

Episode 4: Cultures Online (Annie Galvin, Lauren Michele Jackson, Richard Jean So)

**Annie Galvin (AG):** Hello, and welcome back to *Public Books 101*, a podcast that turns a scholarly eye to a world worth studying. I'm your host, Annie Galvin; I'm the associate editor at *Public Books*, which is a magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship that's free and online. You can read the magazine at [publicbooks.org](http://publicbooks.org).

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So, this is the second-to-last episode in our series on the internet. And so far, we've covered the surprising and interesting origins of the internet, as well as the question: What is the internet doing to individuals and societies? Today, we're going to delve deeper into *culture* on the internet—in other words, the stuff that billions of people make on it, every day. And to do this, I am joined by a real dream team.

**Lauren Michele Jackson (LMJ):** My name is Lauren Michele Jackson, I'm an assistant professor English at Northwestern University and also the author of *White Negroes*, an essay collection on cultural appropriation.

**Richard Jean So (RJS):** My name is Richard So. I'm an assistant professor of English and cultural analytics at McGill University. I work on computational approaches to literature and culture. And this December, I have a book coming out called *Redlining Culture* with Columbia University Press.

AG: In the series so far, we've covered a lot of criticisms of the internet: for example, how racial bias has been encoded in it from the beginning, and how pretty creepy things are being done around our data and surveillance of our data.

But one thing I really appreciate about Lauren's and Richard's work is that they're certainly critical of the internet in many ways, as they should be. But, as scholars who study the culture that humans *produce* on the internet, they view it with a kind of curiosity and wonder that's really refreshing.

Lauren and Richard are both English professors who have spent a bunch of time taking the internet seriously as culture (which you don't really hear about that often!). The internet feels now like such a vast space, almost infinite, and if you're trying to study it, where do you even begin?

So it's really cool to have them both here to talk about internet cultures.

AG: Alright, sounds good, thank you. Okay, great, so, we are so happy to have both of you here. Alright, so, let's start with a question that we're asking all of our guests and I'm really curious to hear everyone's answers and the question is, what does being on the internet in 2020 feel like to you? So this could be a word, a description, a metaphor, anything that captures the feeling of being online to you. So it would be really helpful if

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you could say, being on the internet now feels like, at the beginning, and then, and then answer. Lauren, would you mind starting us off?

LMJ Uh, yeah, so being on the internet in 2020 feels like fighting against my baser instincts.

AG Yeah.

LMJ Should I elaborate?

AG I kind of like the brevity of that, but, if you want to elaborate, go for it, but I also kind of like that little sound bite that I'm sure a lot of people can relate to.

LMJ Yeah, I mean, it's, it's really just a matter of sort of finding new ways to trick myself into not being as online as I already am all the time.

AG Yeah, I definitely feel that. So Richard, how about you? What does being on the internet in 2020 feel like to you?

RJS Yeah, I spent a weekend on this, I couldn't come up with anything good, but I had a first one that is like Lauren's and I decided I don't like this one because it's too dark, but the first one was unconsciously pathological, but I decided that that was too dark, so the other one that I feel is actually more accurate for me at least is being on the internet in 2020 is like being in a very small room with a lot of people speaking very loudly and I can't see anyone. So yeah.

AG Yeah, that's great, and that actually might feed into some of the things that we talk about later. So thank you both for that very much and so I'm sure that we'll be drawing from a lot of work that both of you have done across a number of domains, but it might help just because I think we will be focusing a bit on Lauren's book and Richard on some of the recent work that you've been doing on the internet, so I think it could be helpful to just give our listeners a little bit of an overview of that. So Lauren, if you wouldn't mind, I know this is the most annoying question, but could you give us just kind of a short summary or elevator speech about your recent book, *White Negroes*?

LMJ Yeah. Woo, this feels like so long ago now it came out in November, and I'm just like, what, when was that? So basically my book is a sort of investigation of what I like to call blackness in decay, and so it is really a post-Millennial and post-2000's, you know, sort of pop cultural view, everything from music to food and there is a large portion of the book that does deal with internet culture and digital media and really trying to sort of look at the racial aesthetics of how we express ourselves in popular culture and thinking about how the legacy of what we would call like appropriation of black aesthetics continues in a sort of more contemporary era and also the way in which it is sort of different and mutated and looks very strange compared to what we would think of as far as certain appropriate gestures of old, things like minstrelsy, things like rock and roll, you know, that sort of like a classic view of appropriation, but this book is also really trying to look at the weirdness that the millennium age brings to that subject.

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AG Okay, awesome and we will definitely get more into that, so thank you. And Richard, could you tell us a little bit about, so you're, you know, a lot of the work that you have done including your first two books as I understand it are more so on, you know, what we would more traditionally recognize as literature and print culture, older cultural forms. So I'm curious if you could tell us a little bit about some of the recent questions that you've been asking in your research and you turn increasingly to culture on the internet?

RJS Thanks, yeah, yeah, methodologically I would describe myself as someone who uses large scale data mining techniques to study culture at scale. And this is a method or tool really well-suited to the internet because everything is so at scale on the internet. So recently, I'm working on a series of papers with collaborators. I guess I would divide the work into three categories: one is I'm really interested in what readers and viewers view online. How do they form interpretive communities and how do groups form their own set of norms or categories to, yeah, basically create community. So I'm working on something on Goodreads to see how do lay readers develop their own categories of judgment versus say experts like professors. I'm also working on the next category is narrative. So I'm interested in how do narratives form online. So I'm working on a piece that is like how did Covid become storified or become a narrative in culture, looking at websites like Wattpad where already there are like 10,000 Covid stories on Wattpad, just regular people telling stories about quarantine and stuff like that. And the last thing I also work on critical algorithm studies, I'm interested in how like algorithms like search algorithms like Google search, what are their biases, how do they work, what do they include or exclude. So the third part of my work, I would describe it as a critical study of the algorithms that drive our internet's behavior and our lives. So, yep.

