CANCEL CULTURE: POSTHUMAN HAUNTOLOGIES
IN DIGITAL RHETORIC AND THE LATENT
VALUES OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITY NETWORKS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how modern epideictic practices enact latent community values by analyzing modern call-out culture, a form of public shaming that aims to hold individuals responsible for perceived politically incorrect behavior via social media, and cancel culture, a boycott of such behavior and a variant of call-out culture. As a result, this thesis is mainly concerned with the capacity of words, iterated within the archive of social media, to haunt us—both culturally and informatically. Through hauntology, this study hopes to understand a modern discourse community that is bound by an epideictic framework that specializes in the deconstruction of the individual’s ethos via the constant demonization and incitement of past, current, and possible social media expressions. The primary goal of this study is to understand how these practices function within a capitalistic framework and mirror the performativity of capital by reducing affective human interactions to that of a transaction.
DEDICATION

This essay is dedicated in memory of the late Mark Fisher, and our shared love of the works of Fredrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault. And though I am a late comer to his pivotal work, published posthumously under the title *K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher (2004-2016)*, a collection of his blogs and academic and non-academic essays, I found his work to be critical in working through the abundance of doubt that seems to pervade and haunt the socio-political and economic climate of the 21st century. In addition, I want to thank my fellow peer, Calvin Cummings, for introducing me, rather assisting me, in comprehending the relevancy and critical nature of Fisher’s work as it relates to my thesis and cancel culture. Lastly, it is of great importance to me that I mention the degree to which Michel Foucault inspires this analysis. For though he goes without mention in the reading that follows, it is the spirit of Foucault that drives this text: for in much the same way that Foucault hoped to abandon the pristine notion that truth, in the form of rationality, had transcended notions of power as it relates to history, mental illness, state punishment, and sexuality, I hope to demonstrate that communication technologies have, in fact, not necessarily improved our capacity to communicate but actively diminished it—that it has only shrouded and masked its systems of power.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to personally thank, though I suppose this is rather impersonal, both Dr. Heather Palmer and Dr. Rik Hunter for bearing with me for the duration of this project. This attempted analysis of what constitutes either moral or amoral practices within the realm of epideictic rhetoric has been quite the undertaking. I understand that having not met many of the agreed upon deadlines might have caused a few ripples and, perhaps, notions of doubt in the minds of my committee; however, I feel confident that I have adequately met the standards presented to me by the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, and its presiding English faculty.

Dr. Palmer, I want to specifically thank you for always being rather open and inviting to some of my rather puzzling, and often troubled feelings, about modern politics and philosophy. Without your commitment, rather your attitude towards learning and educating, I don’t think I would have had the confidence to pursue my half-baked ideas, nor fumble through my long-winded class presentations about the necessity of both Jungian psychoanalysis and the moral and ethical contributions of Friedrich Nietzsche during your History of Rhetorical Theory classes.

Dr. Hunter, I think it’s appropriate of me to point out that this is your first exposure to my academic work. In fact, I hadn’t taken a single one of your classes until the very last semester of spring 2020; however, I have been enjoying your demeanor, humor, and overall commitment to student success in the short time that I have been attending your class. Your knowledge of rhetoric, design, and writing has introduced me to many key concepts in the field of rhetoric that I have tragically not been exposed to up to this point. Thank you.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Spectator is ourselves, all of us who glance through collections of photographs—in magazines and newspapers, in books, albums, archives … And the person or thing photographed is the target, referent, a kind of little simulacrum, any eidolon emitted by the object, which I should like to call the Spectrum of the Photograph, because this word retains, through its root, a relation to ‘spectacle’ and adds to it that rather terrible thing that is there in every photograph: the return of the dead

—Jacques Derrida, The Work of Mourning

Beginning in the early 1990s, critical theorists such as Mark Fisher, Peter Buse, and Andrew Scott have sought to unravel the relationship between the living and the dead, man and his ghost, in order to better understand the effects of nostalgia, memory, trauma, mourning, and even the refusal to part with archaic social norms. Their inquiries, spawning from Jacques Derrida’s theory of hauntology (a posthuman concept), birthed a deep discussion concerning the relevancy of the ghost, the specter, as it relates to the rise of modern social media technologies and virtual community networks—the technology itself and the technosphere, respectively. As conceived of by Derrida’s in the Spectres of Marx (1993), the haunting refers to a deferred non-origin1 that undermines all attempts to investigate society and culture from the standpoint of the social sciences and humanities by invoking the “always-already absent present” set of linguistic, historical, and philosophical principles that underpin all social critiques (Macsey and Donato

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1Derrida’s “deferred non-origin” or “always-already absent present” refers to the already present set of cultural values and interpretations that linger over any new cultural innovation or attempt to create. It refers to the inability to conceive of new concepts outside of their relationship to preexisting concepts; ergo, we are always haunted.
Having considered Francis Fukuyama’s book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), wherein he posits that capitalism’s triumph over all socio-political and economic systems had brought an end to history, Derrida initiates the haunting by posing this question: “if communism was always spectral, what does it mean to say it is now dead?” (Fisher “The Metaphysics of Crackle” 50). Back in the 1980s, scholars such as Donna Haraway reinvigorated this notion of the specter—inherited by theorists like Derrida and Haraway from Karl Marx’s spectre of Europe (the specter of Communism)—and aided us in solidifying the haunting in its technological formation by providing us with the “spectre of the ghost in the machine.” In the fields of posthuman philosophy and rhetoric, Katherine Hayles, Cary Wolfe, and Rosi Braidotti have drawn special attention to the “fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism itself” (Wolfe xv) or the idea that we not delude ourselves with notions of transcendence but accept the reality of stasis (embedded and embodied with technical and informatic networks). The inevitable consequences of no longer concerning ourselves with transcendence or the achievement of a singularity with technology, but in fact continuity, has resulted in the proper conceptualization of man as a cyborg—integrated, not transcended.

As early as the mid aughts, academic investigation into the “specter of the machine” has come to focus on the impact that modern social media technologies and virtual community networks have on modern discourse: specifically, how our social media profiles—digitized and archived by the user’s tweet, vlog, or post—manifest a simulacrum of the *self* that fades continuously until it resolidifies into something else, something we no longer recognize as the *self*, but which has nonetheless come to define us. It is the intersection of both our ability to enter the archive at will and resurrect the digital *self* that allows the haunting to persist in the modern age. As it stands, our modern discourse community is bound by an epideictic framework—the
rules and practices that govern how praise and blame, though ultimately shame,² function within 
a given society—that specializes in the deconstruction of the individual’s *ethos*, and, again, via 
the constant demonization and incitement of past, current, and possible social media expressions. 
Most importantly, Derrida believed that modern technologies strengthened the capacity of ghosts 
to haunt us: “that ghosts are part of the future. And that the modern technology of images like 
cinematography and telecommunications enhances the power of ghosts and their ability to haunt 
us.”³ In the modern era, thus, just a few motions can conjure the entirety of any given 
individual’s verbal or written expression and, thus, resurrect, resuscitate, and revive them under 
the pretense that the individual is beholden to those utterances eternally: the tweet, the vlog, the 
post, and even the physical note or diary can be made digital and thus archived. As a result, they 
are sworn to take account for all things spoken and all things which have come to pass. It 
immediately corrupts the individual’s *ethos* and places them within a social landscape that 
anchors them to a specific point in time. However, as we move into the tweens, we see that 
scholars in rhetoric have committed their studies to the posthuman qualities of communication, 
stands out in particular as he builds on the concept of *practice* as originally put forth by Andrew 
Pickering in his book *Science as Practice and Culture* in 1992 and later expounded upon in his 
book *The Mangle in Practice: Science, Society and Becoming* in 2008. Boyle’s work is critical 
because it demonstrates that rhetoric is an iterative process that is both generative and

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² It is important to briefly reference the work of Eve Sedgewick and Adam Frank in their article “Shame in the 
Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins.” Silvan Tomkins, author of *Affect, Imagery, and Consciousness*, is a 
celebrated 20th century psychologist and personality theorist whose work on affect theory, emotive categories of 
expression, are fundamental to critical theory. The work of both Sedgewick and Frank is both contemporary and 
relevant to the discussion surrounding operative nature of shame in modern society. This mention exists to bring 
attention to their work and note its significance while pointing out their absence in this analysis. 
performative and sets the framework for exploring the haunting as a rhetorical practice. In other words, the haunting becomes something akin to the conjuring when considered from a rhetorical standpoint and engages in practice and becomes performative as its ability “to receive, translate, and produce telegraphic signals and, in the process, disappear” parallels the growing strength of social media technologies (Boyle Rhetoric as a Posthuman Practice 29).

In doing so, such practices enact the latent values of our communities: namely, via modern call-out culture, a form of public shaming that aims to hold individuals responsible for perceived politically incorrect behavior on social media, and cancel culture, a boycott of such behavior and a variant of call-out culture. In all cases, the individual’s past is conjured, and the voracity of modern outrage culture reveals to us, perhaps reminds us, “the power of words to represent preexisting things” (Barad 802). However, the slow imbrication of technology and the strength with which it has not only inserted itself into our cultural framework, but replaced it altogether, demonstrates that modern epideictic practices do not—rather cannot—merely enact latent social values and, instead, suggests that they contribute to a deterioration of those values: namely, the rationality and empiricism of the humanist disposition that affords the use of reason over the affect. It appears that modern hauntologies are not just freely “embedded in complex social, material, and linguistic ecologies” (Nicotra) but also constrained in a time “of political reaction and restoration, when cultural innovation has stalled and even gone backwards” (Fisher 53). Thus, rhetoric, as a philosophy of discourse, has not ameliorated under our current technological disposition; it has only shrouded and masked its systems of power: for “the words we record now, the images we make now, will be iterable in our absence, and indeed in the
absence of any ‘empirical being’ currently alive in ‘the living present.’”⁴ Thus, this study seeks to provide a nuanced interpretation of Derrida’s haunting by supplementing it with a theory of practice, the conjuring, and explore the ramifications of a technologically mediated environment that makes the very act of forgetting impossible. Through cancel culture, the past is never misremembered or otherwise lost to our collective memory. And as a subculture embedded within our epideictic system, it parades itself as activism when, in fact, it only seeks to manipulate, blackmail, and strongarm others by manipulating past iterations of the self.

In this way, posthuman hauntologies are best defined by the human tendency to be subject to repetition—their own force of habit. And how “[r]hetoric, framed as a posthuman practice, repeatedly poses the rhetorical question of “what a body can do” (Boyle Rhetoric as a Posthuman Practice 59). As such, matters of practice, our ability to receive, translate, and produce information exponentially over time, and performativity, or the idea that our identity is a product of the secondary act of speaking, writing, and gesturing, greatly inform our modern technological disposition. Like our obsession with the past, the retromania and nostalgia that persists in modern media, film, and entertainment, the ethos has become fixed, eternal, and altogether undying. For though we may own the device, we do not own the software, and the specter, and the haunting—in its technological formation—separates from its predecessors in that it no longer traces the elements hidden with our culture, our nostalgia for the past, or our personal suffering, but our every manifestation of the self via social media platforms. Thus, we (the past) are incapable of death and succumb to subtle acts of technological witchcraft, sorcery, and divination, for just as “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from

magic,”

rhetoric too has long possessed the full range of arcane potentiality: “it can banish fear, remove grief, instill pleasure, enhance pity, bewitch, persuade, and change opinions” (Worthington 341). Thus, as inane magical capacities draw at a digital source of mana, two overwhelming forces, “indistinguishable from magic,” conspire together to form a new state of worship, a posthuman empire. What follows that realization is the nexus and spine of this proposition and mirrors Derrida’s aforementioned paradox: how do we kill something that is already dead? It is “[t]hat this reiteration [of what is ‘the dead’] is necessary [as] a sign that materialization of [‘the living’] is never quite complete.’ ‘The living’ is never quite materialized as such, despite all of our burial rites—cultural and discursive (which amount to the same thing), because of the uncanny fear and disavowed knowledge that ‘the dead’ can and will rematerialize: that there is no crypt that can properly contain/ refrain the dead, and they walk amongst us—indeed, in us, as the living (un)dead” (Ballif 144-45). Thus, in its rhetorical formation, “the art, practice, and study of human communication” itself, this study’s approximation of cancel culture as a cancellation of discourse itself, both the dead and the living simultaneously, takes on an extra-representational signification as it relates to rhetoric as a philosophy of discourse (Andrea Lunsford). It is the interpretation of cancel culture as a unique category of persuasion within the confines of epideictic practices that functions wholly within the context of social currency, latent community values, and unrelenting iterations of the past, present, and future. It is a distilled category of epideictic rhetoric that foregoes any notion of praise and, instead, opts to function entirely as an axiom of shame and blame in its systematic categorization of the human subject. Therefore, this study into the posthuman, hauntological aspects of modern communication

6 A term attributed to an article titled “Capitalism’s Posthuman Empire” by Rob Wilkie. No other reference to the term can be yielded through any database or surface web searches.
practices seeks to reveal how rhetoric within the broader genre of epideixis—
as revealed to us through hauntologies—operates when intersecting across the posthuman dimensions of
technology, death, and capital.

Methodology

Thus, in order to establish how the haunting functions within our modern epideictic
system, or the rituals and practices that dictate the delineation of praise and blame within our
society, I will introduce those posthuman/critical theorists who frame our current faded
disposition as it relates to technology, lost futures, and the perpetuation of the conjuring. I will
attempt to develop a theory of practice that takes into account modern pop-culture references as
they relate to such social anxieties and concerns: lost futures. Given that most critical theorists
consider modern hauntologies to be just that, lost possibilities, I wish to explore the
philosophical underpinnings that guide modern information technologies in resurrecting the
boundaries (limitations) of humanism while demonstrating that the posthuman, as that which
comes both before and after humanism, is key to understanding cancel culture as digital
epideixis. As a result, my primary sources are designed to reveal that our adherence to the past is
best reflected by contemporary/mainstream artifacts surrounding celebrities, politicians, and
individuals who undergo such resurrection via virtual community networks. In addition, I will
reference the hit tv series Black Mirror: namely, episode 3, “Nosedive,” and its infamous
depiction of how modern social credit systems wreak havoc on the individual’s ability to engage

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7 As described by Aristotle as translated by George A. Kennedy’s in On Rhetoric, epideixis is best understood as
that rhetorical situation where “the present is the most important; for all speakers praise or blame in regard to
existing qualities, but they often make use of other things, both reminding [the audience] of the past and projecting
the course of the future.”
in *dissoi logoi*\(^8\) or even justify their own *doxa*, not merely contend with their own shadow or digital archive. This investigation into the haunting, then, as it persists via virtual community networks or social media communities will aid in solidifying the notion that the haunting has become the conjuring with respects to modern epideictic *practices*, or what we might call posthuman subjects as epideictic conjurers. In doing so, I will discuss our eventual fate as specters—phantoms in a technocratic world, and I will discuss both the positive and negative aspects of this haunting in discourse and offer solutions for such possibilities: whether it be continued death, disappearance, reappearance, haunting, resurrection, or some futuristic digital half-life.

Most notable, however, are the multitude of artifacts and examples that constitute a large portion of this analysis. In an attempt to cover quite a bit of ground, this study opts to explore the breadth and scope of cancel culture in lieu of its profound implications on civil discourse within the social sphere: at both the micro and macro, social media and social credit, the corporate and the state. Without sacrificing quality or detail, this study maps the social evolution of epideictic practices as it relates to our modern social paradigm: its mangled and maligned situation within technology—for better or for worse. As a result, with an array of examples, this study hopes to demonstrate how cancel culture has definable and recognizable traits that one can use to identify and distinguish cancel culture from that of call-out culture. In doing so, this study becomes an exercise in epideixis itself as it attempts to make a moral and ethical assessment of cancel culture and its practices. Lastly, though several scholars have implemented the study of hauntology in an attempt to grapple with a myriad of complex issues surrounding the human condition, such as

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\(^8\) An ancient Greek rhetorical exercise that was designed to allow for the philosophical consideration of another’s argument or position on the basis that it might strengthen the individual’s argument or result in a compromise.
Michelle Ballif in her work *Theorizing Histories of Rhetoric*, few, if any, outside of the works of Mark Fisher, have used it in the methodological fashion that I have here. In many ways, therefore, this study attempts to wrestle with notions of morality and ethics as seen in digital rhetoric, yet revealed through hauntology, in order to investigate the possible implications of cancel culture as it relates to our modern epideictic system. And “[b]y so doing, by becoming, all of us, ‘ghost whisperers,’ we would be ‘calling, calling, calling to the Other’ [Vitanza Negation 50], and by communing with them, we could invent our future and ‘learn to live finally,’ ethically [Derrida Specters xvi]” (Ballif 139).
CHAPTER II

THE CONJURING: THE RHETORICAL PRACTICE OF HAUNTING

[Posthumanism] comes both before and after humanism: before in the sense that it names the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world … [I]t comes after in the sense that posthumanism names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore

—Cary Wolfe, What Is Posthumanism?

