2021

# The Uncanny Swipe Drive: The Return of a Racist Mode of Algorithmic Thought on Dating Apps

Gregory Narr
*CUNY Graduate Center*

# The Uncanny Swipe Drive: The Return of a Racist Mode of Algorithmic Thought on Dating Apps

Gregory Narr[a]*

[a]*Sociology Department, Graduate Center, CUNY, New York, USA*

*gnarr@gradcenter.cuny.edu

Gregory Narr is a Ph.D. candidate working on his dissertation on dating apps entitled *Dating Apps, or, Ghosts in the Viral Affect Machine*, where he investigates the transition from dating websites to dating apps as an effect of today's increasingly affective mode of capitalism.

# The Uncanny Swipe Drive: The Return of a Racist Mode of Algorithmic Thought on Dating Apps

As algorithmic media amplify longstanding social oppression, they also seek to colonize every last bit of sociality where that oppression could be resisted. Swipe apps constitute prototypical examples of this dynamic. By employing protocols that foster absent-minded engagement, they allow unconscious racial preferences to be expressed without troubling users' perceptions of themselves as non-racist. These preferences are then measured by recommender systems that treat "attractiveness" as a zero-sum game, allocate affective flows according to the winners and losers of those games, and ultimately amplify the salience of race as a factor of success for finding intimacy. In thus priming users to disassociate their behaviours from troubling networked effects, swipe apps recursively couple their unconscious biases with biased outcomes in a pernicious feedback loop. To resist this ideological severing of the personal from the networked, this paper analyses interviews from fifty online daters through a lens formulated as the "uncanny user unconscious." This lens allows for the affective registration of abhorrent modes of distributed thoughts disavowed by the very users they are created from and coupled with. It may thus afford those seeking more ethical protocols of engagement some purchase on the all too familiar biases some algorithms both amplify and repress.

# The Uncanny Swipe Drive: The Return of a Racist Mode of Algorithmic Thought on Dating Apps

## Introduction

As scholars decry algorithmic oppression with increasing alarm, they also describe it as colonizing every last bit of sociality where it could be resisted. Swipe apps constitute a prototypical example of this development. By employing protocols that foster absent-minded engagement, they allow unconscious racial preferences to be expressed without troubling users' perceptions of themselves as non-racist. These preferences are then measured by recommender systems that treat "attractiveness" as a zero-sum game. Distributing digital traces of desire according to the winners and losers of those games, they then amplify the salience of race as a factor of success for finding intimate connections. So by allowing users to disassociate their behaviours from networked effects, swipe apps are able to recursively couple their unconscious biases with those effects in a pernicious feedback loop.

To resist this severing of the personal from the networked, I analyse fifty interviews of online daters through a lens I call the "uncanny user unconscious." This lens situates the disavowed digital traces Patricia Clough has formulated as the "user unconscious" within Sigmund Freud's understanding of the uncanny: an ominous foreboding stemming from the imminent return of traumatic thoughts "long familiar to the psyche" but "estranged from it" via repression (Clough, 2018a; Freud, 2003, p. 148). This lens will hopefully allow scholars, users, and creators to affectively register abhorrent modes of distributed thought disavowed by the very users they are created from and coupled with. Gaining purchase on the all too familiar biases platforms both amplify and repress might then allow more ethical protocols of engagement to be

delimited, sought out, and devised. This theoretical lens is described in more detail following the literature review below.

## *Literature review: racial bias in algorithmic media and dating platforms*

### *Racial bias in algorithmic media*

Much has been written about the amplification of inequality through algorithmic media (Pasquale, 2016; Srnicek, 2016). Deemed "weapons of math destruction" (O'Neil, 2016), "artificial unintelligence" (Broussard, 2018), "algorithms of oppression" (Noble, 2018), and the "new Jim Code" (Benjamin, 2019), they seem to be turning every last bit of life into digital grist for the analytic gaze of big data (Beer, 2018; Couldry & Mejias, 2019). The amplification of racial bias is central to many of these critiques of algorithmic media (Benjamin, 2019; Cheney-Lippold, 2017; Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Noble, 2018; O'Neil, 2016).

Noble (2018) shows how Google marginalizes people at the intersection of oppressions by allowing the porn industry to purchase any keyword it wants. This amplifies a pornographic white male gaze that views black girls as fetishized sex objects, mapping "old media traditions into new media architecture" through ostensibly colour-blind algorithms (2018, p. 24). The circulation of misrepresentative information of maligned groups in society is thus very profitable for Google. And its racism should be seen as symptomatic of racial bias deeply embedded within society rather than an unfortunate glitch. To fix these algorithms of oppression, Noble contends we must demand greater transparency in how they function. According to her, this would allow us to "transform the consciousness embedded in artificial intelligence, since it is in fact, in part, a product of our own collective creation" (2018, p. 29).

Transforming this collective consciousness will not be easy. Indeed, Benjamin (2019) finds that black people are often disenfranchised by the very tech fixes devised to benefit them. But she warns we should not see this as a concerted effort by racist programmers to keep black people down. In fact, the effort to call out individual racism often distracts us from the slow death perpetuated by "subtler and even alluring forms of coded inequality" that go on under the radar (Benjamin, 2019, p. 24). A beauty contest conducted by Beauty AI illustrates this point. Programmed to determine beauty through pre-labelled images, it ultimately deemed white people to be the most beautiful because it learned from images labelled by people with racial biases. Thus, we should strive to make sure the data that machines learn from are unbiased. If they were, AI could help us "subvert the status quo by exposing and authenticating the existence of systemic inequality" and, ultimately, allow us to "come to grips with our deeply held cultural and institutionalized biases" (2019, p. 65).

The transparency and oversight Noble and Benjamin see as solutions to the problem of anti-black bias in algorithmic media is questioned by Keeling (2019). She describes the roots of today's digital inequality as stemming from financial "futures" devised to protect investments in black bodies during the slave trade. Chattel slavery should thus be seen as "the foundation for present relations of exploitation and domination" within today's economy based on financial speculation (Keeling, 2019, p. 24). Coming to terms with this historical trauma is difficult because multicultural neoliberalism profits from representations that celebrate racial difference, while maintaining socioeconomic relations rooted in white supremacy. This makes it clear that "the benefits of visibility are unevenly distributed" within today's methods of measure and recognition (Keeling, 2019, pp. 100–111).

Algorithmic media is also working to colonize every last space where a critique of it could take place, according to Couldry and Mejias (2019). They explain that data colonialism has roots going back to the 16th century, but rather than capture populations and annex territories, it forces sociality through economically exploitable protocols. In this way, it has supplanted the democratic potential of user-to-user interaction with a cloud empire. In this empire, users no longer produce or own anything; rather, they rent data from the cloud while providing it with free data. And as the internet of things takes over the home for big-data ventures, mobile phones never allow a moment's reprieve from corporate surveillance. These new data relations allow media to extract a profit from people even as their purchasing power has dwindled from decades of neoliberal policies. The terms digital "natives" and data "mining" render explicit the link between the cloud empire and datafication, exploitation and machine learning, colonization of lives and algorithmic speculation. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this colonization is that corporations now produce the data from which knowledge of the social is formed. It is thus threatening to fashion knowledge of the world and our imagination in its own image (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

*Racial bias on dating platforms*

Dating platforms have also been critiqued for their racial biases. Studies of dating sites have found their users have more pronounced racial preferences than their search criteria would suggest (Alhabash et al., 2014; Anderson et al., 2014); women return more messages from men of equal to more desired racial statuses on them; and black women receive fewer responses on them from everyone except black men (Lin & Lundquist, 2013; Rudder, 2015). Furthermore, recommender systems can treat new

users who do not have revealed[1] preferences as though they are long-term users with similar profiles (T. Wang et al., 2011). This would make it impossible to circumvent the racial biases of the entire network of past and present users on dating platforms. It has also been found that increasing the size of photos on OkCupid amplifies the effect of "attractiveness" on the number of messages users receive (Rudder, 2015, p. 123). This indicates that the centrality of images on swipe apps is likely to amplify racial bias on them because this bias is imbedded in "attractiveness" scores generated from pooled preferences of online daters. Some have also found that profiles on apps catering to the LGBTQ community are racist (Hutson et al., 2018). They thus suggest that dating platforms should carefully consider the categories they allow users to filter for, do a better job of monitoring messages, and inform users of the detrimental effects of racist language on profiles (Hutson et al., 2018). While these are good suggestions, they are unlikely to alter liking and messaging patterns, which are influenced more by recommender systems than written content on profiles and messages. These suggestions also do not address the shift from dating websites to apps, where users are increasingly recommended to each other according to interactive data such as liking and messaging patterns rather than deliberate search queries and profile descriptions.