AG Okay, great, thank you that all, that all sounds very cutting edge, so I'm excited to hear more about that. Okay, so, so you are both I believe technically based in English departments, but this is a podcast about the internet. And both of you as we've heard a little bit have experience studying and writing about older cultural forms like the novel, print culture, music, and to start off, I'm curious about what do you consider to be internet "culture" that is new and native to the web? So in other words, what a few examples of new type, new types of cultural objects that we see on the internet that we haven't really seen before in other cultural domains that you have been looking at in your work? So, Lauren, would you want to start with that?

LMJ Yeah, I think, I think what's really new about the internet is almost like, it's almost like not even the objects themselves, but I think the way that they travel and move and disseminate and the rate at which they do. So, if you think about something like a GIF or, you know, any type of sort of moving image online, well, you know, you can look back and see conceptual artists and visual artists, you know, working with the same types of weird and sporadic types of images, like going back decades, right? But I think there is something very new about the ability to share that to thousands upon thousands of people, to remix images at like the blink of an eye, to edit images without the use of like, you know, even software that you have to purchase. Like I remember even just like ten

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years ago I was, you know, trying to torrent versions of like Photoshop and it would take like forever to download or something like that, right, but like you can do that from just like Instagram, right? And so I think the accessibility, I don't know if that, you know, can be like another type of object in and of itself, but I think, I think just the access and ability and speed with, at which these things circulate is just like, yeah, that's almost like a whole, that's a whole other medium, I mean, it is a whole other medium onto itself.

AG Yeah, that's great and you got into in your book, and we can definitely talk about this more, but that really complicates notions of authorship and sort of creative, the creative origin of a piece of culture in kind of a new way. I mean, obviously the notion of authorship has always been a little unstable, but because we don't really know exactly where something starts and a meme or a GIF is often so kind of participatory, there are so many people who input something into it, it just gets, it makes everything kind of slipperier and more complex in a lot of ways, so, that's great.

AG Yeah, absolutely, okay, thank you for that. And so, Richard, it sounds like Lauren has been suggesting that it is not so much that the internet has birthed tons of new cultural forms, but more that we're seeing continuity with older forms, but what is really new is how they circulate and how different people can kind of put their hands on them. So, I'm curious about how you would answer that question about what feels new in terms of culture on the internet?

RJS Yeah, everything Lauren says really resonates that the cultural forms in many ways remain the same and text, image, moving image and so forth and I totally agree too that in terms of the arts, the lowering of the barriers to becoming a creative making art has been a radical transformation of the internet. The other way that I think about it too beyond art making and culture making in terms of communication. One way that communication scholars have described this, which I think is a really nice formulation is the traditional model of mass communication after World War II is what we call one to many so like you write a book and then many people read it, you make a movie and then people consume it. The way that they describe it today is what they call many to many, so even if it is just you joining a discussion on Twitter, you are joining a conversation with many people talking to many other people, which to me is, to me in terms of the internet as a communication mechanism, including art, but also going beyond art and culture, that seems to me the really radically destabilizing and crazy thing about the internet that at any moment it is millions of people are talking to other millions of people and that to me seems profoundly new and original.

AG Yeah, that's great. So in a moment, we will definitely get into looking at some of the specific, I don't know, I guess manifestations of culture online, but I want to start by zooming out a little bit and I'm curious to hear about your experience actually trying to study the internet. Because it seems like from a cultural perspective, people are still a little bit unsure how to classify it, right, because they think for better or for worse, probably for worse, when we think about culture, I think a lot of us have been conditioned to think about museums or theater or the great novels and poems, and maybe

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not GIF's and a bunch of people all talking at the same time and Richard, in our earlier kind of correspondence prior to this episode, you said that you find the internet to be a truly fascinating place in terms of cultural production, but we don't really yet have a good understanding of how it all works. So, I'm curious about what, a) kind of what is fascinating to you about the internet as a place of cultural production, and then second, what do you think we still don't quite understand yet about it?

RJS Yeah, for me, I've always been really interested in mass and popular culture. I, even though I have a Ph.D. in English, the kind of great author model like spending 10 years reading Virginia Woolf, I think that is, I think that is awesome, but it's not really for me, and I've always been very interested in culture being produced by many different kinds of people and to me what's really fascinating about the internet culture as an object is really for the first time we can really know what many, many people are thinking at once simultaneously, instantaneously without any filters, it's to me the closest thing to culture as everyday practice, where there is really no filters, you know, for better or for worse. And yeah, I think, as we were talking about before, we don't really have a vocabulary, a method to really make that a coherent object of study yet, and I think people are trying lots of different ways, like a lot of what Lauren does and other people are doing I think close reading, close analysis, tracking memes can get really powerful. My own work though, I am interested in trying to understand like what a million people saying stuff, what, how that could be some kind of object of study, but, you know, I haven't figured it out. I don't think other people have figured it out, yeah, like what does that mean to treat that as an object and is that even culture looking at 10,000 random comments on Twitter or Goodreads. Is that, is that culture, is that meaningful? I believe they are saying interesting things and I want to know more about what they are saying so that is sort of what drives me to that, to that object.

