

FANDOMONIUM: HOW SPACES MARKED FOR FANDOM TRANSFORMED INTO AREAS FOR POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract

In the early 2000s, social media sites emerged as forums for communication and networking. Before MySpace, Livejournal reigned supreme as the ultimate blogging sphere where cyber surfers logged in to write about their daily lives. Within those spaces, fandom culture evolved as netizens gushed over their favorite books, musicians, television shows, and celebrities. As the decade came to a close and Myspace lost its popularity, three social media giants emerged as quintessential platforms for online engagement. Twitter for example, became the cornerstone for Beliebers, Directioners, Otakus, and K-pop fans in 2009. The site evolved from simple status updates to a space where users could indulge in conversations based on their common interests. Tumblr, making its debut in 2007, made *stanning* your favorite idols much easier with its microblogging interface, allowing its users to post photos, videos, audio, and text messages. The reblog feature also made sharing more accessible, as fans could post media to their blogs in a fraction of a second. Launching in 2005, YouTube morphed into a platform for some of the most innovative and imaginative creations, especially after the development of the Partner Program in 2007. Sharing media across these three platforms cultivated a

trifecta of mass-cultural communication that allowed its users to engage in conversations beyond fan interactions. At the turn of the decade, these social media sites brought in more users that fought to make their voices heard. The 2010s indicates a turning point in how spaces marked for fandom transformed into areas for political and social discourse.

Between the years 2010 and 2020, there is a noticeable cultural shift in online networks where fans began to converse more openly with politically charged topics. Both the #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName hashtags led to waves of political consciousness that transcended social media networking sites and fandom spaces. In fandom, hashtags such as #DrawingWhileBlack and #CosplayingWhileBlackBlack gave voice to Black fans in creative spaces where their works are often uncredited or ignored. Black women in particular created movements that highlight the injustices that African Americans experience. To what extent do online hashtags shape political movements that go beyond social media platforms? In what ways have activists transformed fandom spaces to become more inclusive of social, political, and cultural issues? This paper seeks to investigate the political strategies Black women used to bring awareness to the erasure, violence, and discrimination of African Americans by

utilization of online networks in the twenty-first century.

The blogosphere of the early 2000s did in fact create spaces for political engagement way before Twitter, Tumblr, and YouTube infiltrated global media, however, political conversations became more visible within fan spaces at the turn of the decade in 2010. For example, On 4 January 2012, Franchesca Ramsey, also known as Chescaleigh, uploaded a video to her YouTube channel titled “Shit White Girls Say to Black Girls.” Hopping on the viral wave of the original video “Shit Girls Say” written by Kyle Humphrey and Graydon Sheppard, Ramsey wished to create a version that felt relative to her own experiences as a Black woman. In the video, Ramsey adorns a blonde wig, speaks in a Valley girl accent, and makes several comments that often spark the ire of Black people such as “Not to sound racist, but...” and “Why isn’t there a White Entertainment Television?”¹ Ramsey’s video ignited conversations of microaggressions that Black women experience across multiple social media platforms including Twitter, Tumblr, and YouTube. It infiltrated fandom spaces that led to debates regarding “reverse racism” and indirect discrimination. Some white women felt the sting of Ramsey’s quips, calling her video racist and insensitive. Black women came to Ramsey’s defense by leaving comments on her video

¹ Franchesca Ramsey (Chescaleigh), “Shit White Girls Say... to Black Girls,” *YouTube* video, 4 January 2012, <https://youtu.be/yIPUzxpIBe0>.

and tweeting their own experiences with indirect racism. Tumblr became a hotspot for debate as users argued whether Ramsey’s caricature of a stereotypical white woman was in fact, racist. Although Ramsey’s video received some minor backlash, the overall response was relatively positive. The success of Ramsey’s video led her to pursue a career in activism, where she continues to utilize platforms such as Twitter and YouTube to speak up about racism and other social issues.

Combing through the archives of Tumblr and Twitter proves rather difficult as several blogs from over ten years ago disappeared. Broken links and deactivated pages show up more often than not, but thankfully, a good number of blogs remain active as of May 2022. My own personal Tumblr, which I created on 27 October 2009, provides some context on how political conversations pervaded the fandom space at the turn of the decade. My blog space encompassed Korean popular culture focusing mostly on music and fashion. However, on 22 September 2011, I reblogged a post from *The Daily What*, an internet culture blog that documented the execution of Troy Davis. Troy Davis was on death row at the Georgia Diagnostic Prison for the murder of Mark McPhail in the summer of 1989. The Troy Davis case resurged in 2010 as “Davis was sentenced to death without any physical evidence” and many witnesses “recanted their testimonies.”² In the weeks leading up

