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Art and Activism

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White Flight and white.ly

Historical Context

In this paper, I will discuss the urban phenomenon of "white flight" as it pertains to strictly the

U.S. "White flight" is defined as the large-scale migration of white people from urban areas to a more

racially homogeneous and self selecting suburban area due to the influx of minorities in urban areas in the

1950's through the 70's. Though racial segregation ("separate, but equal") was legally ended in public

schools with the *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, white people, who often had the socio-economic

leverage to move away, circumvented efforts to desegregate by extracting themselves from the regions

with increasing populations of minority groups.

There were several factors enabling white people to migrate in such large quantity, so quickly.

Firstly, after World War II, the rapid government funded highway systems and the subsidization of car

production (the legacy of Henry Ford) and consumerism enabled white Americans to commute to work

daily from their suburban homes. Due to the decentralization of businesses, this made leaving urban areas

particularly accessible for those with the economic means to do so. Additionally, the federal government

perpetuated racial zoning laws through the construction of highways through neighborhoods in order to

more effectively segregate white and nonwhite neighborhoods[1]. The negative impact of highways was

two-fold, both economically and geographically.

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[1] Charles E. Connerly, *From Racial Zoning to Community Empowerment* (2002), 1.

The economic barrier alone made it impossible for city dwelling minority groups who could not afford to move away from the city. However, even if non-whites had the means to move away from cities, which were often falling into urban decay, there were social barriers that prevented them from home ownership. For example, in the South, there were legal exclusionary practices in title deeds and real estate which denied Black people from being granted mortgages or deeds. Therefore, even though legally, segregation was over, socio-economic power dynamics were capitalized upon to continue *de facto* segregation often at the expense of the non-white groups who had no residential mobility. Business tactics deployed by real estate companies and agencies also exploited the few non-white homeowners who could afford to move into suburbs through "blockbusting," which capitalized on the white residents' fears of incoming non-white aspiring homeowners. Real estate agencies, speculators, or developers persuaded white homeowners to sell their property at a lowered cost (due to the influx of "undesirable neighbors") then profited by reselling the homes to non-white residents at a higher price.

"White flight" resulted in several negative impacts which have been observed to take the form of a vicious cycle with damaging consequences and few alternatives. "White flight" often coincided with "capital flight" which is a result of middle class residents fleeing the city due to deindustrialization, the social and economic change caused by the shift of manufacturing services to the service sectors. This would lead to the draining of taxable income from urban areas, the abandonment of local businesses, and the fall of public school systems in these areas once teachers started to migrate to either private or suburban schools. Even non-white residents, when they've gained enough economic capital to leave, fled to the suburbs. Once the cycle started, it didn't stop until most or all of the white or middle class population had moved out of the areas with high concentration of non-whites or lower class. Though this is an issue of both race and class, in the case study below, I will outline how the instigator for "white flight" actually stemmed from racial motivations and then snowballed into an economic one.

Case Study - Detroit, MI

An important case study to look at is the rise and fall of Detroit, Michigan. Starting from its prosperity in the 40's and 50's when it was an urban metropolis with mostly white residents to the present emptied shell of its former self. The mythology that is perpetuated is that "white flight" began in the 60's due to violent race riots, such as the one in the summer of 1967. It's described that that was when white residents, with the means to do so, started to move out due to increased crime and violence in the streets. It was further compounded by the 1974 Supreme Court ruling in the case of *Milliken v. Bradley* which desegregated the Detroit public schools but not beyond the boundaries of the city border.[2] This ruling was widely believed to cause the white and middle class residents to increase their rate of suburbanization but also remain the dominant majority in suburban areas despite non-white residents with economic means also moving out of the city. The myth treats the problem as an economic one but there is evidence to prove that it was social prejudices that underlay the departure of many white residents of Detroit.