AG Hmm, that's really fascinating. And Lauren, how about you, what kind of attracts you to the internet as an object of study and what do you think that we're, that we still don't really understand or what we need to kind of start working to understand about it?

LMJ Yeah, so what initially attracted me was the fact that, I mean, I was in graduate school, I was online all the time to a fault literally, but it did occur to me that, you know, I could actually apply, you know, the things that I was learning, you know, in an English graduate school setting with the texts, right, to the things that I was experiencing in everyday life and the things around me, whether it was pop music or memes or other forms of internet culture. I actually think, you know, one of the things, so I've actually sort of pulled back a little bit from writing about the internet so much in recent months I think because of the, because of what actually Richard was talking about, which is, you know, I do think close reading memes and things is like, it's really fun and I think it is actually really valuable and can teach us a lot about popular culture and why people are attracted to the thing that they are online, but I also think it has its limitations and I realize I think a lot of digital media is sort of getting into this rut where it's like, you know, there is a hot meme and then there is like a rush, like all the critics go to explain

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like here's why, you know, this meme is, you know, a perfect encapsulation of like our current moment.

AG Right.

LMJ It's like is this, you know, is this meme coalescing because of, because of like the cultural, you know, circumstances or is this, is this meme mobilizing culture and image in some way, or do they maybe like is there maybe nothing, like maybe it was just this one meme account that happened to have like a million followers and now we're all like sharing like a random meme from like Gossip Girl or something, even though Gossip Girl hasn't been like in the zeitgeist for like decades, right?

AG Yeah, yeah, Richard, do you want to respond to that because that sounds like, I mean, I guess the, to put a finer point on it, I mean, the question that I have for you is sort of like can your methods of computational analysis, do you feel like they can kind of add something to these real challenges that Lauren is talking about, or just do you want to kind of respond to that point in general?

RJS Yeah, both. I hope, you know, listeners know about Lauren is that, you know, she is active on Twitter, she is an active public writer and, you know, involved in interesting debates on the internet in a way that I'm not, I'm not really, I don't really participate in internet culture, it kind of freaks me out, I just sort of stay back.

AG You are just lurking, yeah.

RJS Right, and I see it though a lot, the thing that Lauren is describing, and again I really appreciate her kind of self-reflective comments and that's what I worry about too. I, my, my kind of love of the internet is the possibility of a kind of radical democracy, but, you know, the danger is always that, you know, hierarchies within traditional culture can be replicated on the internet where you have just sort of like influential people on the internet like at the New Yorker or Slate or whatever, yeah, just deciding things that might not reflect what is actually going on like the 80 other million people like, you know, saying stuff. So yeah, so what, you know, just to the second part of your question, yeah, what kind of drew me and some of my other colleagues like Andrew Piper is that these tools could potentially be democratizing, that it is really opened up the voices. Like everyone is kind of equal, right, so, even you are like a staff writer for the New Yorker or some random person, right, on Twitter, right, you can kind of treat each voice as equal in the production of these, these ideas and languages and discourse on the internet. So I like that. I will say though that the more I do this work, it is constantly disappointing that, that the wording I would say for anyone trying to get into this work it's, I'm discovered that it is just a lot of noise out there, you know, it's hard to find a meaningful signal that, you know, that sometimes the intuition that 50 million people are saying random stuff like on Twitter is actually just noise. Like often it's kind of true that they are not

AG Right.

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AG Yeah, that's a great point and sometimes it is not even people, it's bots, you know, so it is even, it's like disembodied, fully disembodied noise. Yeah, and, yeah, it just makes me think that it feels like what is truly democratic is just that the barrier of access is so low. I mean, of course access to the internet is not equal and, you know, it is striated by, by all kinds of different privileges, but it is easier to write a, to get on the internet somewhere and write a tweet than it is to write a novel that will then, you know, be read by a lot of people, and then I think later we can definitely talk about, you know, what happens after access, right, because I think Lauren, your work really gets into how power comes into play when we start thinking about not just people making a meme, but how that meme circulates and kind of what happens to it.

AG But that's great. So, okay, great, so we've been, we've been, we've landed on memes as one object of our own study here in this conversation, and Lauren in your book you write really perceptively and interestingly about the racial dynamics that define sort of how a lot of memes are created and then distributed, co-opted, appropriated, often even monetized by users of different racial identities across the Web, and there is one sentence from your book really, really jumped out at me. You write: "The spirit of black expression inflects these things called memes that move about the world as if they, too, are constantly surveilled (which they in fact are)." So I would love to hear from you about the link that you see between how memes move through the internet and how black expression has historically moved through culture, perhaps under surveillance, I would just love to hear you expand a little bit on that really interesting quote.

LMJ So, I, so in the book I'm trying to offer what I would like to think of as like a provocative proposition, which is that, you know, if you compare sort of a history of like black language in the Diaspora as a language and a way of expression and communication that has always been surveilled, curtailed, colonized, you know, all the, you know, all the bad stuff, but also has, you know, able to, you know, been able to remake itself and reform itself, you know, because of those conditions, and you compare that to a sort of internet environment in which it is like the, you know, the thing that allows memes to circulate is also the thing that is like ultimately like causes their demise, like the ability to be so circulatable is like what makes them less unique and less funny and less like, you know -

AG Yeah.