Call-Out Culture Versus Cancel Culture

Since the rise in information technologies and social media platforms beginning in the mid aughts, the strength and capacity with which our every word is recorded, cataloged, and archived has increased exponentially. The most immediate, perhaps damaging, aspect of this digital indexing and storing of public discourse has been the archivization of the individual’s ethos, or one’s representational ethic and social standing as reflected by the values of their society. With just a few motions, the entirety of any given individual’s verbal or written expression can be resurrected, resuscitated, and revived under the pretense that the individual is beholden to those utterances eternally: the tweet, the vlog, the post, and even the physical note or diary can be made digital and thus archived. As a result, they are sworn to take account for all things spoken and all things which have come to pass. It immediately corrupts the individual’s ethos and places them within a social landscape that anchors them to a specific point in time, for
“[t]he inhumane forces of technology have moved into the body, intensifying the spectral reminders of the corpse-to-come” (Braidotti 113). As this phenomenon continues, this haunting, our society falls under a great shadow of mistrust and anxiety. Our modern communication platforms (Twitter, YouTube, Facebook) have the power to transform our public sphere into a cold and alienating atmosphere devoid of truth in the form of virtue and principle—of honest and critical opinion. And though only a few individuals at a small scale endure the social pressures that be and the reactionary behavior that seeks to reprimand them, a greater cleansing and ratification of our social sphere’s capacity to engage in dialogue becomes paramount as cancel culture seeks to perpetuate the haunting by summoning forth past iterations of the self on social media. In other words, the haunting has become the conjuring, and epideictic practices are increasingly tangential and hyperreal as that which haunts, via the archive, becomes both inescapable, non-temporal, and indistinguishable from reality.

Call-out culture (or outrage culture) and its more tangible form, cancel culture, are the latest iteration of this affective and epideictic rhetoric on social media platforms. And while call-out culture goes back quite some time (the term going back as far as 2016), cancel culture is its modern derivative, and both stem from doxing: the internet-based practice of researching and broadcasting information about an individual or organization for personal gain. As a result, and regardless of the illicit behavior that call-out culture helps to “call-out,” doxing has and always will be the moral and ethical framework that cancel culture is predicated on. And, in the context of cancel culture, the aspect of epideixis that is praise is part and parcel of blame, for the individual who blames the other de facto praises the self in the context of cancel culture. After

9 In this context of this analysis, affect refers to what Stephanie Arel describes in her book, Affect Theory, Shame, and Christian Formation, as that which “[i] the process of interment, messages about shame internalized as beliefs, values, and norms, or externalized through projection onto others, emerge viscerally as affects in the self.”
all, doxing inspires and precedes the other in form; however, this is only partially true because its epideictic qualities (its distribution of blame) is nothing new. The internet, after all, did not invent the angry mob. The epideictic, then, as discussed or interpreted by philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, is best understood as “a brand of rhetoric in which philosophy and politics are closely fused” (Duffy 79) while, at the same time, “used to inculcate useful or harmful political and social myths,” or serve as a “form of social ritual or public education which reinforces common values within a culture” (Oravec 163). It is merely a digital extension of the processes we use to assign value and reward/punish certain behaviors: it is that “the post-disaster cacophony of discursive acts we cynically call the ‘blame game’ is actually a battleground for competing cultural, political, and scientific value systems” (Richards 97). That being said, cancel culture appears to fall in line with the fundamental presuppositions built into doxing and other forms of online harassment. For one, it requires a bit of social engineering or psychological manipulation, research or rather a lack of research, and the broadcasting of one’s information. However, unlike doxing, this information is provided by the user, often a tweeter, and is not attained via illicit means—although sometimes this is true. In either case, the goal is the same: remove the veil surrounding a perceived wrongdoer, shame, boycott, and dismantle their reputation. However, the lie embedded in cancel culture is that a boycott actually occurs for the majority of the canceled. The truth is that cancel culture is propagated by a very small minority of people who elicit action from authority figures by weaponizing the latent values of their community. Boycott is indeed a dishonest description of the phenomenon known as cancel culture. Cancel culture, as it exists now, would be best described as extortion or intimidation while calling someone out would be best understood as a form of righteous indignation. Cancel culture fails to enact a boycott because it fails to abstain from using, buying, or dealing
with a person or organization: the supposedly canceled individual often remaining very lucrative and most continuing to go about their business, selling out shows, and garnering viewership and subscribers online.

However, certain instances such as the fall of film producer Harvey Weinstein, an event which brought an end to his sexual exploits, has been greatly attributed to his “getting called-out” and his subsequent “cancellation.” Due to the long-term investigation performed by the journalist at *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* into Weinstein’s sexual misconduct—publishing their finding in an article back in October of 2017 and triggering the sequence of events that has led to his trial and even receiving the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service in 2018 due to their hard work—and the many who spoke out in solidarity and in confirmation of such illicit behavior, Weinstein was indeed called-out and the moment emboldened many women to speak out about their own experiences. Nevertheless, it appears that the misconceptions surrounding cancel culture are linked to moments where, like Weinstein, epideictic practices play an important role in serving community. What appears to have happened over the course of the past four years is that the success of “calling-out” an individual or organization has been conflated with the mob mentality and doxing rooted deeper within outrage culture, or what we now call cancel culture. In a sense, certain instances of social justice have romanticized the mob in recent years (many of these events, after all, are marked by heroism and social justice), and cancel culture appears to be a coopted reactionary sub-group that is quickly undermining and ransacking our epideictic system. For unlike call-out culture, which provides an organic form of criticism that those in power cannot control, cancel culture mostly generates suspicion, paranoia, and unease—though at the same time serving to vent societal frustrations (and this is also an important function within our society). In any case, Harvey Weinstein was fundamentally
“called-out” and faces 5-25 years in prison (having been acquitted of the two most serious charges that could have placed him in prison for life) due to socially elicited pressures made possible by great journalism and the responsive behavior of those he victimized, but he was not canceled in the modern or contemporary sense. At the time, the #canceled was a reflection of the very definition of the word canceled (e.g. “the show got canceled”) and in reference a person’s social standing. Back in 2016 and 2017 #canceled was a reference to something that happened, not something that you did, that you performed (even the past tense “canceled” has shifted to the present “cancel” in recent years). Now, between 2018-2020, to cancel an individual is to willingly enter the archive, the totality of one’s expressions on digital media, for the purposes of shutting down a particular group or individual. The act of canceling often involves scouring through feeds, articles, interviews, videos, and any other possible form of media (or just happening upon them) going back decades in order to shame and attack unsuspecting celebrities, politicians, and even the average YouTuber, Tweeter, or any other social media user should they garner enough attention: for “[t]oday, with the help of widespread technology, forgetting has become the exception, and remembering the default” (Mayer-Schönberger 2). Cancel culture is no longer part of a set of reactionary behaviors that seek to call-out someone for crossing burgeoning social boundaries, but a methodological deconstruction of someone’s ethos (their relationship to their community) in order to culturally and socially blacklist them. And unlike the modern epideictic practices rooted in call-out culture, cancel culture is increasing dependent on and fixated on the past and the resurrection of not merely egregious behavior but any banal action that is incongruent with present norms. It is, ultimately, a transformation and turning point

10 “Cancel Culture.” Know Your Meme, knowyourmeme.com/memes/cancel-culture.
for historic power structures and marks a time when “power […] operates predictively as much as retrospectively” (qtd in Fisher “The Metaphysics of Crackle” 53).

Another example of call-out culture achieving true social justice is the case of Governor Ricardo Rosselló, otherwise known as Telegramgate. On July 8, 2019, the Governor of Puerto Rico, Ricardo Rosselló, was subject a scandal involving a telegram between Rosselló and his staff members. Having been leaked to the public from an individual within Rosselló’s cabinet (likely), the telegram revealed a slew of vulgar, racist, and homophobic remarks directed towards many in his place of office and revealed the “institutional mafia” that attempted to target and blackmail potential political opponents and undermine U.S. democracy (Puerto Rico being a territory of the United States). In the end, Rosselló’s demise or removal from office reveals that the “epideictic does not issue from and to an already-constituted community; rather, by virtue of a process, it enacts a community” (Nicotra). Like Weinstein, it proved, once more, that epideictic practices remain functional and necessary while also revealing the distinction between “calling someone out” and seeking out past misdeeds as a political strategy—for that behavior would be ironically similar to the tactics used by Rosselló himself and the one’s that undermined his position in office most severely (alongside his deeply homophobic and racist remarks). For call-out culture is fundamentally and organic form of criticism that cannot be controlled, and it is a “site of critique or transformation of the social order” (qtd in Richards 104). Furthermore, other political figures such as Judge Kavanaugh reveal the very tangible ways in which call-out culture can access the archive and truly return powerful individual to a vulnerable and naked state. When Kavanaugh was accused of sexual harassment by Christine Blasey Ford back in July of 2018, one of the artifacts revealed in Kavanaugh’s hearing was his yearbook. And, acting as a piece of evidence that was chronologically situated within the time frame the accusations were said to
have occurred, the yearbook revealed rhetoric that revolved around heavy drinking and sex with phrases such as “100 kegs or bust” and “The Devil’s Triangle”; thus, coinciding with and reinforcing the themes present in Ford’s accusations. However, what is most telling is the way it reveals how the archive functions outside the digital or in a pre-digital environment. What it reminds us is that the archivization of the ethos has always been extant as an already-always present set of epideictic behaviors. However, Kavanaugh is not representative of cancel culture per se but merely the thorough investigation of relevant evidence. Kavanaugh only serves as an example of past epideictic practices and as a reminder of how they have shifted, or switched mediums, in the past few decades or so.

In any case, cancel culture is an even deeper reactionary component of call-out culture that has separated itself from its connection to the present and that masquerades as a boycott when, in fact, it seeks only to manipulate—manipulate the past. Thus, creating a tendency to invoke Orwellian nightmares and send many into a state of panic and overreaction. However, this is not the state we find ourselves in. An article from the Times by Sarah Hagi, a black-American Muslim woman, titled “Cancel Culture Is Not Real—At Least Not in the Way People Think” reminds us as members of an increasingly participatory culture that “cancel culture” is both nothing new and nowhere near as damaging a phenomenon as some would like to paint it. For like the increasing spreadability of modern media, “the rise of networked computing and the ways its components have been absorbed into participatory culture and deployed through social network sites represents a new configuration of long-existing practices” (Jenkins 37). Ultimately,

what she points out is that the problem with the conversation about cancel culture is that “[i]t oversimplifies. The term is used in so many contexts that it’s rendered meaningless and precludes a nuanced discussion of the specific harm done and how those who did it should be held accountable” and the manner in which it leaves many powerless against their own oppression (Hagi). However, “cancel culture” has undergone a transformation and no longer functions as a way to reprimand certain actions but, instead, inconvenience a handful of elites and celebrities while debilitating the lives of many “not so important” people; however, many circles continue to praise its efforts due to having conflated those called-out and defamed with those subject to the archeology and archivization of social indexing. In other words, that which “enacts a community” has been replaced with the “already-constituted community” (Nicotra). Meaning that the cultural subset that is cancel culture is more so an “already-constituted community” that seeks out its own need for epideictic engagement rather than await enactment (Nicotra).

One such case back in 2019 involved Danny Baker, radio host at the BBC, who was fired for having tweeted a photo which seemingly likened that new royal baby, Archie, the son of Meghan Markle and Prince Harry, to that of a chimpanzee. Despite an immediate withdrawal and sincere apology, Baker, a staunch democrat, member of the labor party, and supporter of immigrant and minority rights for decades, was condemned as a racist. Regardless of the fact that Baker had, by his account, meant to comment on the spectacle that is the royal family, he had invoked the latent values of a particular community and was subsequently canceled. In other words, civility is proximity, and our social media platforms serve to objectify and, thus, remove notions of humanity from the other. However, he has since be rehired by the BBC—a fact which lends itself to Hagi’s claim that cancel culture, like most historical epideictic practices, is
temporary and non-lethal by nature. Likewise, it appears as though this phenomenon is not limited to racial boundaries. Kevin Hart, a black American and celebrated comedian and likely the most iconic example of cancel culture and the first image that appears when web searching the term, was barred (“resigned”) from hosting the Oscars in 2018, a life-long dream of his, due to the homophobic tweets he issued seven years earlier in 2011. Hart appealed to those seemingly apologetic statements he made years prior and refused to reiterate himself. However, the reality is that Hart’s so-called apologies were lukewarm attempts at deferring the criticism legered against him. For example, Hart referred to statements such as “I wouldn’t tell that joke today, because when I said it, the times weren’t as sensitive as they are now” or “It’s just a sensitive topic and I respect people of all orientations. So, it’s just best left alone.” And even though Hart eventually gave an apology on the Ellen DeGeneres show back in January of 2019, stating via a tweet that “I sincerely apologize to the LGBTQ community for my insensitive words from my past,” following it up with a second tweet saying, “I’m sorry that I hurt people,” cases like these, when juxtaposed with that of Rosselló and Kavanaugh, reveal the reactionary and latent component of our epideictic system—that the haunting as the conjuring possesses “the power of words to represent preexisting things” (Barad 802), and that our digital self cannot only be resuscitated or kept alive (Rosselló and Baker) but resurrected (Kavanaugh and Hart). However, regardless of cancel culture’s fixation on past actions, it still serves as an ever-present reflection of our community values, and that should not be disregarded or ignored.

So, again, cancel culture as it is today has failed to produce many tangible or noteworthy results and rarely achieves any great feat like the reigning in of Weinstein, though the broader

epideictic system that we refer to as call-out culture does. In fact, the only thing that validates cancel culture is its relationship to our community values. When it does not effectively appeal to those values, it becomes a viewed as a part of the problem, not the solution; hence, all the backlash in recent years. Namely, former president Barack Obama has call-out the practice by stating that “[t]his idea of purity and you’re never compromised and you’re always politically woke and all that stuff, you should get over that quickly” while frequently referring to woke politics itself as a “circular firing squad” (Hagi) with the millennial response to Obama’s criticism taking on the form of the colloquial phrase “ok, boomer.” More so than any other, the comedy community is most vocal with celebrities such as Sarah Silverman, Bill Burr, Dave Chappelle, and Ricky Gervais being the most outspoken celebrity comedians on the issue. Sarah Silverman stands out in particular as she was recently canceled and fired from her role in a movie after photos of her in blackface from a 2007 episode of “The Sarah Silverman Program” surfaced on the internet. Unintentionally, however, this cancellation revealed the political nature of cancel culture. It revealed how the power of our social epideictic practices to affect an individual is tied directly to their status. Just like Sarah Silverman, Justin Trudeau entered a scandal concerning his own history of dawning blackface—at least three times. However, unlike Silverman, Trudeau’s case was considered harmless and was even referred to as a “teachable moment”; meanwhile, other political pundits like Donald Trump are lambasted for old recordings of “locker room talk,” and the infamous “grab ‘em by the pu**sy” remark from 2005 is considered irredeemable. In other words, biases play a huge role in the way that cancel culture operates in 2020, and it demonstrate how the celebrities and politicians who stand at the forefront of this emerging cultural activism incur a social cost (a loss of credit) equal to that of their power and influence—or use that power to negate it. And though cancel culture is almost entirely a
politically Left phenomenon, the Right does cancel too. For example, a recent Hallmark commercial that ran on December 2, 2019 depicting a same-sex wedding was pulled down due to outrage on the part of conservative viewers. Hallmark took the commercial down but quickly backtracked, apologize, and reran the ad. In a sense, both the LGBT community and Hallmark themselves were “canceled”; however, this instance is much more akin to “calling someone out” as opposed to “cancelling.” Regardless, calling-out Hallmark and its larger conservative base proved to be of social benefit when it comes to correcting undesirable or reprehensible behaviors.