The above narrative doesn't take into account the very beginnings of "white flight" - which was instigated by the fear that white residents had about black residents moving in. This was only later exploited by real estate agencies. There are multiple letters from residents of Detroit to the Mayor from the Detroit Public Library that describe the social outrage that white Detroiters felt in the 1940's at the thought of non-white residents commuting, living, and doing recreational activities in the same facilities or public spaces. One white Detroiter states their "opposition of negros into the project that is now being built in our vicinity" and goes on further to explain that "when [they] built [their] home in 1926, it was stated in [their] contract that all negros were restricted and would not come northward beyond Davison & Dequindre. This assurance was given to [them] and that is why [their] home was built."[3] These and other letters show that white opposition to desegregation was directly tied to the monetary value of their homes and why real estate agencies were perfectly poised to profit off of them.

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[2] Charles T Clotfelter, *The Detroit Decision and "White Flight"* (January 1976), 99.
[3] Michael Jackman, *Detroit's white racist heritage … in letters* (August 2016)

At the borders of Detroit, there are divisions in neighborhoods, specifically Grosse Pointe Park, which show the extent of racial tensions and separation. There are visible blockade tactics utilized to separate Detroit and Grosse Pointe Park. At the border there is a high chain-link fence on the north bank of Fox Creek which separates the two residential areas. The sentiment of the residents of the city of Grosse Pointe Park are very clearly stated through rules and regulations allowing only the city's residents to enjoy the use of municipal areas and parks. Furthermore, there is only a small tunnel on the border that allows residents to move in between these neighborhoods. The contrast of wealth and standard of living is stark. On the Detroit side of the border, houses are boarded up and lawns are overgrown or unkempt. On the Grosse Pointe side, there are clean suburban houses with meticulously manicured lawns. The border is reinforced by a 20 ft tall chain link fence.

Other instances of blockading involve the City of Grosse Pointe Park illegally constructing a farmers' market shed on a main east to west road thereby restricting traffic from either side. The blockade was removed after much deliberation due to the fact that it was located on the City of Detroit property.[4] With racial tensions running high, the division was further exacerbated by homicides which took the lives of multiple children and teenagers of both neighborhoods. There have been efforts to revitalize the side of Detroit, which have been all but evacuated, by introducing joint development agreements across Grosse Pointe Park and Detroit. However, as much as a city like Detroit could benefit from economic revitalization, it often comes at the expense of its long-time residents who have suffered and barely survived through the difficult times.

Gentrification is the process in which middle to upper class residents are reintroduced to areas of poverty or urban decay. At best the influx of new residents consists of artists with little means to survive but at worst it is the influx of white people who have "rediscovered" inexpensive parts of the city to rent

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[4] Nina Ignaczak, *Life on the Border: Blurring the Lines That Separate Detroit and Grosse Pointe Park* (July 2015).

out renovated warehouses on inherited money. This results in the forcing out of predominantly non-white population who are already struggling due to real-estate prices skyrocketing in the response to the influx of wealth. An example within Detroit is Corktown, a former Irish-immigrant-inhabited neighborhood which is now a site for craft breweries, hipster coffee shops, and galleries.

The problem of gentrification is that it is often spearheaded by artists who are looking for financially viable spaces to live but ultimately attract the bohemian, upper middle class who value the "authentic" loft-lifestyle but come from means. This causes real estate agencies to drive up the market price of homes in due to this specific set of people's influx of wealth. This has happened not only in Detroit, but in Brooklyn and San Francisco (due to the Silicon Valley). As Carducci states, this is part of the "broader shift in American society whereby counterculture has been transformed into postmodern consumer culture."[5]

Proposal Background and other artists

Websites have been, in the recent tradition of subversion, popular mediums for creating something that looks just legitimate enough to suspend belief and propose an idea for the viewer to consider more fully than other traditional art mediums such as paintings or drawings, or even traditional print. Through its ease of accessibility, low capital investment, and a certain level of anonymity, the millennial generation consumes content almost exclusively from the screen of a browser or a mobile device. Anything from products you want to buy to building relationships through social media exists on the world wide web. This multi-dimensional platform was first utilized as an art platform by Internet artists like Rafaël Rozendaal who treated each window and website domain as his own personal solo show, circumventing all need for a traditional art institution to be a middleman in between the artist and the viewer. Anyone from any part of the world could see the work, share it, and spread it. If effectively planned and enough publicity is generated, the rate at which work is shared has the potential to shatter the

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[5] Vince Carducci, *On Art and Gentrification* (January 2015)

outdated ideology of requiring bodies in specific spaces of certain privilege (i.e. art galleries, museums, etc).

