GENDER, LANGUAGE, AND POWER: NAMING MISOGyny AND FRAMING UNDERSTANDINGS OF CANADA’S MEDIASCAPE IN THE WAKE OF GENDERED VIOLENCE

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Abstract

This research centres misogyny as a focal point for discourse analysis of everyday language used to describe, discuss, justify, and frame gender-based violence and harassment, using the Toronto Van attack in April 2018 as an entry point through which to examine how language functions socially, and to explore what misogyny does. I approach the Toronto Van Attack as a case study in order to analyze the event as an instance of misogynist violence, using an intersectional feminist lens and an interdisciplinary approach guided by an awareness of our increasingly connected and networked lives. My analysis is informed by a conception of media which positions legacy print media outlets on one end of the media spectrum, linked across the technological spectrum both to their own online versions as well as newer “born-digital” media and social media. I collected, read, and analyzed mainstream news coverage as well as a sample of tweets captured from Twitter, combining qualitative and quantitative methods which included both feminist critical discourse analysis and computer-aided textual analysis in a manner which can be best described as a cyborg reading practice. It is my contention that Canada must be named and recognized as a place where mass killings of women are perpetrated, and that we must continue to talk about the misogyny, racism, homophobia, and colonialism that continue to structure everyday life. This analysis has shown that misogyny and gendered violence were either at the margins of the story or absent from the frame altogether. Misogyny must not be lost from our conversations about this event, and must continue to be discussed in order to disrupt dominant narratives which frame Canada as a progressive post-patriarchy society.
Lay Summary

When violence is discussed in a Canadian context, the way a particular instance of violence is described in news media and on social media shapes our understanding of that event in the present and for the future. The Toronto Van Attack on April 23, 2018 resulted in the deaths of ten people, eight of whom were women. This thesis examines how public perception and conversations around this tragedy evolved. My research seeks to interrogate when misogyny is named as such, where and how it is talked about (or not), what it does, and how feminisms might disrupt dominant neoliberal heteropatriarchal narratives. Where much research has focused on online misogyny in the United States, or gender-based violence in the United States, this research is specifically interested in approaching both the online and offline aspects of misogyny and gender-based violence as they take shape in a Canadian context.
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Dedication

For Kelly E. Maier, my partner and friend, whose love, support, creativity and intellect, make me a better woman and a better thinker. And for Dawn Marie Jones, who loved me always and supports me still, though her own bright star burned too brightly to sustain its own light beyond her 45 years. I would be lost without you both.
Chapter 1: Introduction

I was at home, with my partner, on April 23, 2018, when I heard and saw some of the initial news coverage of the Toronto Van Attack on CBC. This attack involved a young man driving a rented van through a busy area of Toronto, driving up onto the sidewalk and running down pedestrians.¹ Ten people were killed, eight of whom were women. Over the course of that day, and several days afterwards, I watched and listened to how the story was told and how the public was reacting to the tragedy. The words we read and see and use in the rapidly evolving media platforms which form our media landscape help us find and make meaning from events and experiences around us. Words do things beyond communicating in the basic linguistic sense. Words make the world, and language is performative, with performativity in this context broadly understood through queer philosopher Judith Butler’s assertion that language discursively creates, enacts and reproduces what it claims to describe.² Writer and activist George Monbiot has also suggested that “those who tell the stories run the world.”³ This elegantly simple assertion is echoed by cyberculture theorist Manuel Castells, who states that “the power struggle is for the construction of meaning in the minds of the people.” That is to say, the institutions and norms which organize society cannot retain control or dominance by force alone, but rather by influencing the way people think about their social world.⁴ Interrogating the language used to frame an event or to tell a story requires explicit attention to the power of language and the

² Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (New York: Routledge, 1990), 34.
language of power. Intersectional feminisms have long been engaged with questioning systems of power and privilege in order to draw attention to the ongoing inequalities inherent in hierarchical social structures, norms, and institutions. Feminist philosophers, linguists, and media scholars continue to examine the stories we tell ourselves and each other about who we are and what we experience, both as individuals and as members of families, groups, communities, provinces, countries, and nations. Scholars in the interdisciplinary field of gender and women’s studies explore and interrogate how gender is constructed as a social category as well as how it interacts with other social and political categories such as sexuality and race. In popular discourse, North American society is constructed and represented as modern, progressive, and almost if not already “post” a great many things – post-race, post-colonial, post-feminist, and post-patriarchal, just to name a few. This type of narrative suggests, both implicitly and explicitly, that issues like racism, colonialism, sexism, misogyny, transphobia, and homophobia belong to the past or to some other place. In Canada, these unsavoury issues are often displaced onto the United States, with its much larger population and the ease with which stereotypes about racism, sexism, and violence in America can be called upon through American prominence in and dominance of news media and popular culture. This narrative framework positions Canada as a safer, gentler, more polite society when placed in contrast to the United States, or indeed other world powers. While I am not suggesting that Canada and the United States necessarily share the same types of structural inequalities to the same degree, or that they


manifest in the same ways, I am suggesting that viewing Canada in an uncritical or purely comparative light belies the truth of the historical and current colonial project of the nation-state, as well as its current and historical racism, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia. If all we ask of Canada is that it be less racist or less sexist or less violent than the United States, then we are asking too little. When violence is discussed in a Canadian context, the way a particular instance of violence is described and framed in news media and on social media constructs our understanding of that event and of ourselves in relation to that event. The more shocking the event, the more we may be tempted to invoke other events in other places, like the United States, in order to distance ourselves from the violence in our here and now. The impulse to see ourselves in a more favourable light, while understandable, inhibits recognition of the ways in which Canadian perceptions of misogynist violence are structured by white supremacy, settler colonialism, and Canada’s position in global geopolitics.

I have chosen, after much deliberation and reflection, to use the words we, us and ourselves throughout this thesis in order to retain a sense of the personal. It is my aim that this sense of the personal will facilitate connection with, rather than distancing from, some of the difficult subject matter being discussed. I want to be clear however, that I am not making any claim of a universal we or us or ourselves. I will address and explain my own situated positionality in detail in Chapter Three, but I will introduce myself at this point as a white, cisgender (not transgender), non-disabled, lesbian settler living and working in Kelowna, which occupies the unceded and ancestral territory of Syilx Okanagan peoples.

Returning to the subject of the violence in our here and now, I will be drawing upon the event which has come to be known as the Toronto Van Attack for this analysis. This act of violence was perpetrated by a young man in Toronto at approximately 1:30 p.m. (EST) on April
23, 2018. The perpetrator in this case drove a rented van through the busy North York area of Toronto, mounting the sidewalk at several points and running down pedestrians.\(^7\) The Toronto Van Attack resulted in the deaths of eight women and two men. How public discourse around this tragedy took shape and continues to evolve is neither accidental nor neutral. Considering the interconnectedness of online and “offline” life, it is vital for researchers to examine the ways in which language is deployed to describe people and events within and across these spheres. The perpetrator of this attack was a young man. Eight of the ten fatalities were women. Viewing these details through an intersectional feminist lens requires understanding that identity is multifaceted and complex, and cannot be reduced to a singularity. While the perpetrator and the victims of the Toronto Van Attack have varied and complex identities, this research focuses primarily on gender as a key factor, both in the tragedy itself and the subsequent media and public response. This is consistent with the foundational and historical frameworks of Gender and Women’s Studies, which examine the social and cultural construction of gender and its interplay with other social categories such as sexuality and race.

