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Critical Tendencies and the Production of Knowledge: Contention, Coalition, and Antagonism in the Digital Public Sphere

Abstract: As the digital dimension of academia continues growing, so does participation in and dissemination of debates over the production of knowledge. This paper examines the phenomena of critical-ness in the academic public sphere, arguing that critical tendencies have become the forerunning condition of debates over knowledge production and that these tendencies are reinforced and advanced due to the porous, accessible nature of the digital public sphere. Using empirical evidence, this paper points to the development of activist-like behavior and polemical discourse in intellectual debate, which is strengthened by the nature of this sphere's technical infrastructure; an infrastructure that produces impetus for the formation of coalitions and furthers antagonistic divisions in the public sphere – in academic zones and beyond.

Keywords: academia, critical, digital public sphere, knowledge production, participatory discourse

Introduction

The public sphere¹ is bustling, its digital dimension enabling access and participation on unprecedented levels. This is visible in debates over intellectual culture and academia – debates that have stirred contention, formed coalitions, and created deepening antagonisms. Disparate perspectives on intellectual approaches, on challenging underlying power structures, and on methodological disruptions demonstrate a rupture in attitudes towards what is and what is not of academic value and how the University should change. This is particularly evident in debates over knowledge production in the West, and particularly in

¹ I use the singular “public sphere” to refer to a broad, porous space where discussions and deliberations take place. I also acknowledge that the public sphere is not a static, universal space; it is constituted of multiple spheres where entrenched hierarchies exist. My use of the term in the singular is to delineate a broad space that can be seen through different lenses and can sustain intersecting dimensions, for which I qualify the term contextually (e.g. the digital public sphere, the academic public sphere, etc.).

transatlantic spaces where cross-border academic exchange is prevalent. Such debate has taken on a polemical tone, addressing specific issues that have clear overlaps and a common theme: how should processes of knowledge production function in academia?

In the University, the focus on scholarship and career can leave debates over the production of knowledge unrecognized, both in broader academic publics² as well as in terms of their direct relevance to scholarship and career. But as the digital dimension of academia continues growing, so does participation in and dissemination of such debates, creating topical zones in which the scholarly can evolve into a democratic, participatory phenomenon. As the last years have demonstrated, there is intense activity in the academic public sphere that is dedicated to larger, interconnected ideas that transcend national, ideological, and political borders – this is made possible by the porous and accessible nature of many digital spaces, and consequently, the digital public sphere.³ Understood as a differentiated, multifarious, and contested space, the digital public sphere is a dimension “provided or supported by online or social media, from websites to social network sites, weblogs, and micro-blogs ...”⁴ It is a dimension that can be conceptualized through various lenses: from what communicative patterns its infrastructure produces to the participatory potential it presents, as well as the threats it poses to democratic engagement. In the University, the digital sphere is becoming increasingly important – the shift towards online academia in the years of the COVID-19 pandemic has made this clear, as research, teaching, and professional interpersonal interaction during this time could only be sustained by digital infrastructures. The nature of these infrastructures has increas-

2 In this paper, I use “publics” to refer to specific groups undertaking discursive involvement that are constituted of specific demographics by interest, identity and/or discursive space and dimension; these overlap to constitute the public sphere. “Broader academic publics,” for example, refers to a generalized public consisting of interest (those who are interested in academia) and identity (those who are involved in academia). I adopt this term from its use by scholars such as Michael Warner and Nancy Fraser, who have written about the constitutive roles various specific groups take on in forming the broader public sphere. See Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), and Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text* 25/26 (1996): 56–60.

3 While this is a differentiated concept, throughout this paper I rely on an adoption of Christian Fuchs’ concept, which describes the digital public sphere as “not a separate sphere of society, but a dimension and aspect of the public sphere in societies where digital information and digital communication are prevalent.” See Christian Fuchs, “The Digital Commons and the Digital Public Sphere: How to Advance Digital Democracy Today,” *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 16, no. 1 (2021): 13.

4 Mike S. Schäfer, “Digital Public Sphere,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication*, ed. Gianpietro Mazzoleni (New York, John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 322.

ingly interwoven the digital public sphere and academic experience, from both a bystander and a participatory perspective. And herein, critical-ness⁵ has taken center stage. Critical approaches have been incorporated in theory, methodology, and scholarship since the early twentieth century and underwent a popularization with the postmodern turn of the 1960s. Today, however, critical-ness has become an underlying tendency in both discussion and deliberative thought in the academic public sphere. The word itself is topical and as embraced as it is rejected. It has garnered attention and controversy far beyond the academic public sphere, becoming a hot item in politics and policy.

This paper takes an observational approach to the phenomena of critical-ness in the academic public sphere, seeking to tease out underlying patterns in current debates connected to the production of knowledge and unearth what they may indicate about the state of academia today. Using empirical evidence, I will argue that critical tendencies have become the forerunning condition of debates over knowledge production, and these tendencies are reinforced and advanced due to the porous, accessible nature of the digital public sphere. This reinforcement and advancement have, in turn, created echoes of activist behavior by producing impetus for the formation of coalitions within the academe and furthering antagonistic divisions in the public sphere – in academic zones and beyond. Such academic debates employ polemical modes, using digital infrastructures to ensure that their claims and stances are visible to relevant interest groups as well as to larger publics, interweaving various dimensions of the public sphere: the academic, the political, and most importantly, the participatory. To lay out the framework on which this argument stands, I will begin with a contextual sketch of academia and the digital public sphere followed by an overview of critical tendencies in contemporary intellectual culture. These two sections serve to foreground the cases used to substantiate my argument, which I divide into two categories: cases of coalitions and networks that have been formed by digital publics and cases that are grounded in literary production which produces antagonistic cycles of critique.⁶ These cases are rooted

⁵ I use the term “critical-ness” to refer to critical tendencies that are interconnected but distinct from theoretical concepts of the critical, which are primarily used for scholarship that incorporates assessments of structural and social orders into their methods. “Critical-ness,” thus, refers to the incorporation of these assessments into broader thought that is not considered scholarship in the academic sense, but is relevant to structural and social orders in academia and beyond.

⁶ This is not a universal study, nor does it claim to be. This paper positions itself within research relevant to Western academic culture that exists primarily in transatlantic spaces, with a focus on the United States and Germany. The reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, transatlantic rela-

in challenging or affirming norms that have long informed structural processes of academic work and are demonstrative of the critical tendencies that permeate debates over change and resistance; debates that can be viewed as participatory deliberations made possible by the interconnected digital media networks comprising our contemporary public sphere.

Academia and the Digital Public Sphere: Media, Borders, and Possibilities

The public sphere today has evolved far beyond the Habermasian concept. The salons of the nineteenth and twentieth century exist in vastly different forms made possible by an immensely accessible, interconnected digitized media landscape. Historical barriers to accessing information, discussion, and debate such as place, citizenship and class are diminishing as primary determiners of who can access information in this digital public sphere; though to be sure, they certainly influence what information can be accessed. This is manifested in the use of firewalls, paywalls, algorithmic patterns, and other techniques used to manage and control digital information networks, and that are resisted against with the use of technical hacks and community-rooted methods—such as VPNs and shared accounts—to overcome such management and control techniques. While our contemporary public sphere remains non-egalitarian, it presents unprecedented opportunities for participatory deliberation.