Ultimately, there is a stark difference in 2020 between calling someone out (call-out culture) and cancel culture—though the two are both clearly related and intertwined and were at one point in time indiscernible from one another. As a result, it is important to understand how cancel culture fits into a theoretical framework surrounding rhetoric as a posthuman practice. In other words, it is necessary to understand modern digital epidictic practices as that which is performed, iterated, and habituated within the context of man’s relationship to technology. And, for better or for worse, cancel culture has become, at least to some degree, the vehicle for many to exercise that rhetorical prowess—or rhetoric as a posthuman practice. Cancel culture is the transition of the haunting from a mere appearance and disappearance to that of a rhetorical practice. It is no longer rhetorical in the sense that it relentlessly signifies due to its undying nature, but its ability to summon forth, reanimate, and make things tangible once more. It is a return to presence out of absence and a true presence as a physicality. The haunting, from a rhetorical standpoint, is no longer composed of specters but corpses. The ghost has become much more akin to a poltergeist, and the intersection of new cultural progressive trends and powerful technological innovations have resulted in an increase in paranormal activity. Thus, with the rise
of social credit systems and an increasing repertoire of social behavior that is deemed 
wrongthink, we find that purgatory has become a posthuman reality. That the “man-made 
structure of the catastrophe that we continue to attribute to forces beyond our collective control, 
like the earth, the cosmos or ‘nature’” is far beyond our ability to confront, to counteract, or to 
hope to overcome outside of our capacity to bargain or plead for our return to paradise or what 
we know today to be a state of social acceptance and sanctioning at the behest of societal norms 
and the moral arbiters that reside within our society from a place of exaltation and an infinite 
capacity to judge (Braidotti 113). Whether it is the resuscitation of the hateful messages 
produced by Governor Ricardo Rosselló’s over the past three years and the subsequent reveal of 
those hateful messages, the physical resurrection of the obscure references Judge Kavanaugh 
made in his yearbook in the year of 1982, or the continuity we all share with such phenomenon 
as our every word and phrase is categorized and reserved within the armory of would be social 
advocates, we are slowly inching our way towards a social landscape where every individual is 
perpetually haunted by their respective digital self.

A Rhetorical Practice

As it relates to the organizing principles of cancel culture as a genre, the phenomenon is 
best understood by six rather loose situational requirements:

1) The most obvious element that is required for cancel culture to occur/ be enacted is 
for there to be a cancellable offense: i.e. typified by racist, sexist, or homophobic 
remarks (usually on social media). More so than in the past, the conditions which 
warrant an offense to be cancellable are often arbitrary given that what is considered 
offensive or otherwise hateful is as diverse and finite as there are individuals.
However, the offense must clearly resonate with a large swath of people with shared values and moral positions on certain topics. Otherwise, there would not be sufficient support/ people to enact the cancellation. Fundamentally, the subject of cancel culture must be perceived as offensive by a large enough social group to actually lead to the loss of one’s positions in society, a role, a job, etc.

2) The archive must be present or accessible in some fashion. Given that tech monopolies hold a monopoly on information (modern capital being information itself) via social media and mass communications, it is near impossible for someone who is non-participatory on modern communication platforms to be canceled. However, even if one is not active on social media, their actions could be captured, uploaded, and thus archived, at any moment (e.g. Kavanaugh).

3) An offended party must be present as already stated; however, that group, perhaps beginning as just one individual and growing outward form there, must engage in accusatory language, share said offensive content, and garner enough support from their intended audience.

4) And that leads to the next requirement: there must be an audience. This audience must be swayed against the perceived wrongdoer by the accuser. If they are successful, then such support often takes on the form of more shares, reshares, angry faces, dislikes/ likes depending on the manner in which the content is posted, and even actual physical protests should the offense garner enough attention (e.g. again Kavanaugh serves as a good example here).

5) Furthermore, cancel culture is a method of avoiding issues, criticism, and ideas. In its initial stage, it forgoes approaching or discussing the offensive act for solution-based
purposes and opts for mobbing and removing individuals from discussion or simply creating conditions where discussions are limited or near impossible to have.

6) Finally, and most importantly, the actions, not necessarily the content, of the perceived wrongdoer must be trivial, banal, and typified, but not always, by having been uttered or carried out years or decades prior.

Hence, in order to reiterate or reestablish those artifacts presented already, it is important to describe the purpose and function of those artifacts selected. The first thing we must remember is that the severity of the offenses and actions present in the case of Rosselló and Kavanaugh truly remedies any false notion that such instances are examples of cancel culture when they are, in fact, prime examples of call-out culture or the most dominant form of epideictic practice that exists today (and has always existed). And, by proxy, both Baker and Hart are secure examples of cancel culture in that they both appeal to the rather banal and superficial qualities that define it as a subset of call-out culture. And though their actions are relatively causal, meaning that they are outwardly offensive/ unsavory, they are a far cry from the actionable offenses perpetuated by individuals such as Rosselló or Weinstein. As we will see moving forward with a multitude of related artifacts, likeable to that off Trudeau or Silverstein, we will see that most of the instances that fall under the banner of cancel culture are rather superficial by comparison. Ultimately, the examples presented so far are intended to demonstrate not only how certain actions are, as already mentioned, resuscitated or rather resurrected, but how the distinction between both cancel culture and call-out culture is best constituted by actions that are reconcilable (offensive jokes and inflammatory images: i.e. Hart and Baker) and those that are not (systematic sexual abuse and political manipulation as well as hegemonic and systemic racism to name a few: i.e. Weinstein and Rosselló).
What the dichotomy between cancel culture and call-out culture reveals, however, is that the wrongdoer, regardless of circumstances, must be given the same treatment despite pre-existing conditions, circumstances, and evidence. It is that cancel culture is an unrestrained epideictic force that denies the “careful knowledge of appropriate blame” or the Greek distinction made between “a fear of disgrace” and guilt and shame, *aiskhunê*: “one that looks to future rather than to past or present events” (Konstan 1037-38). The use of shame, therefore, as seen in cancel culture, to modify or engender social behavior is both unhelpful, negative, and ultimately dangerous. Thus, it is through the interpretation of the affect/ reactionary behavior of cancel culture, as well as posthuman and hauntological concepts, that we come to understand shame as an unmotivating rhetorical appeal based on fear: for “belief in the inferior self makes counteracting a sense of shame difficult, leading to distress ‘which further activates shame, which thus ends in further defeat and strengthening the image of the self as inferior’ or shamed” (Arel 105). In believing that such appeals are a form of *hubris*, we might recognize shame as “purely a function of arrogance—that is, a form of belittlement” (Konstan 230) which further suggests that “gestures of shame modulate pride and desire” (Arel 78). So, our current understanding of shame is not without precedent as it resonates with what we know to be both psychologically and ethically true: that the use of minimum necessary force and positive reinforcement are much more effective in promoting healthy behavior and social reciprocity. After all, if morality is strictly determined by what we say, then morality is merely a display, not a coalescence of dynamic actions and active virtues iterated across time that unite into a cultural recognized system of morality.

The digital age has suspended the posthuman subject between one reality and another. Here, in our physical space, the present is fleeting and the past wanes severely (at least at a time...
before archivization or the advent of writing) while in digital space, our second reality, everything is held in place and that which occurred decades ago is equally as preserved and present as that which occurs in this very moment. In his 1995 book *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* Jacques Derrida describes just such a reality: “It is thus, in this domiciliation, in this house arrest, that archives take place. The dwelling, this place where they dwell permanently, marks this institutional passage from the private to the public, which does not always mean from the secret to the nonsecret” (Derrida 10). This dwelling, this home, however, represents an estimation of truth. It is both the present knowledge of the living, and the absent experience of the dead. What Derrida realized, fundamentally, is that the archive leaves something out—that every catalog, every memory, and every recording, is a poor representation of reality. What we come to understand, in time, is that these accusations are based on a glimpse of information, a snapshot, and function much like the photograph that represents Jacques Derrida’s object and spectacle. It returns only what it can: a mere iota of the full “thing” or what Adorno’s acknowledges to be “the gap between concept and thing” (Bennett 349). Yet it signifies a return nonetheless. We come to understand that it can only “supply the ground for a representational ethics that resists the very possibility of a complete capture of the natural […] it cannot provide the ‘specter of absolute freedom’ or a fully ‘unobstructed view’” (Propen 123). The canceled the photograph, the text, the referent is of a spectrum, and we are the spectator, or what we might now call the conjurer. For just as we once attempted the use of arcane methods to resurrect the dead in a shallow attempt to shed light on the present, we now make use of information technologies in order to raise forgotten images, the simulacrum of others, with the hope of ensuring our own narrative. The technological now reanimates the forgotten realm of magic—both one in the same. And, as claimed by Cary Wolfe, the posthuman “comes both before and
after humanism: before in the sense that it names the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world” (xv). Thus, understanding the posthuman as uniquely prehumen is paramount to working through our current technological disposition.

This conjurer, this particular sub-group embedded within call-out culture, attempts to raise the spirits of the dead for the purposes of magically (technologically) revealing our present and, thus, influencing any given course of events. And this, that is, what we profess of the dead, is often justice, or vengeance, and an answer to our time and place and the sequence of events that inspire it. Rhetorically speaking, it is an appeal to authority, yet one that is rather decomposed, incomplete, shadowy, and full of half-truths or outright lies. It appears to the conjurer as rather omnipotent, preeminent, and altogether determinant of a reason, a why, and a cause. And it is, as every great fiction has portrayed it, a desperate attempt to cling to absolutes and administer authority from a place higher than oneself—to seek answers and right the wrongs done against our tragic hero. As a plot device, it manifests itself as a dismembered portion of his eventual fall, a further reiteration of his *harmartia*. Yet the conjurer is both you and I, the *self* and the *other*, at different points in time. It no doubt adopts one or the other as a subject depending on its ideological leanings, but it is not an individual. It is a body of individuals that constitute a system of power, and it marks a “disturbed relationship with the dead” (qtd in Hoag *Rhetoric, Mourning, Trauma* 152). We, the conjurer, then, are neither a good/ bad, saintly/demonic, or right/ left entity but merely a persona and a rhetorical strategy or performativity that may be judged in terms of social productivity—beneficial or otherwise. It is something that we all engage in whether we are aware or not. And it is, in some regards, a manifestation of the logos, for it is an appeal to a set of evidential information (logical) that is used to deconstruct and
challenge the ethos. It is a practice, for “subjects, over time, increase their abilities to receive, translate, and produce telegraphic signals and, in the process, disappear,” and, as a result, their “attention [is] free for something else” (Boyle Rhetoric as a Posthuman Practice 29). In this way, we are always engaging in this posthuman practice but subconsciously. As a practice, it has faded over time into an automatic function. For it is, more or less, that public entity which distributes praise and blame, an epideictic figure and “eidolon emitted by the object.” And, as embedded in what can only “be described as a sort of modern necromancy (communication with the dead) for the digital age,” cancel culture has come to represent the latent values and social practices rooted in epideictic rhetoric (Derrida The Work of Mourning 41; Sherlock 164).

Even as Derrida reminds us that the capacity of ghosts to haunt us is paralleled by the growing strength of technology, he also reminds us that it is the specter which “exceeds and thus deconstructs all ontological oppositions, being and nothingness, life and death”; it ‘can give’ and ‘give pardon’” (Saghafi 43). Thus, in conjunction with Derrida’s understanding of such domiciliation, or that which marks the “institutional passage from the private to the public,” (Derrida, “Archive Fever” 10) his configuration of the term hauntology serves as the doorway, entry, or host to such a dwelling, revealing that, in the context of cancel culture, epideictic rhetoric and public shaming are rooted in the desire for a place of belonging—“an intense longing for a promised community, a public democracy” (Mosco 15)—and a need to become participatory within a larger socio-political landscape. And not only is the “h” in hauntology phonetically silent, meaning that it is phonetically identical to the term ontology, the French hanter from which the word is conceived exists as a double meaning (a common theme for Derrida) and relates uniquely to the Levanasian idea of le hôte or host. For the host is the ghost of his own house and the very act of hospitality on which it is predicated on; hence, the term
hanter which itself translates to “a place visited frequently” or the act of “obsessing” itself. As a result, underlying cultural substrates and the ill effects of late stage capitalism have contributed to a transcendental homelessness that is rooted in a disassociation of oneself from the other, not identification. As an obsessive and affective drive, its intersection with the intensifying effects of modern information technologies has resulted in a literal and figurative embodiment of social anxieties and concerns that manifests itself in the form of cancel culture. Thus, just as “a rhetorical training following posthuman practice would be well served to focus not only on what habits to encourage but also on how existing habits are themselves productive,” it is equally important to assess whether or not the habits embedded within cancel culture are to be encouraged or otherwise regarded as a productive social practice (Boyle Rhetoric as a Posthuman Practice 57).

And, as it relates to cancel culture and its capitalistic tendencies, the artifacts presented within this section, Judge Kavanaugh’s yearbook, Danny Baker’s gaffe, and Kevin Hart’s post, serve as a character witness for our respective wrongdoers—whether old, new, physical, or digital—and are representative of the many things that our community detests: sexism, racism, and gender discrimination and, thus, reveals the potentiality of the archive as it intersects with burgeoning social norms and the capacity of new telecommunication technologies to haunt our future and living present. After all, this conjuring, the epideictic system at play, is best understood as a practice based on its relationship to its sociocultural environment, or that which is “pan of the surroundings which produces its ethos” (Boyle Rhetoric as a Posthuman Practice 45). However, just as we are unlikely to “encounter culture outside of digital media,” cancel culture is exclusively restricted to and reserved within digital media—though it does have real world implications (13). So, practice, then, is constituted by “an embodied, materially mediated
array of activities” (Boyle, “Writing and Rhetoric and/ as Posthuman Practice” 544) that, like the posthuman, are uniquely pre and post digital in the sense that they come ““in a time of computational abundance”” (Boyle Rhetoric as a Posthuman Practice 13) and might, therefore, be indicative of that “historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore” (Wolfe xv). The haunting, in other words, becomes the conjuring when it becomes mangled and twisted within the confines of an epideictic system that seeks to tweak, tune, and malign both people and things under the pretense of capital as facilitated by and communicated through social media technologies.
Figure 1.1

Ricardo Rosselló’s leaked chat

Figure 1.2

Brett Kavanaugh’s yearbook caption. Illicit language indicated in the text is blurred
Figure 1.3
Danny Baker’s infamous tweet depicting Meghan Markle and Prince Harry leaving the hospital with their newborn son Archie.

Figure 1.4
Kevin Hart’s tweet from 2011 that got him canceled from hosting the 2018 Oscars.
CHAPTER III
CANCEL CULTURE: THE ECONOMICS OF SIN AND REDEMPTION

[Man] is bereft of every scene, open to everything in spite of himself […] it is the end of interiority and intimacy, the overexposure and transparency of the world which traverses him without obstacle. He is now only a pure screen, a switching centre for all the networks of influence

—Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*

The Posthuman Empire

While the previous section established the conjuring as a rhetorical *practice* that is performative within the context of hauntology, it important to determine its epideictic function in full, explore the specific latent values held by and administered by virtual communities, and identify why those values are unique and distinct from the manner in which they are acted out in non-virtual communities. The values held by those in virtual community are synonymous and representative of its user; however, what distinguishes the two is the additional power provided by mass communication: for “the newly available forms of virtual community and the capacity for acts of shaming to persist via the technologies of search engines has brought back an especially virulent form of public shaming” (Nicotra). Fundamentally, cancel culture serves to unify the distinctions made between the epideictic as an invocation of latent social values and as a product of a stalled and stagnant cultural and socio-political landscape—it is the intersection between the haunting as it were (an existential fear) and as it is now (a posthuman reality, the
conjuring). It is cancel culture’s relationship to the material ecosystem generated under the conditions of late-stage capitalism that cultivates the institutions that enable its behavior: the artificial reputation systems developing at the governmental level in places like China (social credit systems) and the equally potent systems of shame that function organically within social media platforms in the U.S. and other Western countries (call-out culture and cancel culture or the free-market of shame). For capitalism is the socio-economic environment wherein the majority of our material and technological interactions occur. It is the means by which we interact with and interpret technology, and it controls and alters the very manner in which we enact change in the world. It is the authority from which “all the networks of influence” emanate—a posthuman empire (qtd in Fisher *K-Punk* 551).

As a product of the bourgeois posthuman turn,14 cancel culture is best understood by its relationship to man (human) and technology (posthuman) and the manner in which its posthuman qualities modify, redefine, strengthen, deteriorate, or embolden the human condition under the pretense of cybernetic capitalist hegemony and the “external (that is to say, extra-representational) forces of capitalism” (Wolfe 151). And with regards to Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx*, “home is where democracy is, as Cixous once remarked, which is to say nowhere, and indeed Derrida wants to retain Marx as the unaccommodated man, of no fixed abode, address unknown” (Buse and Scott 24). Thus, the architecture of modern capitalism haunts modern society and convinces us that such epideictic actions strengthen “the intensity of adherence to the values it lauds” (qtd. in Beale 222) while always “reinforcing the norms of public morality” (Vickers 771). When, in fact, cancel culture bespeaks a growing inability to negotiate across the

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14 In reference to the critical deconstruction of the human condition under the effects of the technological advancement of human beings in conjunction with psychological, intellectual, and physical transformation.
boundaries of race, sex, and gender: indicating a rising totalitarian disposition that dictates that certain behaviors and actions should be “canceled” as opposed to negotiated with (negotiated being the proper frame of mind as opposed to “educating” someone). It is a paradigm not situated within notions of correcting behaviors but, in fact, dealing out death and judgment, in a hyperbolic fashion, at the behest of the corporations whom liquidate such emotive and affective behaviors into propaganda and, of course, monetary value. Cancel culture, thus, is both a humanist and posthumanist project, for “this network is directly associated with the force of capitalism,” and “capitalism’s tightening of the relationship between information and commodification”—it is the modern-day economics of sin and redemption\(^{15}\) (Wolfe 155, 286).