Another way websites have attempted to circumvent the system of capitalism in the art market is through the very nature of the work belonging to non-objecthood. Digital work, often called "new media art," is intrinsically fleeting, data can be lost, compressed, and altered multiple times throughout its lifetime. Objects on the other hand are static and inhabit physical space continuously. It is not as fluid as digital work, therefore can be more reliable to invest capital in, buy, and sell - therefore are more efficient at carrying value. An example of this is to think about the Mona Lisa. It is easier to carry the painting of the Mona Lisa than to carry its worth in bill form. If we analyze the amount of capital needed to execute something, digital work can often times have a substantially lower barrier of entry than more traditional mediums such as sculpture or painting. Therefore, it is a more accessible form of making and allows the entry of non-male, non-white people into a space that is historically been predominately white and male.

Websites are just a specific subgroup of the broader practice of new media art. Within the domain of websites as the medium, an example of an artist group that has used this medium subversively is The Yes Men. Their target are people or organizations that have abused their power and profited from the exploitation of others. Comprised of a duo, Igor Vamos and Jacques Servin, they use satire, intervention, and obfuscation in order to disrupt, or "culture-jam", the corporate or governmental realm but by using that realm's language. They've impersonated famous figures and corporations in public on national mass media outlets and conferences. Their impersonation is so real, seeing as though they satisfy the physical requirements to do so as white men, that the general public have trouble discerning their satire from reality. Their work is interesting to highlight because their work aligned perfectly with the Dot Com Boom in the 2000's. The Dot Com Boom saw the increase in stock value of companies from just adding ".com" or "e-" to their names due to the rise of equity in the Internet sector and other related technological fields. This made for the perfect playing field for The Yes Men.

The most well known projects that they have done include impersonating the Dow Chemical, President G.W. Bush, and the World Trade Organization. For example, they ripped off the World Trade Organization's website and made another website with satirical and fake content so that when people would try to look up the web address for the World Trade Organization, they just landed on a fake page instead. Another famous example which utilizes mimicry of corporate personas is their impersonation of a representative from Dow Chemical when their fake website dowethics.com was contacted by BBC World to speak on air on December 3, 2004, the twentieth anniversary of the Bhopal disaster. Dow Chemical, who acquired Union Carbide, was the actual company responsible for the toxic chemical spill in Bhopal, India 20 years prior. Neither Union Carbide nor Dow Chemical took responsibility for the spill which had killed over 25,000 people. In the end they only paid $470 million in a settlement to the Indian government, which came out to barely $500 per victim. In the live airing of BBC World, "Jude Finisterra", who was actually Jacques Servin in disguise, claimed that Dow Chemical was finally going to compensate the victims of the Bhopal disaster by resolving to "liquidate Union Carbide .. and use the $12 billion to provide more than $500 per victim, which is all that they've seen, a maximum of just about $500 per victim. It is not "plenty good for an Indian," as one of our spokespersons unfortunately said a couple of years ago. In fact, it pays for one year of medical care."[6] Within an hour, Dow Chemical had lost $2 billion dollars in market value. Once the discovery that "Jude Finisterra" was actually not affiliated with Dow Chemical at all was made, Dow Chemical issued a statement that it was in fact *not* planning on taking responsibility for the Bhopal, highlighting their blatant disregard for the toxic spill, all in the national spotlight thanks to The Yes Men's hoax.