LMJ And so I, you know, I am trying to draw, you know, this correlation that is also strengthened by the fact that a lot of memes, particularly memes with textural elements borrow from recognizable features of black vernacular, whether it is, you know, black American vernacular or elsewhere across the Diaspora, and so bringing all those things together I was trying to think about, you know, okay, how does, how does a culture that is sort of always under threat move and change and sort of retain its sort of core values, while also, you know, pulling new things sort of out of the sky?

AG Yeah, absolutely. And that made me think about another point that you make, and I know other people have made this too, but the observation that often memes that visually

feature black subjects are often kind of outsourced to like express emotion by users of all races, you know, like the Oprah memes and the Tyra Banks and the Crying Jordan, so there's a way in which there are kind of all these, these forms of labor that are kind of being, creative labor that are being done and that are then being taken up by other people without, you know, credit or attribution or compensation or anything like that, that was just something that, that I was thinking about when you were talking about that, but, Richard do you want to add anything to that? Does that ring any bells with, you know, the way that you've been studying? The way, I know that, it sounds like what, a lot of what you've been doing has been kind of trying to see how a kind of narrative sense gets made out of these millions of people shouting in a room or how some kind of organizing structure happens out of that. I wonder whether Lauren's discussion of kind of how these objects move and circulate, does that resonate with anything that you've been thinking about?

LJS Yeah, I think everything Lauren says is really insightful and rings true. It just gets me thinking that, you know, so much of, you know, the history of cultural innovation in America is dependent on black innovation, black cultural forms and the internet just seems a really good example of that. I just want to have questions for Lauren, you know, the one weird thing about the internet is, you know, no one can see each other, right? So there's -

AG Right.

LJS Right, that identity cannot really be certified, so people claiming to be white or black, you know, there's sort of the racial anonymity, combined with the intense focus on racial discourse on the internet, and that's kind of like an interesting paradox, and so, yeah, I just have like more questions for Lauren, like, like how does that, in terms of the long history of, you know, black cultural appropriation as the motor for, you know, mainstream white culture, the fact now that, you know, with the internet, it is just really weird because everyone is super racially anonymous, I don't know if you had any thoughts about that? I have more questions though.

LJS Yeah, no totally, I think that's like a really, that's like another one of those things that I think additionally like anyone who writes about the internet has to contend with. And I think part of, and I think that's actually really exciting about thinking about something like appropriation in an internet context is the fact that we are, you know, we can't, we can't essentialize, like, you know, as sort of foolhardy as it is to do so elsewhere, to say that like, you know, black people listen to this, or black people write this kind of novel and white people write like this kind of novel, it's like on the internet it's like, you really can't do that, you know, you can't say that, you know, so and so is necessarily appropriating this vernacular from black people because you don't know where they got it from. They could have gotten it from, you know, X, Y, Z account that got it from this account from that account, such that like you have, you know, people and I think this is what is interesting about Instagram as well, which is like and the rise of people like the Kardashians, where it is like you have 19-year old girls in Denmark dressing like, like



video vixens, who have no, you know, cognizance of like early 2000's hip hop culture, like they, and you know, they are not appropriating it from black women from the Bronx necessarily, they are appropriating it from, you know, Kim Kardashian sort of fantasy wonderland version of what, you know, a non-white person in America dresses like, right? So it's just like, it becomes so, so convoluted to talk about appropriation as a straight sort of one way shot from black to white or, you know, Latina to white or whatever, right? Because it's just so, it's so messy online, and I think I love that messiness, but I think finding ways to talk about race online in ways that don't revert to these sort of really old essentialist like re-define means of talking about race is like, is like the challenge. Yeah.

AG Yeah. What do you, I'm just curious, so that's a really interesting example of, you know, a teenager in Northern Europe sort of copying, it's like these facsimiles of black culture. Just to get more specific, what do you think is lost in that? So if we are seeing these acts of appropriation or copying that get kind of increasingly distanced from the original kind of cultural origin, like what exactly is being lost or changed in that? And those kind of transactions, are those levels of appropriation, those various like waves of the phenomenon?

LMJ I mean, obviously like any form of a like citational practice gets lost. And I actually don't think, I mean, that's usually, I don't think that is like as huge of a problem until like money gets involved or like reintroduced. So like, you know, there's like millions of people on Instagram, you know, white girls on Instagram wearing like big hoops and I don't know, curling their hair in such a way or I don't like, like playing with their ethnicity, right? Or at least like ethnic aesthetics, and it's like, okay, whatever, like who cares, but it does matter if like, you know, Forever 21 decides to give so and so like a modeling contract or whatever or maybe not Forever 21, but you know, any ad agency, any, you know, any means for a person to become what is now called like an influencer, all of that, you know, that is when it starts to get sinister again because then it is like, oh like you are not going to, you know, you are not going to give money to like the, you know, the black person who is cool, it's the white person who is doing the sort of like less interesting version of what like the black person was doing, even if it is, you know, so many, you know, whatever people removed from whoever authentically created the thing or whatever, quote/unquote authentically, so yeah, I think that's where like we talk about like loss and, you know, the, there's different, there's also like levels to this, right? So when we are talking about people in the world of like fine arts and appropriation, people with, who are, you know, where there is like millions and millions and trillions of dollars on the line at like these big artistic institutions, right? And people are appropriating from black artists, like yeah, that's like a huge problem, but there is also the sort of everyday gestures of just being online and sort of in taking what you see and not necessarily having a super elaborate bibliographic record, which is kind of just like help, what it means to like be online now.