To speak of the public sphere today is to speak of a transnational space which follows two major presuppositions: that decentered, borderless communicative processes can coalesce to form public opinion, and that English as a *lingua franca* can subordinate national languages.⁷ In the academic public sphere,

tions between the United States and Germany have a long history, both intellectually and politically, and continue playing a prominent role today in both academic practice and intellectual exchange. Secondly, due to my own position as a scholar working in American Studies at a German University, I have greater interest and exposure to the academic culture that binds these two national entities. These reasons present a regional bias, which I see as a subjectivity and a strength. My hope is that this paper invites critique and further research into the critical and the participatory elements of contemporary intellectual cultures in and beyond the West – in relation to knowledge production as well as to the impact of digital infrastructures.

7 Nancy Fraser, “Transnationalizing the Public Sphere: On the Legitimacy and Efficacy of Public Opinion in a Post-Westphalian World,” in *Transnationalizing the Public Sphere*, ed. Kate Nash (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 23–25. *This condition must also be critiqued. While English is considered the *lingua franca* from a Western perspective, it is also considered “the lingua fran-

English functions as the de facto *lingua franca*, but in a digitized environment it does not have to be a standalone language. Translation tools, such as the open-access Google Translate, can act as intermediaries, and the capability to display websites in multiple languages has established a new norm in online presence for academia: that digital textual material should be available in English as well as the national language. Often, despite the presence of a different national language, such textual materials are only available in English, which implies assumptions that English is a universally accessible language or a preference and prioritization towards speakers of English exists. The academic public sphere in its digital spaces is thus multilingual but English dominant, and this play an important role in the development of debate and the formation of coalitions.

With the term “academic public sphere” I refer to a specific topical zone that has to do with academia and intellectual culture. Such a zone is filled with opinions, discussions, and arguments that may not directly comment on intellectual practice, but has important, subversive connections. #BlackInTheIvory is an example of such phenomena: when a tweet on exclusion in academia by a scholar sets off a chain reaction of further tweets, then blogs, then mainstream opinion editorials, and then cultivates the formation of a concrete academic network that then further develops its web presence with more tweets, and thus more blogs and articles, it creates a cycle of information that operates in this topical zone.⁸ The hashtag itself may not be about the production of knowledge, but the establishment of a network that fights against certain forms of exclusion in academia certainly indicates attitudes towards it. This is particularly evident in transatlantic spaces between the United States and Germany, which is the parameter this paper works with. These transatlantic spaces of the academic public sphere are porous and permeate the digital media landscape in ways that often remain invisible. They are filled with zones of exchange, mergers, and flows that develop opinions and ideas which cannot be placed within specific national borders. Despite the state or city-bound nature of academic institutions or major

ca of neoliberal capitalism” and must precipitate “thinking past, around, and *about* it.” See Aamir R. Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

8 Such phenomena are described as “hashtag-mediated discursive assemblages” that can be comprised of various actants, such as corporate or collectivist. I adopt this concept to refer specifically to academic collectives that are formed as part of these cyclical information processes that can only be established in the digital public sphere, as this is the dimension for which the hashtag was created. See Nathan Rambukkana, “#Introduction: Hashtags as Technosocial Events,” in *Hashtag Publics: The Power and Politics of Discursive Networks*, ed. Nathan Rambukkana (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2015).

media outlets, the nature of information flow online is stateless, enabling a constant cross-border flow of research, knowledge, ideas, and people in the academic world.

It is often impossible to determine the origins of an idea in the academic public sphere, but ideas gain traction and credibility through U.S. based institutions or initiatives that have a strong web presence.⁹ This can range from internationally-consumed magazines like the *New Yorker* to blogs of academic networks like the Society of U.S. Intellectual History that publish opinion pieces on academic issues and controversies.¹⁰ The U.S. junction is also a reason why English has become the *lingua franca* of the transatlantic academic public sphere – it is the major global academic hub, with U.S. universities and institutions often dominating rankings and U.S.-based scholars gaining increasing social and cultural capital worldwide. This is not to say it is the center of the academic world, but rather to highlight that its role as an intermediary force is powerful.

Perhaps this is why today, it is often events based in the United States that trigger reactions in the transatlantic academic public sphere. New topical foci often enter mainstream academic discourse when such events occur. One of the notable examples of this in recent years are the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests of June 2020, which created massive public interest in discussions on racial inequality and consequently increased attention towards the power structures and inequalities permeating various factions of life and thought today, which is reflected in the tone of activity in the academic public sphere. This what I refer to as critical tendencies and are evident in discussions connected to the production of knowledge in the years surrounding 2020. These critical tendencies

⁹ A commentary by Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant critiques this influence as “universalizing particularisms” of U.S. society and universities. Interestingly, the piece points to a precedent for this in the nineteenth century, where conflicts specific to German universities informed the larger philosophical questions debated throughout Europe. See Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, “New Liberal Speak: Notes on the New Planetary Vulgate,” *Radical Philosophy* 105 (January/February 2001), accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/newliberalspeak>.

¹⁰ While there are several examples that could not be included in the empirical portion of this paper, two important ones discussed in the fourth and fifth section are: Kristal Brent Zook, “How Black Lives Matter Came to the Academy,” *The New Yorker*, January 30, 2021, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-political-scene/how-black-lives-matter-came-to-the-academy> and Tim Lacy, “The Mean(s) of History: #TheoryRevolt, Evidence, and Purported Anti-Intellectualism,” *Society for U.S. Intellectual History*, June 3, 2018, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://s-usih.org/2018/06/the-means-of-history-theoryrevolt-evidence-and-purported-anti-intellectualism/>.

are dedicated to assessing and challenging power structures; in academia specifically, they have become a polemicized mode in debate over what power structures inform both the scholarship that is produced as well the scholars who produce it.

The big “C”: Critical Tendencies in Contemporary Intellectual Culture

The term “critical” has become a staple in the Arts and Humanities, and the digital public sphere, both inside and outside of its academic zones, thrives on it. The widespread use of the term has led to the labelling of various scholarly approaches as well as a shift in attitudes, but how did this develop? There is a connection here between theory, practice, and tendency. Attitude is the focus of this paper and represents a contemporary turn in trajectories of critical-ness. Practice is the bridge between theory and attitude, in terms of the production of the knowledge as well as the factors that shape it. Theory, however, is a genealogical milestone in understanding how such attitudes have developed. While there are multiple definitions and application of critical theory, there is a common thread in its various uses – it can be seen as “less of a method and more of an approach to the social and political world,” as an approach to examining and analyzing “social phenomena that upsets us, like racism, sexism, inequality, marginalization, oppression and domination,” and one that takes an underlying or overt interest “in who has the social and political power to legitimize certain stories about society rather than others.”¹¹ Critical theory, thus, can be seen as an intellectual approach that has to do with reassessing norms and practices and seeking understandings of how they came to be.