As such, this “‘regression to magic’ as symptomatic of the effects of late capitalism and the dominance of the ‘all-encompassing exchange relationship’ which in fact ‘eliminates the elemental power the occultists claim to command’” (Buse and Scott 6) inversely subjugates the user under this newfound system of power by “doing capital’s work for it by condemning and abusing each other” or placing the working class at odds with one another in order to maintain the status quo (Fisher “Exiting the Vampire Castle” 745). In other words, if we are willing to admit that modern epideictic practices exist almost entirely within the technosphere, then it is hard to deny that a neo-liberal capitalist posthuman empire is contributing to modern economic anxieties and concerns surrounding inequality: income, health care, education, workers’ rights, paternity leave, and a whole host of other social issues that remain absent within our socio-economic landscape that exacerbate our discomfort, discontent, and growing hostility towards one another. Under the pretense of capital, cancel culture succeeds in placing the formulation of

\(^{15}\) A reference to Robert B. Ekelund et al.’s notion of repentance as an economic phenomenon as depicted in their article “The Economics of Sin and Redemption*: Purgatory as a Market-Pull Innovation?"
blame into “moralizing terms: greed, corruption, reckless, dishonest, disloyal—which all point towards a modern understanding of the relationship between humans, nature, and technology” as presented through the posthuman empire (Richards 98). Just as Viktor Mayer-Schönberger points out in his seminal work, *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in a Digital Age*, that “[i]f we replace the trust in our past with the trust in digital memory, dictatorial regimes will no longer have to control our minds. Controlling the externalized memory of our collective past will suffice,” we too have to recognize the potential for new power structures to form at the intersection of technology and the hegemony of capital and empire (qtd in Hoag *Rhetorical Studies for the 99%* 162), or what we might call a lack of “discourse that joins the subliminal and aesthetic suasion of its rhythmic ‘witchcraft’ to the felt ‘timelessness/permanence’ and ancestral/archival authority of ‘ancient wisdom’ to generate, in the mind of its audience, a mood of numinous ‘truth’ surrounding whatever is being said” (Walker 12). In other words, this return, this regression to magic, to ritualistic practices, incantations, and conjurings is merely to say that we are approaching a singularity wherein our social practices, powerful in and of themselves, intersect with, forge, and combine into a larger more powerful entity: where technology becomes magical in scope and in its ability to create and do the impossible—death and resurrection included.

This posthuman, capitalistic empire that warps are delineation of praise and blame is a system of containment that is dependent on the socio-economic illiteracy of its consumers and the addictive properties of its consumer goods; namely, social media platforms, advertisements, and all forms of digital media. We, thus, remain discontent with one another as opposed to viewing each other as symptomatic of much larger social issues that dictate how our society formulates meaning at all—especially the meaning, value, and worth of the individual. Cancel culture, as an extension of capital’s stranglehold on technologically mediated interaction,
individualizes and privatizes all iteration of the self by way of its relationship to the rapid dissemination of information and epideictic processes rooted in all human communication. It conflates blame with causality, and it marks “the moment when the struggle not to be defined by identitarian categories became the quest to have ‘identities’ recognised by a bourgeois big Other” (Fisher “Exiting the Vampire Castle” 740-41). And as private and corporate interest continue to ally, their unremitting bid for power forms its own like state of purgatory or excommunication, for “purgatory was an important political force in the hands of the Church, enabling it to extend its power over the faithful into the world beyond death” (Ekelund 3). This cyclical behavior, this going through the motions, invokes the origins of the epideictic. It promotes a system which is brief, collated around public events (ceremony), and fixated on display: “the epideictic of "mere show" [that] concerns topics which are unimportant for producing choice or action” (Oravec 162). This is the result of late stage Capitalism and the rampant corporatism that is defined by the immoral tendency to use social issues to advance its trade as “the expanding size and political organization of the working-class presses evolving Capitalism not only to liberalize its political institutions, but to extend the suffrage and the political role of legislatures” (Elliot 389).

In the essay “Disgust, Distributed: Virtual Public Shaming as Epideictic Assemblage” by Jodie Nicotra, she discusses this very phenomenon back in 2016 before it was formally dubbed “cancel culture.” In doing so, Nicotra identified a set of behavioral trends within modern social media shaming that still carry over to this day: the capacity of negative emotions to spread more quickly than positive ones, the weak ties or bonds that embody online communities and, thus, exacerbate the spreading of rumors, and the desire to engage in a “virtual settlement” or become participatory within a larger community of action. In doing so, Nicotra explains that “the low reciprocity of messages between users” and that “users are mainly inactive with outbursts of
retweets around certain viral news” (Nicotra). In fact, it is reported that only 9% of social media users are regularly contribute to social media dialogue, and a mere 1% are responsible for producing original content (Huffman 1), meaning that social media based dialogic interactions are dictated by a few, and the rest of us are mere “lurkers”\textsuperscript{16} within a larger Twittersphere. As a result, our social media based epideictic systems are deeply isolated, contentious, and poorly constructed for the purposes of effectively policing social norms and behaviors. In other words, unlike other social media platforms, Twitter is uniquely unproductive in its capacity to condemn across a multitude of assemblages. To the contrary, it is mostly only effective at singling out particular instances of poor behavior and creating short-lived moments of outrage.

As a result, Twitter, as the main platform for the propagation of cancel culture, oscillates between the hottest trend and the biggest scandal; it does not produce informative dialogue as do other long-form media sites such as YouTube or news outlets. In much the same way that “Twitter would not be considered a community; [because] it has a ‘low reciprocity of messages between users,’” cancel culture too fails to garner substantive debate or imbue instances of social shaming with layers of critical discourse—or, rather, a mere lasting impression of a dialogue and one which might inform future dialogue (Nicotra). The natural conclusion being that the primary user function of Twitter is not to engage in dialogue but to administer isolated instances of epideictic rhetoric and that the capacity for users and their rhetoric to function “didactically to unite the public on common moral grounds” and “serve as a precursor to collective action” is highly reduced if not nonexistent (Chaput 3). Under these conditions, the “affective public[s]” proclivity to lean towards passion over reason becomes a misnomer as their disposition ceases to

\textsuperscript{16} A social media user who is a non-participant i.e. they do not post, share, or like internet content on social media platforms.
carry itself out in the world, and we digitally and culturally resolidify into good versus evil paradigms wherein the epideictic becomes obsolete as our inability to “balance reason and passion” results in a secluded system of amoral ritualistic practices (Chaput 3). Therefore, whether or not critical dialogue surrounds a particular cultural artifact, as showcased on Twitter, is left to an entirely new set of market forces. And by the time that discussion begins, the cycle and the system has already reset: a new epideictic artifact displaces the old and the aforementioned commodity or product is exchanged for another endlessly.

For example, of Nicotra’s artifacts, the comically dubbed “Donglegate” stands out in particular. Its exemplary nature is due to its reciprocity or its shared delineation of shame. While in attendance at the language programming convention PyCon on March 17, 2013, Adria Richards, a developer, overhead two men making crude, sexual jokes in the row directly behind her. Given that the current speaker at the event was discussing ways to get more women into developing roles, Richards found this behavior egregious; however, instead of confronting the men, she snapped a photo and tweeted it with the caption “Not cool. Jokes about forking repo’s in a sexual way and ‘big’ dongles. Right behind me #pycon.” Three days later on March 21th both parties, the offending party and Richards, would be subsequently fired from their respective companies: Playhaven and SendGrid. What makes this example essential, not only to Nicotra’s thesis but to a growing epideictic trend, is that both parties were subsequently punished in that they received equal treatment, regardless of who the perceived antagonist was. In other words, it didn’t matter who started the fight, and unlike most attempts at cancellation (though, to be fair, Richard’s never called for such actions; she simply called the pair out for their behavior), the presiding authorities found it appropriate to punish both the transgressor and the transgressed, not to mentioned that Richard’s own archive was utilized by the resulting Twitterstorm to upend
her critique of said offenders and label her a hypocrite (e.g. Richards having frequently engaged in crude sexual jokes on Twitter). Unlike so many other cases of “cancellation,” the present authority (responding to backlash on both ends) chose to make an example of the behavior that led to such an enormous online response and breakdown of discourse among the developer community: claiming that Richard’s “actions strongly divided the same community she was supposed to unite” (“Donglegate/ Adria Richards” *Know Your Meme*). In what is ultimately a disavowal of the epideictic behavior at play, Richard’s case is indicative of the manner in which online solicitation and shaming bars and resists discourse while fundamentally functioning as a chaotic form of passive aggressive behavior that retains the potential for a net social loss on the part of both parties—each of which could have, in all likelihood, resolved the situation much more peacefully and, thus, appeal to a latent communal desire to resolve differences in a non-hostile manner. In any case, like most cancellations, both Richards and the men in question are doing fine and cancel culture, some seven years later, continues to remain relatively non-lethal.

Another great, but brief example, is the story of Carson King. After receiving a great deal of media attention for holding a sign that read “Busch Light supply need replenished. Venmo Carson-King-25” at ESPN College Day back in 2019, King struck a deal with Anheuser-Busch and raised a million dollar for the University of Iowa Stead Family Children’s Hospital. However, a reporter for the *Des Moines Register* by the name of Aaron Calvin in Des Moines, Iowa decided it would be a good idea to dig up his old tweets: revealing deeply racist remarks King had posted 8 years prior in 2012 at the age of 16. Following this exposure, Anheuser-Busch cut ties with King, ending his fundraising efforts, despite him having made a public apology

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before a request for apology had even been requested. Yet, as fate would have it, the internet took revenge on Aaron Calvin. After a little bit of digging, it was revealed that the reporter, Calvin, has used the “n” word inappropriately in past tweets. As a result, Calvin was fired from the *Des Moines Register*. So, what stories like this and that of Richards reveal, of course, is that cancel culture is void of solution-based dialogue. It is not an avenue for ameliorative discourse or change, but, in fact, online bullying, blacklisting, and the gradual deconstruction of avid discourse.

According to the online community, there are two motives that underlie cancel culture as an epideictic system: 1) to dox an individual or ridicule them so severely that they are socially compelled to withdraw from a given space and 2) to gain social capital.¹⁸ For example, Left-leaning trans YouTuber ContraPoints (Natalie Wynn) was “canceled” back in September of 2019 for posting a tweet where she discusses her identity as an “old-school trans” or binary trans woman as a dying gender category—with many trans identifying outside the gender binary or as non-binary. For this she was doxed and harassed by fringe individuals both within and outside the LGBT community until she deleted her twitter account. The cancellation, like so many others, was temporary and quickly forgotten. However, recently on January 2, 2020 ContraPoints uploaded a video condemning the act of “canceling” that received 1.5 million views within three weeks. ContraPoints, along with several other left leaning YouTube personalities such as Gutian and Peter Coffin, have criticized cancel cultures seemingly capitalist cultural framework and the growing tendency of groups associated with progressive politicking to engage in in-fighting, woke mobs, and purity policing. As a result of Mark Fisher’s controversial essay “Exiting the

¹⁸ “The Truth Behind Cancel Culture.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Gutian, 6 Nov. 2019, youtube.com/watch?v=SPdB2YkSKSs&t=1s.
Vampire Castle,” many on the Left have begun to reassess the cultural implications of capital while others have remained reactionary and hostile towards the notion that they retain within their social practices a neo-liberal *ethos*. In any case, cancel culture as capitalist culture remains a popular topic among budding liberal intellectuals, Redditors, and social media personalities with many citing capitalism’s role in the divisive behavior that many believe is fractioning the progressive movements. And reminds us that the degree to society values a particular ethic (in this case capital) parallels the strength and capacity with which it reprimands the individual and, simultaneously, demonstrates “the nature of all epideictic (and, indeed, all rhetoric) as *dunamis* or dynamic potential, intrinsically technological” (Nicotra).

Similarly, ContraPoints details the seven tropes of cancel culture from her perspective (not only as a left leaning trans woman, but as a once canceled social media celebrity): the presumption of guilt, abstraction, essentialism, pseudo-moralism/ pseudo-intellectualism, no forgiveness, transitiveness or infectiousness, and dualism. By demarcating a series of affective and epideictic trends unique not only to cancel culture, but to online shaming in general, ContraPoints aids in pinpointing and reinforcing the notion of cancel culture as dependent on social capital as currency as well as its regressive mob like tendencies. It is, namely, the presumption of guilt and the lack of forgiveness that truly defines the affective components of cancel culture. As it relates to ContraPoints, she uses these seven tropes in her video “Canceling” to analyze the “downfall” (again, cancel culture is not very effective at producing the level of excommunication that many would like to believe) of the now infamous YouTuber made famous and beauty and makeup star James Charles. On May 24, 2019, Charles entered into a scandal

with long time business partner and friend Tati Westbrook following a conflict of interests wherein Charles solicited and sponsored an ad for a competing hair vitamin brand to that of Westbrooks. As a result, and succeeding a long history of drama between the two, Westbrook uploaded a 43-minute long video titled “BYE SISTER” (a reference to catchphrase Charles’ built his brand on). In the video, Westbrook brutally detailed all the moral failings of Charles, defamed him in nearly every regard, and even went so far as to claim he is takes joy in “ticking” straight men into having intercourse with him—a statement which quickly metastasized into “James Charles is a sexual predator.” Within a week’s time, Charles’ number of subscribers dropped from 16.5 to 13.8 (his channel has now risen back up and rests at 16.7) while Westbrook’s channel rose from just under 5 million subscribers to 9 million with the video receiving 35 million views.20 And similar to the case of Justine Sacco, a communications executive at the Intersocietal Accreditation Commission (IAC), who tweeted out “Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get AIDS. Just kidding, I’m white!” just before boarding a plane with no internet service only to find that she had been severely ridiculed and fired from her job upon landing, Charles stated in a Tweet posted on February 16, 2017 that “I can’t believe we’re going to Africa today omg what if we get Ebola?,”21 As a result, Charles was already predisposed and vulnerable to such social degradation.

Whether a high-status figure like James Charles or a low profile figure like Justine Sacco, figures on social media are experiencing cancel culture to varying degrees; however, certain online personalities with a platform large enough to vocalize concerns over cancel culture, such

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as ContraPoints, have come to realize that unlike guilt, which “retains a certain dignity as a sentiment, […] shame seems at best infantile and other-directed” (Konstan 1032). And even though guilt is often invoked by shame, many are beginning to question when epideictic practices go too far in debasing and demoralizing the subject of their outrage. With cases like James Charles, underlying motivations for public shaming become tangible via the mark of social capital: the like, the view, the share or those “neo-liberal capitalist values connected to an ethos of ‘accumulate wealth, forgetting all but self [sic]’” (qtd in Hoag Rhetorical Studies for the 99% 214). And, like ContraPoints, Fisher identifies five laws that govern cancel culture i.e. the Vampire’s Castle: 1) individualize and privatize everything, 2) be overtly serious, humour is not allowed, 3) propagete as much guilt as you can, 4) excommunicate and condemn by essentializing and oversimplifying your opponent, and 5) stoke up reactive outrage at every possible interval (Fisher K-Punk 741-42). For individuals like Hart, Baker, Charles, and Sacco these rules, these modes of expressing a certain appetite for enjoying the troubles, failures and humiliation of the other, are all too real, while at the same time serving to reveal the extent with which we are “trying to come to grips with the complex systems a writer, text, and reader encounter, affect, and live in” (Mara and Hawk 2-3). Overall, what is most telling is the extent to which the rules that define cancel culture, i.e. the Vampire’s Castle, are so similar across the multiple personalities that have taken it upon themselves to critique the practice. In all cases, the individual notes the hyper-capitalist nature of the epideictic processes that define cancel culture: that is ridiculing, doxing, humiliating, shaming, and castigating the individual while reducing, confining, exiling, oversimplifying, and moralizing the situation. Across a multitude of bodies and interpretations, the realities underlying cancel culture become readily exposed, and we, once again, begin to question what our latent community values are. As a result, as it relates to
hauntologies, the one who witnesses or engages in such practices begins to realize the highly tentative and disposable qualities they subsist under as it relates to modern epideixis. The haunting has become a vivid apparition and conjuring. And, as a principle of cancel culture as capitalist culture, the epideictic rhetoric of the 21st century increasingly engages in economic violence in order to achieve its goals: attempting to subject the individual to career loss, job, or position for the purposes of restricting their socio-economic access.