This ignoring of the shift to interactive data is largely due to the proprietary nature of the big data captured by platforms and the algorithms they use to analyse it. But media scholars have begun interrogating digital platforms through the lens of algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2017). In these studies, users have been found to alter their engagement on Facebook and Instagram to ensure their posts are prominently

---

[1] Revealed preferences are "revealed" by liking and messaging patterns of users rather than what they say they want on profiles or indicate what they want through search criteria.

placed (Bucher, 2017; Cotter, 2019), avoid unwanted connections by not using certain words and providing screenshots instead of links (van der Nagel, 2018), exchange views on algorithmic manipulation of users emotions (Hallinan et al., 2020), and make information about algorithms more widely available (Cotter, 2019). In this way, some algorithmic imaginaries circumvent platforms' attempts to strategically disclose how their algorithms function to some, while hiding this information from others (Cotter, 2019).

While online dating has quickly surpassed other ways of finding sexual partners (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012), with over 40 percent of couples having met online by 2017 (Rosenfeld et al., 2019), the way algorithms on dating platforms make users feel is unclear. It has been found that couples who met online experience lower rates of divorce and express more satisfaction than those who met via other means (Cacioppo et al., 2013). This suggests that the algorithms employed by dating platforms may lead to better relationship outcomes. But scholars contend there is no scientific evidence that algorithms can predict compatibility (Finkel et al., 2012; Hitsch et al., 2010; Joel et al., 2017a). Perhaps, then, it is belief in algorithms that explains these positive outcomes, as this leads to more personal disclosure and less uncertainty before a date (Sharabi, 2020). It has also been found that online daters are not usually aware of the precise formulation of matching algorithms (Sharabi & Dykstra-DeVette, 2019), do not usually take issue with the way recommendations are made by them (Lorenza Parisi & Comunello, 2020), and consider them to be innocuous ritual tools, even when problematic historical biases are embedded in them (S. Wang, 2020).

While the algorithmic imaginary is a way of studying algorithms without having access to their precise formulation, the critique proposed in this paper builds from a comparison of OkCupid's and Tinder's algorithmic recommender systems. I go into

more detail about these systems in the discussion. But for now, it should be noted that whereas OkCupid's Match system assumes idiosyncratic attraction based on many user-adjustable variables, Tinder's "attractiveness" scale assumes attraction to be a universal quality measurable by the ratio of right to left swipes users receive. I propose that these differences make Tinder a prototypical platform for understanding the way life and subjectivity is being appified today, a process which some have argued began around 2010 (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Light et al., 2016). The transition from OkCupid to swipe apps that many of my respondents made indicates an acceleration of neoliberal competition, hierarchization, and control. But it also constitutes a shift form neoliberalism. This is because entrepreneurs of themselves are less central to today's economy. Indeed, the affective flows of communication in today's mediasphere renders user rationality tangential, if not largely incompatible, with profit making.

While debates over whether dating apps are superficial (David & Cambre, 2016) or not (Carpenter & McEwan, 2016; Enomoto et al., 2017; Hobbs et al., 2016) have been a point of contention, this paper addresses the shift from dating sites to apps in terms of its impact on race. This shift seems to have created an affective milieu well-suited for implicit racism to flourish. Implicit racism is an unconscious bias that leads one to overvalue races that society privileges and undervalue races that society disadvantages (Dovidio et al., 2016). These unconscious biases become ingrained in psyches at a young age because of racist media and social structures within the United States. This unconscious racism is increasingly at odds with the non-racist worldview that many hold, a disconnect between unconscious and conscious thoughts that has been called "aversive racism" (Dovidio et al., 2016). Unconscious racism becomes more pronounced in those with aversive racism when it is easier to discriminate against

certain races without troubling one's self-image as non-prejudiced. An important through line in this paper is that swipe apps constitute one such context.

Given this milieu of swipe apps, where unconscious racism can easily become embedded in coded protocols determining social life and death against users' wishes, a framework seems needed to allow users to gain some purchase on how they are being used by them. To that end, I argue that swipe apps should be seen through the theoretical lens of the uncanny user unconscious, which I develop below.

### *Theoretical lens: from the death drive to the uncanny user unconscious*

This theoretical lens situates the death drive and biopower within the user unconscious and, in turn, embeds the user unconscious within the uncanny. It is split into three sections: first, resonances between biopolitics and the death drive are highlighted; second, the implications of information theory for understanding the death drive are outlined; and third, an explanation of the critical import the uncanny lends to the user unconscious is given.

#### *The origin of processes now animating the unconscious: biopower and the death drive:*

Foucault (1978) described biopower as a transition from governments taking the lives of subjects to assessing, managing, and orchestrating populations in the 18$^{th}$ century. This concern with population management – generating, fostering, and optimizing the workforce – coincided with the bloodiest atrocities ever recorded, from genocidal conquests to chattel slavery to the Nazi holocaust. This was no coincidence according to Foucault. The ostensible focus on public health, increasing birth rates, and reducing the ravages of deceases made genocidal pogroms, medicalized sexuality, and eugenics-based immigration policies seem natural.

Foucault's understanding of biopower resonates with the dualistic battle between life and death Freud proposes in *Civilization and its Discontents* (2019). In this book, Freud contends there is an interlinked dynamic between "eros" and "death" that drives the development of individuals, societies, and the human species. Eros is fairly straightforward: it looks to foster the life of individuals and the human species through the libido, causes individuals to come together to propagate, and leads to large groups of people in civilizations. The death drive is harder to detect: it overrides the pleasure principle, compels people to repeat past traumatic experiences, and fosters excessive acts of aggression. Civilization subdues this aggression through the superego, which creates an overbearing conscience in subjects, forcing them to bottle up aggression in an unsustainable way. According to Freud, this death drive tends to erupt in mass destruction when it is not adequately addressed (2019). So just as Foucault details the atrocities perpetuated by societies ostensibly bent on optimizing life, the death drive points to repetitive trauma undergirding the more easily discernible forces of "eros". Both the "death" drive and biopower can thus be seen as exposing the sordid underbelly of life.

Dean (2009) has noted the link between biopolitics and the death drive as well. She claims biopolitics is "a politics of the death drive" because it pulls society out of the "natural rhythms and processes of organic life" (p. 3). But for Freud, the death drive pulls society apart as a capitulation to nature, not a transgression of it. That is, it obeys the second law of thermodynamics, which states that closed systems become increasingly disordered over time (Tran The et al., 2020). According to Freud, then, life is an emergent process borne of oscillations between order and disorder. While "eros" struggles for order against the disorder of the "death" drive, we see life as that which flourishes above the fray, a lovely ordering of matter into organisms, species, and

civilizations. Freud tells us that just below this façade of life is a morbid force looking to erupt.