My research proceeds from foundational premises in feminist linguistics, gender performativity, and gender and sexuality in digital landscapes which assert that there are profound connections between language use and online and physical performance/embodiment of masculinity and femininity.\(^8\) Analysis of the ways in which gender is embodied, performed, and enacted in online and offline spaces must ask questions about language use and how it may

\(^7\) CBC, “Timeline and Takedown.”

function to reveal or to obfuscate the real and ongoing danger misogyny poses, particularly in patriarchal social systems which are explicitly gendered along binary and heteronormative lines, as is the case in contemporary Canadian society.

This research re-centres misogyny as a focal point for discourse-centered analysis of everyday language used to describe, discuss, justify, and frame gender-based violence, using the Toronto Van Attack as an entry point through which to examine how language functions socially, and to explore what misogyny does. I contend that critical analysis of language, including close reading, qualitative content analysis, and computer-aided quantitative analysis, has urgent relevance in this current climate in which misogyny, racism, transphobia and homophobia abound. Which stories are told, how they are told, which words gain traction and which words are suppressed, are all inextricably linked to structural issues of power and privilege that must be challenged if we are to find ways to build more equitable social worlds and more livable lives across differences. Following feminist philosopher Kate Manne, my focus on misogyny stems from the idea that misogyny is a word that we as feminists need, but are in danger of losing. The prospective loss of the word and/or the dilution of its meanings will be explored in detail throughout this thesis. I assert at the outset that combatting misogyny requires naming misogyny as such and drawing attention to its functions and effects, however differently these functions and effects may be expressed and experienced depending your position in the social hierarchy. In Canada, as in many other parts of the world, those atop the social hierarchy continue to be white, able-bodied, cisgender (rather than transgender or non-binary) heterosexual (rather than homosexual, bisexual, or queer) men.

9 Kate Manne, Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 12.
Background and Definitions

In the media-saturated global landscape, words, images, and ideas reach across borders and traverse online platforms, blurring the boundaries between online and offline spaces and lives. As elucidated by cultural theorist Stuart Hall, “every news event is already, if incompletely, assigned to a context which ‘explains it.’” In the current North American context, the media landscape is one that differs from pre-Internet generations not only in terms of scale (i.e. the sheer volume of information available), but also by its networked nature. That is to say, legacy print media outlets occupy one end of the media spectrum and are linked across the technological spectrum both to their own online versions as well as newer “born-digital” media and social media. Since this research examines the Toronto Van Attack as misogynist violence, it is important to clearly state the definition of misogyny I will be using, as well as my rationale for using this definition. More specifically, I wish to historicize what has been posited in feminist circles as a turning point in popular discourse around misogyny. This turning point links back to Australian Prime Minster Julia Gillard’s October 2012 “Sexism and Misogyny” speech in parliament and the viral media coverage of it, followed by the Macquarie Dictionary update to their definition of misogyny. Reporting in The Guardian pointed out that while the Oxford Dictionary had broadened its definition of misogyny more than a decade earlier, staff at the Macquarie Dictionary made this shift only after the media coverage of Gillard’s speech and the


debates it precipitated. Prior to these changes, misogyny had been defined broadly as hatred of women, either universally or generally, specifically because they are women. The updated definition of misogyny now includes “entrenched prejudice against women” as well as the previously indicated hatred of women. In the case of the Toronto Van Attack, I suggest that naming the attack as an instance of misogynist violence does not require consensus regarding whether or not the perpetrator hates women. Thinking alongside feminist philosopher Kate Manne, I concur that “misogyny is as misogyny does.” The Toronto Van Attack must be named as misogyny so that we do not lose sight of the fact that one of the things that misogyny does from its position in a patriarchal order, often although not always in combination with other forms of prejudice, is kill. In addition, Canada must be named and recognized as a place where mass killings are perpetrated, however infrequent they may be when considered in comparison with the United States.

**Research Questions**

I return to my opening anecdote in order to situate my research questions. I was at home with my partner when I saw the initial news coverage of the Toronto Van Attack on CBC. Over the next several days, we watched and listened to how the story was told and how the public was reacting. I began to consider possible themes and emerging patterns. As someone who vividly


13 Manne, *Down Girl*, 32.

14 Davies, “Australian PM’s New Ally”.

and viscerally remembers the mass murder of fourteen women by a young man on December 6, 1989 at École Polytechnique in Montréal (subsequently known as the Montréal Massacre or the École Polytechnique Massacre)\(^\text{16}\), I found myself wondering how a mass killing of women by a man in Canada could be happening again. I then began to formulate questions which would become the basis of my research:

1. What were the dominant themes in the news coverage of, and social media response to, the Toronto Van attack which happened on April 23, 2018?
2. Which words were most prominent in public discourse around this event?
3. Did language use/word choice and dominant themes shift in the week following the attack?
4. Were references made to other well-publicized acts of mass killing perpetrated by a single individual in Canada (i.e. the Montréal Massacre)?
5. How did feminist, non-feminist, and anti-feminist rhetoric interact in framing this event?

I explored these questions by examining and analyzing mainstream Canadian news media coverage as well as what was circulating on social media, specifically Twitter, regarding this event, as will be described in detail in Chapter Three.

**Significance**

There is a growing body of research into online misogyny.\(^\text{17}\) This relatively new field of inquiry often overlaps with research into the increasingly networked nature of our no longer

\(^{16}\) I use Montréal Massacre throughout this thesis for brevity.

discretely separated online and offline lives. The concept of networked subjectivity includes the interplay of affect, emotion and digital media in contemporary political and social landscapes. The dialectical nature of feminist and anti-feminist rhetoric in media and social media is generative when considered in relation to earlier conceptions of counter-publics as discursive arenas which permit the voices of subordinated social groups to formulate alternative ideas, identities, forms of political action, and modes of public speech. My research seeks to interrogate when misogyny is named as such, where and how it is talked about (or not), what it does, and how feminisms might disrupt dominant neoliberal heteropatriarchal narratives. When an event such as the Toronto Van Attack happens, how it is discussed in the media and in online platforms reveals underlying systems of power and privilege which reflect the ongoing hegemony of white heteropatriarchy. Where much research has focused on online misogyny in the United States, or gender-based violence in the United States, this research is specifically interested in approaching both the online and offline aspects of misogyny and gender-based violence as they take shape in a Canadian context. I analyze the ways this tragedy was described, explained, and discussed in order to better understand how misogyny functions in structures and systems of power which continue to uphold inequality, injustice, and unequally distributed conditions of precarity across vectors of gender, sexuality, and race in Canada. How this story


was told, and the way the story evolved, was mediated and reiterated across different public platforms, positioning the event in our cultural memory and constructing how Canadians think of themselves and the social and political landscape of contemporary Canadian society.21 Disrupting the narrative which portrays Canada as having moved beyond sexism, misogyny, and racism is necessary in order to continue conversations about the prevalence and effects of misogyny in this contemporary incarnation of white heteropatriarchy. These conversations across platforms and disciplines may provide tools to help dismantle dominant power structures in order to combat oppression and inequality. Rather than focusing solely on the ways in which current patriarchal systems deploy the language of misogyny, I also explore how neologisms are increasingly being used to frame (or re-frame) public discourse around everyday gender-based violence, harassment, and discrimination at intersections of racism, neocolonialism, and heterosexism.