In an age where disasters happen as a result of corporate exploitation and negligence, all corporations need to do is to issue a command to their PR department to get the company profile as far removed from the incident as possible and keep their heads down long enough for the public's eye to

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[6] Bonanno, Mike; Bichlbaum, Andy; Gonzalez, Juan. "'The Yes Men Fix the World': In New Film, Anti-Corporate Pranksters the Yes Men Continue to Jolt Polluters and Profiteers."

move away. The amount of time a corporation has to keep its head down is getting shorter and shorter as the amount of media we consume each day increases. We are overwhelmed with different disasters on a daily basis. Being held accountable is no longer something to worry about, because the masses will just do the job of forgetting on their own, no additional compensation or coaxing is necessary.

Though the results of the Dow Chemical hoax in particular was a way to bring forgotten misdeeds, that were devastating for thousands of people, into the spotlight, it also took an adverse toll on the people of Bhopal. Their hopes had been raised and shattered in the span of a couple of hours. This calls into question the white male savior complex that The Yes Man embodied and their exploitation of an already exploited group of people through the imitation of the very corporate structure which profited off of their loss in the first place. Even if their critique was through imitation, their effect mainly relied on the public denouncement from the corporations they were attempting to critique. I believe that they were successfully able to draw critical mass attention, but the method in which they did it were sometimes problematic. For example, in the Bhopal hoax, Dow Chemical denied all association with the Yes Men and in the end didn't take responsibility for it anyway. Like the first time Bhopal was recognized in media 20 years prior, it quickly faded from limelight with no action from Dow Chemical to help the people of Bhopal. **Both times, it was the people of Bhopal whom suffered**.

This kind of work that disrupts the "normal" media, can be translated perfectly into the supposedly most disruptive industry of them all, startup and tech culture. These bubbles are full of Venture Capital money and is predominantly white and male. Tech is also the sector of industry that is expanding the most rapidly and touching every part of our lives. It has become a powerful tool for democratizing ideas and products. However since these products are created by a predominantly white and male group of people of a certain class, the products cater to those same group of people, thereby making the products themselves inaccessible by people of color or the lower class. For example, Snapchat has a Snapchat filter which allow its users to digital yellow-face with an "anime" filter which exaggerated

the user's nose and teeth and gave them downward slanting eyes. Another example is Facebook's check-in and flag filters on user's profile photos only when a Western-related tragedy happens, denying acknowledgment of the *constant* (often caused by the Western world) tragedies and deaths in other parts of the world not deemed worthy enough of white sympathy because of the color of their skin. The assumption that theses huge tech companies are predominantly male and white, comes from the fact that many just refuse to publish their diversity numbers. These are the misdeeds of the companies that I want to highlight. I want use the idea of imitation as a subversive tool to specifically critique white flight through content and simultaneously critique the exclusionary practices of the tech world through its form.

My proposal is to make a fake online real estate database company which targets white people. The website, called "white.ly", will be like every other house-hunting website (like Zillow) except it will claim to run predictive algorithms on a large database of minority population growth (collected from the United States Census Bureau) in regions close to where the user has indicated interest in buying/renting property, and indicate only the residential listings for areas which will remain homogeneously white for up to the next ten years. It will look like all the other sleek startups with a clean polished interface. The top header will give the user the option to buy, sell, figure out mortgages, find an agent, and advice for home protection (from immigrants or approaching militant minorities). There will be a big wide landing page which allows users to enter in the desired street address or zip code for where they would like to live. This will lead the user to a window which will show the area that you are searching within with a toggle bar to see residential listings that will be not be in the region of minority population growth of 1 to 10 years depending on how long the users plan to be living in that area. The motto will be "Live in your dream house with the comfort of knowing that you'll be safe for years to come." There will be listings of price options, number of beds, bathrooms, etc. and other similar options for houses on sale or for rent. The user will then will be able to contact a real estate agent, and the picture of the agent will be a nice blonde woman in her 30's with sparkly white teeth and a clean blazer. There will also be quotes and testimonials

from previous users who will vouch for the effectiveness of this online database and how much it has helped them to find their dream home. The testimonials will include a slideshow of a white families and couples with their nicely mowed grass and golden labrador retriever.