From a historical perspective, critical theory is widely considered to have its roots in the Frankfurt School and European Marxist tradition, with German scholars such as Max Horkheimer often credited as originators of this intellectual approach.¹² Horkheimer’s writings distinguish critical thinking as non-individualistic, but as subject to “a definite individual in his real relation to other individuals and groups, in his conflict with a particular class, and finally, in the re-

¹¹ Eva Erman, “What Is ‘Critical’ about Critical Theory?” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 43, no. 3 (March 2017): 300–301, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453716671272>.

¹² James Bohman, “Critical Theory,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2021 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/critical-theory/>.

sultant web of relationships with the social totality and with nature.”¹³ Today, critical thinking is a standard in approaches to race, class, and gender, and such intersections are considered necessary inclusions in scholarship in the humanities and social sciences. But critical thinking has also been criticized as unnecessarily politicizing research. Such criticism is both within and beyond the academic zones of the public sphere – a prominent example of this is state-level legislature effectively banning the use of critical race theory (CRT) in public schools in the United States, using claims that the approach increases divisions and fuels racism against white people as justification.¹⁴ Horkheimer predicted such resistance, writing that “the hostility to theory as such which prevails in contemporary public life is really directed against the transformative activity associated with critical thinking. ... Those who profit from the status quo entertain a general suspicion of any intellectual tradition.”¹⁵ Like what is happening with CRT in the United States, as various forms of critical-ness are driven forward by proponents, they are accompanied by such hostility and suspicion predicted by Horkheimer.

CRT is a case where scholarly approaches enter the broader public sphere and blend the academic and the social in political deliberation, making it necessary to distinguish it from the critical theory that is widely associated with Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School.¹⁶ CRT has its roots in the United States, where scholarship began diverging from traditional, universalist approaches by addressing specific groups and identities in the second half of the twentieth century. Gender studies, for example, emerged alongside women’s studies in the 1970s; the two were often placed in opposition to each other, one of the fears being that with “gender studies has emerged as an alternative to women’s studies, undermining the primacy of women as the field’s proper object of study...”¹⁷ Ethnic studies also emerged in the 1970s as the civil rights movements had

13 Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell and others (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1975), 211.

14 Stephen Sawchuk, “What is Critical Race Theory, and Why Is It Under Attack,” *Education Week*, May 18, 2021, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/what-is-critical-race-theory-and-why-is-it-under-attack/2021/05>.

15 Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 232.

16 In fact, Frankfurt School scholar Theodore Adorno (and Horkheimer’s contemporary) rejected the concept of identity in his work, criticizing it as a deterministic and causal agent. It is likely that the Frankfurt School may have rejected CRT, presenting a complexity in attempted genealogies of critical theory that are rife for exploration. See Theodore Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (Suhrkamp, 1973).

17 Robin Wiegman, “Academic Feminism Against Itself,” *NWSA Journal* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 19.

brought national attention to repressed minorities, establishing sub-disciplines such as African American studies or Indigenous studies in several universities.¹⁸ Amongst this division of disciplines was a subversive focus on race and advocacy of intersectionality in scholarship. Legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw is widely associated with the emergence of such intersectional scholarship, with her 1989 paper “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” emphasizing that “theoretical and political developments [that] miss the mark with respect to Black women because of their failure to consider intersectionality.”¹⁹ This paper is considered a pioneer for intersectional approaches to scholarship, and such approaches would succeed in interweaving disciplines such as Gender studies or African American studies with established disciplines like History and Literature, producing work that can now be categorized as interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary.

The emergence of such sub-disciplines also introduced new ideological approaches and schools of thought, CRT being among them and which Crenshaw continues to be associated with.²⁰ CRT began as an academic movement in legal studies in the 1970s, developing alongside civil rights studies in the humanities but in a fundamentally different way, as “unlike traditional civil rights, which embraces incrementalism and step-by-step progress, critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order.”²¹ CRT quickly moved beyond law, and was absorbed into the social sciences, the humanities, and education and pedagogical methods. Defining CRT, as with defining critical theory, is impossible with a static definition but there are some basic, common features, such as the idea that “racism is ordinary, not aberrational,” and that because of this ordinariness “racism is difficult to cure or address.”²² CRT also “holds that race and races are products of social thought and relations” and that

18 Roger Chapman, “Multiculturalism and Ethnic Studies,” in *Culture Wars in America: An Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints, and Voices*, ed. Roger Chapman and James Ciment (New York: Routledge, 2014), 440.

19 Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1: 140.

20 Rita Omokha, “‘I See My Work as Talking Back’: How Critical Race Theory Mastermind Kimberlé Crenshaw Is Weathering the Culture Wars,” *Vanity Fair*, July 29, 2021, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2021/07/how-critical-race-theory-mastermind-kimberle-crenshaw-is-weathering-the-culture-wars>.

21 Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 3.

22 Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 7.

“races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient.”²³ Similar to Horkheimer’s description of critical thinking as subject to the individual in their relation to other individuals or groups, CRT focuses on how structural issues can determine the positions of individuals and groups, with a definitive emphasis on how race can circumvent universalist principles or ideals as set on paper.

This extrapolation on CRT is important, as the school of thought has informed mass calls for disruption in traditional, essentialist approaches in scholarship. Although its origins lie in legal studies, today CRT is associated with numerous, non-traditional approaches in traditional disciplines, and a prominent one is History. CRT advocates for a reexamination of “America’s historical record” by “replacing comforting majoritarian interpretations of events with ones that square more accurately with minorities experiences.”²⁴ This is encouraged in pedagogical approaches to U.S. history by established scholars. In a 2018 report on teaching history, historian David Blight wrote that there “is the deep, abiding American need to conceive of and understand our history as ‘progress,’”²⁵ which encourages the teaching of master narratives and hinders the teaching of multi-faceted histories. Blight argues that the “point is to tell American history as a story of real human beings, of power, of vast economic and geographical expansion, of great achievements as well as great dispossession, of human brutality and human reform.”²⁶

One such project was established to do just this – the New York Times’ 1619 Project, an initiative that “aims to reframe the country’s history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center”²⁷ of the dominant, U.S. national narrative. The project is a series of essays, literary works, and visual histories that began as the brainchild of writer Nikole Hannah-Jones: the first essay, titled “The Idea of America” by Hannah-Jones, kicked off the project in August 2019 and won the Pulitzer Prize for commentary in 2020.²⁸ As the project attracted increasing attention, it also generated

²³ Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 7.

²⁴ Ibid., 20.

²⁵ David Blight, “Introduction,” in *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery*, ed. Kate Schuster (Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018), 8, accessed March 15, 2022, https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/tt_hard_history_american_slavery.pdf.

²⁶ Blight, “Introduction,” 8.

²⁷ Jake Silverstein, “Why We Published The 1619 Project,” *The New York Times*, December 20, 2019, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/12/20/magazine/1619-intro.html>.