**Thesis Structure**

This introduction forms the first of six chapters in this thesis, and in it I have provided some background information on the Toronto Van Attack, which I analyze as an instance of misogynist violence. I have also offered the definition of misogyny that I use throughout, as well as the rationale for and historicization of this definition. Chapter Two provides an in-depth review of relevant literature and the theoretical frameworks I draw upon which include intersectional feminist theory as a primary framework, as well as aspects of queer theory, feminist media studies, feminist philosophical inquiry (including feminist epistemologies), critical race theory, and critical feminist linguistics, explicating the foundation upon which

subsequent chapters are built. Chapter Three outlines methods and methodologies, including subsections which explain data collection, data analysis, quality and validity, researcher positionality, and ethical considerations. Chapter Four analyzes the mainstream media coverage of the Toronto Van Attack, both at the time and for two key brief news cycles since the original attack (which are explained further in Chapter Three). Chapter Five analyzes what was circulating on Twitter regarding the Toronto Van Attack on the thirtieth anniversary of the Montréal Massacre (for reasons which we are explained in detail in Chapter Three). Chapter Six, which is the final chapter, discusses findings and interpretations as well as possible directions for further research.
Chapter 2: Context

Theoretical Frameworks and Foundational Concepts

My theoretical approach is informed by my background in the interdisciplinary field of Gender and Women's Studies. As a field, Gender and Women’s Studies is relatively young, with its formal place in academia tracing back less than 50 years. It continues to evolve as a discipline while retaining its foundational focus on interrogating the ways in which gender, as a social and cultural construction, interacts with other social and political categories such as race, sexuality, class, and ability, particularly in relation to how these categories are interwoven with hierarchical systems which unequally distribute power and privilege. There are many ways to engage with gender and power as concepts, and this thesis draws upon intersectional feminist theory for its primary framework. Other theoretical and critical frameworks which contribute to my analysis include aspects of queer theory, feminist media studies, feminist philosophical inquiry (including feminist epistemologies), critical race theory, and critical linguistics. Questions about systems of power and oppression are central to this inquiry, with a focus on deconstructing and problematizing dominant hierarchies and hegemony. I will discuss these frameworks and concepts in detail in this chapter. I begin, at the outset, by insisting that feminism is central to my approach, and following feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed, I proceed from the starting point that “citation is feminist memory.” For me, drawing links between the feminists from whom I have learned and my own lesbian feminist thinking is more

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than simply a required element in academic writing. It is a conscious and deliberate move to contribute to the preservation and strengthening of feminist memory.

**Intersectional Feminisms**

I refer to feminisms, in the plural, rather than feminism, in the singular, throughout this thesis. This serves as both a reminder of and a reflection on the different forms and approaches feminisms have taken and how this continues to evolve. This way of thinking of multiple feminisms owes a debt to women of colour who worked to translate their lived experience of multiple oppressions into the critical theory which became known as intersectionality. Lawyer, civil rights advocate, and critical race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw’s conception of intersectionality describes the ways in which social and identity categories are multiple and intersect in complex ways which differentially privilege some while oppressing others based on some of these intersecting categories, including but not limited to race, gender, sexual orientation, class, age, and ability.\(^{24}\) This understanding of intersectionality was influenced by a variety of thinkers from the 1970s and 80s, including the Combahee River Collective, among others. The Combahee River Collective was a collective of black lesbian feminists formed in 1974 which described its politics and its work as struggling against interlocking systems of oppression while finding ways to integrate analysis of these systems of oppression with feminist praxis and activism for the liberation of all women of colour.\(^{25}\) I use an intersectional feminist lens as both a theoretical framework and a reflexive practice in order to resist any tendency towards over-simplifying complex and interlocking issues in a reductive way which erases

\(^{24}\) Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins,” 1245.

difference and reinscribes the authority and priorities of those already most privileged at the expense of folks with less power and privilege. This is particularly important for white settler feminists like myself if we are to hold ourselves accountable for the ongoing harms of settler colonialism and racism in Canada, which uphold the current system of white heteropatriarchy, as well as the ongoing occupation of Indigenous lands, and the authority of the white western feminist academic canon. Following Tuck and Yang’s analysis of discourses of decolonization, I adopt an “ethic of incommensurability” as an important reflexive stance which facilitates ongoing awareness that solidarity or alliance may not be comfortable or easy, and must not depend upon erasing past or present harm or foreclosing future tensions and conflict. This understanding of incommensurability resists conflating anti-racist or intersectional feminisms with anti-colonial projects, and refuses notions of innocence that seek to position more privileged women such as myself outside of structures of oppression which marginalize and oppress other women. I will return to a more robust discussion of whiteness, privilege, and oppression in the following section on feminist philosophy and epistemologies, as well as in Chapter Three when I address researcher positionality.

**Feminist Philosophy and Epistemologies**

Feminist philosophy, or perhaps more precisely, feminist philosophers, have sought to bring feminist analysis into the still predominantly androcentric and heterosexist domain of philosophy. This has been particularly evident in feminist work in the areas of epistemology and the philosophy of science, both of which emphasize the importance of considering both


knowledge and the subject positions of knowers in their specific contexts. These contexts can include social, historical, political, and geographical specificities. Feminist philosophy complicates binary frameworks common to the broader discipline of philosophy historically, including dichotomous conceptual frameworks which value one of the two in an opposing pair differently in ways that are often coded by gender. In other words, feminist philosophy asserts that reason and objectivity have been defined as superior as well as coded as masculine, and that this must be examined critically. As elucidated by feminist scholars of epistemology and the philosophy of science, including Lorraine Code, Sandra Harding, and Donna Haraway, knowledge is partial and situated, and requires a critical approach which questions what Haraway has referred to as the “god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere.”

What is defined as knowledge is determined by people who live and work and think in specific contexts, in varied embodiments, and in relation to others. Stated simply, who we are, where we are, and how we got there affect what we know as well as how we define knowledge. Feminist philosophy has formed a central part of my understanding of intersectional feminisms as an analytic framework grounded in the concept of situated knowledges.

As a white settler scholar and feminist, my ongoing task is not only to learn from scholars and activists of colour and indigenous scholars and activists, but also to think alongside other white scholars who continue to grapple with their own positions of privilege. Feminist


philosopher Marilyn Frye frames her analysis of whiteness not as a biological condition, but rather as a social and political category with particular privileges and benefits.\(^{30}\) This is consistent with understanding identity categories as constructed by and in our social and cultural environments. Recognizing that there are privileges and benefits which accrue to whiteness is a useful starting point for a white feminist scholar, provided that this recognition makes no move to minimize or discount whiteness as a structure which oppresses others. In Frye’s formulation, oppression is likened to a cage built of barriers, penalties, and social norms which may or may not be visible and are seldom universally applied, but which are related to each other in a systemic manner in such a way as to inhibit both the view of the overall oppressive system and escape from or correction of its oppressive forces.\(^{31}\)

In this thesis, I draw my underlying framework for examining misogyny from Kate Manne’s incisive analysis of misogyny as a structure and a series of effects which support heteropatriarchal systems of power. This approach to misogyny rejects what Manne refers to as the “naive conception of misogyny,” which defines misogyny as the individual property of individual misogynists.\(^{32}\) This individualistic narrative underwrites much gender-based violence and harassment by pathologizing individual acts of misogynist violence perpetrated by the


proverbial “lone wolf”\textsuperscript{33} violent actor rather than addressing the structural and systemic violence of white heteropatriarchy.

**Queer Theory, Gender, Language and Feminist Linguistics**

Queer theory has historically been engaged with posing critical questions which challenge essentialist categories and rigid boundaries in relation to dominant ideologies, hierarchical systems, and disciplinary regimes and norms around gender, sexuality, and identity. As an intellectual movement which began in the early 1990’s, queer theory continues to evolve across conventional disciplinary and ideological boundaries. It is this fluidity and openness which structures queer theory as fundamentally opposed to normative, static, and exclusionary frameworks for building theory, creating knowledge, and understanding complex embodied identities.\textsuperscript{34} Queer theory, like much feminist theory, links the personal with the political and with the theoretical in ways which are both relational and contextual. In this thesis, the work of two influential queer theorists is paramount. The first is Judith Butler, whose conceptualization of gender as performativ\textsuperscript{e} shapes my analysis of both language and gender. As framed by Butler, gender is constituted through the ways we enact and describe it, rather than existing as a stable identity prior to its enactment in the social world.\textsuperscript{35} Following Adrienne Rich’s influential 1980 essay on the compulsory nature of heterosexuality as an institution and an organizing social structure, Butler asserts that this social world is constructed around the naturalization of


\textsuperscript{34} Code, *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories*, 413-15.