Freud saw the death drive as a strange compulsion that goes beyond the pleasure principle, but Lacan claims it goes beyond death itself: a "Will to destruction. Will to make a fresh start. Will for an Other-thing" (1997, p. 212). This positions humans as creators after the death of god, according to Lacan. He explains that this is an impressive feat because it is not "difficult to make what is called thought emerge from the evolution of matter…. What is difficult to make emerge from the evolution of matter is quite simply *homo faber*" (1997, p. 214). In this way, Lacan inverts the death drive: no longer leading to destruction, it becomes the ground of emergence for a godless homo faber. This inversion is congruent with a paradigm shift that took place in the interim between *Civilization and its Discontents* and Lacan's reading of it quoted above. I turn to this shift next because it is a crucial link between the user unconscious and the death drive.

### *Turning death into life: how disorder became crucial to the creation of new forms of life in the second half of the twentieth century*

While Freud's model for the death drive was the entropic heat death of the universe, his model for life was the struggle for homeostasis discernible in the steam engine (Luciana Parisi, 2004). From this perspective, he saw humans and groups as seeking to maintain homeostasis in systems constantly threatened with dissipation. This required them to use external sources of energy without altering their internal function (Luciana Parisi, 2004).

After the turn of the twentieth century, scientific thought began investigating open systems that did not tend toward homeostasis – in quantum mechanics, chaos theory, and information theory, for instance. The latter would become central to

cybernetics and our increasingly digital world beginning with Shannon's formula for information in 1948. This formula was nearly identical to the one it superseded, except for one change: the sign preceding it was flipped from negative to positive. This flip inverted the relationship between entropy and information, altering the way noise, turbulence, and randomness would be seen thereafter. Rather than the result of dissipation and portending death, entropy would be seen as the foundation of useful information and the emergence of life (Clough, 2010, pp. 217–218). Inverting the relationship between entropy and life made it possible to modulate affect in the economy because energy could be seen as an always informing and formative measure. Energy in human bodies could be captured as information, and energy from the environment could penetrate them in ways that altered their informational substrate (Clough, 2010, p. 221). In this way, the human body would become an assemblage of "organic and non-organic life" that goes "beyond the organism as an entropic, closed system" (Clough, 2003, p. 362).

This shift to modulating affective information coincides with the transition to an information economy and a mode of production that makes extensive use of affective labour (Castells, 2009; Hardt & Negri, 2001). But seeing the economy as working through the modulation of affect in itself rather than affective labour highlights the becoming independent of affect from individuals (Clough, 2018b).

The transition to modulating affect also coincides with a shift from state-centred to neoliberal biopolitics (Foucault, 2010). This shift is seen most acutely in America, where economic rationality would colonize an ever-expanding remit of social life, from immigration and crime to finding a spouse and raising children. A key difference between liberals and neoliberals is that the latter no longer saw workers as productive or unproductive from birth; instead, they saw them as enterprising entrepreneurs of

themselves, susceptible to market-based incentives compelling them to increase their productivity throughout their entire lives (Foucault, 2010).

As an unalterable, ascribed status, it is hard to see how race could be used as a locus of incitement for people conceived as entrepreneurs of themselves (Foucault, 2010, p. 228). Moreover, racism is difficult to detect in neoliberal governmentality because it feels like less of an imposition than previous modes of governance. Instead of disciplining bodies or internally subjugating individuals, it would optimize "systems of difference," tolerate "minority individuals and practices," and adjusts "the rules of the game" (Foucault, 2010, p. 260). In other words, neoliberalism uncovers a detailed grid of behavioural responsiveness to environmental variables that are then calibrated for profitability (Foucault, 2010, p. 259).

Deleuze has outlined this transition to neoliberalism as one in which power controls dividuals rather than individuals (1992). Dividuals are datafied fragments of individuals pulled apart by the intense competition immanent to networked neoliberalism in "societies of control" (1992). These societies implement a new form of racism that Clough and Willse call "population racism" (2011, p. 51). No longer working to control groups of human beings, this racism functions by statistically organizing and manipulating "groupings of characteristics, features, or parts" through algorithmic analyses (Clough & Willse, 2011, p. 52). Many of the arguments made about structural racism embedded in big data colonization (Couldry & Mejias, 2019), algorithms of oppression (Noble, 2018), and the new Jim code (Benjamin, 2019), which I outlined in the literature review, confirm this move to modulating parts of datafied selves (Cheney-Lippold, 2017). While proxies for race are regularly put to use by algorithms mining vast caches of data, the effects of race on their output becomes buried in impenetrable jumbles of code (O'Neil, 2016). Crucially, Clough and Willse

explain that this population racism works by calibrating affective milieus to bring about future effects (2011, p. 53).

To render this notion of affective milieus more concrete, we might think of affects as strong attractions toward or away from objects (Kernberg, 2009), two states that coincide with swipe app protocols. The "death" drive can then be seen as working through swipe apps to compel, amass, and agglomerate these affects – traces of desire written in binary and from which social life and death are determined. This makes it clear that speculating algorithms profit from creating affective milieus that facilitate social connection, engagement, and privilege only against an underlying amplification of social death. Irreducible to intrapsychic or "interpersonal processes" (Hartman, 2020, p. 318), this social death is animated by algorithmic assessments of risk that cross "intra-, inter-, and ultrapsychic registers," with heightened risk all too often attributed to non-white users in normatively white collectives (Hartman, 2019, p. 96).

To discern the entanglement of this social death with today's mode of algorithmic repression requires a critique that goes beyond the individual subject (Clough & Johanssen, 2020). Indeed, as algorithms learn by probing noisy data in search of profitable forms of networked engagement, they break down the bodies, habits, and rituals of individuals, reconfiguring them as users to surreptitiously speculate upon (Clough 2018:107). With speculation now central to algorithmic media, venture capital, and tech start-ups, the conceit that human speculation is the seat and benchmark of reason in contrast to machinic instrumentalism is troubled. This requires a reformulation of the mind and its relation to the unconscious (Clough, 2019). I explain why the uncanny user unconscious should be seen as a critical contribution to that reformulation below.

*The uncanny user unconscious*

Clough's notion of the "user unconscious" goes a long way towards reformulating the unconscious for today's speculative data logic (Clough, 2018a). She explains that this unconscious is now constituted from ubiquitous appeals to you that come from others on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter. These appeals have led to communities in which feelings of love and hate, comradery and shame are amplified (Chun, 2016). But you are not only addressed by others online. You are also addressed by algorithmic systems allocating access to affective flows of communication: systems that determine who gets recommended to whom on dating apps, who sees which posts on Facebook, and which hashtags go viral on Twitter. Platforms do this by mining your networked engagement and comparing it to others that have inhabited the network before you. This is what I see as the deepest recess of the user unconscious, where digital traces from the cloud, "no matter how disavowed, are becoming an intimate part of the I" (2018b, p. xxxii).

As a vastly distributed, massively networked, and eminently affective mode of thought, the user unconscious belies the conceit that humans can think in more complex and creative ways than computational media. As such, it points to more than an economic mode of analysis hiding social death within it. It points to the coupling of users with an affective milieu that embeds trauma in algorithms governing the defining edge of sociality today: impetuous transgressions of the personal and the networked necessitated by today's promiscuously connected machines (Chun, 2016; Clough, 2018b, p. XXII).

While Clough does not invoke Freud in her elaboration of the user unconscious, the preceding discussion has sought to situate his notion of the death drive within it. Both the death drive and biopolitics dissolve social cohesion and the autopoietic body,

leaving dividual competition modulated by undulating networks of affective flows in their place – vast networks of turbulent data churning up sociality via speculating algorithms. But as life today is understood to be in a constant state of flux, with minute changes constantly reverberating through open, non-equilibrium systems, it is imperative to go beyond normative assumptions about life and death, stability and volatility, order and disorder to critique biopolitics. Seeing the death drive and biopolitics as working in tandem to create traumatic thoughts within the user unconscious is meant to render the opacity of platforms a bit clearer, alerting us to the uncanny return of disavowed thoughts we are being used to create, largely against our conscious wishes.