²⁸ “Nikole Hannah-Jones of The New York Times,” *The Pulitzer Prizes*, accessed September 6, 2021, <https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/nikole-hannah-jones-new-york-times>.

increasing criticism. Together, five historians at leading U.S. universities sent a letter to the *New York Times Magazine*, which was published with a rebuttal from the publication's editor-in-chief Jake Silverstein.²⁹ The letter criticized the project as suggesting a "displacement of historical understanding by ideology" and of "selective transparency" when it came to source selection and process, and the lengthy rebuttal responded to these criticisms by defending Hannah-Jones and the 1619 project, emphasizing both their positions as journalists rather than historians as well as pointing out that "within the world of academic history, differing views exist, if not over what precisely happened, then about why it happened, who made it happen, how to interpret the motivations of historical actors and what it all means."³⁰ This exchange grew to involve actors beyond the platform maintained by the *New York Times*. In the digital public sphere, historian Leslie M. Harris wrote a critique of Hannah-Jones' claims³¹ and a larger group of Civil War historians published a second letter accusing the project of "a historically-limited view of slavery."³²

The criticism the 1619 Project continues to receive is similar in scope to the resistance against CRT more generally, in the public sphere and beyond. Such critique and resistance illustrate that CRT has become a powerful school of thought that has entered the mainstream, moving beyond its scholarly origins into broader publics. The existence of the 1619 Project as well the response it generated are demonstrative of critical tendencies in the mainstream, but they exist within academic frameworks as well. Critical tendencies in academia can be in-

29 The letter was signed "Sincerely, Victoria Bynum, distinguished emerita professor of history, Texas State University; James M. McPherson, George Henry Davis 1886 emeritus professor of American history, Princeton University; James Oakes, distinguished professor, the Graduate Center, the City University of New York; Sean Wilentz, George Henry Davis 1886 professor of American history, Princeton University; Gordon S. Wood, Alva O. Wade University emeritus professor and emeritus professor of history, Brown University." See "We Respond to the Historians Who Critiqued The 1619 Project," *The New York Times Magazine*, December 20, 2019, updated January 19, 2021, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/20/magazine/we-respond-to-the-historians-who-critiqued-the-1619-project.html>.

30 "We Respond."

31 Leslie M. Harris, "I Helped Fact-Check the 1619 Project. The Times Ignored Me," *Politico*, June 6, 2021, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/03/06/1619-project-new-york-times-mistake-122248>.

32 This criticism argues that the 1619 Project presents slavery as an exclusive U.S. undertaking and compresses 400 years of history into a single interpretation, limiting the history of slavery by region and to a singular interpretation; these are, in fact, the very issues the 1619 Project criticizes in traditions of U.S. history. See "Twelve Scholars Critique the 1619 Project and the *New York Times Magazine* Editor Responds," *History News Network*, January 26, 2020, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/174140>.

corporated beyond scholarship and into the constituency of the academe, by which I mean scholars and the coalitions they form.

Identity, Experience, Perspective – Coalition Formation in the Academe

As critical tendencies move into methods, pedagogy, and source acquisition and analysis in scholarship, they also manifest in stances explicating the personal experience of scholars. Here, the digital public sphere acts as an agent in propagating these stances, which are espoused by individuals and quickly disseminated on online platforms by people who agree, have similar experiences or sympathize and, perhaps even more efficiently, by those who disagree or critique.³³ The use of the hashtag, in particular, has become a popular strategy to develop such discussions into movements – the hashtag “brings statements together and forms collectives” but it can also gloss “over differences and thus obscures subtleties,”³⁴ creating a for-or-against tendency within the digital public sphere. The profuse dissemination of such stances via hashtags can result in the rapid drawing of alliances, the most productive of which can establish coalitions and socially efficacious networks of scholars. Again, June 2020 serves as an important trigger point for recent cases.

The widespread BLM protests were accompanied by a plethora of statements, images, and videos shared through the use of hashtags in the digital public sphere, and amidst this BLM discourse #BlackInTheIvory emerged. Started by Shardé M. Davis and Joy Melody Woods³⁵ on Twitter,³⁶ the hashtag was used to

³³ There is much research done on filter bubbles and echo chambers and the restrictions they place on nuanced debate; these phenomena group participants by opinion or interest, leaving little room for counter opinions or opposing views. See Axel Bruns, *Are Filter Bubbles Real* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019) and Cristian Vaccari and Augusto Valeriani, *Outside the Bubble: Social Media and Political Participation in Western Democracies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

³⁴ Andreas Bernard, *Theory of the Hashtag*, trans. Valentine A. Pakis (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 6.

³⁵ Despite having been credited as a co-founder of the hashtag in media coverage during the viral phase of the hashtag, Woods is not present on the #BlackInTheIvory website nor is credited as a cofounder along with Davis. According to her own personal website, Woods is now involved with #ownvoices, a Twitter-based movement dating back to 2015 that campaigns for the connection between author identity and experience through storytelling to be actively championed in the publishing world. #ownvoices is an interesting movement in its own right, bringing structural issues of the publishing industry into the public sphere, but also acting as a bridge between

share the experiences of Black scholars with higher education, which were wrought with racism, discrimination, and marginalization. Davis, an assistant professor at the University of Connecticut at the time, and Woods, a doctoral student at the University of Texas, got the idea through conversations about their personal experiences as Black women in academia. Inspired by the surge in BLM discourse, they decided to share some thoughts publicly on twitter with the hashtag; #BlackInTheIvory went viral overnight.³⁷ Black scholars in various places – the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and elsewhere – nurtured the conversation by publicly sharing stories of individual racism, structural racism and the excessive emotional and professional burdens they felt as Black academics. The hashtag was also used by non-Black academics to express solidarity and sympathy, as well as to criticize or demean. But by and large, #BlackInTheIvory became the impetus to create a borderless community for Black academics for personal and professional support in dealing with the issues the hashtag had brought to the fore. The hashtag continues to be used on social media but it has gone beyond the discursive. It has spurred conferences and conversations that openly address invisible structures of academia and it has also become a growing community beyond the public sphere.³⁸ Davis trademarked the hashtag, creating the Blackademic Social Network, how-to guides for allies and interested parties in academia, and an upcoming published volume which takes the hashtag into the realm of print.³⁹

academic and mainstream publishing by addressing the “who” in both research claims and authorship. See: Joy Melody Woods, “About Me,” *Joy Melody Woods*, accessed September 5, 2021, <https://www.joymelodywoods.com/aboutme> and Moneeka Thakur, “The #OwnVoices Movement: Whose Voices Are Being Heard?” *Cherwell*, May 11, 2021, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://cherwell.org/2021/05/11/the-ownvoices-movement-whose-voices-are-being-heard/>.

36 *Black in the Ivory*, 2021, <https://blackintheivory.net/>.

37 Nyasha Junior, “#BlackInTheIvory Documents Anti-Blackness in the Academy,” *Women in Higher Education*, September 1, 2020, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.wihe.com/article-details/158/-blackintheivory-documents-anti-blackness-in-the-academy/>.

38 Examples of these are “#Blackintheivory conference is centerpiece of Black History Month at UON,” *University of Northampton*, October 1, 2020, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.northampton.ac.uk/news/blackintheivory-conference-is-centrepiece-of-black-history-month-at-uon/>, and Josh Busby, “The Networks and Hidden Procedures that Keep Discrimination Alive in Academia,” *The Duck of Minerva*, July 12, 2020, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.duckofminerva.com/2020/07/the-networks-and-hidden-procedures-that-keep-discrimination-alive-in-academia.html>.