\textsuperscript{35} Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 34.
heterosexuality as the only legitimate sexuality, and therefore as compulsory.\textsuperscript{36} This in turn reifies the construction of gender as binary, and of woman only in relation to man, in a dialectical constitution of gender and sexuality along binary and heterosexual lines. Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick similarly discusses “ambient heterosexist culture”, which frames heterosexuality as the norm, as natural, and as taken for granted in terms of being assumed as the default or unmarked sexuality.\textsuperscript{37} This understanding of both gender and sexuality is important for framing my underlying analysis of misogyny as a structural feature of a patriarchal social order which is underwritten by gendered norms and expectations that are experienced and embodied as well as being expressed and constituted through language and discourse. In this thesis, I extend Sedgwick’s minoritizing/universalizing model of understanding queerness\textsuperscript{38} in order to explore the ways in which heteropatriarchy as a universalizing system succeeds in large part through its minoritization of misogyny. In other words, if misogyny is defined as rare, then the universal nature of heteropatriarchy seems not only natural, but also just and righteous.

Queer theory is often brought into conversation with feminist work in other areas, including feminist linguistics and feminist discourse analysis. From the perspective of feminist and critical theory more broadly, Butler’s work on the performativity of gender was instrumental in advancing the linguistic turn in Anglo-American feminist theory.\textsuperscript{39} This explicit linking of the


\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 85-86.

performativity of gender with the performativity of language creates rich critical terrain for analyzing structures and social categories which produce (and reproduce) white heteropatriarchal order in and across our online and offline social and political worlds. As Butler has suggested, we punish those who fail to do their gender right.\textsuperscript{40} In order to be seen and recognized as performing gender correctly, we must be seen to adhere to existing norms of gendered behavior. These norms operate in comparative relation to hegemonic heteronormative masculinity and femininity.

\textbf{“Fragile Masculinity” and “Aggrieved Entitlement”}

In considering the ways in which gender is constituted, enacted, and reproduced along binary lines with masculinity on one side in the dominant position and femininity on the other, there are two features of contemporary masculinity that are particularly generative for my analysis. The first is the concept of “fragile masculinity”, which is understood to rest upon the failure, or fear of failure, to demonstrate the dominance and superiority required to successfully and convincingly perform hegemonic masculinity. If masculinity is in question, then it must be proven in order to receive the benefits and rewards that heterosexual masculinity accrues.\textsuperscript{41} The second is sociologist Michael Kimmel’s conceptualization of “aggrieved entitlement”, whereby men believe that they are not receiving the benefits and privileges they feel are owed to them. Kimmel frames this with particular reference to white men, but this sense of aggrieved entitlement may be applied to other groups who feel their rights and privileges are being

\textsuperscript{40} Butler, \textit{Gender Trouble}, 190.

These benefits and privileges include dominance over “inferior” men and over women, as well as unfettered access to women’s bodies and labour. Both fragile masculinity and aggrieved entitlement seek to redress doing gender wrong or being wronged by others through violence. I will elucidate these concepts further in the literature review.

**Femininities and Masculinities in Popular and Digital Culture**

Masculinity and femininity are performed and produced not only through the embodied acts of people navigating their day to day lives in the material worlds of home, family, work, relationships, and institutions, but also in popular and digital culture. This thesis examines the ways in which the performance and production of masculinity and femininity in popular and digital culture does not simply reflect social norms and cultural changes, but also actively produce those changes, including changes in understandings of gender, sexuality, and political projects like feminism. My research builds on theoretical work by Angela McRobbie on femininities and popular culture, and her analysis of the neoliberal construction of individual identity and femininity. McRobbie’s analysis interrogates the notion of individual empowerment and its relationship to the performance of femininity in the neoliberal rhetoric of progress through individual success rather than collective/collaborative work. In McRobbie’s formulation, the discourse of post-feminism is based on the deployment of the language of freedom, choice, and success in order to insist that feminism is no longer needed as a collective political project. According to this narrative, women can do it all and have it all, and popular


Intersectional feminist analysis remains crucial in critically interrogating this narrative and questioning whether this vision of individual success is attainable for most people, or if it is the exception rather than the new rule. In other words, we must examine for whom freedom, choice, and success are attainable, and which social and institutional structures support the current hierarchies which continue to be inherently inequitable.

McRobbie’s work is generative with respect to popular and consumer culture in relation to gender and other social hierarchies, and recent research in the field of Internet studies by scholars like Michele White has much to contribute to this analysis in light of the everchanging digital landscape and the ways in which it is increasingly inseparable from our “offline” lives, which have never been non-mediated and have always existed along a technological spectrum. White’s analyses of the production of masculinity and femininity in and across Internet spaces brings the Internet into broader conversation with the work of McRobbie and other feminist cultural scholars. White’s intervention relates specifically to extending earlier conceptions of technologies of the self and technologies of gender, by Michel Foucault and Teresa de Lauretis respectively, into the Internet and related technologies and social practices, engaging with “the


deeply produced aspects of Internet settings, the affordances of systems, and the humanities methods [such as close reading] that apply when writing about online representations.”

The relationships between feminism, post-feminism, misogyny, and the performance of masculinity and femininity through language as well as in and across physical and digital spaces are of central importance for understanding the questions this thesis asks. This requires looking at the specificity of the medium (i.e. print, internet, social network) as well as what Richard Grusin refers to as the “inseparability of reality and mediation.” Although some examples of misogyny are presented as exceptional or unusual, and sometimes directed towards a specific individual woman, more often misogyny functions structurally as a response to feminism, or to the ostensible gains made by feminism, and the challenge these gains pose to white heteropatriarchal power, and to men’s entitlement more broadly. These concepts and frameworks will be discussed in greater detail in the literature review.

Affective Economies

According to queer feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed, emotions do not reside in a subject or a body, but emotions do work to bind subjects or people together. The “work” that emotions do is done through the way that they circulate among and between people, thus creating affective economies. Ahmed’s analysis of affective economies and the language of threat also inform this


research, particularly Ahmed’s assertion that categories of *us* and *them* are created through the mobilization and circulation of affect in ways which position *us* as in need of protection from *them.*\(^{49}\) While I will not be using affect studies as a primary framework, I believe that examining affective economies will contribute to my overall analysis of the language of entitlement and obligation invoked in anti-feminist and misogynist reactionary responses to notions of what men have lost through the gains of feminism. This formulation works well in conversation with Sarah Banet-Weiser’s analysis of the dialectical relationship between popular feminism and popular misogyny. This formulation is also reflected in the ways in which the language of white supremacy is invoked, both implicitly and explicitly, to suggest that immigration is a threat to “national” (white) identity and prosperity, or the language which positions “traditional values” as both homogenous and endangered due to shifting norms and legal protections. Frameworks like these underwrite dichotomous, zero-sum narratives which suggest that if some people (women, people of colour, LGBTQ folks) achieve gains (in equality, inclusion, representation), other people (straight white men, as individuals and as an institution) lose what they had/have.