To see why the uncanny provides a critical contribution to the user unconscious, one must recall Freud's essay outlining its essential features (2003). He first tells us that our typical understanding of the word is incomplete, that there is nothing particularly uncanny when inanimate things seem to come alive. Indeed, he quickly dismisses the mechanical dolls considered uncanny when he was writing as unworthy of the term. This is because he saw the uncanny as stemming from long repressed modes of thought that were threatening to return (2003, p. 147).

As was the case a century ago, I would like to propose that there is a repressed mode of thought threating to return today. And as with Freud, I see it as having little to do with things being on the verge of springing to life. Far from instilling ominous foreboding, the liveliness of things is a mundane fact of life today. And as much as we are encouraged to think of our machines as magically assembling things into synchronized swarms, optimized flows, and turbocharged equilibria, few of my respondents bought into this techno-utopian hype. Today, the uncanny return of

repressed modes of thought comes from algorithms stringing engagement most people would not consider problematic into profitable milieus that most people would.

So the critical import of seeing the user unconscious as uncanny is not that it alerts us to the disequilibrium of biopolitics, nor that life is always tinged with death. These are tenets of today's neoliberal zeitgeist, central to our techno-utopian ideology presenting creative destruction, disruptive innovation, and turbulent data as crucial to the capacity of platforms to add value to users' lives. The critical import of seeing the user unconscious as uncanny is that it allows us to uncover repressed modes of disavowed thoughts undergirding algorithmic media, machine learning, and artificial intelligence.

Freud's psychanalytic project has been characterized as a conservative force, making the strange familiar by rendering anomalous thought processes intelligible against the backdrop of a family drama (Fisher, 2018, p. 10). Indeed, psychoanalysis has often been complicit in creating subjects in the image of dominant social forces, most recently lending its energies to the child-rearing concerns central to neoliberalism (Rozmarin, 2020). But beneath this conservatism is a countervailing move, a move that renders the familiar strange, our most cherished memories as screens covering events too traumatic to remember having lived. Freud's notion of the uncanny recursively couples these two movements. It estranges us from the familiar narratives we tell about ourselves while revealing our thoughts to be abhorrent in an all too familiar way. Highlighting this uncanny coupling allows for the affective registration of the return of thoughts we have long prided ourselves on overcoming but that algorithmic media implicate us within again.

I explore this framework more concretely in the discussion and conclusion, turning next to the method used for this research.

## Method

This analysis is based on fifty interviews taken in 2017 for an exploratory investigation into dating apps. I found these respondents through snowball sampling, starting with my own networks on social media and branching out from there. The average age of the sample was thirty-two years old, and they had all used at least one dating platform. There were twenty men, thirty women, thirty White, twenty people of colour, forty straight, and ten who were not straight in the sample. Five respondents were working in the online-dating industry: analysing data, consulting app creators, coaching online daters, making a documentary about online dating, and marketing a dating website.

The interviews were open-ended and took place in bars and coffee shops in New York City. In them, I fist asking about any differences my respondents found between dates they had encountered through dating platforms and those they had found through other means. I then asked about any differences they saw between the various platforms they had used, memorable dates or relationships they had made through them, what they would like to see changed on them, and anything else they found interesting about their experiences using them.

About two-thirds of my respondents showed me their profile on at least one app they were using. While they did this, I asked them to tell me how they felt about their profile, why they had chosen the pictures they had put on them, and what they were thinking about while writing their "bios." After going over their profile with them, I had them swipe on about twenty profiles, asking them to tell me why they had swiped left or right. Nine of my respondents let me look at some of the messages they had sent and received. On average, the interviews took fifty-six minutes. The longest was two hours and four minutes, while the shortest was twenty-two minutes. I recorded and transcribed all of them.

I explore two interrelated themes that came up in those interviews below: first, the strangely compelling drive to swipe induced by swipe apps; and second, the racial preferences amplified by them.

## Findings: the racist swipe drive

### *The drive to swipe*

The first dating app for touchscreen phones with general appeal was Tinder.[2] Created in 2012, by 2015 it was the most popular dating platform available (Ansari & Klinenberg, 2016). Tinder's success is partially due to the swipe interface it introduced, where users are presented with a stack of photos to swipe right on if they want to connect and left on if they do not. This photo can be tapped to show more pictures and a brief space for text known as a "bio." Some users leave this space blank, while others write a few words, emojis, or sentences to give their profile some flair. Only users that both swipe right on each other can exchange messages.

When I began interviewing in 2017, Tinder had already swept through the date-o-sphere – the rapidly evolving ecology of dating platforms (Slater, 2013) – and some new apps were becoming increasingly popular. Tinder, OkCupid, Bumble, Coffee Meets Bagel, Hinge, and The League were the most popular platforms used by my respondents. Most of them were using more than one app, and they generally viewed them as an inevitable part of dating today. Many of the apps they were using are seen as Tinder clones because they copied its minimalistic aesthetic and signature feature – swiping.

---

[2] Grindr was successful in the gay community three years prior to this.

Swipe apps move the initial decision of whom to pursue from deliberate searches to visceral swiping. This is likely to alter what is captured by them and what can be coupled with the habits of their users. A key finding from my research is that many of my respondents described swiping as addicting because matching with others felt like a jolt of recognition. For instance, Jane was worried she was swiping as a substitute for a relationship. She says:

> I did Tinder, but I only did that as a diversion. I never met up with anyone. It was just like playing a game. – **Was it fun at all?** (my words are bold) – I think it was just a substitute for having a relationship and not really being ready to date. – **So you got enjoyment out of matching with someone?** – I did. I would say there was probably like a pleasure in, hmm, how many people might be attracted to my profile. – **And then did you talk to anyone?** – On Tinder, no.

While Jane got pleasure from playing Tinder like a game, this did not lead to the superficial hookups some have proposed it would (David & Cambre, 2016). Tinder was seen as a game by my respondents strictly in the sense quoted above, without implying anything beyond the interface. Nevertheless, the excitement of matching was readily apparent during my interviews. Jane even equated it to a shot of dopamine:

> I would swipe right. I would like him. It's a match! – **Look at you. He's probably going to say hi to you, and then you can ignore him like you do most of the people.** – Yeah, you got it. – **Haha, but that was fun. At least he matched with you.** – Yes, seriously. That is like dopamine. I'm like, "Great we matched! That's enough for today."

Swiping for the dopamine is a far cry from looking for a substantial connection, but the immediate validation users got from a match was hard for them to resist. Hilary explains:

> I mostly just swipe and don't answer people that message me. It's just like for validation. – **What kind of validation do you get from it?** – I guess if people like

> you, they consider you attractive or whatever. And like dudes mostly swipe right on everyone I think, so it's not like real validation.

While Hilary considered the validation she got from a match to be unreal, she continued to swipe as though it was real. Similarly, Tom said the dopamine rush from a mutual like was sometimes all he used Tinder for:

> Some people are on Tinder just for the dopamine. They're just like, "Oh cool!" and then like they're done. And then that's it. And they just want to be liked. I have done that sometimes. Like, "Ahhhh! I don't know why I'm swiping! I've had days where I'm like, "Swipe, swipe, swipe, swipe right. Everyone swipe right." And I'm like, "Am I ugly? No! I'm not! OK!" And then that's it.

As Tom suggests, swiping can activate dopamine centers in the brain, making it very addicting. Similarly, Lucy explained that she had tried to stop using multiple times, saying "It can become a bit addictive. And I have deleted it. Like I don't know if that. Like off and on deleting and then reinstating it." Swiping is addicting because it feels like a game of chance, with a match creating a burst of excitement designed to hook users on the app. Jenny felt this game-like aspect was probably why her matches rarely bothered to text her:

> If I get matches, the likelihood that somebody messages me or that I message them is very low. I think people are just playing the game, playing it like a game. But then they're like, "Fuck, I don't want to do." I think everyone's gone through the whole thing, and either it worked out and they met someone, or they just got really discouraged.

