulder, like, 'you can't tell me what to do.' …That reaction too would happen with racial issues or racial callout posts where people are like, 'oh, you're taking it too far. You're being this, this, and that!' And they're not really listening to what's being said. They see it as an attack towards this person.

In other words, the endless possibilities and creative expressions through role-play has more value than the concerns of a racial minority. Just as these concerns are dismissed in the physical world, so too do they become neglected online and within a collective reputed for its social justice-oriented stance on marginalized issues.

Reproducing Inequalities

As mentioned before, occupants of the online and role-playing world do not suddenly part ways with the identity (or habitus) they have attained from the offline world. Rather, they are reproducing ways of thinking and acting that serve as foundations for their online subculture and fictional interactions. In addition, role-players are also reproducing the same inequalities that are present within the physical world. Through their writing, they are imposing generalizations and stereotypes that guide their understanding of an opposing identity and when those actions are called into question, they perpetuate the same tactics of aversion evident in the offline world. Sappho points out the prevalence of these generalizations as they appear in stereotypes imposed onto Asian characters.

I have seen… So… Much… Misrepresentation… Or people going into it way too much to the point where there are some blogs where I've literally just scooted away from, 'cause I'll look at it and… every word is like a Japanese word and their character is constantly bowing.

When it comes to avoidance, multiple individuals I interviewed spoke of the Tumblr role-play community's habit of "sweeping issues under the rug (Picasso)," actively ignoring posts that point out the lack of graphics and resources for characters of color (Walker), not reblogging callout posts relating to race (Lorde), not replying to role-plays with characters of color (Basquiat), and even dismissing and continuing certain offenses that were brought up through private confrontations (Sappho). Role-players also minimize the relevancy of race and become aggressively defensive when they are forced to engage in racial discourse. We saw this in callout posts where offenders threatened to kill themselves after being confronted with their racial injustice and we saw the defensiveness through Basquiat's story of how his friend modestly attempted to correct someone's racial misrepresentation, only to be portrayed as the villain for interfering with the offender's creative freedom. The role-playing collective does not value the culture or input of racial minority role-players just like how the physical world does not value or see the necessity for addressing race. Therefore, users do not intend to integrate the concerns of racial minorities into the foundations of the role-play community. Although many role-players belong to some kind of marginalized group that, to some extent, has shared in the experience of discrimination and oppression with role-players of color, they still (voluntarily or involuntarily) contribute to the reproduction and enforcement of racial inequality.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The lessons learned from the offline world are not so easily discarded. The attitudes, values, beliefs, and practices that people adopt and label "common sense" do not suddenly disappear when someone enters a new setting or attempts to explore the realms of fiction. People transfer much of their learned philosophies into interactions and experiences, regardless of whether they occur online or offline. Through this transference, users continue to make race relevant and they continue to further perpetuate injustices even if they cannot see who they are engaging with. More so, injustices such as racism remain prevalent even in one's imagination and through their creative outlets. Through role-playing, we see the ways in which writers engage in forms of minimization, avoidance, exclusion, white-washing, and racial and ethnic erasure. These actions are embraced because attempting to be inclusive within fiction is seen as an inconvenience to one's creative liberties. Within the role-playing community we see the way users attempt to diminish the importance and relevancy of race-related issues, because these issues are seen as interfering with someone's "fun and freeing" writing experience.

However, even though racial minorities struggle to have their injustices addressed and taken seriously, many are attempting to combat the oppression by calling out problematic actions, behaviors, and users. Through the callout method, users are actively

voicing their resistance against the racism that persists within the community, but thus far it is not enough to deter users from repeating certain racial offenses. Therefore, it is important to conceptualize alternative routes of resistance that impact online occupants on a collective level.

Resistance Through Restorative Justice

Role-players have internalized and are contributing to a culture that allows people to get away with both covert and overt acts of suppressing racial minorities. Although certain role-players are attempting to break the cycle of inequality through the construction and sharing of callout posts, it is not enough to immediately end any racial injustices. If perpetuating and reproducing inequality can emerge from people who share in the subordination experience and if inequality is inevitable regardless of one's level of willingness to contribute to its transmission, can we truly get rid of it? Is it possible to exist within, at the very least, a subculture with such a small population that is absent of any inequality? According to Bourdieu (1998), the ability to advert inequality is possible, but only through appropriate methods of resistance. The mission now is to identify the current mechanism(s) of resistance, evaluate their effectiveness, and come up with alternative routes of resistance for the fight against inequality.