The Free-Market of Shame and Social Credit Systems

Nevertheless, depending on one’s status or the degree to which they adhere to the reticent values embedded within our communal framework, the exchange rate of social capital can vary just as much as the social implications. And, as mentioned before, individuals locked into such epideictic processes will incur a social cost (a loss of credit) equal to that of their power and influence—or use that power to entirely negate it. For “one finds an admission of shame and a palpable sense of guilt, feelings often associated with confession, not to mention an explicit recognition that the narrative will open the subject in question to greater surveillance and control” (Hoag, *Rhetorical Studies for the 99%* 121). Therefore, it appears as though the effects of cancel culture are limited in ways that the broader epideictic system we call “call-out culture” is not. Namely, its call-out culture appears to be highly correlated with judicial and legal processes that indict and reprimand individuals outside the public sphere by entering into the realm of the State. As a result of our condition under capital, power is increasingly allocated into the hands of individuals who slowly come to embody the now faded responsibility of the State to communicate and administer moral authority under written law. And “[w]hat this means, therefore, is that rather than protecting privacy rights, practically every move a subject makes
online is archived, and is archived so as to suit the ends of Capital” (Hoag *Rhetorical Studies for the 99%* 161-62). And perhaps its subversion is dependent on “a posthuman theory of agency that rejects the human agent as the primary source of change but redeems that agent as a participant in the larger network of which he or she is a part” (Hallenbeck 19). In other words, if we do not recognize that we are not “primary,” and that our capitalist condition inhibits our capacity to be redeemed and properly positioned within an egalitarian framework—one wherein enmity may finally be overcome and reconciled—we will forever oscillate between an iconography of social obedience and political enslavement.

If we are to accept that “all rhetorical acts are more productively conceived less as a discrete series of transactions than as ‘unfolding event[s] – distributed, material process of becomings’ (Gries 7) emerging from a technological assemblage” (Nicotra), then we must question the modern terminology which surrounds such practices. In order to understand how rhetoric functions as a practice within a capitalistic framework, it is necessary to understand how the performative aspects of capitalist tendencies reduce affective human interactions to just that: a transaction. For where once credit cards were often declined, canceled, flagged, or otherwise declared void, the respective individual who is both trapped in and embedded within the imbrication of technology is now subject to such labelling and, indeed, “through arrangements between the political sphere and corporate sphere, memory has become a commodity given that information on users has significant exchange-value” (Hoag *Rhetorical Studies for the 99%* 161). We have to question, take seriously, whether or not our current social interactions are geared towards a positive and progressive future or one that is tragically unapologetic and apathetic due to increasing animosity and mistrust of the other. For due to capitalisms influence on the posthuman, class has become invisible in America: and though “class exists in America but
cannot be talked about … it is ‘hidden’ … there is no language for it … it is ‘displaced’ or ‘spoken through’ other languages of social difference—race, ethnicity, and gender” (Ortner 9). It is through the use of shame, based in and on the affective and emotive implications thereof, that seeks to socially engineer behavioral norms and override critical public discourse at the behest of capital, for “digitalization is itself indissociable from the globalization of capitalism” (Wolfe 285-86). And what is considered excusable under the pretense of latent community values is also beholden to and manipulated by both just and unjust power structures: revealing that though modern epideictic practices are properly situated within the context of equality, they are poorly articulated and directed within a capitalist framework that dictates that social norms function like a marketplace.

This process, manifesting itself in the form of the epideictic, seeks to capitalize on rising cultural norms and implement them as a mainstay in modern marketing and advertising strategy. For this reason, instances revolving around cancel culture are usually carried out at the behest of large corporations—cancel culture as capitalist culture. And though this activity has clear and dangerous repercussions for society, namely the application of virtue signaling (the public expression of sentiment to demonstrate one’s moral character) as a means of social control and political allure, our consumer culture is all too eager to respond to their “signaling” with praise (a channeling of an exigent ethos) as corporations seek to consolidate their efforts in the form of wealth—a means to obtain social and political power. And, as pointed out by philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas, it is “because private enterprises evoke in their customers the idea that in their consumption decisions they act in their capacity as citizens, the state has to ‘address’ its citizens like consumers.” As a result, “public authority too competes for publicity” (Habermas Structural Transformation 195). Much like the fetishization of labor that defines capitalist’
structures, the epideictic deifies the “luminosity of noble acts and thoughts” (Duffy 80). As the use of epideictic discourse invades the private sphere, it mirrors capitalist separations of materiality and thought and serves to remind us that both state and private interests are converging towards a single point. As they do, the public sphere intervenes and instigates controversy; hence, the emergence of cancel culture and its desire to transform social norms into a form of social currency. And, as asserted by Trevor Hoag, “[it] shows how forces like neoliberal capitalism christen counter-hegemonic, counter-memorial efforts as ‘dead,’ appropriating and accelerating aggrieved displays of affect/feeling with disruptive sociopolitical potential” (Hoag Rhetoric, Trauma, Mourning 152).

In the end, as mentioned before, we are left questioning what our latent community values really are: for as the “mass of productive forces, capital funds and conditions, which, on the one hand, is indeed modified by the new generation, but also on the other prescribes for it its conditions of life and gives it a definite development” (Marx and Engels 165). And, equally so, if we are to give any credence or credibility to Francis Fukuyama’s claim in Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution (a claim which parallels to the one he makes in The End of History and the Last Man) that posthuman technologies will come to alter or destroy the inviolable human essence that serves as the basis for equality and human rights, then we should assess appropriately those in power, or those who mark the end of the interiority and intimacy of man and signal the degradation of man’s relationship with technology and any of its new forms of technē, of art, of creation. It is a future not “where data dance[s] with human consciousness,” but “where human memory is literalized and mechanized, where multi-national information systems mutate and breed into startling new structures whose beauty and complexity are unimaginable, mystical, and above all nonhuman” (McCaffery 264). Hence, underlying our
virtues and hopes for social equality and justice are a host of latent community values embedded within and driven by capitalist hegemony: it is an economic transfer of the public concern to private wealth, and it occupies that space wherein capitalist labor becomes synonymous with social grievances. As a result, when people are subject to “cancellation,” their mourning or grief is regarded as “self-pity and refusing to take responsibility” because “they are simply the ‘natural’ outcomes of the most ideal socio-economic arrangement possible” (Hoag “Ghosts of Memory” 5). It is the free-market of shame at work, and it is justified under the neo-liberal assumption that all social issues can be sequestered, parsed out, and dealt with via market-based solutions. The material interest of the bourgeois public sphere becomes characteristic of the prestigious aura and presiding authority of the capitalist elite; thus, private companies seek to manipulate the public and encourage disruption: often dictating when a social pariah is worthy of defamation and punishment. It is the corporate establishment that “pulls the trigger” so-to-speak or otherwise “slams the gavel.”

It is not a loss of revenue or social credit that informs corporate decision-making practices as it relates to public outcry; it is, instead, the knowledge that such circumstances are ripe for exploitation and greater profits at the expense of class unity—alongside the added benefit of social unrest because “the mob is not only the refuse but also the by-product of bourgeois society, directly produced by it and therefore never quite separable from it” (Arendt 155). The seeming pressure that the public places on the corporation via outrage culture does little to threaten their bottom line, and it is not indicative of an institution undergoing social and ethical transformation, but a market decision: for “the performance of mourning/ grieving have no value in the bright green seductive eyes of Capital unless reappropriated, such forces can disrupt specific socio-economic hierarchies that Capital inherently produces” and, as a result,
“mourning/grieving, as temporary stopgaps in production, find themselves formalized and quickly brushed aside” (Hoag “Ghosts of Memory” 4). A recent example, and likely the most tangible instance of cancel culture as capitalist culture, is a scandal involving a journalist at the Washington Post following the death of retired NBA all-star Kobe Bryant. Just hours after the death of Kobe Bryant, his daughter Gianna, and eight others, Washington Post journalist Felicia Sonmez tweeted a link to a 2016 article titled “Kobe Bryant’s Disturbing Rape Case: The DNA Evidence, the Accuser’s Story, and the Half-Confession.” The backlash following the tweet was enormous with over 10,000 death threats and abusive emails. As a result, she was suspended, “temporarily canceled,” by the Washington Post (she has, of course, reassumed her position since). And though the facts embedded within the seventeen-year-old court case are, indeed, damming to say the least, such shaming is indicative of the underlying behavior produced by the intersection of cybernetic capitalism and epideictic practices: the need to compete, publish first, and garner the most social capital via likes, shares, and all means of social visibility. And, regardless of the intentions, one has to wonder what the social benefits are gained by shaming the dead. Surely, without the anxiety driven conditions of capital, well-meaning individuals such as Sonmez would lack the compulsory need to “get ahead” or “stay afloat” in a manner that is fundamentally economic. Were her very position at the Washington Post not predicated on her social capital, synonymous with her own economic well-being, she, like Jill Filipovic who posted an entire article on the subject (a far more tactful strategy), would have found a more timely opportunity to address the hero worship in our society that often sidelines important issues.

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concerning sexual assault, racism, and gender discrimination. However, timeliness or taking on such a *kairotic* disposition is another by-product of the capitalist conditions that lead to such social indignation: for it was indeed timely to post such criticism at a time of death and morning; hence, it was profitable. In any case, cancel culture as capitalist culture points to (or perhaps simply makes visible) a new form of epideictic ridicule: the post-cancellation or cancellation following one’s physical death.

Thus, just as the “world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only,” so too are our epideictic and social practices veiled and twisted under capital (Habermas *Structural Transformation* 171). If we accept that no economic system that preceded capitalism—e.g. feudalism/ monarchy or mercantilism/ aristocracy—is purely economic, but in fact equally cultural, then neoliberal influences on socio-cultural interactions should be regarded as a given, not as a particularly political viewpoint held by a bipartisan or biased group. In any case, though call-out culture continues to function broadly as a “form of social ritual or public education that reinforces common values within a culture,” cancel culture bespeaks the manner in which the “epideictic may be used to inculcate useful or harmful political and social myths”—the myth of capital and, thus, the myth of applying free-market solutions to complex socio-economic issues (Oravec 163). Ultimately, the truth is that to disregard those epideictic practices in our community that empower the marginalized and disenfranchised is to dismiss an organic form of criticism that holds those in power responsible for their actions; however, it is also true that to sanction all epideictic practices that enact any positive or moral community value excuses equally harmful and culturally destructive behavior. Moreover, the product of those epideictic

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24 Coffin, Peter. “Cancel Culture, or Capitalist Culture? | Many Peters69.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Peter Coffin, 6 Nov. 2019, youtube.com/watch?v=4RaR1xACR9Y&t=472s.
practices embedded within cancel culture are tantamount to token gains directed towards and extracted from one’s neighbor, not their oppressors, for “in practice it never focuses on anything except individual behavior” (Fisher K-Punk 741). As a result, the human condition is sidelined, class is made invisible, and society is increasingly divided across the boundaries of race, sex, and gender while the “theos-logic” of capital dictates that “when one fails, one should take pleasure in one’s suffering as it is medicinal” (Hoag “Ghosts of Memory” 5) while revealing with certainty Katherine Hayles’ assertion that “we have always been posthuman” (209). The only difference now, however, is that our socio-cultural relationship to one another is dictated by a new episteme,\textsuperscript{25} or our current understanding of knowledge and power under the hegemony of capitalism—the posthuman empire.

\textsuperscript{25} A Greek term reimagined by Foucault in his 1966 work The Order of Things. It is defined by Foucault as the \textit{a priori} circumstances that inform knowledge, discourse, and all representative possibilities during any particular epoch.
Figure 2.1
Adrian Richards’ tweet from PyCon

Figure 2.2
Justine Sacco’s tweet from 2013 just before she boarded a plane bound for Cape Town from New York
Figure 2.3
James Charles’ tweet from February 16, 2017 that resonates with Justine Sacco’s case

Figure 2.4
Felicia Sonmez’s tweet from the day of Kobe Bryant’s death on January 26, 2020
CHAPTER IV

LOST FUTURES: POSTHUMAN SUBJECTS AS EPIDEICTIC CONJURERS

Thus I counsel you, my friends: mistrust all in whom the impulse to punish is powerful. They are people of a low sort and stock; the hangman and the bloodhound look out of their faces. Mistrust all who speak much of their justice! Verily, their souls lack more than honey. And when they call themselves the good and the just, do not forget that they would be pharisees, if only they had—power.

—Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Archivization and Social Indexing

The very concept of the haunting as a posthuman *practice* in rhetoric hinges on the fact that hauntings are, in and of themselves, a literal and figurative embodiment of social anxieties and concerns. Of these concerns is the fear of what Mark Fisher refers to in his posthumous work *K-Punk* as “lost futures.”

As a deeply humanist concern, lost futures themselves are an extension of human mortality, or our reliance on reproduction, creation, and the transmission of information itself beyond our mere physical body—a quality which the posthuman constantly deconstructs and threatens, yet cannot dissolve, cannot kill. However, as Cary Wolfe points out in his book *What is Posthumanism?*, the posthuman only decenters man in its passing (present), not its ascent or descent (before and after). Much like Wolfe, posthuman scholars such as Katherine Hayles recognize that the positioning of the cybernetic is “actually intensifying a

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26 Lost futures as denoted by Mark Fisher are a reassessment or reestablishment of the Derridean specter, or that spectrality wrought from the always becoming yet never realized qualities of Marxist ecologies. It is *ressentiment*, and the absence of that which one believes to be rightfully theirs or what should otherwise “be.”
liberal humanist tradition rather than breaking from it” (Boyle 65). The implications of this paradox suggest that we are neither situated within humanism or posthumanism but in between: that we are tragically recentered under our modern technological disposition. That we are neither before, or after, but present. As a result, posthumanism compels us to recognize the “fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism itself” (Wolfe xv). And, by the same token, asks that we not delude ourselves with notions of transcendence but accept the reality of stasis (embedded and embodied with technical, informatic, and economic networks). And it is the purposefulness of this limbo, this blending and meshing of the human and the posthuman, that drives modern posthuman hauntologies in digital rhetoric: for we are cybernetic beings, cyborgs, and we are integrated, not transcended. As a result, and unlike centuries prior, our modern cultural landscape is best defined by necromedia: or “the relationship between death and technology” (O’Gorman 39). And not just the death of media, but the death of the self and our broader social sphere as it is constantly subject to the rampant effects of either free-market principles or government overreach.

However, investigations into the finitude of the technological and the human stall and become mangled when considering the true relationship man has with technology: it is, as pointed out by Casey Boyle, Cary Wolfe, Rosi Braidotti and several other scholars, a prosthetic relationship and one which is conjoined and grafted on to humanism in much the same way that “post” in posthumanism latches on to the aspect “human.” This relationship embodies our physical relationship to technology inasmuch as it is representative of our psychological state. As a result, our culture and its subsequent media has a symbolic and psychoanalytic relationship to its episteme, or its current understanding of knowledge and power. For “the human is itself a prosthetic being, who from day one is constituted as human by its coevolution with and
coconstitution by external archival technologies of various kinds—including language itself as the first archive and prosthesis” (Wolfe 295). And, as it relates to this lingering, or feeling of perpetual nostalgia, scholars Cary Wolfe, Marcel O’Gorman, and Mark Fisher all present vivid though rather esoteric examples as it relates to modern culture as defined by necromedia, with each progressing further into the present. For Wolfe it is the uncanny soundscape presented in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, for O’Gorman it is the techno terror present in *Six Feet Under* (2001) and films like *American Beauty* (1999), and for Mark Fisher, it is the anachronism or “the slippage of discrete time periods into one another” found in 1979 tv drama *Sapphire & Steel* or the music and presentation of the Arctic Monkey’s 2005 hit single “I Bet You Look Good on the Dancefloor” (Fisher *K-Punk* 5). Today this retro aesthetic, or retrofuturism, is a hallmark of modern entertainment industry—or what we might call the nostalgia industry—and is beset by copious amounts of retrobaiting. As an aesthetic, media has gravitated towards and seeks to presents the future as depicted by those in the early 20th century. Inversely, and unlike those in the 1920s, we no longer project the future as it pertains to our own imagination, our own poesis, but via the visions held by those before us. In a sense, it is born from the desire to relive the future via the past. It is a return to presence in our current state of absence. And when we cease to conceive of the future, we become stuck in the past.