As these users suggest, swipe apps may have been too addicting for their own good. They were soon overrun by compulsively swiping users that rarely bothered to engage in verbal communication at all.

This compulsive swiping seemed nonsensical to many of my respondents. For instance, Stacy considered the whole process to be really weird, explaining that she mostly uses them "out of boredom. It's so stupid. It's a mindless, pointless act." Likewise, Mandy displayed a pretty common paradox, exclaiming her aversion to swipe apps, while continuing to use: "I'm telling you, Tinder and Bumble I can't. I hate them so. – **Did you meet anyone from Tinder and Bumble? –** This guy is from Tinder. The one I'm going to meet today. – **Oh, OK**." She is clearly fed up with swipe apps, yet continues to spend time and energy to make them work. As users swipe against their own better judgement, the swipe drive can be activated by the flick of a thumb, leading to long hours of swiping, streams of messages, and multiple dates a day.

While my respondents generally took their compulsive use to be a mindless bit of fun or aggravation, few linked this engagement to networked flows of affect distributed by speculating algorithms. This is a key feature of the user unconscious, which seeks to downplay the way individual use is linked to networked effects. As this paper is meant to render this link more discernible, I turn next to a problematic effect of this dynamic: the linking of users' racial preferences to the value assessed to users on swipe apps.

*The racial preferences of my respondents*

Many of my respondents rejected profiles during the interactive portion of my interviews because of looks. They said their potential dates looked too short, ugly, fat, feminine, etc. This made them seem superficial. But having them swipe during the interview probably led them to make superficial assessments, as there is little besides looks to base swiping decisions on.

Race was one of many reasons my respondents cited for swiping left or right. Determining if racial preferences for selecting a date is problematic would run counter

to the theoretical framework I have been arguing for in this paper: that is, a time when we could think in terms of personal preference is gone. Indeed, the notion that personal preferences should be considered independently from their networked effects seems to be central to today's techo-utopian ideology, which looks to sever the link between the personal and the networked in the minds of users while requiring the transgression of that link in every use. Rather than focus on individual acts, then, I am looking to detail how these preferences are worked into and coupled with networked flows of affect. This connection is made more explicitly in the discussion section, but as the basis for that discussion, I outline a few of my respondents reasons for their racial preferences below.

I begin with Jenny to illustrate the extent to which I had to prompt my respondents to describe why they were swiping left or right on profiles. Jenny is more forthcoming than a lot of my respondents, most of whom found it exceedingly hard to convey, or even know, why they were swiping left or right. She says,

> The time when I downloaded Tinder during spring break, I downloaded Coffee Meets Bagel as well. I didn't like it. – **Why?** – It was just all nerdy Asian guys – **Do you have a certain criteria for who you would like to date or is it kind of General.** – I mean you are seeing the people I am swiping on. They are all very, very different. – **Can we do this exercise really quick to just see how you are swiping? [Here I am reiterating the fact that I want Jenny to tell me why she is swiping left or right instead swiping silently]** – I would swipe left because. – **The first picture? What is wrong with it?** – I just don't like that. It is like part of his face. – **Oh because it's like the side of his face?** – Yeah. and he's not smiling too. – **This next one is smiling.** – I don't like this one. I don't know. I'm just not into. – **You can see more of his face.** – his look. – **Any particular part of the look that you don't like? Or you just can't explain it?** – Yeah, I just don't like that at all. – **Like the sunglasses are too flashy or something**? – I don't like the beard [swipe left]. – **Okay, that makes sense. [She swipes left on another profile]. Another guy with a beard?** – No, it's just not attractive to me [swipe left]. Him neither [swipe left]. – **Not him either?** – Not him either [swipe left]. – **You seem to swipe a lot to the left.** – Yeah, if there is no picture then definitely

> not, this one is like Blurry. – **He is blurry?** – He looks like kind of smart though, so I will look. – **[She taps the profile picture to see more photos]. Okay, he has glasses, looks like a dancer.** – Oh, that's weird, no. Yeah, no [swipe left]. – **No?** – No. Sunglasses you can't really see. I just feel like they have something to hide, you know? [swipe left] – **If they have sunglasses? Okay.** – No, he has a kid, even though he might say 'that's my nephew,' I still won't [swipe left]. – **Even though, eh?** – This one is all blurry. I don't like his sunglasses [swipe left]. – **What's with the sunglasses on all of these guys?** – I just don't like it. – **Yes, I understand. I don't know why people would put sunglasses on their first picture.** – Not attracted to black guys [swipe left]. – **Okay.** – I don't know. I don't like how he looks. Don't like him [swipe left]. Don't like him [swipe left]. Why are they giving me such bum guys? – **I don't know.** – Wait I think I know that guy [swipe left]. Nope [swipe left]. Nope [swipe left]. Nope [swipe left]. – **Wow.** – Like, Tinder is really hard.

In this exchange, it is clear that Jenny found it difficult to articulate why she was swiping left on profiles. This was the case with many of those that I interviewed. To me, this indicates that they were not accustomed to thinking about their swiping decisions, at least not in a verbal way. This illustrates one way in which Tinder's interface primes users for absent-minded engagement in which unconscious racism can flourish.

Mindlessly swiping on profiles allows race to influence one's swiping decisions in a less direct way than checking a box to indicate one's preference, making it seem less racist. For instance, Julia first explains that she has a racial preference, saying:

> You can tell the Tinder rating by who you are receiving, and I would say that I don't like the fact that I have a racial preference, but I do. And it would be mainly white men, second mainly Asian men, but mostly white men, and I wasn't receiving that many.

Julia gave up on Tinder because she wasn't receiving the kinds of users she preferred. But this did not lead her to an interface that would allow her to filter for race by checking a box. She explains,

> I wasn't using Tinder because I specifically wanted to find somebody, and it was only to try it out for fun. So I think if I was kind of looking more seriously, then I would research it and look into other apps. But I don't have much knowledge of them. I just know that they exist, but not that much. – **Yeah because some of them allow you to say that "I want black men or white men or whatever."** – At the same time, even though I do have a preference, I would feel bad about discounting people because my preference isn't exclusive. It's just a preference. But I've also met people who do not fit my preferences and have liked them or dated them or whatever.

Julia's racial preferences are fairly complex. She is Indian and was living in NYC when I interviewed her. She knows that she will eventually have to find someone from the same Indian background as herself in order to be accepted by her family, but while she is dating casually, she is looking to date outside of her race. While Julia was open to dating all races, however, she detected a racial hierarchy embedded in the recommender system itself. That is, the racial hierarchy of preferences she was not proud of seemed to be reflected back on her as a person of colour in terms of the likes she was receiving.

Grace also explained a similar hierarchy of racial attraction discernible in the messages one is likely to get:

> If you are like a 10, you might get a call from each and every person on the site, but if you are a seven and a half, maybe you will not get messages from, say, Asians or whites. I got a lot of hits, interestingly enough, from black men.

Grace felt that racial preferences were more important on swipe apps because they put looks front and centre:

> It is not people being racist. Maybe it's just their attraction, which is different for different races. If you're purely going by the looks factor and not counting the personality factor, a lot of people are attracted to, say, blonde women versus Asians versus Indians, and maybe black women are lower. If we are on the list, we are on the list for some fun, but not for some serious relationship, you know?

While Grace acknowledges that having a racial preference does not make one racist, Jon notes that he is conflicted about wanting to filter for race on dating apps:

> I would add like a filter. I mean, if you could filter people, then I would, definitely. Because as of now, for Tinder, really, the only filters is male, female, age, location, distance, and that's pretty much it. So if I had to add something. I mean, dude, that's weird, because what if I say I prefer whites or Asians? That's kind of. – **Well, a lot of apps have that.** – Really? – **Yeah.** – I didn't know that. Because on some level, that seems racist. – **Hahaha.** – Right? – **On some level, yeah.**

As Jon and Julia make clear, there is a sense that filtering for race by clicking a button is more racist than simply swiping according to one's racial preferences. In the following discussion I look to unpack this common assumption.