Currently, callout posts are used as the primary defense against racial injustices, but they only help on an individual level and do not serve as a mechanism for deterring the collective. In fact, callout posts ultimately lead to community exile and it inspires members of the collective to feel fear that they will be forcibly removed from the

community even if their actions were a misdemeanor or they genuinely did not mean to cause harm. Basquiat recalls period when the community fully embraced callout posts and used them to call out multiple behaviors and individuals that could have been corrected through alternative means.

> At some point, it reached like a blood frenzy where anything you did could be called out. That really sent me into a panic. I used to have, like, nightmares about it, where I would be called out. Or I would role-play for like, an hour, after high school shit and the SAT or whatever and then I'd go to bed and have a nightmare about like, getting a callout post. And I'd be like, 'what did I do?' You know, I used to be reading every [role-play] response I had, combing it for anything I could be possibly called out for. And I was wondering what I was doing wrong… But it could happen. I have to be perfect.

Callout posts ultimately make users feel helpless. Although certain users understand why certain actions are considered problematic, they fear that other actions they engage in might be misconstrued and used against them. It, therefore, becomes difficult to be receptive of callout posts if they can be used against anyone, for any reason, and with the power to forcibly remove individuals from the community indefinitely. With this in mind, I propose a restorative justice approach towards handling the racial injustices that occur within the Tumblr role-play community. Restorative justice is typically understood as a set of techniques that aim to rebuild "a sense of justice" and relationships "among offenders, victims, and their respective communities (Wenzel et. al 2008)." Through restorative justice, the goal is not solely to punish, but rather to address the damaged relationships between the affected parties in order to reach a state of healing (Tsui 2014). Typically, the act of mending between victim and offender occurs through conversation and with a mediator present. The act of restoration is thus

more intimate and requires the affected parties to share the same space, engage in discussion, and work towards a solution.

Through callout posts, conversations are difficult and near impossible to have. Once again, the callout post serves as a community wide alert to a problematic action or individual and is seldom seen as a post for further discussion. Callout posts are also one sided and are typically constructed by the victim or on the victim's behalf, thus ruling out the ability for direct confrontation to occur. In some cases, an individual does not know they have committed an offense until they had a callout post made about them. However, by encouraging individuals to embrace dialogue, users can be made aware of their actions, understand the full extent of their wrongdoing, and receive a chance to genuinely make things right with those they have harmed. This method allows users to strengthen their bond with the community and it prevents others from being able to distance themselves from and minimize issues once seen as inconvenient.

However, imposing a restorative approach is not always easy and does come with complications. First and foremost, users would need to commit to continuous discussion and not be tempted by the block button. Users would also need to agree upon an established mediator that can keep the conversation from derailing or escalating. And, of course, both users would need to agree to the act of working things out rather than seeing punishment as the only option. In addition, much of the literature on restorative justice primarily addresses face-to-face confrontations, but little to no research exists on how a restorative justice approach would function with people who cannot meet face-to-face and exist within an online space. Does the lack of contact impede upon any kind of

progress that can be made by the affected parties? Does the Tumblr role-play community have enough community cohesion to embrace restorative justice? Does the ability to block users online and escape confrontation further complicate the ability to engage in discussion? How do we break users of this habit of avoidance? In addition, how can restorative justice function in a space like the Tumblr role-play community which has no official authoritative figures (like judges and officers) that typically occupy crucial roles during the restoration process?

There are some of many questions that emerge when contemplating a route of resistance against racial injustices within the Tumblr role-play community. A restorative approach is ideal in its ability to turn offenses into teaching moments that affect the collective, but the initiation of this approach is a complicated ordeal. Although more research and experimental implementation is required within the field of restorative justice, the concept carries with it far more promising implications that go beyond the individual and unify the collective. When it comes to callout posts, the goal from the beginning was to strengthen the community by calling attention to unacceptable actions, but the best way for users to retain that knowledge and to place value on the concerns of victims (specifically those belonging to a racial minority) is by engaging in dialogue, allowing for reflection, and extending opportunities for growth rather than avoidance and negligence.

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