AG Yeah, that's, that's great, and I think, yeah, I would just kind of want to underline and underscore that I think that's such a kind of valuable intervention that your book makes into these conversations because I think that often especially in sort of mainstream spaces like the op-ed page of whatever newspaper and a lot of the kind of predominantly white spaces where these conversations about cultural appropriation happens, it often kind of stops at well, you know, it's wrong, it's offensive, blah, blah, blah, but it all feels very, those critiques feel very vague and I found it really just useful to think about from reading your book the way that it's not just that it is offensive or tasteless, it's actually, it represents kind of like a theft, like a theft of power and capital from people who are doing creative work, so I just wanted to thank you. For, for me that really helped shift my thinking around these conversations. Richard, do you have any, anything that I was, I just, I was just reading this weekend your recent article in PMLA, which is a literary studies journal and you can definitely talk more about that, but as I gather, you and your co-author, Edwin Roland are sort of reading a very large corpus of texts from the late Twentieth, mid to late Twentieth Century by black writers and white writers and you are sort of looking at the way that race is expressed in this large archive of novels and I'm I guess, from what Lauren was saying and what we have all kind of been thinking about, it seems like that gets even more complicated when we are talking about material online, like thinking about what racial expression even is and what its significance is, so I'm just wondering if you have anything kind of to add on what Lauren was saying maybe from that recent work or just unrelated.

RJS I do. Yeah, more related, happy to talk about the piece later, but yeah the thing I wanted to add, the kind of angle, everything Lauren is saying I completely agree with, it's really, these are powerful critiques. The one way I've been thinking about it with some colleagues because we work on platforms and sometimes we collaborate with platforms, you know, people who make the platforms and sometimes artists, and what I've noticed was happening a lot with people who made culture for a living is like people like Holly Herndon, Grimes, you know, they kind of want to make their own platforms to promote their own community, the things that they care about. Like a platform I really love a lot is AO3, I don't know if you guys know this, young people archive of our own, and it's huge, so if the norms on that platform, which has like, you know, like a hundred million people on it, is really like, really extremely progressive in terms of gender and sexuality, and they, and you kind of can't get away with doing terrible bullshit on that platform because the values and the norms they uphold are really progressive and really good. It would be really cool to have a kind of AO3 for people interested in black culture, right? Like the idea is that, you know, AO3 is massively popular, it's, you know, more people per day visit AO3 than the New Yorker.com. Younger people are creating their own platforms that support the things that they care about. So, yeah, a lot of the work I do is also in some ways applied trying to imagine like what could a good platform look like?

AG Yeah, I would love to hear from Lauren about that too, but before we do that, Richard, could you just kind of quickly explain what an archive of our own is, for listeners who might know AO, is it AO3, is that right?

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RJS Yeah.

AG Yeah, if you could give kind of a quick description of what it is that would help.

RJS Just yeah, it's a fan fiction website, and it's a place where people just upload stories, share stories, talk to each other, again it has, you know, 20,000 stories or upload per day. If you compare that to, say, Random House or like a major big book publisher, it completely dwarfs any other, you know, print cultural mechanism happening today. So these websites are really, really, really important, you know, and literally 80, 100 million people per platform and everything is interesting about, it got some attention recently because a short story, a science fiction short story that was uploaded, a science fiction short story which just, I think it won the Hugo or the Nebula award for science fiction, so it was the first time a work of fan fiction won a major literary prize, so these are increasingly powerful and dominant platforms.

AG That's super interesting. Lauren, do you have anything, any other thoughts about, about platforms? I mean, and kind of what Richard has been talking about. I know that you have, it becomes clear from your writing that you have spent some time on Twitter and also some time on Tumblr and, you know, obviously different platforms that exist have different affordances and drawbacks, but I found it really interesting how Richard is talking also about inventing new platforms that could foster kind of healthier cultural expressions maybe than our existing ones do. So I'm curious whether you've thought about how kind of platform factors into all of this stuff that we've been talking about?

LMJ Yeah, I think with platforms like I, I don't know, I increasingly find myself like nostalgic for, I don't know why I call it like the old days, because like not the old days, like they are still message boards and like forums and pro boards and like all that stuff is like, it still exists, but I do kind of miss when it was a little bit, a little bit more scattered, a little bit more, like Yahoo Groups, like it just like it wasn't as pretty, as seamless, it wasn't as clean. I think just like, I think also like the size of Twitter and Facebook is just like they are so mammoth that it is just like, I don't know, it like exceeds the limits of like ethics or something, I don't know it's just like, and I think there is a lot of even in like black online cultural spaces, talk about, you know, creating our own, which is in some ways an extension of what has sort of always been a mantra of like black political organizing, which is like, you know, making our own spaces, our own universities, our own community centers, like etc., etc., etc. But I also think it gets like even that mindset gets like weirdly capitalistic, so like I know I think Issa Rae recently has been like promoting some new platform for like meant for black creators to, you know, per the sort of like advertising copy, like basically make money from your own culture. Like, you know, your article driven so and so often online like now you can actually make money for the things that you create and own the things that you create, and there is something about that like proprietary language that I think is, I don't know, I don't know if it is really as reparative as, as it supposes to be. Because I think the thing about the internet is like, yeah, like you can't, you can't own culture.

AG Right.

LMJ Like the idea isn't necessarily to have ownership over a thing, but to have like a more, I don't know, equitable, ethical relationship to it. So yeah, I don't know, I'll, you know, I'll sit back, I'll wait and see whatever the next big thing, I mean, actually like the next big thing is like Tiktok and I have no clue what is going on over there, so, maybe not. Maybe I'm stuck here.