**Discussion:**

The interviews quoted above illustrate how swipe apps prime users to mindlessly swipe, compelling them to privilege looks above other qualities and making race a more salient factor in their swiping decisions. In this discussion, I explain why this drive to swipe should not be dissociated from the uncanny user unconscious. I do this by detailing how swiping becomes recursively coupled with speculating algorithms on swipe apps. To flesh this out, I compare OkCupid's match percentage to Tinder's "attractiveness" scale. While both of these systems are still used, I argue that the move many of my respondents made from dating websites to apps points to a more general shift in the data-o-sphere for three reasons: First, my respondents considered dating apps to have supplanted dating websites; second, OkCupid's user interface has become more like Tinder's over the past five years, with many now using its swipe app; and third, the match percentage is no longer as central to OkCupid's recommender system as it once was. Tinder's user interface and recommender system can thus be seen as partially

supplanting OkCupid's, both because of its popularity and because its business model has been copied by many other dating apps, including OkCupid's. Understanding why Tinder's recommender system is likely to amplify racially biased outcomes is thus important because it indicates the trajectory the date-o-sphere seems to be heading.

Tinder's recommender system is likely to amplify racially biased outcomes because it uses an "attractiveness" scale based on pooled preferences to recommend users to each other. This is different from OkCupid's match[3] percentage, which is calculated using an algorithm that incorporates hundreds of multiple-choice questions that users answer. Users can also determine which questions to answer, how much weight to give each question, and how they want their matches to answer questions.

On the other hand, Tinder has admitted to recommending users through an Elo-inspired "attractiveness" score based on the ratio of right to left swipes they receive ("Powering Tinder®", 2019). Elo-scores rank people in competitive, zero-sum games like chess. On swipe apps, a user's score would go down every time they "lost" a swiping event: for instance, if they swiped right on someone that later swiped left on them. Swiping right on users with lower attractiveness scores would also decrease one's score, leading to fewer, "less-attractive," and slower recommendations. Measuring users in this way does not sit well with the notion that attraction can be idiosyncratic. It marginalizes those who are not attractive to a majority of other users. And it incentivizes a competitive approach to dating.

---

[3] OkCupid's match percentage can still be used as its recommender system, but it is no longer its default system, and the ease of swiping on its app has habituated users to using it in the absent-minded way I detailed above. I mention it here to show how different it is from swipe app recommender systems and to highlight the fact that the transition to swiping is likely to amplify racially biased outcomes in the date-o-sphere.

Tinder's attractiveness scale is thus likely to lead to very different outcomes than OkCupid's match algorithm. Instead of matching users on an individual basis using hundreds of different variables, it employs a hierarchical ranking system based on how often profiles are liked or rejected. So my argument is not that there are people who have racial preferences, disavowed racial preferences, or unconscious racial preferences on swipe apps. This is obvious. And as Benjamin has warned, focusing on individual racism often distracts us from the subtle ways racial bias gets embedded in code (2019). My argument is that using a hierarchical ranking system based on looks to recommend users to each other embeds each one of these levels – from outright racism to unconscious preferences – into it. In fact, even if people merely prefer to date their own race, pooled attractiveness scores would disadvantage racial minorities simply if fewer of them were using the app. On swipe apps, then, the zero-sum game being played is decidedly not like chess: it amplifies a racial hierarchy of users by assessing them according to pooled preferences and using those assessments as the basis for recommendations.

The move to swipe apps thus dovetails with neoliberal methods of measure that Foucault has outlined (2010): it amplifies minute differences in society by turning everything into a competition, ranking people according to how they fare in those competitions, and allocating resources according to those rankings. By putting users in direct competition with each other, ranking them on a single dimension, and measuring attraction as a zero-sum game, they put race to work as grist for algorithms distributing affect according each user's presumed capacity to generate a profit. In this way, they increase the salience of race as a factor of success in today's dating games, even when race is not used as a parameter in their recommender systems, most people are open to

dating all races, and user's do not know their swiping decisions are being used to create a racial hierarchy of "attractiveness."

So while algorithms on dating platforms have been critiqued as mere marketing ploys (Finkel et al., 2012; Joel et al., 2017b), we should not stop at this critique. The way they facilitate connections, order profiles, and distribute likes matters, precisely because they do not work as advertised. More than merely validate or invalidate one's sense of self-worth, they influence whether users will get matches in the future and with whom those matches will be with, as well as who continues to use them and who does not.

As persons of colour, Julie and Grace understood swipe apps to be rigged against them because of the matches, recommendations, and messages they received. As Julie put it, "you can tell the Tinder rating by who you are receiving," and she was not seeing the men she preferred to meet. It might be tempting to think that the racial preferences Julia and Grace have, preferring Asian and white over black men, negate the claim I am making that swipe apps disenfranchise them. But this would be to shift the focus back on the personal choices that people make. To be clear, there is absolutely no reason to tether personal preference for certain races to biased outcomes on platforms; rather, it is the user interfaces and algorithmic sorting mechanisms of swipe apps that create a milieu in which unconscious racial biases get embed in the networks they set in motion. The comparison between OkCupid's match percentage and Tinder's "attractiveness" scale makes it clear that personal preferences can be put to use by algorithms in very different ways.

Insofar as swipe apps encourage the disassociation of personal choices from networked effects in the minds of users, they conform to two key feature of the user unconscious: first, "the separation of the personal and the networked is more imagined

than actual;" and second, this imagined separation invites users "to be caught in public acting privately" (Clough, 2018a, p. 77). This ideological severing of the personal from the networked is an effect of the swipe drive, where users are encouraged to swipe for the dopamine even when they consider this to be a "mindless, pointless act," as Stacy put it. Precisely because swiping feels mindless and pointless, it is easy to sift through dozens of profiles a minute without thinking about why one is swiping left or right. The litany of left swipes quoted from my interview with Jenny indicates how race can make its way into one's swiping decisions, almost as an afterthought. After all, race came up in just one of a few dozen of her swiping decisions, along with other superficial reasons for swiping left – wearing sunglasses, having a picture with one's nephew, or not liking someone's face, for example. It should also be noted that much of the feedback I received during the swiping part of my interviews came after much prompting. To me, this indicates that my respondents were not accustomed to articulating, or even thinking about, why they were swiping left or right. It is thus unlikely that their swiping decisions would have been consciously thought out had I not been prompting them to express why they were swiping left or right.

The mindless swiping that swipe apps encourage makes it easier to engage them without thinking about the implications of one's swiping decisions. Circumventing deliberate thought processes on swipe apps is also easier because no box needs to be checked to indicate one is looking for certain races. In contrast to swiping, clicking a box to filter for race "seems racist," as Jon rightfully notes. Thus, filtering by swiping makes it easier for users to distance themselves from their racial preferences. This is alluded to by Crystal, who notes that she would not check a box to filter for race even if, as she says, "my mind would have been thinking it. Or even if I had it written on a piece of paper." Likewise, Julie is able to mindlessly swipe according to her personal

preference for certain races on Tinder without having to "feel bad about discounting people."

While it is not clear if having a preference to date a certain race over another is racist, it has been well documented that users of dating websites have such preferences (Alhabash et al., 2014; Anderson et al., 2014; Lin & Lundquist, 2013; Rudder, 2015). So swipe apps do not make people more racist. Rather, they provide a context in which unconscious racial biases can flourish because they can be expressed without troubling users' self-perceptions of themselves as being non-racist. These are contexts in which the aversive racism widespread today is exacerbated (Dovidio et al., 2016). In other words, swipe apps create highly suitable milieus for unconscious forms of racism to be amplified by networked flows of affect.