² Jodi Kaufmann. “The Meaning of ‘Not Innocent’: The Troy Anthony Davis Case.” *International Review of Qualitative Research* 4, no. 3 (2011): 291–312. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/irqr.2011.4.3.291>.

to Davis's execution, many online activists rallied to petition his death sentence as there was no evidence to convict him of the crime, and that his conviction was racially charged. This case generated thousands of tweets the day before his execution; approximately 7,671 tweets per second were sent on 20 September 2011.³ Fandoms across these platforms paused as we waited to hear if the state of Georgia would overturn Davis's sentence. Unfortunately, Georgia proceeded to execute Troy Davis. He passed away on 21 September 2011 at 11:08pm.⁴ Troy Davis's execution sparked many conversations about race and criminality on several social media platforms, but soon dispersed in the fandom space as people moved on and continued discussing their respective interests. As 2011 ended, the new year brought in fresh perspectives on issues of race, gender identity, sexuality, feminism, class, and mental health within the blogosphere.

Twitter, much like my own personal Tumblr, offered sprinkles of social commentary within the fandom space. As the year 2012 progressed, several events occurred that gained national attention. The death of Trayvon Martin on 26 February shocked us all. It seemed as if time stood still that day. A young boy with so much potential was just robbed of his life over

something completely nonsensical. The mainstream media posted photos of Trayvon smoking and throwing up "gang signs" to paint him as a criminal that deserved what happened to him. Conversations on daytime television revolved around Trayvon's state of dress, pegging him as a hoodlum because he wore a hooded sweatshirt. A petition soon launched to indict George Zimmerman on murder charges. When Zimmerman stood trial for the crime a year later, social media exploded with injustice at Zimmerman's acquittal. This decision by the State of Florida sprouted an online movement co-founded by three Black women: Patrice Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi.

The #BlackLivesMatter hashtag created in July 2013 soon became a trending topic as many people fired off tweets regarding their anger and frustration at George Zimmerman's acquittal. The hashtag never lost its momentum as micro-bloggers continued placing it at the end of their tweets and Tumblr posts when discussing police violence against unarmed Black people. #BLM began cropping up in Twitter bio's to show support for the movement. In 2014, the murders of Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner gained national attention as activists proceeded from online spaces to organized protests in various cities across the United States. In December 2014, the hashtag #SayHerName launched by the African American Policy Forum (co-founded by Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw) brought awareness to the murders of Black women at the hands of police. Soon, online activists began using both #BLM and #SayHerName in tandem while discussing the brutality Black people suffered at the

³ Erick Schonfeld, "The Top Spiking Tweets of 2011," *TechCrunch+*, 6 December 2011, <https://techcrunch.com/2011/12/06/top-spiking-tweets-2011/>.

⁴ On the evening of 21 September 2011, I send off a tweet on my personal account expressing my frustration with the state of Georgia's decision to execute Troy Davis. <https://twitter.com/seaposy/status/116703757156360192>.

hands of police. According to scholar Sherri Williams, she argues that “Nonfiction media, including journalism and documentaries, have not amplified violence against Black women” the way that social media has.⁵ Black women whose murders were forgotten, became memorialized through #SayHerName. Online activists began circulating their stories throughout the blogosphere, bringing awareness to the cases of Rekia Boyd, Aiyana Mo’Nay Stanley-Jones, Renisha McBride, and Kayla Moore. Their narratives disappeared within mainstream media but #SayHerName keeps their memories alive. Williams suggests that “#SayHerName reminds us that Black, gender nonconforming women experience a complex and layered policing from authorities that affects the way they are perceived by both journalists and authorities as legitimate victims.”⁶ The #SayHerName initiative continues to highlight the names of non-binary, trans, and cisgender Black women that are often ignored in mainstream media.

Five years later, 2020 saw a resurgence of the #BLM movement as seventeen-year-old Darnella Frazier recorded Derek Chauvin with his knee on George Floyd’s neck on 25 May 2020. In my own historical memory, I saw the video in its entirety on my Twitter feed that day. At the time, it gained little traction as only Black Twitter and other online social activists were talking about it. After witnessing the brutal murder

of George Floyd, I decided to take a short break from social media. At this point, I think we were all just tired. Floyd, another victim of police brutality soon became a trending topic. I returned to Twitter on 27 May 2020 and the microblogging site was filled with commentary and threads about Floyd’s murder. Within the Twitter space, users within multiple fandoms began voicing their opinions and concerns about George Floyd. If you were not talking about Floyd or #BLM, according to some online activists, then you did not care about the state of affairs regarding racism and police violence. Twitter and other social networks like YouTube, Instagram, and Tik Tok, arguably act as a means of escapism from the cruel realities of our world. Users indulge in their respective fandoms to take their minds off of upsetting news. Sometimes, that triggered irrational responses from other users because how could one smile, laugh, and crack jokes when we all witnessed a murder? Black users in particular argued this point as Black people are the first to speak out on the injustices of racialized policing due to our vulnerability of police violence. Witnessing this type of trauma proves mentally and emotionally exhausting. In response to non-Black users, Black Twitter claimed that we should post what makes us happy freely and without judgement.