AG Yeah, yeah, that's interesting. Yeah, it seems like maybe there, I am kind of hearing that there is maybe a tension between, you know, that, the freedom, the low barrier of access, the phrase that I think Richard used of the kind of radically democratic nature of online participation and cultural creation and then on the other side, yeah, the notion of copyright and ownership and compensation, and it's, it is like in an ideal world, we would be able to have both, but it is sort of hard to have both, I guess.

RJS I, I was, I was interested in hear Lauren's take. I want people to make money. I don't know, like I want people to get paid, you know, I understand their concern, I mean, I have the sort of utopian desire, you know, John Dewey, you know, in the early Twentieth Century had this ideal of culture as, you know, really the anti-museum ethos, right, which is like culture will be really truly culture and democratic when it just saturates our everyday life, right? And the internet is cool in that it seems to be, you know, drifting in that direction, you know, like, people, like being a creative person is just something that everyone can do and it could just be a part of your day, a part of your life, like I really like it is a lot and that's close to this ideal, but, but yeah, I just feel like, you know, it's completely inextricable from potentially making money and ideally if you can do that plus get paid, I don't know, I just, it seems almost impossible not to replicate the order or hierarchies of cultural production, except I don't know, a good friend of mine who is like Lauren who writes a lot for the public, my friend Hua Hsu just feels like the trend is more people being in culture, but fewer people will be able to make a living doing it. Which seems to me right. And I think for someone like Hua Hsu is more of a creative, that worries him.

AG Yeah, Lauren I'm wondering, I'm, when Richard is talking about that, I'm thinking about an example that you talk about in your book in a chapter about viral videos and you are talking about the meme Eyebrows on Fleek, which I don't know, was I guess created, I didn't, I mean, this speaks to, you know, the power of this phenomenon, but I didn't know actually who had originated it, but you point out that it was originated by a 16-year old named Kayla Newman, and this phrase, Eyebrows on Fleek or like anything on Fleek, you know, went viral and we certainly reached a point where, you know, you see like white internet users using it to gain some kind of cultural or social capital, and then I believe it even appeared, you know, of course brands then start to seize on the newest cultural trend and incorporate it into ads and so people—not Kayla Newman—actually end up making money off of her own invention basically. I'm wondering does that sound to you like an example sort of what Richard is talking about where it feels like, you know, at some level the money does kind of matter because it is kind of a bummer that

she never, it seems like she never really saw any compensation for creating this kind of cultural wildfire in her bedroom or wherever she made that Instagram video?

LMJ Yeah, totally, she, I mean, as she said, so Doreen St. Félix who is a staff writer at the New Yorker, but, you know, a couple of years ago had written a feature on Kayla Newman for the Fader and, you know, as Newman told her, like I didn't make any money off of this. Like and just thinking about the disparity between how everywhere that word and that expression was, I mean, it was in like a Nicki Minaj and Beyoncé video, like that's insane, like Beyoncé is like using your term, and like, yeah, that's like really, you know, that's really cool, but also like you can't pay for college or groceries or rent, you know, with like, you know, my word was in Beyoncé's video, right? You can't pay your bills with that. And so I think, you know, also, it is just, you know, it's not so much the fact that like she created an internet thing that went viral, I think it's the fact that, you know, had she been like a white teen, like she would probably be on, you know, she probably would have gotten to go to Ellen, and you know, Ellen who has become now like the vehicle for like I don't know white kids gone viral online. And so, you know, in cases like that, yeah, I think it, it becomes hard to argue that, you know, that none of this, this stuff is like owned or proprietary because it is like, you know, it was made, it was created, there is like an origin story, there is a person, you know, that begins that plot point, and so yeah, I think that's, that's very, that's very real.

AG Yeah, definitely. Okay, I think we probably want to start sort of wrapping up soon. I have a lot of other questions, so I'm trying to think about what we want to make sure to fit in. Yeah, I mean, it strikes me that in a sense what, what you are explaining there is again another way that the internet isn't necessarily creating this new behaviors, but it's more a continuity of older forms, right? Like I think in a lot of ways that sounds like some of the practices that you mentioned really early in our conversation, like minstrelsy and kind of rock and roll being an appropriation of black musical forms and I guess I did want to ask you about the concept that you write about, which it's a term that you take from Joshua Lumpkin Green's Master's thesis, the term, digital blackface and I guess in essence it means how technology like videogames, social media, “enables non-black individuals to slip into black personhood,” and I think that was a quote from you. So I'm wondering if you could just explain that concept a little bit, and we can maybe talk about that, again as, as one of these, these modes of being online that are both new and old essentially.

LMJ Sure, so to be like, you know, appropriately modest. I will admit that like this isn't a term that I've, you know, super fleshed out all that much. I think I have my idea about it and obviously as you just said, I, you know, taken the term from Joshua Lumpkin Green, which is where I first encountered it in a Master's thesis he wrote looking at the game Grand Theft Auto, San Andreas and thinking about the way in which the black avatar is being mobilized by, you know, someone behind the controller who could be black, could be white, could be anybody, and so for me the term I think really just encompasses like a constellation, a broad constellation of gestures enabled by the internet. So everything