39 All these can be found on the official #BlackInTheIvory Website. See “The Blackademic Social Network,” 2021, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://blackintheivory.net/blackademic-social-network>, and Shardé M. Davis, *Being Black in the Ivory: Tips for Amplifying the Voices of Blacka-*

Such negative experiences in academia extend beyond identity, in cases where shared experience is the basis for network formation without the categories of ethnic, racial, gendered, or class-based identities. This can be seen in the Academic Parity movement, a network addressing bullying in academia that uses human rights as a lens to address abusive behaviors in mainly laboratory-orientated university environments.⁴⁰ Established in 2019, and inspired by research conducted by founder Morteza Mahmoudi, the movement developed anonymous complaint procedures and produces research and publications on bullying in academia to quantifiably and qualitatively demonstrate that such problems in academia are widespread and require tackling on an institutional level. While founded by scholars in the United States, it is also borderless, with an international board and no citizenship requirements for its growing network. But despite an active Twitter account and popular YouTube videos, it has received little to no coverage in mainstream media. Compared to #BlackintheIvory, which generated praise and criticism beyond the academe and received coverage from mainstream publications like the New Yorker and the Guardian, the Academic Parity Movement has garnered significantly less public attention. Thus, while shared experience serves as foundation for network formation, perhaps this points to identity as the magnet of interest for non-academic publics and as a catalyst for efficacious development when it comes to the public presence and reputation of coalitions.

Borderless-ness as a feature of contemporary, critical networks can thrive on the transnational nature of the digital public sphere, but in transatlantic spaces it is also dependent on the accessibility of language – the Academic Parity Movement and #BlackInTheIvory operate in English because of their origins in the United States, but this is also the reason for their international appeal. For #BlackInTheIvory, identity and the hashtag are important factors in its exponential growth and garnered attention. The shift from hashtag to movement has proven to be effective, and the transition can be seen in Germany as well; an example of this is the #IchbinHanna hashtag turned initiative. The hashtag appeared on Twitter in June 2021 as a response to a video⁴¹ posted by the *WissZeitVG* “the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research” explaining the Wissen-

*dem*ic TRUTHtellers in the Academy. *Black in the Ivory*, February 1, 2021, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://blackintheivory.net/blackademic-truthtellers>.

⁴⁰ “The Problem,” *The Academic Parity Movement*, accessed September 5, 2021, <https://paritymovement.org/the-problem/>.

⁴¹ While the video is no longer available on official *WissZeitVG* platforms, it can still be viewed on YouTube. See “Ich bin Hanna,” Jörg Thomsen, YouTube video, 2:23, June 17, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIq5GIY4h4E>.

schaftszeitvertragsgesetz “Academic Fixed-Term Contract Act” – the act exempts universities from standard labor rights using innovation in scholarship as justification for the widespread practice of issuing limited term contracts. Hanna is a reference to the video, which featured a fictional PhD student named Hanna as a success story of fixed term contracts; the video posits her success as a result of the experience she gains at different universities. Hanna is thus an attempt to personify the alleged benefits of the *Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz*. The #IchbinHanna hashtag was first deployed by Amrei Bahr, Kristin Eichhorn, and Sebastian Kubon, who are established critics of the *WissZeitVG*. Previously, in October 2020, the trio had published their *95 Theses against the WissZeitVG*, a lampooning of the Ministry in both German and English.⁴² While less viral than #IchbinHanna, the theses also began on Twitter with the hashtag #95vsWissZeitVG, which then led to a blog and a printable *plakat*.⁴³ #IchbinHanna was more productive. It was used by scholars to share of thousands of personal experiences with fixed-term contracts in German academia on Twitter, and these experiences were negative and tainted with insecurity and precarity – as a result, the *WissZeitVG* deleted the video.⁴⁴ Like the Academic Parity Movement, the #IchbinHanna initiative is founded on shared experience, but its use of the hashtag has generated more discussion. It has also become a grassroots initiative in Germany aimed at sustaining this discussion by both German and non-German speaking scholars. #IchbinHanna tweets appeared in German and English and the initiative published their statement in both languages, demonstrating that members of the academe within national borders are unmistakably pluralistic. Pluralism in the German academic community was affirmed in the critical response the hashtag itself received; a new hashtag, #ichbinreyhan, highlighted the increased obstacles that scholars of color faced in German academia.⁴⁵

42 Amrei Bahr, Kristin Eichhorn, and Sebastian Kubon, “95 Theses against the WissZeitVG,” accessed September 5, 2021, <https://95vswisszeitvg.wordpress.com/95-theses-against-the-wisszeitvg/>.

43 Amrei Bahr, Kristin Eichhorn, and Sebastian Kubon, “95 Thesen gegen das WissZeitVG,” accessed March 15, 2022, https://www.perspektivbrocken.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/95vsWZVG_Online_Platat.pdf.

44 Ilka Brasch and Jens Temmen, “Englisch Version: IchbinHanna (translates to #IamHanna),” accessed September 5, 2021, #IchBinHanna, <https://ichbinhanna.wordpress.com/english-version/>.

45 See Dr.in Reyhan Şahin (@LadyBitchRay1), Twitter Post, June 11, 2021, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://twitter.com/ladybitchray1/status/1403238905051332609?lang=en>, and Susan Djangard, “Ich Werde Ständig Unterschätzt,” *Zeit Campus*, June 19, 2021, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.zeit.de/campus/2021-06/ichbinhanna-hashtag-twitter-arbeitsbedingungen-diversitaet-diskriminierung>.

Shared perspective is another basis for coalition formation and growth in the online media landscape. The Germany-based *Netzwerk Wissenschaftsfreiheit* “Network for Academic Freedom” is, according to the first sentence of their English-language manifesto, “an association of academics with the common concern to defend the freedom of research and teaching against ideologically motivated restrictions and to contribute to strengthening a liberal academic climate.”⁴⁶ The network, comprised primarily of university professors at German universities, did not start with a hashtag or on social media, but has been widely discussed in mainstream German media such as *Sueddeutsche* or *Die Welt* as well as by its critics on Twitter. Its website has a .de URL,⁴⁷ clearly displaying that its origins and presence are rooted in Germany. Yet, the availability of the content of the website in both German and English language versions affirms the *lingua franca* status of English within the German academe and indicates that an international dimension exists at the network or that there is some desire for international appeal. Founded in February 2021, the first English-language press release states that ideological or political agendas connected to “Cancel Culture” and “Political Correctness” are what inspired its establishment – countering such ideological or political agendas in academic research is what the scholars “joined forces” to do.⁴⁸ The German-language version of their web page for press releases is more demonstrative of what unites the network’s members: a claim to no single perspective. For example, a German-language press release, *Netzwerk Wissenschaftsfreiheit fordert: Kein Zwang zum Gendern* “Network for Academic Freedom demands: No Compulsion to Gender” is a call on academic institutions to restrain from issuing binding regulations on the use of gender-sensitive language.⁴⁹ The network has also received significant media coverage in Germany, in the academic sphere and beyond, and a long list of this appears in the list of links posted *Das Netzwerk in den Medien* “The Network in the Media” page.⁵⁰ That the network is presenting these links indicates that such

46 “Manifesto,” *Netzwerk Wissenschaftsfreiheit*, February 2021, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.netzwerk-wissenschaftsfreiheit.de/en/about-us/manifesto/>.