**Literature Review**

In the realms of media, communications, and cultural studies, much of my background research was informed by scholars Emma Jane and Sarah Banet-Weiser. Former journalist, now academic, Emma Jane has been a leading researcher into online misogyny and gendered cyberhate over the last several years, and her 2017 book entitled *Online Misogyny: A Short (and Brutish) History,* offers incisive analysis of the emergence and evolution of gendered cyberhate over time. It is this historical tracing which facilitates Jane’s argument that misogyny, which she

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also refers to as gendered cyberhate and gendered hate speech, is not new, but rather has changed and been amplified since early examples in the late 1990’s. In Jane’s words, “misogyny has gone viral,” and it has significant consequences for women in their daily offline lives as well. Jane’s work has not only provided historical context for understanding online forms of misogyny, but it also informed my choice to engage with online misogyny without immersing myself in the manosphere, which is the term used to describe virulently misogynist online spaces such as blogs, podcasts, and fora focused on men’s rights activism and anti-feminism. Jane’s book is, by her own estimation, not pleasant to read. Her choice to quote “unexpurgated examples” of violent, sexually explicit online threats is direct and undiluted, where my own choice has been to look at this discourse in terms of themes and patterns without using the explicit wording directly. I will expand upon this and explain it in greater detail in Chapter Three, but the most salient point at this juncture is that I share Jane’s conviction that online misogyny has far-reaching offline consequences, and my focus on the Toronto Van Attack as misogynist violence is one such example of offline consequences.

Media and communications scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser’s 2018 book discusses the dialectical relationship between popular feminism and popular misogyny. In Banet-Weiser’s formulation, popular feminism and popular misogyny are co-constitutive, and both are networked through interconnected nodes across multiple forms of media and in everyday


51 Marwick and Caplan, “Drinking Male Tears,” 543.


practice. As Banet-Weiser points out, the “networked visibility of popular feminism …has stimulated a reaction, mobilizing misogyny to compete for visibility within these same mediated networks.”

Banet-Weiser frames popular feminism as being constructed within the walls of neoliberal logic through the language of empowerment, confidence, capacity, and individual success/resilience. According to Banet-Weiser, it is popular in terms of its circulation in popular culture and media, and it is popular in terms of the popularity imperative attached to the accumulation and circulation of likes, shares, and tweets. This popularity, however, renders only certain popular (i.e. mainstream) feminisms (typically white and affluent) visible, which is a useful reminder of the need for intersectional feminist analysis.

Like popular feminism, Banet-Weiser sees popular misogyny as expressed and circulated across media platforms and in public spaces, but as a defensive or aggressive response to popular feminism rather than as an activist movement in its own right. Where popular feminism may be understood as a watered down or more palatable, non-radical (less threatening) version of feminist activism, popular misogyny may be understood as what I will call reactive activism. This misogynist reactivity, as Banet-Weiser explains, is reacting both to feminism itself and to the popularity of popular feminism. Indeed the popularity of popular feminism can be read as reactive – or perhaps protective - in its own right, by virtue of being contained with expectations of what feminism is allowed to be (i.e. not radical) and therefore limiting backlash. Popular misogyny in this analysis is also understood as constructed within the walls of neoliberal logic, but through the language of crisis, threat, entitlement, and recuperation/reclamation. It is

54 Banet-Weiser, Empowered, 4.
55 Ibid., 1-3.
56 Ibid., 2-3.
important to note that this language of crisis, injury, threat, and entitlement does not name itself misogyny, but rather purports to reclaim men’s right to be men (as defined by so-called Men’s Rights Activists). Both popular feminism and popular misogyny demonstrate binary conceptions of gender and normative gendered behavior. Banet-Weiser’s analysis is particularly generative for incorporating networked feminisms into the analysis of networked and online misogyny. Work in these fields continues to explore gender norms and expectations, as well as gendered power dynamics, through the lens of language and image use across changing media platforms and in popular culture, both online and offline. My work examines both online and offline misogyny and its operations and effects in a Canadian context. Other literature relevant to this discussion will be addressed in the section on feminist media studies.

In order to bring these analyses into conversation with my own focus, Kate Manne’s 2018 book entitled Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny was particularly generative. Manne frames her discussion of misogyny in terms of the role it plays in patriarchal social order, with misogyny understood not as the property of individual misogynists, but as part of the social structure which polices and enforces gendered norms and expectations in ways which uphold male dominance and female subordination. Manne considers specific well-publicized instances of intimate partner violence against women and mass or serial killings, including the Isla Vista shooting, as well as the silencing of women more broadly. For my purposes, Manne’s concept of “himpathy” is paramount for understanding how public discourse can, and often does, shift sympathy away from women who have been harmed and towards men who have caused the

57 Banet-Weiser, Empowered, 118.
58 Manne, Down Girl.
59 Ibid., 19.
harm. Where Manne discusses latent misogyny as a predisposition in patriarchal social environments, I bring Manne’s formulation into conversation with Sedgwick’s model of ambient heterosexist culture, in order to assert that misogyny has become ambient. That is to say, both heterosexuality and misogyny, when understood as ambient aspects of culture, are largely unmarked and unremarked upon unless in the context of an extreme individual example.

This thesis is interested in the dominant themes in news and social media coverage of the Toronto Van Attack, and the competing feminist and anti-feminist rhetoric in public discourse. In order to incorporate analysis of both the individual event and the broader public discourse, I moved outwards from the background theoretical research discussed above to literature that focused specifically on online misogyny, digital feminisms, networked subjectivities, and feminist media studies more broadly, including feminist discourse analysis. The most significant gap I found in the literature was content specific to Canada. This thesis posits that media and social media content, in conjunction with social networks in offline spaces, can disrupt dominant narratives which frame Canada as a progressive post-patriarchy society. The importance of disrupting this narrative is a crucial element of my analysis throughout. My hope is that re-focusing on misogyny in a Canadian context will facilitate ongoing analysis of misogyny as an everyday danger in the lives of girls and women, and that this continued conversation may offer tools to help dismantle the structural power of white neoliberal capitalist heteropatriarchy, with its seemingly endless capacity for reinvention in service of its own reproduction.

60 Manne, Down Girl, 23.

61 Ibid., 71.
Feminist Media and Communications Studies

The work of Jane and Banet-Weiser provides specific theoretical background and analysis, focusing on online misogyny, and popular feminism and popular misogyny respectively. Delving into feminist media and communications studies more deeply, I began with a special issue on online misogyny in Feminist Media Studies in 2018. This special issue is indicative of the increasing academic interest in online forms of misogyny, and shows links between online misogyny and other forms of misogyny, as well as the intensity and amplification of misogyny online, and its effects on women both on and offline. This issue deals with key concepts and events that recur in much of the literature on online misogyny, including specifically anti-feminist rhetoric, digital feminist responses, and the violent sexual content of gendered online abuse, as exemplified in both Gamergate and the Isla Vista shootings.62 Gamergate brought mainstream media attention to the masculinist culture of gaming, and the gendered closing of ranks which included coordinated campaigns of threats, abuse, and harassment aimed at keeping women out of the gaming community and the gaming industry.63 The Isla Vista shootings brought mainstream media attention to “incels” (involuntary celibates).64 I will discuss the Isla Vista shootings and incels specifically in relation to the Toronto Van Attack in subsequent chapters due to the fact that the Toronto Van Attack


perpetrator’s own published Facebook post, which was reported on CBC’s *The National*, referenced the Isla Vista shooter and the “incel rebellion.”

The growing body of literature on new iterations of online misogyny and networked harassment also includes a 2018 edited collection by Jacqueline Ryan Vickery and Tracy Everbach on misogyny, technology, and harassment. This collection analyzes the myriad ways women are targeted for online harassment and examines key historical moments of mediated misogyny, including Gamergate and the 2016 presidential campaign, among others. The authors also offer valuable historicization of mediated misogyny prior to the internet, as well as examples of feminist resistance to online harassment. My work seeks to bring this technologically oriented approach into conversation with Jane, Banet-Weiser, and Manne, and their analyses of the roots of misogyny, and then to further focus on Canadian context broadly, and the Toronto Van Attack specifically. This Canadian content is largely lacking in the literature and will contribute to a deeper understanding of the causes and effects of misogyny in the lives of girls and women here.