At the height of the #BLM movement in 2020, a rallying cry from fans around the world called for celebrities and influencers to utilize their platforms to talk about George Floyd and police violence. Many answered the call while others remained silent. Those that chose to remain silent

⁵ Sherri Williams, “Revisiting Digital Defense and Black Feminism on Social Media.” *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 8 (2021): 1373–1377.

⁶ Sherri Williams, “SayHerName: Using Digital Activism to Document Violence Against Black Women.” *Feminist Media Studies* 16, no. 5 (2016): 922–925.

were called out aggressively. This type of activism became criticized as “performative,” as social media influencers, public figures, and celebrities tagged their posts with #BLM, and figured they have done their part. Literary scholar André Brock argues that “The hashtag, originally intended to collate conversations around an external topic, thus becomes a call for Black Twitter participants to recognize performance and respond in kind.”⁷ Performative activism crept in the blogosphere in multiple ways. While trying to increase their online engagement, a few social media influencers filmed themselves at organized #BLM protests, holding up #BLM posters or marching in time with actual protestors. Black Twitter soon called out this behavior, pointing out the lack of sincerity for the movement just to gain clicks and views.

During this timeline, one fandom in particular received much praise for matching the donations of their idol group, BTS who donated a total of one million dollars to Black Lives Matter and other organizations. On 4 June 2020, nine days after George Floyd’s murder, BTS tweeted, “We stand against racial discrimination. We condemn violence. You, I and we all have the right to be respected. We will stand together. #BlackLivesMatter.”⁸ Prior to this tweet, Black ARMY’s called for BTS to use their platform to raise awareness about George

⁷ André Brock, “From the Blackhand Side: Twitter as a Cultural Conversation.” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*. 56, no. 4 (2012): 529–549.

⁸ 방탄소년단 @bts_twt, “We stand against racial discrimination,” *Twitter*, 4 June 2020, https://twitter.com/BTS_twt/status/1268422690336935943?s=20.

Floyd’s murder and police violence.⁹ With over ten million followers on their Twitter account in 2020, BTS catered to a large fanbase with insurmountable influence. As the days ticked by, Black fans wondered when the idol group would speak out about Floyd. In the past, BTS tweeted their condolences to the victims of the Manchester arena bombing and the Las Vegas shooting in 2017, demonstrating their astuteness to world news and events.¹⁰ BTS, also known for their philanthropy, collaborated with the United Nations Children’s Fund, and donated nearly half a million dollars to the Love Yourself campaign which promoted anti-violence in 2017.¹¹

As one week went by and still no acknowledgement from BTS, Black ARMY’s voiced their frustrations and disappointment with their idols.¹² Writer

⁹ Army is the fandom name for BTS. Formally an acronym, A.R.M.Y originally stood for Adorable Representative MC for Youth. With BTS’s rebranding in 2017, they discontinued the acronym.

¹⁰방탄소년단 @bts_twt, “Our hearts are heavy about the tragedy in Manchester. We send our love to all the victims, Ariana, her fans and crew,” *Twitter*, May 23, 2017, https://twitter.com/BTS_twt/status/866905914674003968; 방탄소년단 @bts_twt, “There are no words that can do justice to this tragedy. BTS loves #LasVegas and our #USA family who are in our hearts today. #prayforvegas,” *Twitter*, 2 October 2017, https://twitter.com/BTS_twt/status/915075784556953600.

¹¹ Tamar Herman, “BTS Collaborates with UNICEF on ‘Love Myself’ Anti Violence Campaign,” *Billboard*, 31 October 2017, <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/bts-collaborates-unicef-love-myself-anti-violence-campaign-8022101/>.

¹² ARMY is the fandom name for BTS. Formally an acronym, A.R.M.Y originally stood for Adorable Representative MC for Youth. With BTS’s rebranding in 2017, they discontinued the acronym.