47 The website for #IchbinHanna, in contrast, has a .com URL; see <https://ichbinhanna.wordpress.com/>.

48 Sandra Kostner et al., “Press releases,” *Netzwerk Wissenschaftsfreiheit*, accessed September 5, 2021, <https://www.netzwerk-wissenschaftsfreiheit.de/en/press/press-releases/>.

49 Sandra Kostner et al., “Netzwerk Wissenschaftsfreiheit fordert: Kein Zwang zum Gendern,” *Netzwerk Wissenschaftsfreiheit*, June 25, 2021, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.netzwerk-wissenschaftsfreiheit.de/presse/pressemitteilungen/>.

50 “Das Netzwerk in den Medien,” *Netzwerk Wissenschaftsfreiheit*, accessed September 15, 2021, <https://www.netzwerk-wissenschaftsfreiheit.de/presse/das-netzwerk-in-den-medien/>.

coverage is, in part, awarded because it is comprised of academics with contacts and influence amongst the German media establishment.

Netzwerk Wissenschaftsfreiheit is an interesting case of critical tendencies as it has been formed in response to what its members perceive as injustice. The network presents itself as taking a minoritarian position, yet it is one that does not have collective historical struggles comparable to coalitions like #Black-InTheIvory nor did it come together due to the experiences of job insecurity like the supporters of #IchbinHanna. Perhaps then, the network presents a case of simulated critical tendencies; because of this, it has generated backlash at the heights of its own activity in the digital public sphere. The network's claims have been billed as a "Kampf um die Wissenschaftsfreiheit" "battle over academic freedom,"⁵¹ critiqued as restricting legitimate criticism and democratic expression by the inter-university student organization the *freier zusammenschluss von student*innenschaften* (fzs),⁵² and accused of perpetuating a *Schreckgespenst* "bogeyman."⁵³ It has also led to the formation of a counter-initiative called *Wissenschaftsfreiheit* "Academic Freedom." *Wissenschaftsfreiheit* describes itself as a coalition rather than a network, with the stated understanding of academic freedom "as a process to extend participation in science" and as a "basis for processes of negotiation."⁵⁴ The coalition, an initiative of the *Forum Antirassismus Medienwissenschaft* "Forum of Antiracism Media Science," has a vast signatory list including professors, lecturers and independent researchers, and more, a contrast to the professors comprising *Netzwerk Wissenschaftsfreiheit*. Its URL ends in .org, which is typically used for non-profit organizations, a contrast to the .de URL address used by *Netzwerk Wissenschaftsfreiheit* which implies a nation-bound quality. Apart from this, the URLs are identical, and one can easily land on either page without intention if they have mistakenly typed .org or .de, or done a Google Search without a close look at the results – arguably, this is the intention. Both have German and English versions of web text, but the text available on the *Wissenschaftsfreiheit* website is concise and direct –

51 Arnd Diringer, "Kampf um die Wissenschaftsfreiheit," *Welt*, July 23, 2021, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/article232656823/Recht-behalten-Kampf-um-die-Wissenschaftsfreiheit.html/>.

52 Iris Kimizoglu, "fzs kritisiert das 'Netzwerk für Wissenschaftsfreiheit,'" *freier zusammenschluss von student*innenschaften*, March 8, 2021, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.fzs.de/2021/03/08/fzs-kritisiert-das-netzwerk-fuer-wissenschaftsfreiheit/>.

53 Martin Lütke, "Netzwerk Wissenschaftsfreiheit: Eine kurze Replik," *DeGruyter Conversations*, February 5, 2021, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://blog.degruyter.com/netzwerk-wissenschaftsfreiheit-eine-kurze-replik/>.

54 "Wissenschaftsfreiheit," *Wissenschaftsfreiheit*, accessed September 6 2021, <https://netzwerk-wissenschaftsfreiheit.org/>.

it is simply a statement of purpose in both German and English on the same page with a list of signatories below, and a separate page in German for contact information for interested signatories and press inquiries.⁵⁵ *Wissenschaftsfreiheit*, then, can be seen as a critical reaction to *Netzwerk Wissenschaftsfreiheit*, which in itself is a reaction to the growth of critical approaches. Without any explicit description, the two networks can be placed in opposition to one another when examining their web content, their member and signatory lists, and most notably, the discussion surrounding them in the digital sphere – if *Wissenschaftsfreiheit* has been formed as a result of the accumulated criticism of *Netzwerk Wissenschaftsfreiheit*, then this is testament to the power of critical publics in developing from interest groups into concrete coalitions.

Critical Antagonisms: Theory, Methodology, Pedagogy

Critical tendencies in academic discourse have set in motion a reassessment of long-established norms in scholarship; norms that have traditionally positioned dominant narratives as sole histories and created imbalanced planes of experience for members of the academe. This critical-ness has its opponents, creating antagonisms between drivers of these reassessments and opponents who argue that the reassessment itself should be under review. Herein, the production of literature stemming from this critique and the reaction it garners is indicative of the deepening antagonisms connected to perspectives on how theory, methodology, and pedagogy should be in practice. In this regard, a critical look at critical theory is also underway.

Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything About Gender, Race, and Identity and Why This Harms Everything by Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay was published in 2020. The book's basis is that another culture war has been taking place since the beginning of the twenty-first-century,⁵⁶ which is driven by a postmodernist culture of “social justice activism” in scholarship that is detrimental to intellectual practice and academic communities. For the authors, this culture war has resulted in the detrimental creation of the hy-

55 “Kontakt,” *Wissenschaftsfreiheit*, accessed September 6, 2021, <https://netzwerk-wissenschaftsfreiheit.org/kontakt/>.

56 Helen Pluckrose and James A. Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity – and Why This Harms Everybody* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone Publishing, 2020, EPUB), 22.

brid “scholar-activist.”⁵⁷ Pluckrose and Lindsay are self-described advocates of liberalism and for them, “[p]ostmodern theory and liberalism do not merely exist in tension: they are almost directly at odds with one another.”⁵⁸ The book’s argument rests on the claim that “there is nothing that postmodern theory can do that liberalism cannot do better, and it’s high time we regained the confidence to argue for this.”⁵⁹ The publication of *Cynical Theories* was met with commercial success, attracting attention beyond the academe and becoming a bestseller.⁶⁰ The topic and angle struck a chord with opponents of critical theory and critics of “social justice discourse,” and it was one that the authors had a history with.