Risking oversimplification for added clarity, we might think of right swipes as positive affects looking to connect and left swipes as negative ones to disconnect, as I mentioned in the theoretical framework of this paper. These affects can then be set in motion by recommender systems looking to generate a profit. In general, these systems make connections quickly and frequently for those amassing a lot of right swipes or who simply pay for those connections. This can be seen as linked to a libidinous impulse within society, what Freud saw as "eros". The obverse of this would then be users that amass a lot of left swipes and are ignored by recommender systems. They are left to suffer a slow social death, relegated to the bottom of the stack of profiles that others swipe through. The pooled preferences that swipe apps amplify thus ensure social death undergirds the perpetuation of privilege, making it easier for a select few to find sexual satisfaction, intimacy, and love.

In the beginning of this paper, I mentioned Noble's (2018) claim that by opening up the black box of algorithmic media we could "transform the consciousness

embedded in artificial intelligence, since it is in fact, in part, a product of our own collective creation" (p. 29). This is a laudable goal. But as she also notes, algorithmic media cannot be disentangled from the primitive accumulation at the root of capitalism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019), financial futures devised to speculate upon black bodies during the slave trade (Keeling, 2019), and structural racism in the criminal justice system (Alexander, 2012). These roots of racial capitalism are now embedded in a new Jim code (Benjamin, 2019), where algorithms of oppression (Noble, 2018) perpetuate quotidian violence against black futures (Keeling, 2019). As these theorists make clear, racist practices, systems, and ways of thinking we often pride ourselves on having moved beyond as a society – slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, bigotry, xenophobia, etc. – have a tendency to erupt into public attention only to be hidden deeper within social structures soon after. Today they are embedded in algorithmic code animating a user unconscious. While the metaphor of the black box and calls for transparency are needed, then, seeing this user unconscious as repressing the unseemly side of algorithms sheds light on why those calls are rarely heeded, rendering concrete the quandary algorithmic media present us with today.

Part of the promise of algorithmic media is that they could allow us to overcome injustices felt most acutely at intersections of race, class, gender, ability, and sexuality by circumventing human prejudice. But they often lead to more inequitable outcomes than human decision-making had. The common assumption that algorithms are intelligent is thus only possible because their unintelligence is hidden. That is, algorithmic media are opaque precisely because this allows the inequity amplified by them to be repressed, keeping the social death of those they systematically marginalize again and again from public scrutiny. Repressing the racial hierarchy of attraction swipe apps amplify, the user unconscious hides the historical trauma they perpetuate within

impenetrable jumbles of code, preventing the traumatic return of racial bias from gumming up their continued seamless generation of profits.

*Conclusion*

This paper has outlined an increasingly salient quandary algorithmic media presents to socially conscious scholars, users, and creators: as their oppression is decried with heightened alarm, they continue to sever the loop of the conscious self from speculating algorithms (Hansen, 2015), human understanding from machine learning (Hayles, 2017), and AI from the user unconscious. By capturing, calculating, and manipulating unconscious processes, they make it difficult to see where resistance to the oppression they amplify might come.

Capturing vast troves of data from the inattentive performativity of users, today's algorithms work to mine the depths of unconscious desire for profitable extraction. Swipe apps are at the cusp of this data logic. They turn the intractable messiness of intimacy into grist for algorithms carving up users according to their presumed profitability or lack thereof. They thus constitute a quintessential example of the way population racism is amplified today: by capturing and recursively coupling users' digital traces of desire with carefully calibrated affective flows.

While Freud had described the entropic drive within us as bringing us ever closer to death, this drive can now be seen as animating the shadowy agency of a user unconscious within algorithmic media. Working through swipe apps to compel, amass, and agglomerate digital traces of desire, this unconscious affords social connection, engagement, and intimacy for some only against an underlying amplification of social death for others. It can thus be seen as the latest formation perpetuating the ideological roots of capitalism – bigotry, xenophobia, racism, etc. – by embedding them in impenetrable jumbles of code. Repressing these disturbing modes of distributed

thought, the user unconscious prevents the quotidian violence platforms implicate users within from gumming up their continued seamless generation of profits.

Donna Haraway once said, "our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert" (1990, p. 152). But a time when we could think of "our machines" or "we ourselves" is past. We entail machines, just as machines entail us. Indeed, that disturbingly lively ghost in the machine – uncannily repeating past traumatic modes of thought again and again – is us as we become users. Haunted by disavowed traces of desire and animated by speculating algorithms, we are incessantly rendered as so much digital grist for algorithmic media to mine for profits despite the all too familiar way those profits are made.

If these algorithms are to be resisted, new tools must be devised to gain some purchase on the affective milieus they set in motion. My hope is the lens of the uncanny user unconscious proves useful as one such tool. Estranging us from the familiar narratives we tell about ourselves while revealing our thoughts to be abhorrent in an all too familiar way, it enables the affective registration of distributed thoughts disavowed by the very users they are created from and coupled with. It might thus assist those working to envision protocols of engagement more likely to mitigate than amplify social inequity.

**Works Cited**

Alexander, M. (2012). *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. The New Press.

Alhabash, S., Hales, K., Baek, J., & Oh, H. J. (2014). Effects of race, visual anonymity, and social category salience on online dating outcomes. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *35*, 22–32. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.02.016

Anderson, A., Goel, S., Huber, G., Malhotra, N., & Watts, D. (2014). Political Ideology and Racial Preferences in Online Dating. *Sociological Science*, 28–40. https://doi.org/10.15195/v1.a3

Ansari, A., & Klinenberg, E. (2016). *Modern Romance* (Reprint edition). Penguin Books.

Beer, D. (2018). *The Data Gaze: Capitalism, Power and Perception*. SAGE.

Benjamin, R. (2019). *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (1 edition). Polity.

Broussard, M. (2018). *Artificial Unintelligence: How Computers Misunderstand the World*. The MIT Press.

Bucher, T. (2017). The algorithmic imaginary: Exploring the ordinary affects of Facebook algorithms. *Information, Communication & Society*, *20*(1), 30–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1154086

Cacioppo, J. T., Cacioppo, S., Gonzaga, G. C., Ogburn, E. L., & VanderWeele, T. J. (2013). Marital satisfaction and break-ups differ across on-line and off-line meeting venues. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *110*(25), 10135–10140. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1222447110

Carpenter, C. J., & McEwan, B. (2016). The players of micro-dating: Individual and gender differences in goal orientations toward micro-dating apps. *First Monday*, *21*(5). https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v21i5.6187

Castells, M. (2009). *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture Volume I* (2nd Edition with a New Preface edition). Wiley-Blackwell.

Cheney-Lippold, J. (2017). *We are data: Algorithms and the making of our digital selves*. New York University Press.

Chun, W. H. K. (2016). *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*. The MIT Press.

Clough, P. T. (2003). Affect and Control: Rethinking the Body 'Beyond Sex and Gender.' *Feminist Theory*, *4*(3), 359–364. https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001030043010

Clough, P. T. (2010). The affective turn. Political economy, biomedia, and bodies. In M. Gregg & G. J. Seigworth (Eds.), *The Affect Theory Reader* (unknown edition, pp. 206–225). Duke University Press Books.

Clough, P. T. (2018a). The Other-Than-Human and the "User Unconscious." *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, *19*(1), 73–80. https://doi.org/10.1080/15240657.2018.1419683

Clough, P. T. (2018b). *The User Unconscious: On Affect, Media, and Measure* (1 edition). Univ Of Minnesota Press.

Clough, P. T. (2019). Notes on Psychoanalysis and Technology, the Psyche and the Social. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, *20*(2), 75–83. https://doi.org/10.1080/15240657.2019.1594043

Clough, P. T., & Johanssen, J. (2020). By the Skin of Our Machines: Psychoanalysis Beyond the Human A Dialogue Between Patricia Clough and Jacob Johanssen. *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry*. https://doi.org/10.22387/CAP2020.46

Clough, P. T., & Willse, C. (2011). *Beyond Biopolitics: Essays on the Governance of Life and Death*. Duke University Press Books.