from like actual campaigns birthed on like 4chan to, you know, try to confuse feminists and activists to color online by starting like fictitious hashtags that, you know, become real hashtags because they are hashtags such as like there was the hashtag called like end father's day, that was like ostensibly started by feminists of color and it was actually organized by, you know, a group of, a group of users on 4chan, who again, you know, we don't necessarily want to call them white because we don't know the racial makeup of these people, but you know, assume a very sort of white, very masculine politics, right? And so, like gestures like that I consider, you know, within the purview of digital blackface, which is to say using the sort of memes of the internet and the relative anonymity of the internet to sort of inhabit a sort of racial identity or assert a racial identity, but then you know, on the sort of other end of the spectrum, the sort of more subtle end of the spectrum, I think about the way in which the internet allows us to sort of signify blackness, you know, without actually, you know, putting on like the shoe polish or, you know, whatever, actually having to go through all the costuming that it takes to do a performance, right? And again, this is something that is sort of enabled by something like an automated GIF button where you can perform the sort of sassiness or the sort of extra, extraneous that gets attributed to, attributed to black bodies, black people, particularly black femmes of various genders and the way that you can sort of borrow that for, to sort of emote on your own terms on the internet without actually having to be say like fluent in the sort of queer vernacular, or fluent in, you know, a certain mastery of like, you know, shade or whatever. You know, it is so easy to, to actually just appropriate and borrow from that via digital means.

AG Yeah, definitely. Richard, do you have any, I guess, this, this makes me wonder about the practice of writing fan fiction and the AO3 site that you talked, the fan fiction site that you talk about because yeah, the kind of extreme possibilities for having, or sort of inhabiting other identities on the internet obviously can be used toward, you know, to put it lightly, sort of nefarious means, but that can also I think in some ways be liberating let's say for like young queer people, or you know, I think in the fan fic space or in kind of the role playing game space that notion of being able to kind of put on and take off an identity, you know, can sometimes be a little bit more productive or liberating in some ways, and so I'm wondering if you see any relationship between what Lauren was talking about and the fan fic sites that you, or the other communities that you study?

RJS Yeah, totally, yeah, this kind of gets at this big question that is always on my mind, which is, you know, fundamentally is the internet making us better or worse human beings, right? And this is totally -

AG Yeah, just a small question.

RJS Yeah, and I wonder about it every day.

AG Let's think about that.

RJS Because I don't know. But, you know, we talked about kind of earlier cultural forms, you know, and the training that all three of us have had with the novel in particular, and, you

know, the novel was a new technology in, you know, you look at something like Uncle Tom's Cabin, it was, you know, a radical example of, right, slipping into, right, the body of this, you know, black slave and then the famous scene where Uncle Tom is like whipped, you know, extremely violently and that galvanized all this stuff and yeah, to me, it gets to this question of, you know, the core question, the timeless question in many ways of the relationship between arts and empathy, right? Like trying, like the whole point of the novel was you could try out to see what it feels like to be a different kind of person and ideally in the end it makes you like a better person in some way, right, like you a man like sees what it is like to be a woman, a white person sees like what it is like to be a black person, and yeah, in many ways, right, the internet is just an encoding of those older dynamics, right? The relationship between arts and empathy, but it is so intense for me, you know, hearing Lauren talk about this and your question in that it is no longer just, you know, reading stuff, it is like, you know, like an 18-year old white kid in the South can go on, you know, Black Twitter and, you know, basically pretend to be a black person and see what that is like and it's so intense, you know? It has become an active venture, it's, you know, a hundred times more intense than just, you know, a white person reading Uncle Tom's Cabin in the late Nineteenth Century, and it is deeply behavioral, it is probably going to change you in some ways and I just think we don't know, like it is an important question of what does that do to a person? Ideally, you know, yeah, trying out what it feels like to be a black person if you are not black on Twitter somehow this is going to give you some meaningful experience, it is going to change you in some way for the better, but I don't know, I am kind of skeptical, but so yeah, in many ways it is as you said before, it is a continuity with the older cultural forms, but just so intensified where the stakes feel so much higher now.

AG Lauren, do you want to add anything to that?

LMJ Yeah, I, I also wanted to add that I think part of what makes it so, I don't know like what's like worth mourning I guess, I think about something about Tumblr, which ultimately became the sort of punching bag for a certain kind of, you know, socially conscious person online in part because for a lot of people it was the first time they got to come together with people they felt like were their community, so, people who couldn't be out in their "real lives," you know, could be out in various ways on Tumblr. And again like we still, you know, and I think that's also why it is important to like not talk about like internet identity as like a sort of one-to-one relationship. Like if you are a queer person online, but you are, you present as not queer outside, like does that make you any less queer? Like, you know, I think that, no, right? But I think part of why, you know, now it is kind of reached a sort of insidious place, it's like, you know, the freedom of being either whoever you want to be, you know, the freedom of being whoever you want to be online like has, clearly has its like downside because it doesn't just mean being who you want to be, it means like being who you want to be, like what does that mean to different people? I mean, it is different things to different people, right? You know, for some people it means expressing an inner truth, for some people it means like play acting, and yeah, it's just like it turns, it gets really sticky.

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AG Yeah, I think that's, yeah, I think that's just, it's interesting have these conversations about the internet because at some point you get to these extremely metaphysical, philosophical questions, like what is a person, what is a self, what is a body? Is this making us better or worse? So, I mean, it is kind of opening up a whole other Pandora's Box, but I guess as we wrap up, I'm just wondering whether either or both of you, is there anything that you want to say related at all to any part of the conversation that you haven't gotten a chance to, anything you want to add or maybe we've covered everything, but I just want to give you that chance. Richard, is there anything dangling on your mind that you would want to add into the conversation at this point?