This online real estate platform will be marketed towards white people who want to live around white people because **"white people want to live around other white people."** The audience will be mostly middle to upper middle class white people. Of course a pitfall for this kind of project would be that white people might actually use this in order find housing that perpetuates white flight. However, the "predictive algorithm" will actually be a pseudo-randomized algorithm that produces bogus results. The white people who will actually have the nerve to look for housing on this website will be conned into thinking that they are ensuring their homogenous white-exclusive future when actually, they are limiting their housing options and probably not getting as best of a deal as they possibly could if they were to use other websites such as Redfin or Zillow to look for housing. Therefore, this project will use the same language of imitation that The Yes Men used but without exploitation of people of color to make the statement. In fact, it will directly exploit the people it is meant to critique.
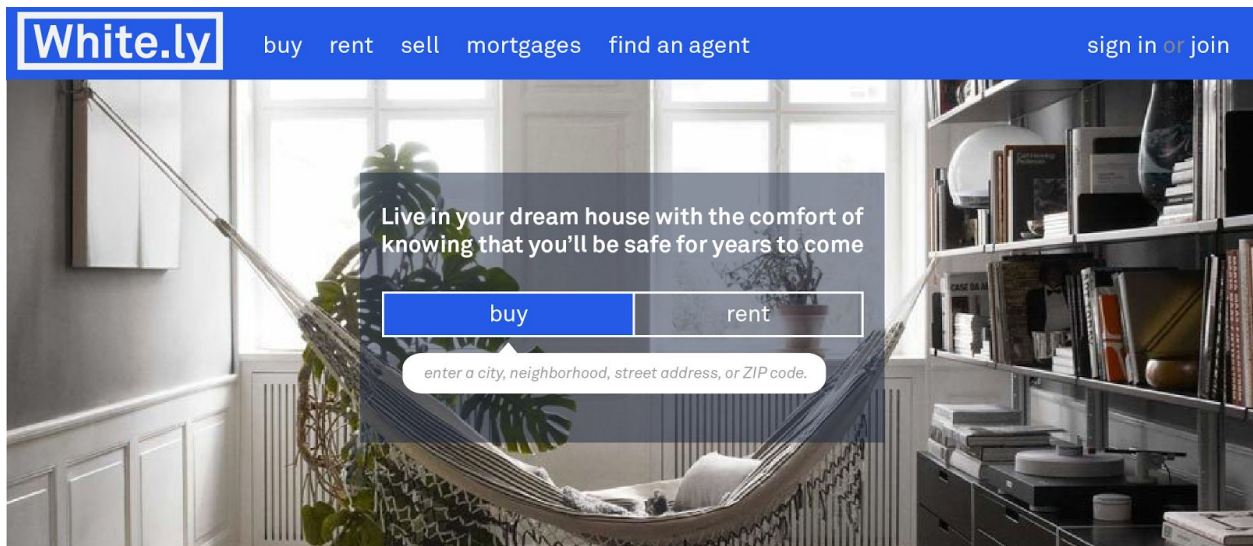
Once the website is developed, it'll be sent out to different publishing platforms to generate press and establish media presence. I primarily want people to react with outrage and disgust. The project would be published anonymously with fake or no information regarding contacts or whereabouts of the company. Since the implications of such a sleek tech design often disguises the level of whiteness in normal tech companies, I want to be a bit heavy handed with the message. I would be running some sort of analytics on the website to predict the critical mass point and then at that point, send out an artist statement to various press outlets to claim the project at the height of its publicity. Ultimately, this piece should serve to exploit the benefactors of this type of technology, a critique of the tech industry, and those who have the residential mobility to seek self-selecting homogeneously white neighborhoods, a critique of the people who change residences due to racial motivations, i.e. "white flight."

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