As such, one of the most significant aspect of this retrobaiting and retromania is how it manifests itself at the cultural level. According to O’Gorman, this necromedia, this relationship between death and technology, is indicative of the lost futures that saturate our culture and the extent to which it “underscores the way in which recordings of ourselves live on in our absence” (O’Gorman 12). In his final chapter, Cary Wolfe leaves us with an new appreciation for the uncanny soundscape produced by both Brian Eno and David Byrne’s in their album *My Life in*
the Bush of Ghosts (1981), our modern technological landscape provides equally complex cultural artifacts that are subject to the indexing and archivization of media; however, what separates today’s culture from that of the early 1980’s is the transition from analog media to digital media. Unlike the “anthropological, religious, or political context” (Wolfe xxxiv) that created the abstract musicality found in the works of Eno and Byrne or even perhaps the works of Pink Floyd (sharing many of the same elements: nature sounds, human screams, political propaganda, etc.), our modern cultural productions are not limited by the analog, or its relationship to its own physical space, but its emission of 1s and 0s—its binary and digital element. Media and technology are no longer merely representative of something else but constitutive and simulative of wishes and dreams, or all things denied to us: lost futures. In other words, existence or nonexistence: appearance or absence (both equally real and even hyperreal). Whether it be the matrix as conceived of by William Gibson in his famous sci-fi novel Neuromancer (just as one of the main characters pseudo-resurrects or generates copies of individuals’ memories, personalities, and appearances, we too are utterly invested in the likeness of the past) or its more popular iteration in the movie The Matrix, our modern culture is both a retelling of and a representation of our current techné, and it is beholden to the act of diegesis (narrative) and mimesis (imitation), simultaneously. Like the tentative relationship between the human and the posthuman or one’s social credit being active versus canceled, the relationship between analog media and digital media is similar, both spatially and temporally. All are uniquely integrated in some form—philosophically, socially, and physically, respectively—and none are separate, removed, or absolved from the other. Across interpretation, social standing, or even our use of technology, the tragic reality is that our culture has reached a singularity wherein
new ideas are not born or wrought through poesis (nothing really is), or the act of bringing into being something that did not exist before, but are merely imitated and faded.

According to Fisher, there are two fundamental causes for such a fixation on retro or past media: either there is “an increasing sense that culture has lost the ability to grasp and articulate the present. Or it could be that, in one very important sense, there is no present to grasp and articulate any more” (Fisher K-Punk 9). These lost futures, this specter, this reinvisionement of the past, or the past revisited, has haunted us and invaded media, and Simon Reynolds, philosopher and critical theorist, claims just as much in his book *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to Its Own Past* (2011): “[n]ot only has there never before been a society so obsessed with the cultural artifacts of its immediate past, but there has never before been a society that is able to access the immediate past so easily and so copiously.” As an obsession, the past becomes our domiciliation and representative of the host who becomes a ghost within their own home. This place, visited frequently, marks the point in human history when pain, tragedy of circumstances, and historical oppression ceased to be about the future. Pain is no longer a point of learning or means for modifying the future but, instead, a place of deep ressentiment: a place to set up camp, to call home, and to dwell. It is born of a deep desire to force the past to either match the present or create a future with no “real” history and revisionist past. As mentioned before, this ressentiment represents both a sense of hostility directed towards an object which one identifies as the cause of one’s frustration and also an influential force for the creation of

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27 A term first introduced by philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and later expanded upon by Friedrich Nietzsche. It is the hostility that one directs towards the object that one identifies as the source, the center, of one’s frustration. Nietzsche expanded upon the term and integrated it into his conceptualization of the Übermensch or the Overman. It is the last humanist quality that must be overcome in order to approximate the Übermensch, or a purely secular morality. Overcoming ressentiment is the final stage to achieving the status of the Overman—a fundamentally unattainable way of being.
identities, moral frameworks, and value systems. However, within the context of cancel culture, as archivists and necromancers, our broader cultural landscape becomes increasingly fixated on the past and the distinction between progress and regression become harder and harder to make, and ressentiment manifests itself as intense othering in its rejection of all antagonistic external forces. For “[a]ll these debaters and communicators are inspired by ressentiment [because] they speak only of themselves when they set empty generalizations against one another” (Gilles and Deleuze 29).

This retromania, or pop-culture fascination with the past, is best illustrated by our growing inability to create new cultural artifacts or envision the future. Several of our modern icons are bound by these limitations and exhibit the sort of resilience born of a Derridean conceptualization of spectrality, or that “a trace that marks the present with its absence in advance” (Derrida Ethnographies of Television 117). One of the cultural artifacts that sticks out the most is that of the British science fiction anthology series Black Mirror’s 2016 episode “Nosedive.” Defined by its hauntological qualities, “Nosedive” is representative of the anxieties and concerns surrounding social currency/ capital as it manifests itself in the digital as an epideictic conjuring. Within the confines of the narrative, the characters are subject to a sort of posthuman purgatory. Everyone is ranked, in a free market manner, from individual to individual. Having a high score increases one’s popularity, whitelisted, while receiving a low score results in blacklisting, low popularity. In each case, the individual’s position within society is equally tentative and false and everyone is reduced, so-to-speak, to a series of 1s and 0s—leading to disastrous effects for many of the main characters. Such media interpretations parallel the emergence of cancel culture and the real-life circumstances of the modern comedian, actor, politician, and the unlucky individual who happens to incur the wrath of modern outrage culture.
For the responsive behavior of the many who endure such circumstances, mirrors the mental breakdown suffered by our main protagonist, Lacie, as she attempts to cope with the godlike social hierarchy that has been constructed for her—dictating her self-expression and her relationship to others in a manner that is near inescapable. And it is this interpretation of modern social media through film and entertainment that best represents our current reality: or that which does not exist to “produce this strange occultation of the present by its own formal power, but rather merely to demonstrate, through these inner contradictions, the enormity of the situation in which we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our current cultural experience” (qtd in Fisher 46). This representation of our modern epideictic system on full display in popular culture acts to subconsciously signify the potency and potentiality of our growing imbrication with technology. Its portrayal of a residual and ever-present specter of the self and the manner in which technology continues to form a singular human expression with which to negotiate our social status and credibility—marking or predicting a point in time where the epideictic, as a haunting, transforms into a habitual process. It is our modern epideictic system: the haunting as a conjuring.

Thus, in its posthuman formation, the haunting “in all the inscrutability of its hauntology, appears to announce, promise, conceal another subjectivity: posthuman subjectivities, in their othering to the human, in which the human might yet, very paradoxically, be self-transgressing itself—and in a willed way” (Callus and Herbrechter 253). In other words, we compel the haunting to continue and reiterate itself at the individual level with our social media platforms, for there is a system of power that lies at the fingertips of the tweeter, the vlogger, and the one who posts or shares accusatory or inflammatory content. As a posthuman, postcommunist, postcapitalist entity, Haraway’s aforementioned cyborg mirrors the specter of Marx in its
capacity to haunt. Yet it offers a solution, for though “[p]re-cybernetic machines could be haunted; there was always the spectre of the ghost in the machine” (293). The cyborg grants us an entity and formation that sits outside such transgressions, as did Marx, in its ability to retain “affinity, not identity” (Haraway 296). For, as pointed out by Haraway, “[i]t’s not just that ‘god’ is dead; so is the ‘goddess.’ Or both are revivified in the worlds charged with microelectronic and biotechnological politics” (301). As a result, Haraway’s cyborg functions as both a solution and point of reference from which to properly construe this digital haunting in all its spectrality.

For just as the specter of Marx/Marxism has become the critical lens with which we use to deconstruct and undermine late capitalist institutions, the cyborg is an apparition of insight into the capacity of information technologies (an extension and product of capitalism and modern technocracies) to resurrect the boundaries (limitations) of humanism: its nakedness, its vulnerability, its susceptibility to shame, and its dependency on social reciprocity and acceptance. For the haunting—in its technological formation—separates from its predecessors in that it no longer traces the elements hidden within our culture, our nostalgia for the past, but our personal suffering, and our every manifestation of the self via social media platforms. However, Haraway’s cyborg represents a far greater set of embedded and enmeshed way of being that overcrowds and unites to form the flawless, genderless, and collective component that is the symbolic posthuman subject because it runs outside, exists in between both metaphorically and philosophically, in that space where our typical social and epideictic practices become null in that they bar the very formation of the cyborg itself. They are inhibiting qualities that stall progressive towards that complete entity that is the cyborg.

It is that in an age of rapid change—embodied by the mutation and transformation of modern information technologies—these ghosts have come to signify the “slow cancellation of
the future”: an era imbricated within the infinite deep space of technological enhancement and subjugation. It is as if the future is approaching us faster than we can absorb the myriad of qualities which define its existence: its artistry, its poesis, and its ousia or subjectivity. In other words, we are lagging (responding slowly) to the changes occurring within our society. The future has met us so quickly—interrupted and disrupted our lives so dramatically—that we are stuck in the past and unable to catch up. And it is this—this faded reality built into the framework of the future itself—that initiates the haunting. Reality has become “what one does not perceive when one perceives it” (Wolfe xix). We are marooned, and the dimension that is the future has disappeared. We are trapped, culturally, in the 20th century, or what Mark Fisher refers to as “the 20th century distributed by high speed internet.”28 The more space and time become embedded within capital, more properly indicated as communicative capital, the more our lives are taken over. The future has, more or less, disappeared. This phenomenon, this lost future, is the life’s work of Fisher and is best realized under the pretense that suffering, that loss, that what could have been, is the product of absence itself and is exacerbated under capitalist hegemony and a loss of difference. We are beset by revivals and visitations: the loss of culture existing within a specific moment, and a culture which relentlessly subjects itself to appearance and disappearance: revealing that “something strange and terrible is born through archive fever: ‘the possibility of a history constituted by the erasure of its own witness, a history that burns away the very possibility of conceiving memory, that leaves the future itself, in ashes’” (qtd in Hoag Rhetoric, Trauma, Mourning 13).

28 Fisher, Mark. “Mark Fisher: The Slow Cancellation of the Future.” YouTube, uploaded by pmilat, 22 May 2014, youtube.com/watch?v=aCgkLICTskQ&t=2s.
Ultimately, “capitalism’s valorization depends on the exploitation of intellectual, communicative, and affective labor,” or that which is an immaterial labor, not a material one, and instances such as these reveal the degree to which our community values can conflict within the context of mass communication and a generation of users committed to social justice (Greene “Rhetoric and Capitalism” 200). It is hyper-individualism and the unfettered accumulation of neoliberal ideals within our socio-economic system, from the age of feudalism to the here and the now: it is “the concept of a sovereign, Enlightenment subject who can think and act without the influence or assistance of others” and, most importantly, “the violent destruction of freedom of speech and assembly” (Hoag Rhetorical Studies for the 99% 31). For, perhaps, we no longer subsist within a community that values “freedom of” but, instead, “freedom from.” In response to government overreach and severe restrictions on free expression, namely the implementation of social credit systems that track every action, motive, and in some cases every thought, in the district of Hong Kong by the Chinese government, the American flag and supposedly alt-right memes like Pepe the Frog are viscerally attached to the protests for freedom and democracy; meanwhile, both images are viewed as antithetical to freedom and democracy here in the U.S., and are viewed as symbols haunted by the affective energy of historical oppression—revealing the degree to which symbols can represent different things across material bodies. In a true Orwellian experience, the peoples of China are subject to the whim of the national reputation system of the government, as guided by its complex artificial intelligence and surveillance system Skynet. Since 2009, some 26.82 million air tickets 5. 96 rail tickets have been denied to those deemed “untrustworthy (失信).” Such individuals lose credit gradually for reasons

ranging from the mundane (personal waste, jaywalking, smoking in public, etc.) to the criminal (drug use, selling drugs, sexual assault, arrests, etc.) and can work to regain said credit by committing acts of public good (donating blood, volunteering, charity, etc.). And while there are those blacklisted for such undesirable behavior, there are also those whitelisted or assigned certain privileges for “good” behavior: better access to healthcare, discounts on goods, and a greater chance at receiving employment/ raises/ promotions.

Additionally, in America, under free market principles, public shaming retains in its expression a fleeting and ephemeral impact on the individuals social standing (usually a few weeks/ maybe a month or two); however, under the national reputation systems developed under the hyper capitalist/ corporatist dictatorships of China, removing oneself from the “blacklist” can take years (if the individual has the economic and social means and personal will to do so). In our case, it seems freedom does have its advantages. Despite the similarities between the West and the far East, in America, as pride and desire modulate our technological isolation, the motivating qualities of the affect undergo no dialogical refinement, and power cease to retain any ameliorative category within the reverberating halls of a technological system of signification which inspires discourse but rarely enables it. The isolating qualities of our modern epideictic systems and, our fixation on in-fighting and tokenism as opposed to class consciousness and class unity continues to force upon us as both subjects and objects a deeply humanist, low-resolution image of the world that is indistinguishable from a good versus evil paradigm while encouraging us to conceptualize “discursive practices as a form of labor rather than a form of political signification [that] sidesteps anxiety about well-chosen language and emphasizes the life-affirming activity involved in deciphering issues, inventing paths through those issues, and communicating new ideas to others” (Chaput 2). As the private sphere need only generate the
perception of involvement, activity, and action with one’s *public* in order to garner their desired result: the illusion of shared interests, this new materialist position, hinging on the attribution of worth to objects of affiliation, seeks out its own political agency, for “once material factors are ‘given due’ (Coole and Frost 2010), agency can no longer be located merely with a human subject” (Rekret 50). After all, “these diverse forms of labor are in some way subject to capitalist discipline and capitalist relations of production. This fact of being within capital and sustaining capital is what defines the proletariat as a class” (Hardt and Negri *Empire* 53).

However, the qualities of social credit systems that have, for now, been unique to the forms of government in in places like China are now beginning to infiltrate the free market epideictic system of the West: namely, in the United Kingdom. Beginning with the infamous case of Scottish YouTuber Count Dankula, Mark Meecham, who in 2018 was found guilty of “grossly offensive” speech and was fined £800 for teaching his dog, a pug, to do the Nazi salute whenever he uttered the phrase “sig heil” or “do you wanna gas the Jews?” and then subsequently uploading a video of the interaction. British courts found him guilty under the Communications Act of 2003, and his prosecution and conviction led to many concerns about the state of free speech under British common law for the first time in half a century since the publishing of D. H. Lawrence’s novel *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* in 1960—an erotic novel that was subject to investigation under the Obscene Publications Act of 1959 but was eventually found to have literary merit and the charges were dropped. The case caused such a stir because it was the first notable case where the law, the judicial branch of the UK’s government, used arbitrary terminology like “grossly offensive” speech to assume the *thoughts* and intentions of someone’s

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use of speech, regardless of the fact that an investigation into Meecham’s online history and political activity revealed no connection to any hate group. And despite the concerns raised by the event, the situation in the UK has worsen over the years. One instance in particular stood out the most when a British man by the name of Harry Miller when he liked and shared a limerick that questioned whether or not trans women were biological women. Just the act of retweeting the post was enough for his actions to be flagged as a “hate incident” (the post was rather egregious to say the least). Regardless, the incident fell under the genre of what we might call in Orwellian terms a thoughtcrime. After all, this was proven the case given that the officials, responding to complaints about Miller’s actions, arrived at his house to question him about his online activity. When he asked if he was under arrest or if what he had does was a crime, the officers responded by telling him no, he had not committed a crime. What they did tell him, however, was that “we need to check your thinking.” And in spite of the fact that the archive, whether digital, physical, or otherwise, has and always will be a character witness for any perceived wrongdoer, its practice has become overtly mobilized in certain areas of the world in order to fulfill ideological position surrounding social progress/ justice: for “[t]hey have the power to interpret the archives” (Derrida “Archive Fever” 10).