Cotter, K. (2019). Playing the visibility game: How digital influencers and algorithms negotiate influence on Instagram. *New Media & Society*, *21*(4), 895–913. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818815684

Couldry, N., & Mejias, U. A. (2019). *The Costs of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism* (1 edition). Stanford University Press.

David, G., & Cambre, C. (2016). Screened Intimacies: Tinder and the Swipe Logic. *Social Media + Society*, *2*(2), 2056305116641976. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116641976

Dean, J. (2009). *Drive as the Structure of Biopolitics* (SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 1460759). Social Science Research Network. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1460759

Deleuze, G. (1992). Postscript on the Societies of Control. *October*, *59*, 3–7.

Dovidio, J. F., Gaertner, S. L., & Pearson, A. R. (2016). Aversive Racism and Contemporary Bias. In C. G. Sibley & F. K. Barlow (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of the Psychology of Prejudice* (pp. 267–294). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316161579.012

Enomoto, C., Noor, S., & Widner, B. (2017). Is Social Media to Blame for the Sharp Rise in STDs? *Social Sciences*, *6*(3), 78. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci6030078

Finkel, E. J., Eastwick, P. W., Karney, B. R., Reis, H. T., & Sprecher, S. (2012). Online Dating A Critical Analysis From the Perspective of Psychological Science. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, *13*(1), 3–66. https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100612436522

Fisher, M. (2018). *K-punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher* (D. Ambrose, Ed.; New edition edition). Repeater.

Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (Reissue edition). Vintage.

Foucault, M. (2010). *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978--1979* (Reprint edition). Picador.

Freud, S. (2003). *The Uncanny*. Penguin.

Freud, S. (2019). *Civilization and Its Discontents: Adapted for the Contemporary Reader* (J. Harris, Trans.). Independently published.

Fuller, M., & Goffey, A. (2012). *Evil Media*. MIT Press.

Hallinan, B., Brubaker, J. R., & Fiesler, C. (2020). Unexpected expectations: Public reaction to the Facebook emotional contagion study. *New Media & Society*, *22*(6), 1076–1094. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819876944

Hansen, M. B. N. (2015). *Feed-Forward: On the Future of Twenty-First-Century Media*. University Of Chicago Press.

Haraway, D. (1990). *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (First Thus edition). Routledge.

Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2001). *Empire*. Harvard University Press.

Hartman, S. (2019). Hashtag Mania or Misadventures in the #ultrapsychic. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, *20*(2), 84–100. https://doi.org/10.1080/15240657.2019.1594044

Hartman, S. (2020). Binded by the White: A Discussion of "Fanon's Vision of Embodied Racism for Psychoanalytic Theory and Practice." *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, *30*(3), 317–324. https://doi.org/10.1080/10481885.2020.1744965

Hayles, N. K. (2017). *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious*. University of Chicago Press.

Hitsch, G. J., Hortaçsu, A., & Ariely, D. (2010). Matching and Sorting in Online Dating. *The American Economic Review*, *100*(1), 130–163.

Hobbs, M., Owen, S., & Gerber, L. (2016). Liquid love? Dating apps, sex, relationships and the digital transformation of intimacy. *Journal of Sociology*, 1440783316662718. https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783316662718

Hutson, J. A., Taft, J. G., Barocas, S., & Levy, K. (2018). Debiasing Desire: Addressing Bias & Discrimination on Intimate Platforms. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, *2*(CSCW), 73:1–73:18. https://doi.org/10.1145/3274342

Joel, S., Eastwick, P., & Finkel, E. (2017a). Is Romantic Desire Predictable? Machine Learning Applied to Initial Romantic Attraction. *Psychological Science*, *28*, 095679761771458. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797617714580

Joel, S., Eastwick, P. W., & Finkel, E. J. (2017b). Is Romantic Desire Predictable? Machine Learning Applied to Initial Romantic Attraction. *Psychological Science*, *28*(10), 1478–1489. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797617714580

Keeling, K. (2019). *Queer Times, Black Futures*. NYU Press.

Kernberg, O. (2009). The concept of the death drive: A clinical perspective. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, *90*(5), 1009–1023. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-8315.2009.00187.x

Lacan, J. (1997). *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Ethics Of Psychoanalysis* (J. Alain-Miller, Ed.; D. Porter, Trans.). W. W. Norton & Company.

Light, B., Burgess, J., & Duguay, S. (2016). The walkthrough method: An approach to the study of apps: *New Media & Society*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816675438

Lin, K.-H., & Lundquist, J. (2013). Mate Selection in Cyberspace: The Intersection of Race, Gender, and Education. *American Journal of Sociology*, *119*(1), 183–215. https://doi.org/10.1086/673129

Noble, S. U. (2018). *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. NYU Press.

O'Neil, C. (2016). *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (1 edition). Crown.

Parisi, Lorenza, & Comunello, F. (2020). Dating in the time of "relational filter bubbles": Exploring imaginaries, perceptions and tactics of Italian dating app users. *The Communication Review*, *23*(1), 66–89. https://doi.org/10.1080/10714421.2019.1704111

Parisi, Luciana. (2004). *Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Biotechnology and the Mutations of Desire* (1 edition). Bloomsbury Academic.

Pasquale, F. (2016). *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information* (Reprint edition). Harvard University Press.

*Powering Tinder®—The Method Behind Our Matching*. (2019, March 15). Tinder. https://blog.gotinder.com/powering-tinder-r-the-method-behind-our-matching/

Rosenfeld, M. J., & Thomas, R. J. (2012). Searching for a Mate: The Rise of the Internet as a Social Intermediary. *American Sociological Review*, *77*(4), 523–547. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122412448050

Rosenfeld, M. J., Thomas, R. J., & Hausen, S. (2019). Disintermediating your friends: How online dating in the United States displaces other ways of meeting. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *116*(36), 17753–17758. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1908630116

Rozmarin, E. (2020). The Subject as Threshold. *American Imago*, *77*(2), 309–336. https://doi.org/10.1353/aim.2020.0023

Rudder, C. (2015). *Dataclysm: Love, Sex, Race, and Identity--What Our Online Lives Tell Us about Our Offline Selves*. Broadway Books.

Sampson, T. (2016). *The Assemblage Brain* (1 edition). University of Minnesota Press.

Sharabi, L. L. (2020). Exploring How Beliefs About Algorithms Shape (Offline) Success in Online Dating: A Two-Wave Longitudinal Investigation. *Communication Research*, 0093650219896936. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650219896936

Sharabi, L. L., & Dykstra-DeVette, T. A. (2019). From first email to first date: Strategies for initiating relationships in online dating: *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407518822780

Slater, D. (2013). *Love in the Time of Algorithms: What Technology Does to Meeting and Mating*. Current.

Srnicek, N. (2016). *Platform Capitalism* (1 edition). Polity.

Tran The, J., Ansermet, J.-P., Magistretti, P., & Ansermet, F. (2020). From the Principle of Inertia to the Death Drive: The Influence of the Second Law of Thermodynamics on the Freudian Theory of the Psychical Apparatus. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *11*, 325. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00325

van der Nagel, E. (2018). 'Networks that work too well': Intervening in algorithmic connections. *Media International Australia*, *168*(1), 81–92. https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X18783002

Wang, S. (2020). Calculating dating goals: Data gaming and algorithmic sociality on Blued, a Chinese gay dating app. *Information, Communication & Society*, *23*(2), 181–197. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1490796

Wang, T., Liu, H., He, J., Jiang, X., & Du, X. (2011). Predicting New User's Behavior in Online Dating Systems. In J. Tang, I. King, L. Chen, & J. Wang (Eds.), *Advanced Data Mining and Applications* (pp. 266–277). Springer Berlin Heidelberg. http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-642-25856-5_20