Pluckrose and Lindsay had already established a reputation for mocking what they and others refer to as “activist scholarship.” In 2018, along with colleague Peter Boghossian, the trio wrote some 20 papers using language associated with postmodern scholarship in a jargonistic fashion and submitted them to journals associated with critical scholarship in fields such as gender studies, queer studies, and race studies, or what the trio has cumulatively termed grievance studies. Nicknamed the Grievance Studies Affair or Sokal Squared after the Sokal Hoax,⁶¹ they achieved quite some success with this plan: seven of their papers were published in peer-reviewed journals.⁶² To reveal their hoax, Pluckrose, Lindsay, and Boghossian published a tell-all essay describing what their issues with critical academia are with a run-down of the papers they had written, the feedback they had received, and the acceptance or rejection statements from various journals. In their essay, the trio emphasized that they “undertook this proj-

⁵⁷ Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 19.

⁵⁸ Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 389.

⁵⁹ Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 413.

⁶⁰ The Associated Press, “US-Best-Sellers-Books-USA Today,” *The Washington Post*, September 3, 2020, accessed March 15, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/us-best-sellers-books-usatoday/2020/09/03/9f6d462e-ee03-11ea-bd08-1b10132b458f_story.html.

⁶¹ The Sokal Hoax refers to a prank played by NYU physicist Alan Sokal in May 1996, wherein a parody article he had written and submitted was published in the academic journal *Social Text*. Sokal later published an opinion piece which was released by the New York Times, stating that he had written the article with absurd claims using jargon to show that poststructuralism was having detrimental effects on research and argument in the humanities. See Lingua Franca, *The Sokal Hoax: The Sham That Shook the Academy* (Lincoln, NB: Nebraska University Press, 2000) and Zack Beauchamp, “The Controversy Around Hoax Studies in Critical Theory, Explained,” *Vox*, October 15, 2018, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/2018/10/15/17951492/grievance-studies-sokal-squared-hoax>.

⁶² Yascha Mounk, “What an Audacious Hoax Reveals About Academia,” *The Atlantic*, October 5, 2018, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/new-sokal-hoax/572212/>.

ect to study, understand, and expose the reality of grievance studies, which is corrupting academic research”⁶³ and incorporated a pronounced call to action by recommending “all major universities to begin a thorough review of these areas of study ...”⁶⁴ The call to action was embraced by some and scoffed at by others, and whether or not any institutions have acted upon it remains to be seen. But the essay reveals that the hoax was a well-planned affair with an antagonistic ideological crux: it produced a critical reaction to critical-ness. After all, Pluckrose, Lindsay, and Boghossian were assessing what new norms are in the process of being produced.

Such antagonisms exist within disciplines as well, such as the lesser-known but hotly debated #TheoryRevolt. Known by the hashtag, #TheoryRevolt is a manifesto written for scholars associated with history. The manifesto, entitled *Theses on Theory and History*, was written by historians Ethan Kleinberg, Joan Wallach Scott, and Gary Wilder in May 2018 and promotes a rebellion against traditional, empiricist historiography by calling for the incorporation of theory, and for establishing a theoretical approach to historiography as part of the discipline itself.⁶⁵ The manifesto ends with a coda that imagines “the historian as akin to the interpreter of dreams,” stating that “we see that those who look to make literal sense of the dream by presenting it in a chronological, realist, and self-evident manner, are recognized and rewarded.” The coda concludes with its appeal for theory in history, placing interpretation at the center and theory as its tool: “The historian equipped with a background in theory is attuned to the navel of the dream, to the places where history does and does not “make sense,” and this is the opening to interpretative and political innovation.”⁶⁶ With the manifesto, the authors placed themselves in opposition to what they viewed as normative history and normative historians, and the reaction in the academic public sphere was swift. A response by independent scholar Tim Lacy published on the Society for U.S. Intellectual History’s blog critiqued the manifesto as redundant, arguing their presentation of history was distorted: “I don’t see a profession enchained by common-sense realism, mere description, or stale evidentiary standards. ... I see practitioners working toward a mean be-

⁶³ James A. Lindsay, Peter Boghossian, and Helen Pluckrose, “Academic Grievance Studies and the Corruption of Scholarship,” *Areo*, October 2, 2018, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://areo.com/2018/10/02/academic-grievance-studies-and-the-corruption-of-scholarship/>.

⁶⁴ Lindsay, Boghossian, and Pluckrose, “Academic Grievance Studies.”

⁶⁵ Ethan Kleinberg, Joan Wallach Scott, and Gary Wilder, *Theses on Theory and History* (Wild On Collective, May 2018), 8.

⁶⁶ Kleinberg, Scott, and Wilder, *Theses on Theory and History*, 11.

tween evidence and interpretation.”⁶⁷ A post written by PhD Student Jonathon Caitlin for the Journal for the History of Ideas blog historicized the use of theory in history, citing courses taught at Princeton University that incorporated theoretical reading with specific historical cases as early as 1965 to demonstrate that theory in history has a longer tradition than the manifesto alleged.⁶⁸ On a personal blog, historian Matt Fitzpatrick detailed a section-by-section critique of the manifesto, arguing that it created “a false dichotomy between empiricism and theory” but, at the same time, praising its “renewed call to embrace” theoretically driven history.⁶⁹ Blogs of historians and history societies were critical, but excited by #TheoryRevolt, and the volume of feedback induced a response in July 2018 by Kleinberg, Scott, and Wilder. On the Critical Inquiry blog, they wrote that their digital “open access platform has led to a global reception that has exceeded our initial target but also reveals that these “Theses” have hit a nerve and provoked a response. ... The point here is that whether one agrees or disagrees with the ‘Theses,’ they have started a debate about the norms of the historical discipline.”⁷⁰ The writers credited the digital public sphere for their publicity – they had published the manifesto online and free for download, and the hashtag had easily developed and categorized the discussion about it. This technical environment, combined with the topical appeal of the Theses, created an antagonistic dynamic within the discipline that scholars were keen to explore. #TheoryRevolt is an example of methodological antagonisms that excite the academic public sphere, but perhaps are too niche to move beyond it.

Other critical antagonisms, however, can move into a broader public sphere if they are seen to have a direct connection to major sociopolitical issues in the mainstream. This is the case with #DisruptTexts, an initiative seeking to disrupt pedagogical norms by changing the Western literary canon. The initiative was founded in 2018 by Tricia Ebarvia, Lorena Germán, Kim Parker, and Julia Torres, four educators, English teachers and women of color, and describes itself as “a

67 Tim Lacy, “The Mean(s) of History: #TheoryRevolt, Evidence, and Purported Anti-Intellectualism,” *Society for U.S. Intellectual History*, June 3, 2018, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://s-usih.org/2018/06/the-means-of-history-theoryrevolt-evidence-and-purported-anti-intellectualism/>.

68 Jonathon Caitlin, “Theory Revolt and Historical Commitment,” *Journal of the History of Ideas Blog*, October 8, 2018, accessed August 7, 2022, <https://jhblog.org/2018/10/08/theory-revolt-and-historical-commitment/#>.

69 Matt Fitzpatrick, “A Few Preliminary Thoughts on #TheoryRevolt,” *The Kaiser and The Colonies: Monarchy, Democracy, and Empire in Germany*, June 3, 2018, accessed March 15, 2022, <http://monarchydemocracyempire.blogspot.com/2018/06/a-few-preliminary-thoughts-on.html>.