**Internet Research, Networked/Affective Publics, and Worldviews**

Internet research can include research which uses the internet as a tool, research which uses the internet as a source of information, and/or research that uses the internet as the subject of study. At this juncture, it is important to define the distinction between earlier incarnations of the internet, which were predominantly “read-only,” with what is commonly referred to as Web

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2.0, with its interactive and user-generated content. Web 2.0 has been described as “the social web”, linking not only documents, but also people to other people, organizations, events, companies, and more. The underlying logic of social media is about sharing, with its implicit invitation to, or at least the possibility of, reciprocity, although reciprocity is not necessarily required. It is the spread of the internet and the social web into all aspects of daily life, along with the virality of information, which is important for unpacking and analyzing links between online misogyny and offline violence against women in mass killings like the Toronto Van Attack.

There is a body of literature which explores internet platforms and affordances for their potential to link people to each other, to common causes, and to information which is not censored by state or mainstream media powers. Danah Boyd describes networked publics as publics that are structured by networked technologies and which simultaneously create an imagined space and an imagined collection of people who interact as, technology, and practice overlap. In one example of a networked public, Zizi Papacharissi examines uses of Twitter both in Egypt leading up to Hosni Mubarak’s resignation under the hashtag “Egypt” (#egypt), and the Occupy Wall Street movement under the hashtag “ows” (#ows). Papacharissi’s analysis explores


the ways in which crowds become “affective publics” through the use of media like Twitter which invite affective expression and connection as people tell their stories collaboratively, binding themselves to each other through feelings of community. This does not suggest that Twitter on its own is necessarily a force for positive change, but its potential for use in that regard offers a useful contrast to the focus on the viral spread of online misogyny through anti-feminist affective publics in the manosphere, including “men’s rights activists” (MRAs) broadly and incels specifically. Papacharissi’s conception of affective publics is generative in conversation with other work on social media and activism, and for my purposes, particularly in reference to the hashtag #YesAllWomen. Jackson and Banaszczyk analyze this hashtag from the perspective of a feminist counter-public, and B. Barker-Plummer and D. Barker-Plummer approach it as feminist resistance on Twitter. The #YesAllWomen hashtag emerged on May 24, 2014, one day after the misogynist violence in Isla Vista, California, in which the perpetrator killed six people, injured 13, and killed himself. The perpetrator had posted videos and a “manifesto” online describing his motivation (hatred of and rejection by women). A Twitter user with the handle @gildedspine posted the first tweet using the #YesAllWomen hashtag: “Guys, I’m going to be tweeting under the #YesAllWomen hashtag. Let’s discuss what ‘not all men’ might do, but women must fear.” The hashtag #NotAllMen was mobilized in response in order


74 Jackson and Banaszczyk, “Digital Standpoints,” 392.
to distance other men from this violence.\textsuperscript{75} The #YesAllWomen hashtag arguably operated as feminist discursive activism, extending the conversation about the prevalence of male sexual violence beyond women’s conversations and feminist discourse and into public debate.\textsuperscript{76} It is important to note here that which hashtags are taken up and rendered visible often mirrors the “tendency to collapse women’s experiences only along lines of gendered oppression.” Counter-narratives continue to be important in this regard, and one such counter-narrative was raised by Twitter user @JennMJack on May 26, 2014, who started the hashtag #YesAllWhiteWomen. This hashtag was used predominantly by women of colour in order to insist on the inclusion of race in these conversations, as well as to resist the erasure of the contributions of women of colour to feminist and activist movements, including launching the hashtag #YesAllWomen.\textsuperscript{77} Hashtags like this offer a productive reminder of the need for Sara Ahmed’s figure of the “feminist killjoy.” The feminist killjoy can “kill joy just by not being made happy by the right things” (such as sisterhood or solidarity based on gender which forecloses intersectional consideration of other social and political categories such as race and sexuality).\textsuperscript{78}

Another important layer of analysis is offered and expanded upon by Boler and Davis in their discussion of affective politics, feeling rules, and networked subjectivity.\textsuperscript{79} Arlie

\begin{footnotes}
\item[B.] Barker-Plummer and D. Barker-Plummer, “Twitter as a Feminist Resource,” 94.
\item[I.] Ibid., 91.
\end{footnotes}
Hochschild’s landmark work on gendered norms and expectations for affective behaviours, which she developed into the concept of “feeling rules” is central to their approach.\textsuperscript{80} Boler and Davis explicitly connect Hochschild’s framework of feeling rules with Papacharissi’s influential work on affective publics and online storytelling on social media in order to draw attention to the relationality and intersubjectivity of affect and emotion which then influence whose stories are told, and whose voices are heard.\textsuperscript{81} While my own work does not draw heavily on affect studies, the concepts of feeling rules, networked subjectivity, and affective publics are helpful for making connections between gendered expectations and gendered power relations across digital and physical realms in the context of misogyny, feminism, and anti-feminism. This dialectical relationship between anti-feminist and feminist discourse, as exemplified in the not-all-men response to yes-all-women, was also examined by Coulling and Johnson in their analysis of public response to the “not guilty” verdict in the Jian Ghomeshi sexual assault case in Canada. While their work operates primarily within the context of criminal justice, it is useful here for its specifically Canadian content as well as the highly gendered component of affective responses to whether the justice system “worked” or failed.\textsuperscript{82} As Coulling and Johnson also point out, the not-all-men discourse reacts to the yes-all-women discourse in order to focus attention on individual men at the expense of making structural change that would benefit all women.\textsuperscript{83} This type of

\textsuperscript{80} Boler and Davis, “The Affective Politics of the ‘Post-Truth’ Era,” 75-78.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 81-84.


\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 322.
narrative reversal is emblematic of Kate Manne’s conception of himpathy, and will be expanded upon further in my analysis of media coverage of the Toronto Van Attack.

I have been searching for academic literature on the Toronto Van Attack since it happened in 2018, and found only one article. In it, Stephanie J. Baele, Lewys Brace, and Travis G. Coan map the incel worldview, which they link to political violence and terrorism broadly, and to online misogyny, offline violence, and the Toronto Van Attack (as well as the Isla Vista shooting) specifically. Their analysis differs notably from mine in that they focus on the textual content of the now-suspended online forum Incels.me, whereas my focus is on the public discourse and language used by mainstream and online media to describe, discuss, justify, and frame the Toronto Van Attack. Some of the links discussed by Baele, Brace and Coan are prominent in my own work and some elements figure in my background research (see Kate Manne and Emma Jane), but my work seeks to bridge analysis of the more virulent forms of online misogyny in the manosphere with the broader structures of white heteropatriarchy as the primary hegemonic system in contemporary Canadian society. It is my contention that this type of analysis is vital for ensuring that misogyny remains a central focus in ongoing discussion and analysis of the heterosexism, gender inequity, and structural violence that misogyny, in its many guises, continues to uphold.

**Feminist Linguistics and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis**

Feminist linguistics, as broadly defined by Sara Mills and Louise Mullany, studies the interplay between gender and language with an eye towards raising consciousness about relations

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among genders in order to advance emancipatory projects that move towards greater social equality. There are a number of approaches to feminist linguistics, including but not limited to sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, and conversation analysis, which are often employed across disciplinary orientations. For my purposes, I have chosen to focus predominantly on critical discourse analysis, with its attention to “de-mystifying ideologies and power” within semiotic data (written, spoken or visual).