Monique Jones posted an article to her website *Color Web Mag*, describing the hardships Black fans face when supporting the K-pop industry. She claims, “Black K-pop fans often come to the defense of each other and converse among themselves about how the industry—and even some of the idols themselves—don’t seem to care about Black lives, save for the aesthetics of Black culture.”¹³ Black ARMY’s addressed those concerns with BTS’s prolonged silence, triggering the indignation of non-Black fans. The fandom soon became divided by their opinions on the subject at hand. To remedy the situation, ARMY’s who remained neutral in the debate, worked hard to salvage their reputation as a fanbase. However, Black ARMY’s still faced backlash within the fandom, as non-Black ARMY’s insisted that BTS were probably “too busy” to tweet with their schedules, or most likely unaware with the political climate of the United States. Interestingly, there were multiple international protests on the behalf of George Floyd in counties such as South Korea, Japan, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Russia, Australia, and New Zealand. Black ARMY’s also received racially charged insults from other fans as they continued to talk about the lack of response from BTS.

On 4 June 2020, after BTS sent their tweet in support of the Black Lives Matter Movement and pledged one million dollars to the organization, Black ARMY Daezy Agbakoba kickstarted a campaign to match

¹³ Monique Jones, “BTS, ARMY and Black Lives Matter: The Value of Fandom Meshing with Activism,” *Color Web Mag*, 22 June 2020, <https://www.colorwebmag.com/2020/06/22/bts-army-and-black-lives-matter-the-value-of-fandom-meshing-with-activism/>.

BTS’s donation.¹⁴ The #MatchAMillion hashtag generated much buzz within the BTS fandom, as ARMY’s opened their wallets and matched their idol’s generous donation in just twenty-four hours. Journalists and academic scholars began writing articles discussing BTS’s generosity and the tenacity of their fanbase, coming together to raise money for a just cause, but little information is known about what proceeded within the fandom prior to BTS’s delayed tweet. Even fewer articles mention Daezy Agbakoba, the first person to tweet #MatchAMillion, which soon went viral with its philanthropic initiative. A Black fan that started the donation drive, unfortunately gets left out of the greater narrative.

Since the beginning of 2010, online spaces and fandoms became more politicized as social media networks continue to blossom with activism. Black women transformed these spaces to discuss social and political issues, creating movements that went beyond the blogosphere. The hashtags #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName continue to make waves on social networking sites, inspiring other tags within the fandom space. Annabelle Hayford, a Maryland Institute College of Art graduate, created the hashtag #DrawingWhileBlack to “celebrate and appreciate Black artists.”¹⁵ The art community on Twitter began using the hashtag to share their works and promote

¹⁴ Monique Jones, “BTS, ARMY and Black Lives Matter: The Value of Fandom Meshing with Activism,” *Color Web Mag*, June 22, 2020, <https://www.colorwebmag.com/2020/06/22/bts-army-and-black-lives-matter-the-value-of-fandom-meshing-with-activism/>.

¹⁵ “#DrawingWhileBlack,” *Maryland Institute College of Art*, <https://www.mica.edu/art-articles/details/drawingwhileblack/>.

each other's artistry. Black illustrators and artists are often overlooked or dismissed within the industry, and Hayford wished to make Black artists more visible. #DrawingWhileBlack continues to circulate on Twitter and other social media platforms.

The Black cosplay community created the hashtag #CosplayingWhileBlack to dismantle the stigma that Black cosplayers could only adorn costumes of Black characters. Black fans uploaded photos of themselves in various cosplays of non-Black characters such as Sasuke Uchiha, Beetlejuice, Tengen Uzui, Tifa Lockheart, and Sailor Moon. Black cosplayers often receive comments on their photos telling them that the character they are portraying is not Black, that their costumes are unrealistic, and that they should stick to dressing up as Black characters. Sometimes, racial slurs are hurled at Black cosplayers for daring to adorn costumes of non-Black characters. Alongside cosplay, the Black fan art community also receives backlash by drawing Japanese Anime characters as Black. Black voice actors who portray Japanese characters in English dubs obtain similar insults regarding their race. In opposition to the narrative that Black cosplayers, fan artists, and voice actors should only represent Black characters, Black fans created their own tags showing love to their favorite characters regardless of their racial attributes.

Conclusion

As the new year dawned, 2013 saw the creation of the #BlackLivesMatter, followed by #SayHerName in 2014. The power of

these hashtags created movements that went beyond social networking sites, bringing awareness to the injustices that Black people face around the globe. In addition to #BLM and #SayHerName, Black creators fashioned hashtags such as #DrawingWhileBlack and #CosplayingWhileBlack that focused on their art, solidifying their artistry in spaces that often denied their creativity. Black women utilized social media platforms to their advantage, creating spaces to discuss topics often ignored by the mainstream media. Without the hard work of Black women, these movements would not exist. We must ask ourselves where would we be without the diligence and perseverance of Black women.

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