70 Ethan Kleinberg, Joan Wallach Scott, and Gary Wilder, “From the Authors of the ‘Theses on Theory and History,’” *Critical Inquiry*, July 10, 2018, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://criting.wordpress.com/2018/07/10/from-the-authors-of-the-theses-on-theory-and-history/>.

crowdsourced, grassroots effort *by teachers for teachers*".⁷¹ As in the case of #TheoryRevolt, it was conceived as a hashtag that would generate literature to further their goals. #DisruptTexts challenges traditional modes of pedagogy in literary education by diversifying the canon and incorporating anti-racist and anti-bias teaching methods. A column published by the founders in the *English Journal* described the principles of the coalition as critical: "The antithesis to critical literacy is universalism. Too often, students may read a text through a dominant narrative, a single interpretative lens. Instead, students can ask questions of texts such as *Who is centered? Who is marginalized? Who is missing? And what does this mean and why does this matter?*"⁷² Thus, for the coalition, critical literacy can be developed through changing the canon as well as changing the way we view the canon, from elementary school to post-secondary education. The coalition has teaching guides available for download on their website as well as on the website of publishing conglomerate Penguin,⁷³ increasing their visibility and credibility given Penguin's established history and reputation as a publisher of literary classics. Again, like #TheoryRevolt, the founders use of the hashtag as a name demonstrates their aims of developing a conversation, as can be seen on their website as well as on social media platforms such as Twitter. The homepage is filled with posts about how teaching literature can be effectively disrupted by teachers; from re-contextualizing or re-teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* to reducing the focus on Shakespeare,⁷⁴ the conversation the coalition has fostered is detailed and can be easily shared with the hashtag in digital publics.

#DisruptText's intended audience is educators, but its belief that diversity and anti-racism should be incorporated into pedagogical methods connects it with other critical tendencies that have moved beyond academic publics into the mainstream public sphere. A major controversy surrounding group was sparked by a tweet by Germán on November 30, 2020: "Did y'all know that many of the 'classics' were written before the 50s? Think of US society before

71 Tricia Ebarvia et al., "What is #DisruptTexts?," *#DisruptTexts*, accessed September 6, 2021, <https://disrupttexts.org/lets-get-to-work/>.

72 Tricia Ebarvia et al., "#DisruptTexts," *English Journal* 110, no. 1 (September 2020): 101.

73 Disrupt Texts, "Disrupt Texts in Your Classroom Educator Guide," *Penguin School and Library Teacher and Librarian Resources*, accessed September 6, 2021, <https://penguinclassroom.com/books/disrupt-texts-in-your-classroom-educator-guide/>.

74 See Lorena Germán, "Chat: Disrupting 'To Kill A Mockingbird,'" *#DisruptTexts*, May 13, 2018, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://disrupttexts.org/2018/05/13/disrupting-to-kill-a-mockingbird/>, and Lorena Germán, "Chat: Disrupting Shakespeare," May 25, 2018, accessed September 6, 2021, <https://disrupttexts.org/2018/10/25/5-disrupting-shakespeare/>.

then and the values that shaped this nation afterwards. THAT is what is in those books. That is why we gotta switch it up. It ain't just about 'being old.' #Disrupt-Texts.”⁷⁵ Again, the hashtag generated several written responses in the digital public sphere, some agreeable and others mocking. An Op-Ed in the Wall Street Journal titled “Even Homer Gets Mobbed” raged that a “sustained effort is under way to deny children access to literature” and that #DisruptTexts was constituted of “critical-theory ideologues, schoolteachers and Twitter agitators [who] are purging and propagandizing against classic texts.”⁷⁶ A longer piece on Harpers aligned the coalition with author Viet Than Nguyen’s call for “literary insurgency,” arguing that #DisruptTexts and its advocates “borrows the tech world’s callow fetish for “disruption” to advocate the diversification of reading lists.”⁷⁷ A piece on Quillette discussed the “punishment the activist teachers meted out” on Jessica Cluess, an author who had criticized the coalition on Twitter.⁷⁸ Each piece cited Germán’s tweet. The coalition predated the tweet by two years, but Germán’s words triggered publics in a way that #DisruptTexts objectives had previously not. While the tweet itself sparked a viral response, #DisruptTexts continued generating discussion in the public sphere as this virality died down, which considering the use of a hashtag is, in essence, a goal achieved.

Conclusion

The digital public sphere provides new possibilities for discussion to gain momentum and, potentially, to spark change. Interconnected, intellectual discussion is thriving due to an unprecedented accessibility of information as well as the widespread technical and discursive capabilities to disseminate agendas. And the intellectual agendas of today are underscored by critical tendencies, intentionally and inadvertently, that create polemical modes of debate – debates that incorporate definitive argumentative stances that can unite different per-

75 Lorena Germán (@nenagerman), Twitter Post, November 30, 2020, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://twitter.com/nenagerman/status/1333449963401924609>.

76 Megan Cox Gurdon, “Even Homer Gets Mobbed,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 27, 2020, accessed March 15, 2022, https://www.wsj.com/articles/even-homer-gets-mobbed-11609095872?mod=article_inline.

77 Thomas Chatterton Williams, “Campaign Literature,” *Harper’s Magazine*, April 2021, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://harpers.org/archive/2021/04/campaign-literature/>.

78 Lona Manning, “What is #DisruptTexts?,” *Quillette*, December 9, 2020, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://quillette.com/2020/12/09/what-is-disrupttexts/>.

spectives under an umbrella, but deepen divides between those who critique or vehemently disagree.

While such debates are evident in different facets of intellectual culture, they are linked to what factors do and should inform processes of knowledge production, and can be openly observed in the digital public sphere. This sphere exists as a porous space, allowing for cross-border forms of communication that develop discursive assemblies that are topical, but with underlying connections. The transatlantic academic zone of this sphere is dependent on a common language to render this as accessible, which enables an exchange and development of opinion, support, and antagonism across national, ideological and political boundaries. Coalitions and networks formed amidst this exchange attract members based on identity, experience, or shared perspective rather than citizenship or nationality, and literature promoting methodological disruptions are intended for disciplinary change beyond national borders.

From theory to methodology to members of the academe, a critical reassessment of academic norms has a powerful impetus for change. Yet, there are also defenders of norms and resisters of change, leading to tensions that create a thriving discussion in the academic public sphere. In fact, it is the swaying scales between consensus and rupture that prove most effectively that participatory engagement in the public sphere is roaring, and that academics are participating members of an active discursive environment that is contributing to the formation of horizontal communities. This paper has highlighted the immense potential for participatory academia that digital infrastructures enable, and this is a key difference between academia today and academia in the twentieth and early twenty-first century. There is much more research on this to be done. What are the genealogies of current modes of debate, and how do we pinpoint what is new in the making? How did debates over knowledge production unfold without this digital infrastructure? What were the capacities for coalition-building and methodological disruption in a time when information borders were harder and when communication was more restrictive? Did comparable types of critical tendencies exist in dominant intellectual discourse? Did the same type of public interest exist without the accessibility the internet provides?

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