RJS I guess the only thing I wanted to say, partly to a little bit insider-y to colleagues, academic colleagues, but also to certainly like journalists or just regular people that, but particularly to my colleagues, for people who care about the social impact of language and stories and narrative, I just feel like the internet is God's gift to people who want, you know, we've always sort of hypothesized, you know, this belief that stories and language have this impact on reality, and I think with the internet, we can really finally truly see that in action in a really visceral way that the internet in many ways is the place where language becomes a kind of action or a discourse becomes an action. And I think it is just unfortunate that, you know, this is not a huge part of the humanities or English departments, right, how many professors in English departments actively study the internet, right? I just think it's such an important part of continuous with our tradition, but essential to all the things that we care about with affect, aesthetics, you know, narrative, art, like this is really the internet and yet I hope that also like regular people or journalists, you know, take it seriously in the way that is not just the, you know, the kind of interesting dominant things, but the masses, like take seriously the 80 million people on AO3 making stories, like I think that is really important because they, in my opinion, you know, they probably impact society more than ten writers at the New Yorker in many ways, you know, like these -

AG Right.

RJS They en masse are incredibly important to doing stuff and we need to take it seriously to make a better society, so, yeah, that's just what has been on my mind.

AG Yeah, that is really beautifully said. Lauren, do you have anything that you want to add about anything?

LMJ I'll just add like something slightly more like, or slightly combative which is just to say.

AG Great. Right at the end.

LMJ - that if you, if you work on, write about, think about, like the contemporary like you have to contend with the internet. Even if you don't write about the internet, you have to contend with its existence and it as a means of again storytelling, of language formation, narrativizing the way people are making sense of the world around them, like you just



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have to. Like if you, if you don't, you are missing, like you are missing it. You are missing it, so yeah, that's my words of like please do this.

AG Duly noted. Yeah, I think that's really well said. So the last question that we just ask everyone is about kind of the next big question. So what is, what do you think is the next big question that we need to be asking as we study the internet, culture on the internet, identity on the internet, these topics that we have been talking about in our conversation. Richard, what do you think.

RJS Yeah, again, this is a little bit insider-y, this is to my colleagues doing work in this area. But I think it is really, really important to understand the relationship between social processes or social things like racial inequality, income and equality, environmental collapse and narrative. So exactly what Lauren is saying. Right, people make stories to make sense of their lives. I think it was Joan Didion who said, "we tell ourselves stories in order to live." The internet as exactly what Lauren is saying is the place that people are doing it, but I think one next step in terms of the work that I find interesting and the work that I do is like so what? Right, what's the impact of that, right? Like, you know, like we're about to head into a recession, a depression, you know, stories are going to change like can we tell stories that like mitigate the impact of disease or economic precarity or vice versa, I think, you know, with the fact that everyone tells stories on the internet like so what? Like what does that really, what does that really do? And I think that's, we have to start figuring that out.

AG Yeah, that's a great way to put it. How about you, Lauren?

LMJ I think and this is, this is not really like a question for myself, like this is for someone, this is for someone else to take.

AG For someone else to pick up.

LMJ Because it's not, it's like, it's very, it's like very far outside my like purview and like area of expertise or influence at all, but I do think just as a person that like uses the internet, I think we need to figure out what to do now that like the platforms and the people who control them are like not the like scrappy little guys anymore. Like they are like they are Goliath. And I think we're still like catching up to that like in our head, like we still think about like Twitter as like, oh it is Jack and you know, he tweets at me and like blah, blah, blah. It's like, no, like Twitter is a behemoth and I, and like even, I don't know, I just like think like even the U.S. Government like doesn't treat like Mark Zuckerberg seriously and like he's running circles around them and it is just like, okay, like I think we need to contend with the idea that like these spaces that once felt young and untried and scrappy are, you know, huge and hulky and surveilling and yeah, I think that's sort of something that we are, you know, kind of coming, increasingly coming to realizations about, but like we don't know what to, like what do we do? Like we know it, what do we do about it?

AG Yeah, that's a great point. I think we're definitely moving into that phase and maybe, maybe you've just given someone a dissertation topic or a book project. So, we'll see,

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maybe that, hopefully that will get written at some point. But I think that's, I think that's all that we have for now.

[brief music break]

And that's our show! Many thanks to Lauren Michele Jackson and Richard Jean So for sharing their research and thoughts about internet cultures. Richard is actually a section editor at *Public Books*; he edits our Digital Humanities section. And we published an excerpt from Lauren's book, *White Negroes*, called "The Hipster." You will find links to those pieces, and more, at [publicbooks.org/podcast](http://publicbooks.org/podcast).

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The next episode of *Public Books 101* is our series finale. We'll zoom out a bit to look at the economy that has grown up around the internet and the digital technologies that continue to shape our lives in profound ways. We'll ask, how did we get here? And where do we go next? I'll talk to Margaret O'Mara, who has written an incredibly expansive history of Silicon Valley, and Meredith Broussard, who is a software developer and data journalist who really understands how machines and digital technologies work.

So I hope you'll join me for the *final* episode of *Public Books 101: The Internet*, as we wonder: How do we build more equitable technologies as we head into the future?

This podcast is a production of *Public Books*, in partnership with the Columbia University Library's Digital Scholarship Division. Thank you to Michelle Wilson at the library for partnering with us on this project. This episode was produced by me, Annie Galvin, with production assistance from Jess Engebretson and Kelley Deane McKinney. It was edited by Jess Engebretson. Our theme music was composed by Jack Hamilton. Special thanks to the editorial staff of *Public Books* for their support for this project, and to the Mellon Foundation and the American Council of Learned Societies, where I am a public fellow. Thank you for listening, and I hope to see you next time.