Michelle Lazar’s work on Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is particularly instructive in this regard due to feminist CDA’s operation as politically invested at the outset. According to Lazar, while CDA has been broadly interested in analyzing different types of inequality and injustice, adopting an explicitly feminist approach brings critical attention to the seemingly inescapably gendered dimensions of inequality with a view towards finding strategies for making structural change. Following Lazar, I contend that an explicitly feminist approach to discourse analysis is vital in the context of the post-feminist and anti-feminist backlash this thesis considers as central to online and offline forms of misogyny.

**Significance**

In seeking to address the questions this thesis asks regarding gender, misogyny, and violence in contemporary Canadian society, I have drawn upon intersectional feminist theory as


86 Ibid., 66.


89 Ibid., 142-144.
a primary analytic framework in order to retain awareness of the ways in which complex social and political categories accrue different privileges and penalties within the hegemonic system of white heteropatriarchy. Queer theory has made important interventions in challenging dichotomous and rigid gendered norms and expectations, particularly Butler’s influential work on the performativity of gender, and Sedgwick’s work on the epistemology of the closet and ambient heterosexist culture. In considering expectations regarding gender and sexuality, the concepts of fragile masculinity and aggrieved entitlement are important for framing my analysis of misogyny and anti-feminist discourse, particularly in conversation with Manne’s work on misogyny, Banet-Weiser’s analysis of popular feminism and popular misogyny, and Jane’s work on online misogyny. Building on the growing body of research into online misogyny and the semiotics of online and social media, I aim to fortify links between feminist philosophy, feminist media and communication studies, affective publics, queer theory, and feminist critical discourse analysis in order to analyze the ways the Toronto Van Attack was described, explained, and discussed in order to better understand how misogyny functions in structures and systems of power which continue to uphold inequality, injustice, and unequally distributed conditions of precarity across vectors of gender, sexuality, and race in Canada.
Chapter 3: Methods and Methodologies

The Toronto Van Attack as Misogynist Violence

At its most elementary, misogyny polices women’s behaviour and lives, and enforces women’s subordination while upholding the structure of white heteropatriarchy.\(^9\) Misogyny also polices gender roles and behaviour more broadly for folks who may not identify as women but who are seen as feminine in ways which fall outside heteronormative standards (i.e. queer men, gender non-binary folk, and boys or men who are perceived as “effeminate”). Misogyny is about power — who has it, who feels entitled to it, and how those living within its hierarchical structure are expected to operate within its boundaries. I propose to examine misogyny as both a structure and a series of effects.

The framing of this story requires an in-depth analysis of how this event was discussed in the media as it unfolded and in the immediate aftermath. While I am interested in the language and rhetoric of misogyny and its relationship to gender-based violence, I have chosen to focus on the discourse surrounding online misogyny with a “one-degree-of-separation” approach. That is, I have chosen not to immerse myself in the manosphere. Instead, I analyze how these spaces and their rhetoric are addressed and discussed in more mainstream media and social media spaces. This approach has two main functions. The first is to manage the scope of the project in a way which focuses on broader public discourse rather than subgroups or specific fora on the internet. The second is a methodological decision based on my positionality as a feminist researcher, which has both benefits and risks that I address throughout the discussion of ethical considerations.

Data Collection and Decisions

The event took place in Toronto, and the responses to the event crisscrossed online and offline spaces. I conceived of this project as combining mixed qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative contribution involved manually conducting online searches of identified Canadian news sources, filtered by date, to include April 23, 2018 (the day of the attack) through April 30, 2018 (the seven days following the attack). Two additional time frames were also canvassed. The first was April 22 through 24, 2019, which was the day prior to the one-year anniversary, the day of the one-year anniversary, and the day after. The second was September 27 through 30, 2019. September 27, 2019 was the day news came out regarding the court ordered release of the video recording of the police interviewing the perpetrator hours after the attack, and I have included the three days following that initial reporting. I used the search terms “Toronto Van Attack” in order to return search results which focused specifically and predominantly on the attack (rather than articles where it was mentioned briefly or peripherally). The results of these searches are detailed and analyzed in Chapter 4. The news coverage under examination was collected from Canada’s two leading national newspapers, The Globe and Mail and the National Post, as well as the Toronto Star, in order to provide both national and local perspectives. In addition, CBC news coverage was reviewed in order to ascertain how Canada’s public broadcaster covered the story.

In keeping with my focus on the interconnectedness of online and offline activity, I was interested in collecting data regarding what was circulating on Twitter in the wake of the attack, using public tweets attached to #TorontoVanAttack and the search term Toronto Van Attack. I

then added “Montréal Massacre” as a search term, both because it was emerging as a connection and because it is an explicit connection which I and many folks who remember the Montréal Massacre had made from the outset. The outcome of these searches is be detailed and analyzed in Chapter Five. I had initially planned to employ Twitter “scraping” to collect these data. As defined in Sicelo Masango’s Python tutorial on DataCamp.com, “web scraping is a term used to describe the use of a program or algorithm to extract and process large amounts of data from the web.” 92 I explain my method of data collection in further detail below, but wish first to briefly explain why I began with exploring scraping as a method, but ultimately discarded it as not as well-suited for my project.

One issue I encountered was that digital humanities tools are often framed as easy to use. This is particularly true of “out-of-the-box” tools which are designed, or perhaps more accurately, marketed for users who have limited, if any, computer programming experience. It may be more accurate to say that some tools may make a particular process easier than a different tool. Even this framing of “easy” is dependent upon many factors, including what type of material is being examined (i.e. text, images, etc.) and the researcher’s skill level and contextual knowledge regarding a particular tool, its use, and applications.93 In the case of using the Twitter Application Programing Interface (API) to scrape Twitter, the purported ease with which this can be accomplished is in complicated by limitations imposed by Twitter which involve time limitations and access restrictions for researchers, as well as corporate protection of


design and functionality.\(^{94}\) While Twitter data is considered public in a broad sense, it is owned by Twitter and governed by Twitter’s infrastructure and design. This means that free (as in unfettered) and free (as in not behind a paywall) access to historical tweets is extremely limited. Since the event I am interested in had happened more than a year in the past, the number of accessible tweets was minute in comparison to what would have been available had I been scraping and archiving tweets in real-time. Additionally, I was unable to find existing archived public datasets related to this event. This is a challenge for research that focuses specifically on an event that happened in Canada, if for no other reason than population demographics, with the United States having a population almost ten times the size of Canada’s population.\(^{95}\) This alone is a significant contributing factor to the dominance of U.S. events even in Canadian (and world) news, and the accompanying absence of Canadian events in the news more broadly. With this in mind, I hypothesized that the anniversary of the Montréal Massacre, as a historic instance of

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\(^{94}\) The Twitter Standard API allows simple queries which search a sampling of recent or popular Tweets published in the past 7 days. The standard search API focuses on relevance rather than completeness, and therefore some Tweets and users may be missing from the search results. In order to access more complete results, Twitter recommends either the Premium or Enterprise Search API, both of which Twitter charges fees for. See “Standard Search API,” Standard Search – Twitter Developers, Twitter, accessed March 26, 2020, https://developer.twitter.com/en/docs/tweets/search/overview/standard. For a researcher whose project would be aided by accessing Tweets through the standard search API, with its 7-day time restriction, access is also limited by the number of Tweets the API will allow access to within that time frame (approximately 1,500). See Lorenzo Mosca, “Methodological Practices in Social Movement Online Research,” in Methodological Practices in Social Movement Online Research, edited by Donatella Della Porta, 399–401. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198719571.001.0001. Note that a researcher can scrape Tweets in real-time or search within the 7-day time window, and would then need to archive these Tweets because they will no longer be searchable without fees. For further information regarding limitations and access via the free Sandbox 30-day and Paid Premium options, see “Premium Search APIs,” Premium Search – Twitter Developers, Twitter, accessed March 26, 2020, https://developer.twitter.com/en/docs/tweets/search/overview/premium.

gendered mass killing in Canada, would offer a window of opportunity to access related tweets within Twitter’s narrow access time constraints.