Another source of Orwellian nightmares, revealing the need for “the archive [to] be deposited somewhere, on a stable substrate, and at the disposition of a legitimate hermeneutic authority” (Derrida “Archive Fever” 10), is that of Fama, a social media screening service whose

31 A humorous poem consisting of three long and two short lines of rhyming aabba.
32 A term taken from George Orwell’s 1949 dystopian novel Nineteen Eighty-Four. It is defined as a person’s politically incorrect or unorthodox thoughts and unspoken beliefs.
self-description reads “the smartest way to screen toxic workplace behavior.”\textsuperscript{34} Returning to the free-market end of the epideictic spectrum, a company like Fama reveals how in a free-market Democratic Republic like the United States, the economic, ecological niche gets filled in despite countries like the US lacking a certain Big Br(Other) to send the thought police after those who occupy the tentative position of the thought criminal. One such instance was the self-reported case of Twitter user @kmlefranc who tweeted out on January 27, 2020 that “I hard to get a background check for my job, and it turns out the report is a 300+ page pdf of every single tweet I’ve ever liked with the work ‘fuck’ in it. Enjoy your dystopian bs! *waves* [sic].”\textsuperscript{35} It is this sort of archivization of the individual at the behest of the posthuman epideictic subject or institutions that conjurers past social media expressions that dauntlessly informs and critiques the dystopian practices of modern virtual communities: whether it be the individual, the state, or the corporation that engages in the affective appropriation, redistribution, and taxation of social currency. Much like the fetishization of labor that defines capitalists’ structures, the epideictic deifies the “luminosity of noble acts and thoughts” (Duffy 80). As the use of epideictic discourse invades the private sphere, it mirrors capitalist separations of materiality and thought and serves to remind us that both state and private interests are converging towards a single point—that they have and always have been one, for they compete relentlessly for the same resource (labor), the same capital (profit/ taxation), and both, in their extremes (i.e. corporatism (the right) and communism (the left), dawn the false persona of public interest. And that, as socio-economic responsibility continues to stretch between the state and the corporation, the right to socio-economic access (state) or earned access thereof (corporation/ free-market) is weaponized.

\textsuperscript{34} Fama homepage at fama.io/.

Latent Values and Competing Values

As it relates to capital, however, we note that “the majority in the United States takes over the business of supplying the individual with a quantity of ready-made opinions and so relieves him of the necessity of forming his own. So, there are many theories of philosophy, morality, and politics which everyone adopts unexamined on the faith of public opinion” (qtd in Habermas *Structural Transformation* 134). Now, at the behest of large corporations, this “public opinion” is rebranded and redistributed for consumption. And those heterodox individuals who lie outside this framework of “public opinion” constitute the opposition and serve as fodder for the affirmation of said “public opinion” or what Sara Ahmed describes as “*the affective cost of not following the scripts of normative existence*” (107). It is the reimagining of our place within the Edenic drama indicative of the human situation in sin, and it is the of the very will and desire of an affective quality designed to resurrect the *self* continuously for the purposes of working out our future, yet at the cost of that very future (Arel 92). Thus, “by looking not only back but also forward and beyond death, archivization becomes a ‘source of creation’” (O’Gorman 13), and at the same time a shallow representation of the “countless shades of dead and gone” (Fagles *The Odyssey* 246-47). This *nekyia*, the rite by which we interrogate the dead; this *katabasis*, the descent into the underworld (our archive); and this *nekromanteía*, the conjuring of the undead, work together relentlessly as it relates to the archivization and archeology of the *ethos*, a fixed *ethos*. And as this conjuring pertains to the archeology of that archive, it is both the precipice and the abyss, and it bespeaks a rising totalitarian disposition as it relates to the mediation of pride and desire—it is the appropriation of *affective wealth* by capital, and its stranglehold on the very epideictic practices that threaten to enact the “slow cancellation of the future” (the failed arrival of class consciousness, the only logical next step in terms of
socio-economic progress), while invoking the “cliché caricature of ‘[a] pesky underworld creature populating particular loci [or] disturbing figures return[ed] from the dead bent on exacting revenge” (qtd in Hoag Rhetoric, Trauma, Mourning 152).

Despite presenting themselves to the world as a “woke,” social justice advocate, the real issue arises as the political Left, which historically detests large corporations, becomes so easily enraptured by this display of virtue (virtue based on shared grievances) that they succumb to the peddling of superficial political opinion. It is by harnessing the dead, or that digital being who has been “anthropomorphized as a deadly antagonist,” (O’Gorman 39) from the modern epideictic conjurer, social media user, that corporations succeed in masking their underlying yet clear motives, for the “consensus concerning behavior required by the public interest, or so it seems, actually has certain features of a staged ‘public opinion.’ Although public relations is supposed to stimulate, say, the sales of certain commodities, its effect always goes beyond this. Because publicity for specific products is generated indirectly via the detour of a feigned general interest” (Habermas Structural Transformation 194). It is this marriage between the undeniably corrupt interest of the private elite and the public sphere’s commitment to the disenfranchised that undermine our political discourse and the political sphere’s ability to perform their proper function within society: mediate unjust power structures and speak for those dispossessed by the inevitable complications of human hierarchy. If this is the case, then the public has succeeded in exchanging their virtues for a form of social currency. In other words, they’ve engaged in what can only be conceived of as a neo-capitalist enterprise and the subsequent refeudalization of society—the corporate erasure of ethics. After all, “affects are self-rewarding and self-punishing, because they inherently lack knowledge of the world and objects” (Leys 34).
However, several Twitter users, and many of the voices that exist on the subject, have even pointed out the ultimate failures of cancel culture to produce similar results when compared to the more general phenomenon of “calling someone out.” One Twitter user, @minyardists, states, “when has cancel culture affected anyone outside of social media? i mean, big name celebs that have been “canceled” still get jobs lmao they don’t care about a few tweets. the whole world doesn’t revolve around twitter. if there’s no real life consequences, it doesn’t exist [sic].”

Like Hagi, this is a very valid point to make, and it begins a very important discussion, not only in philosophy, but as to the effectiveness and legitimacy of certain epideictic practices. It imposes a great paradox: if cancel culture is so weak and unproductive in its capacity to shame, deride, and do exactly what it sets out to do, “cancel someone,” then why are so many circles worried, concerned, and put-off so-to-speak by its seemingly non-existent implications? The answer to this question is rather simple: certain epideictic practices themselves invoke entirely new, but not totally unrelated, community values. Just as epideictic practices reveal our community’s commitment to certain ethics, the manner in which that epideictic behavior is carried out or formulated does so too.

Just as there are two distinct latent values within the context of cancel culture, that of administering social indignation against the unjust and that of excessive censorship and excommunication, there are two corresponding notions of shame: “one retrospective and oriented toward the past, the other prospective and oriented toward the future” (Konstan 1039). Thus, as an affective, epideictic system, shame, in the context of cancel culture, takes after the former while call-out culture closely resonates with the later. By parsing out the two, we can begin to

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understand how both the seen and the foreseen interact within the parameters of shame. In the past, when the archive was much weaker, so-to-speak, such retrospections, such hindsight, was largely dependent on memory, and memories are most notably susceptible to alteration, manipulation, and misremembrances. Now, however, “memories can no longer be altered or avoided, save insofar as one can perhaps change the opinions that others hold of them and thus limit the damage to one’s status or repute” (Konstan 1040). As a result, and as it relates to two competing forms of shame and latent values, we might consider noting that shame, prior to the imbrication of man and technology, was inhibitory, not retroactive as it is in the here and now. Shame, then, in its connections with blame, was a mechanism by which people sought to avoid pain or personal failings in the future; it was not an instrument for dwelling in one’s past mistakes or crafting harmful repercussions for their living present. After all, in shames continual relationship to the modulation of pride and desire, “the close connection between shame and honor in fact allows for gradations in the phenomenological effects of shame. There is no reason why it must be experienced as an assault on one’s essential being” nor does it “suggest such drastic consequences” (Konstan 1044).

Furthermore, it is the non-corporeal quality of the specter, our personal ghost, that stands in stark contracts to our growing corporeality or increasingly tangible existence by way of the abstract persistence of our memories, trauma, mourning, and personal imperfections. In other words, the more persistent our ghost, the more concrete our human condition becomes. As stated previously, it is that which resurrects the boundaries (limitations) of humanism: its nakedness, its vulnerability, its susceptibility to shame, and its dependency on social reciprocity and acceptance. To put it otherwise, we are gradually returning to a naked state of being. We as living beings have become exposed under such rapidly changing conditions engineered via
technological progress, and we have become both inadvertently powerful yet fragile in a new and dynamic set of ways as it relates to how we communicate affectively. Our bodies have become rather sensitive, but our social practices have yet to adjust. If man is to become so weakened under technological conditions, then he must increasingly treat others with care. Because our ability to fail has remained static and unchanged, Twitterstorms and offensive content in mass standing as evidence of this reality, we have no option but to resituate our moral and ethical assessment of others and our responsibility to one another. For unlike the past where “everybody knows that they are constantly being judged, nobody hides that they are acting like judges, and nobody hides that they seek to be judged positively,” we feign such sentiments in outward attempts to save face (qtd in Konstan 1042). Meaning that we, in the present, are falsely assured that we are open, understanding, and naturally attenuated to the fair and balanced judgments of others, when, in fact, we are not. As we go through our daily lives quite passively and without judgement, many of us are shocked and horrified by how quickly we can be rebranded in modern discourse communities given the event of a tweet gone viral. As such, “tension between its inhibitory and its posteriori manifestations, the relation between judgments concerning specific actions and those concerning the self as a whole, and the role of responsibility versus events beyond our control” is rapidly deteriorating under our technological disposition (Konstan 1046).

And, again, unlike call-out culture, cancel culture in particular seems to invoke in our community ghastly images of, again, Orwellian nightmares, but also our collective memory of unjust and unfair public displays of ridicule: stocks, pillories, gibbets, scaffolding, and any other form of flagellation that might invoke the abject realization that people often find pleasure in pain—or, at the very least, find a sense of elation or a sense of relief at the very thought of not being “you” in a given set of circumstances. Ultimately, there is a latent fear of being self-
gratified by someone else’s suffering or tragic fall because it reduces society to the amoral framework that is “two wrongs make a right,” and it reveals something about our own character, about the human condition, that we wish to hide, bury, or otherwise make absent. Such behaviors are, fundamentally, rooted in the psychology of humiliation, schadenfreude, and ressentiment, and “[t]hey can indeed themselves be called archives du mal—archives of evil (or suffering)—because they not only leave an impression but hide their impression” (qtd in Hoag Rhetoric, Trauma, Mourning 12). And though the overwhelming majority of attempts to call someone out (call-out culture, or the positive end of this epideictic spectrum) are justified, cancel culture as a whole has failed to garner much respect within virtual communities and broader society (with many remaining unaware of its existence or seemingly present yet absent implications), and it appears to have failed to attach itself effectively to the plight of modern social justice—though it does retain a presence within certain online communities.

Ultimately, the fundamental way this phenomenon manifests itself is through modern outrage culture. It is through the use of shame, namely based in and driven by the affect and the emotive implications thereof, that seeks to socially engineer behavioral norms and override critical public discourse as a means of solution-based dialogue. This means that capitalism becomes the moral arbiter of our societies and, in time, our feudal lord. We as citizens must pay homage to their landholding (capitalist) tendencies in exchange for token reprisals of the smaller and discernably benign other. This process manifests itself in the form of the epideictic, praise-and-blame, and seeks to capitalize on rising cultural norms and implement them as a mainstay in modern marketing and advertising strategy. And though this activity has clear and dangerous

37 A portmanteau of German schaden “damage, harm” and freude “joy” and literally translates to “harm-joy.” It has been used in psychology to describe the pleasure derived from bearing witness to someone else’s misfortune.
repercussions for society, namely the application of virtue signaling (the public expression of sentiment to demonstrate one’s moral character) as a means of social control and political allure, our consumer culture is all too eager to respond to such “signaling” with praise (a channeling of an exigent ethos) as corporations seek to consolidate their efforts in the form of wealth—a means to obtain social and political power. Thus, it is “because private enterprises evoke in their customers the idea that in their consumption decisions they act in their capacity as citizens, the state has to ‘address’ its citizens like consumers. As a result, public authority too competes for publicity” (Habermas Structural Transformation 195). Hence, as it relates to our socio-political environment, our epideictic system is twofold: on the one hand is the bourgeois elite and on the other is proletariat elite—and struggling, fighting, and altogether drowning at the center of the two is the individual and source of power for either hegemonic force.

As a result, what truly embodies our current technological disposition is our socio-economic relationship to one another. It is the reality that “disciplines take their specificity not from the objects of their attention but from the specific protocols of their discourses” (Wolfe 113). It is the manipulation of the affect, a system of motivation which is separate from baser drives, which permits “gestures of shame [to] modulate pride and desire” (Arel 78). For millennia, this practice has constituted the outward expression of power and has served to debase the natural instinct of the public sphere to administer novel and enlightened criticism of authority. And though we do engage critically with complex social issues, our epideictic system is often misdirected and preordained because “although shame is often activated by confrontation with other human beings, it is also activated by excitement about impersonal objects or activities which are both interrupted and attenuated” (Tomkins 289). That interruption likely being the mundanity of life, the manipulation of emotive categories provokes our aforementioned sense of
desire or pride at will. Thus, as it encapsulates the *pathos* of the individual, capitalist structures make light of the human subject and invoke what Donna Haraway refers to as the “‘final’ irony since the cyborg [the very posthuman subjectivity that capital must refute in order to stall class consciousness] is also the awful apocalyptic *telos* of the ‘West’s’ escalating domination of abstract individuation” (292). In other words, the epideictic conjurer is also the mechanism by which our varied ways of enacting change in the world may finally be reconciled. And, in a way, cancel culture itself must be canceled: for the subtext, the underlying causality of our social anxieties and concerns, must be redirected, and we must once again understand that there are indeed favorable categories of “being” rooted deep within our ritualistic practices—our desire to mold and shape our socio-cultural landscape to that of a promised community, a place where social reciprocity, not social indignation, is primary, and the knowledge that adopting responsibility for these goals, not administering shame and proliferating sin, represents progress.
Figure 3.1
Lacie Pound from episode 1 of season 3 of the tv series *Black Mirror*. It portrays her social credit rating as determined by her peers in a dystopian future where arbitrary social standing is the basis for human value.

Figure 3.2
Hong Kong protesters appealing to President Donald J. Trump to liberate the people of China from government overreach.
Figure 3.3
A snapshot from Mark Meecham’s infamous “M8 Yer Dugs A Nazi” video from April of 2016

Figure 3.4
A photo from @kmlefranc’s Twitter profile showing the 300+ page document allegedly given to him from his employers through the services offered at Fama. It details every tweet he ever liked that could be deemed unfavorable: e.g. alcohol and poor language
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

We need to learn, or re-learn, how to build comradeship and solidarity instead of doing capital’s work for it by condemning and abusing each other. This doesn’t mean, of course, that we must always agree—on the contrary, we must create conditions where disagreement can take place without fear of exclusion and excommunication.

—Mark Fisher, “Exiting the Vampire Castle”

The State of Apology

Under these conditions, many will wonder as to whether or not something must be intentional in order to be an offense, though perfectly offensive, as it relates to taking on a justified position of guilt, and the answer is, to some degree, yes. For example, if the assessment of such actions does not make a clear distinction between the speaker as, let’s say, racist, sexist, or homophobic and the artifact as such, then the motivation or the source behind such a claim becomes disingenuous. In other words, to say that intentions do not matter is to say that discourse itself does not matter. This delineation of blame, therefore, ceases to be a tool for dialogue, and claims of racism, sexism, and any and all other ists and isms become synonymous with blasphemer, non-believer, and heretic. These accusations become inauthentic as their legitimacy relies solely on the reticent pathos of their subject: i.e. I’m offended, and I find this racist/ sexist and thus it is real. Such a paradigm abandons Western notions of an adversarial judicial process, or what we often communicate culturally through the expression “innocent until proven guilty.” However, it is a purely cultural network that exists outside the rule of law. It is
the public sphere as it relays and communicates its own values and its own sense of justice. It is a staunch indicator that our current governing institutions, being equally cultural and passed down from many eras and generations before us, are at odds with the modern conceptualization of what is good and just. Our social tendencies no longer reflect our broader, Western ethos—perhaps they never have.

And herein lies the underlying hypocrisy of the archive and of modern social indexing: the archive, the specter, is only ever used to condemn, never to exonerate. In the case of Baker, an investigation into the archive would have revealed an overwhelming lack of supporting evidence with which to label Baker a racist; however, it doesn’t really matter. In that moment, that blunder, Baker becomes a source of ressentiment and object of affiliation—a place where those disenfranchised can condemn and abuse someone and direct all of their frustration and anger. Under this paradigm, the individual becomes static, unmoving, fixed, and, most of all, unforgiven. If we adopt the example of Baker above, and the refusal of intent, then, by way of analogy, every misremembrance, any incorrect statement, poorly worded information, or error on the part of the human subject de facto and retrospectively makes us all liars. This, obviously, is not the case. We consistently and openly accept intent as a valid point of discourse in our everyday lives. And though it is most often afforded those whom we know intimately and whom we trust, it is ultimately our inability to extend such courtesies to those outside our purview that resonates with and is indicative of the separation and anxiety embedded with social media: its alienating, callous, and detritus effects on human interaction, or its plasticity as a medium primed for the othering of individuals.

The underlying reality is that faith and forgiveness, apologies and reconciliation, are just another form of discourse, and all discourse is a two-way street. It operates on that
aforementioned faith in one’s community to receive and, by way of agreement, nullify them of their actions so that they can reenter and reinsert themselves in their community as a wholly new and transformed human subject. Cancel culture denies such an ameliorative social framework predicated on trust, though it equally fails to undo it. And regardless of its current failure to render the individual obsolete or entirely bar them socially, its effects will likely compound over time and warp our social interactions. As a result, the state of apology is rather grim. Indeed, it is true that the rhetor is the one responsible for what they say or do: i.e. racist, sexist, or homophobic rhetoric; however, equal responsibility falls on those rhetors who choose to take offense to said rhetoric. After all, the audience, the receiver, has the option to defer from such speech and opt to utilize their own perspectives and points of view in disagreement. As a whole, when we choose to speak, we accept the responsibility that entails because it is that freedom and responsibility are one in the same; thus, to accept the concept of free speech itself is to agree and take responsibility. It is to have always already been in a contract with one’s community and have already accepted the repercussions of freedom and responsibility while at the same time knowing and accepting what it means for anyone to be able to speak at all: pain. And if pain is about anything, it is about the future, not the past. It is a means for creating new behaviors and ways of being, not dwelling on decades old slights and reprimanding individuals who are by all accounts no longer a kairotic subject for which to add context to today’s rhetorical acts. What we seem to have forgotten as a society is that free speech is the very condition wherein one gives offense and takes offense and that outside of such stipulations, neither exist. When not situated within the context of freedom, an authoritarian state, one does not offend or take offense; one simply does as they are told, and their feelings are merely a liability.
What seems to be misunderstood in the modern realm of discourse is that concepts rooted in free speech developed out of not only a need to take offense, but a desire to: i.e. the inverse is much worse, and we have forgotten that. Thus, via contract, as we seek to reprimand individuals for perceived politically incorrect behavior, we too are adopting just as much responsibility within this dialectic of freedom as the perceived offender, and, most significantly, we take on greater responsibility: to show better character, to act with the care and attention they lack, to listen, to see to it that this person reconciles with their peers in a healthy manner, and to allow them to re-enter the social sphere smoothly for fear of alienating and radicalizing them. Perhaps, in the future, we will call it restorative justice. In the end, forgiveness and leading by example are tried and proven methods of correcting human behavior. Positive reinforcement always outweighs and outproduces negative reinforcement. The average individual (barring sociopathic behavior) is both enlightened and humbled by its community’s commitment to reestablishing a connection regardless of the otherwise symptomatic behavior of its members. After all, what is true for society is true for the individual, and what is true for the individual is true for society. When we cease to view modern iterations of racism, sexism, and homophobia, etc. as mostly symptomatic of larger, much more fearsome, hegemonic forces held over and retained from decades and centuries past, we engage in just such behavior: merely treating the symptoms, not the underlying disease.

In review of Kevin Hart’s case, then, it is easy to stipulate that the lackluster, dishonest, and halfhearted apologies on the part of Hart are merely a refraction, a reflection, of the state of our community. Hart’s behavior is a mirror image of the same poor qualities held by our society, and the position of Hart and so many others indicates the same halfhearted behavior because their behavior demonstrates a lack of faith in their community to receive them fairly and with
open arms. And, again, this is not to absolve individuals of responsibility; it is merely to remind and reestablish that there are little to no positions within the greater discourse community where any one party is entirely absolved of responsibility, nor does it ever benefit them or society to do so. When we start our accusations at racism or guilty until proven innocent and work our way backwards, we simply cause collateral damage and sow social division. It appears Hart needs to work on apologizing with a bit more tact and sincerity; however, we as a community might consider our own role in creating the conditions where an apology is equivalent to an admission of guilt and an opportunity for mobbing, doxing, and the accrual of social capital on the part of the one who cancels the individual for their actions on social media; thus, enacting that aspect of praise that is parcel of blame, for the individual who blames the other de facto, or more often than not, praises the self in the context of cancel culture.

As it stands, cancel culture, by its very nature, is a void. It is the deletion or cancellation of cultural phenomenon. It is not a restorative process. It is pure absence, and the only presence invoked in that empty space is that of fear and unrest in the wake of the unknown: the titular and ever-present fear of deletion, cancellation, and abandonment. It is above all others the true mechanism by which lost futures, or, again, that reassessment or reestablishment of the Derridean specter, or that spectrality wrought from the always becoming yet never realized qualities of Marxist ecologies, occur. It is ressentiment, and the absence of that which one believes to be rightfully theirs or what should otherwise “be.” It is willful betrayal of principles rooted in community, progress, and development. And the only thing that stays this epideictic pursuit is its eventual loss of appetite and attention. Ironically, the primary apparatus by which one is freed from the grips of cancel culture is to be truly forgotten, lost, and made absent. Only then is the job done, completed, and at the same time resolved. As a result, the aforementioned
function of shame in this context comes to “refer to a desire to ‘disappear from view’ or ‘comportment that [which] would avoid the emotion (the obverse of shamelessness) [sic]’” (Konstan 1039). And this is our potential future, a place where the rhetoric surrounding forgiveness is so shallow and veneer that doubling down and remaining unapologetic is ultimately the most effective way to counter social reprisal and condemnation. Thus, neither member engaged in said epideictic discourse possesses any axiom for self-reflection or transformation. Their position becomes equally as static as the archive itself, and our disposition comes to resonate with the cold and unfeeling stream of data and systematic bookkeeping of social indexing.

**Fear and Unrest**

In final reflection, this study concludes with an introspective look at Mark Fisher’s critical essay “Exiting the Vampire Castle” and the manner in which it informs the assertions made thus far: that cancel culture is best understood not only as rhetoric, but as a posthuman practice, that it is fundamentally capitalist culture, and that, as propagated by the posthuman subject that is the epideictic conjurer, cancel culture is a manifestation of social anxieties and concerns that parallel the concept of “lost futures,” or the inability of our current culture to truly achieve class consciousness under capitalist hegemony. In the end, cancel culture, or the manner in which modern epideictic practices persist, does indeed invoke a new set of latent values that parallels and contends with the ones we advocate for as a society. In other words, just as epideictic practices are indicative of latent social values, its performative qualities equally point to a new subset of anxieties, concerns, and altogether forgotten social values. Within the confines of cancel culture, two sets of community values are at odds. And while call-out culture and
cancel culture exist within the same genre, they have unique features that separate them as two distinct epideictic practices: social justice versus mob justice. As a result, cancel culture remains ineffective, and people are never truly canceled, while failed class consciousness transforms into an obsession with individual purity and past expressions on social media.

In review of the analysis conducted here, it is important to understand, perhaps reestablish, the qualities that separate call-out culture from that of cancel culture: in what is fundamentally a form of doxing, cancel culture 1) requires social engineering and psychological manipulation, 2) a deeply biased and poorly framed representation of the individuals social standing and the circumstances under which they are being harassed, and 3) the broadcasting or wide distribution of someone else’s information—often information that is years if not decades old. Cancel culture separates from what we refer to today as call-out culture in its underlying reality: social issues are best resolved by carrying out the poised and unrelenting condemnation of banal actions (Hart, Baker, Charles, Sacco, Meecham), not by thorough assessment and deconstruction of those in power (Weinstein, Rosselló, Kavanagh). As a result, hostility towards those who share our social anxieties and concerns is heightened on the basis that a few, in fact most of us, in a very capitalist manner, fail to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps or match the intensity with which modern social practices ask us to perform, remain performative, and never fail or flounder within the confines of rapidly transforming social norms. This attempted self-correcting system that feigns general interest in the public good does little more than intensify social animosity and replace it with what would constitute shared reciprocity as expressed through class solidarity. As a result, our ideals—egalitarianism, equality, and even the somewhat unattainable notion of equity—go unrealized as we oscillate, forever unmoored, from that promised community: an atmosphere that is “anti-racist and anti-sexist, but refreshingly free of
the paralysing feeling of guilt and suspicion which hangs over left-wing twitter like an acrid, stifling fog” and a place where enmity may finally be overcome or that very place most of us occupy now in pockets, in isolation, and in the confines of the interactions we share with our peers, friends, loved ones, family members, and coworkers. (Fisher K-Punk 738). The Twitterstorm that defines this phenomenon, after all, is non-representative of our shared and lived reality or what Jürgen Habermas refers to as the “discontinuity in everyday life” (“Modernity Versus Postmodernity” 5).

As it relates to cancel culture as capitalist culture, it is important to reflect on Fisher’s assertion that cancel culture, the Vampire’s Castle, “was born the moment when the struggle not to be defined by identitarian categories became the quest to have ‘identities’ recognised by a bourgeois big Other” (Fisher “Exiting the Vampire Castle” 740-41). As it stands, our modern epideictic system, the rituals and practices that dictate the delineation of praise and blame within our society, is rooted in neo-liberal social norms. And nowhere else is this stated more clearly than through the words of Mark Fisher: we have ultimately entered a space where the invisibility of class persists “not because we are terrorised by the right, but because we have allowed bourgeois modes of subjectivity to contaminate our movement” (740). It is the Vampire’s Castle, as illustrated by Fisher, that is extra-representational of that aforementioned specialization in the deconstruction of the individual’s ethos via the constant demonization and incitement of all past, current, and possible social media expressions. It is this fixation on condemning and abusing one another that is so dependent on our past, our trauma, and the mourning we hold towards a history rife with social injustice that enables and ennobles us to carry out the social alienation of one another under the pretense of virtue and rampant moralism, or that place “where class has disappeared, but moralism is everywhere, where solidarity is impossible, but guilt and fear are
omnipresent” (Fisher *K-Punk* 740). Thus, as a reactionary movement or set of behaviors, cancel culture, as identified by scholars such as Jodie Nicotra and Mark Fisher long before its formal diagnosis, bespeaks a growing inability to communicate across such boundaries. It refuses all the communal markers we share: economic anxieties, health concerns, education reform, climate change, and even the very concept of individual liberty and freedom itself, and, instead, opts for a culture that perpetuates tokenism, or that which is dependent on menial and self-satisfying identifiers to signal its moral position and personal frustrations in an attempt to occupy the center or a position of attention within a broader interest group: woman/ man, black/ white, gay/ straight, non-binary/ cis, and left/ right.

As a rhetorical and posthuman *practice*, however, the specter of the *self*, this epideictic conjurer, is best understood as a faded disposition on the part of the posthuman subject, for their behavior—the act of doxing, canceling, deplatforming, and faux boycotting through social outrage—is just as invisible to them as class is to all those who subsist under the socio-economic conditions of capital. Class is but a subtext underneath the enormity of material capital that sidelines, marginalizes, and dismisses our underlying social anxieties. Thus, to consider its potentiality, its capacity to forestall and stagnate our cultural and technological condition, is to come to terms with the fleeting, ephemeral nature of modern discourse. It is *practice* as constituted by the “*embodied, materially mediated array of activities*” (Boyle “Writing and Rhetoric and/ as Posthuman Practice” 544), and it is how epideictic *practices* become *performative* as our ability “to receive, translate, and produce telegraphic signals and, in the process, *disappear*” matches in strength cybernetic capital’s grip on technologically mediated ways of becoming (Boyle *Rhetoric as a Posthuman Practice* 27). Under these conditions, the posthuman subject’s “attention [is] free for something else” or, if restated, absent and altogether
unconscious of one’s technologically mediated behaviors and actions: i.e. cancel culture (Boyle Rhetoric as a Posthuman Practice 29). In response to these conditions, every facet of our lives mirrors the practices of late-stage Capitalism and seeks to bury discourse under the restraint of social capital. And unlike spectre of Marx or the spectre of absolute freedom conceptualized by Haraway’s cyborg, the success of capitalist hegemony lies not in its ability to motivate large sums of people into action but leave them motionless and seemingly preoccupied. It is a system of containment that is dependent on the socio-economic illiteracy of its consumers. And within the digital sphere, its attachment to shame undergoes immense misdirection and falls flat as we cascade through the infinite social apparatus of online hypermediacy. In its material formation, perhaps its Christian formation or that previously mentioned economics of sin and redemption, the epideictic is catastrophically reduced to instances of isolated self-satisfaction and self-aggrandizement.

Class consciousness, then, is best represented by what Cary Wolfe refers to as “the spectrality of the ghosts here on display” or that which “might well be understood as the exteriority and embodiment—what Derrida calls the ‘living-on [sur-vie]’—that resists forms of digital rendering” (Wolfe 285). It is class struggle, after all, that remains ignored by the archivization and indexing of social media, or what we might call our social gaze or that which has not be realized, made public, or recognized by the posthuman subject due to the veil of social currency and any and all other forms of capital; for just “as digitalization is itself indissociable from the globalization of capitalism, and in particular capitalism’s tightening of the relationship between information and commodification” (Wolfe 285-86), class is inseparable from our social practices or those who are, and have always existed in, a posthuman reality, or that which both intimately and confidently “comes both before and after humanism” (Wolfe xv). It is suffused
with “our capacity to truly understand or prehend fragility, finality, death, dying, torture, extinction and brutality, and our increasing anxieties about the future when the human (as a generic and unmarked) species is displaced from its fantasy of mastery” (Blackman 15), and becomes a system of moral self-mastery (not a mastery or control of the other) only when contained within a “posthuman philosophy of death” (Braidotti 108). Meaning that in order for the “affirmation of the positivity of difference” (Braidotti 11) to emerge, the posthumanities cannot make light of one group over the other or constitute grounds that would allow for mass dehumanization on the basis of race, sex, or conceived otherness; in fact, it must transcend notions concerning the self and other as a harsh binary and instead view them as intermingled and vastly nuanced encounters amongst innumerable human bodies that seek alliance.

With these exteriorities and interiorities in place, posthuman theory, with regards to its truly panhuman, technological, and cybernetic form, must become “a generative tool to help us re-think the basic unit of reference for the human in the bio-genetic age” (Braidotti 5). This is made so when we recognize “a sort of mutual dependence between the flesh and the machine” or that codependency between the self and the other (Braidotti 113). As a pure egalitarian framework, the posthuman, as repositioned through Haraway’s conceptualization of the cyborg, “provokes elation but also anxiety” (Braidotti 2) because cancel culture, as a byproduct of our posthuman cultural framework or neo-capitalist posthuman empire, “in all the inscrutability of its hauntology, appears to announce, promise, conceal another subjectivity: posthuman subjectivities, in their othering to the human, in which the human might yet, very paradoxically, be self-transgressing itself—and in a willed way” (Callus and Herbrechter 253), or as posited by both Katherine Hayles and Casey Boyle, is “actually intensifying a liberal humanist tradition rather than breaking from it” (Boyle 65). It is through cancel culture that a dark alliance forms
between those who represent the posthuman empire, the capitalist or corporatist, and those who represent the affective labor of modern progressive movements. As posthuman subjects, we promote neoliberal modes of being such as hyper-individuality and free-market principles when we castigate and reprise the individual who breaks from normative existence by way of politically incorrect speech or behavior. And even though such epideictic practices mostly persist through minimal online dialogues and Twitter based rants, it reflects poorly on the epideictic system that seeks “restorative balance through rhetorical deliberation” (Chaput 3).

While our all too human epideictic practices play themselves out across a budding posthuman/technologically mediated environment, two competing sets of values begin to manifest within our socio-cultural subconscious and rise to the surface: that of discrimination and harm directed towards an individual on the basis of race, sex, or gender, and growing concerns about social condemnation, apathetic moralism, public humiliation, and the ever present reality of state, corporate, or neoliberal practices restricting an individual from socio-economic access. In the end, cancel culture and similar epideictic practices lack the capacity to produce such conditions; however, they do have the potentiality to alter our ambient surroundings: producing suspicion and paranoia in a society otherwise held together by principles rooted in free-expression, liberal social practices, and the embracement of the other. Yet, in spite of this, our modern epideictic practices point to “a ‘left’ that replaces class politics with a moralizing individualism, and that, far from building solidarity, spreads fear and insecurity” (Fisher K-Punk 744). It is the result of the communicative capitalism and the capitalist cyberspace that dictate our social interactions via mass communications, the posthuman, itself. It is a neoliberal bourgeois invasion of a moral philosophy that would otherwise deepen and reactivate the cause of class struggle. In the end, it is a refusal to accept
that the posthuman is defined by an inheritance of sorts, a humanist tradition, and, in our case, capitalist traditions. After all, “men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx *The Eighteenth Brumaire* 5).


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