I elected to use the NCapture free web browser plugin for Chrome to collect or “capture” tweets based on my search terms, and then imported these tweets into NVivo for archiving and later analysis. I captured the tweets on December 5 and 6, 2019 (the day before and the day of the anniversary of the Montréal Massacre), as well as April 23, 2020 (the 2-year anniversary of the Toronto Van Attack). NVivo is computer-aided data analysis software used for qualitative and mixed-methods research, and it facilitates organization and analysis of unstructured text, audio, video, and image data. NVivo is proprietary software, which means that there is limited information available about the specifics of design and algorithmic functions, but it is generally presented as a tool to aid in “manual” handling of data (as opposed to automated analysis based on statistical features of the text/data, as is the case with Leximancer). As detailed by Goble et al in their interdisciplinary research project in health ethics, the “ideal use” of the program, as promoted by developers, involves “implicit assumptions promoted by the software’s structure that shape that analysis process.” Goble et al go on to explain that some of these assumptions include ideas about data collection and analysis as discrete and linear; the notion that computer-aided coding is the only way to manage data; and the idea that all qualitative analysis follows a similar pattern. Additionally, the coding and memo features are presented as creating an “analysis audit trail” which conforms to a positivistic approach that privileges measurable, “scientifically verifiable” evidence rather than allowing for varied definitions of valid knowledge.

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and different types of “acceptable” evidence. One of NVivo’s purported strengths is that it is researcher driven in terms of how meaning is assigned to data from a human perspective during the coding stage, with a “visual first” approach that can be used in an exploratory manner to assist with iterative inquiry. Ultimately, how analysis is conducted and which types of knowledge are produced are questions that are both epistemologically and methodologically relevant, depending on the nature of the project and the disciplinary orientation of the researcher. For my purposes, I used NVivo primarily for its utility in capturing tweets and storing data from both the news media surveyed and the Twitter searches. The results and analysis of captured social media data are discussed further in Chapter Five.

The story of the limitless possibility/potential of the internet is offered up as the newest incarnation of the epistemological primacy of “hard” science and “objective” data, as well as the next level of fetishization of the new as the route to individual agency and success. It is precisely this story of limitless potential, linear progress, and value-neutral technology that critical digital media studies suggest requires the intervention of interdisciplinary approaches, theories, and methods. Thinking alongside Christian Fuchs’s discussion of digital positivism, I concur that critical digital research benefits from combining quantitative analysis of either big or small data with qualitative methods like critical discourse analysis in order to interpret how ideologies are...


Evolving forms of online sociality and community are presented as existing in a realm of limitless user choice/agency by the hosting platforms/technology companies, but in the current moment of “compulsory connectivity”, critical interpretive researchers have suggested that the social is becoming an effect of algorithms and technological infrastructure rather than technology acting as an enabling agent for new and ostensibly better/more accessible forms of sociality. Researchers Nick Couldry and José Van Dijck, in their 2015 article “Researching Social Media as if the Social Mattered,” emphasize the importance of questioning which forms of the social become hegemonic through the market/profit oriented logic of the owners/creators of digital media platforms which host this social realm, framing it as the space where sociality happens.\footnote{Nick Couldry and José Van Dijck, “Researching Social Media as if the Social Mattered,” \textit{Social Media + Society} 2015): 2-3, doi: 10.1177/2056305115604174.}

The ostensible limitlessness of the internet is a key feature of its appeal, and a seductive feature at that, but it is also crucial to be wary of the ways in which the idea of freedom on the internet actually obscures the corporate monopolies and the mass surveillance of users. Google and Facebook are two of the most powerful of these corporate monopolies, each presiding over “a vertically integrated chain of platforms and search algorithms” which allow them to structure and define online traffic and activity, including collecting user data in exchange for “free” services.\footnote{Ibid., 3-5.}
Finally, we must visit and revisit questions regarding who is conducting the research, and for what purpose? These questions are essential in designing and executing research that adapts to complex ethical frameworks and the contextual, relational, and shifting nature of our intermingled online and offline worlds. Such questions include: will the researcher include Twitter handles? Does this make a non-public person identifiable? Can/should the researcher obtain informed consent? Does the researcher quote tweets directly, even if the Twitter handle is not given? (Search engines and other data mining software can make direct quotes searchable, and then cross-referencing can make a person identifiable, even if this is not the researcher’s intent.)

As mentioned earlier, I used NVivo’s NCapture extension to extract data from the Twitter searches I conducted, utilizing NVivo as an archive from which data could be exported to other programs or applications for analysis. I employed Voyant Tools to assist with my analysis of tweet text. As described on their website, “Voyant Tools is a web-based text reading and analysis environment” which allows you to work with your own text or collection of texts in various formats, including plain text, HTML, PDF, XML, RFT, and MS Word. It allows the user to copy and paste text into the main text box in Voyant Tools, or upload files from their own computer. Within Voyant Tools, the user can work with computer-aided textual analysis tools which show word frequency graphs, word count, word trends, keywords in context, word cloud visualizations, and more. These tools-within-the-tool are clickable, and do not require use of codes or programming languages.

In a study by A. Miller assessing the content analysis


capabilities of Voyant Tools, Miller points out that the default “skin” in Voyant has five tools (Cirrus, Summary, Trends, Reader, and Contexts). Cirrus creates word cloud visualizations using an algorithm that detects the frequency of words. Summary provides an overview of the text. Trends shows a line graph of distribution of word occurrence. Reader allows the reader to fetch text on demand. Contexts shows the occurrence of key words with surrounding context. As Miller notes, these tools can interact with each other in a way that is versatile and interactive, and depends on the user’s choices and input.\textsuperscript{105} The algorithms and statistical processes used in these tools are well-accepted approaches to computational linguistics, and these processes form the “back-end system that executes analytic operations.”\textsuperscript{106} For my purposes, I used the default skin to interactively view the Cirrus word cloud that was produced, the Summary indicating total number of words, unique word forms, and most frequent word counts, and the Reader to move through the full text to see words in context.

Different visualization tools create different “views” which can generate questions and ideas for further exploration.\textsuperscript{107} While there are a number of visualization modes available in Voyant Tools, some of which are more complex, I chose to focus on the word cloud visualization for its visual appeal and simplicity. The word cloud visualization uses a simple word frequency based algorithm which is limited by the dissociation of words from their context, but this visualization does facilitate a swift scan for relevant information such as the presence or absence


\textsuperscript{107} Miller, “Text Mining Digital Humanities Projects,” 183-185.
For the purposes of this project, which focused on patterns and changes in what was present or absent from public discourse around the Toronto Van Attack, the word cloud visualization functioned as a type of algorithmic criticism, which Stephen Ramsay defines as “criticism derived from algorithmic manipulation of text.” As Ramsay points out, we can uncover distinctions and patterns by reading carefully, and we can also uncover them using a computer, employing the computer to help discover features and then present those features in a visual format that is different than the original. An approach such as this is often used on a large corpus of data, but can also be used on a small corpus as in this project, and is in keeping with N. Katherine Hayles’s conception of a “cyborg reading practice.” Working with a comparatively small number of documents, where the researcher will read each document, a suite of tools like Voyant is appropriate to the task and does not require learning new programming languages. The process of analysis and details of findings are discussed in depth in Chapters Four and Five.


110 Ibid., 11-17.


Quality and Validity

My primary strategy for ensuring the quality of this research is to conduct the research with intellectual rigour and transparency about methodology, theoretical frameworks, my biases and positionality, and the choices I made in deciding which data to analyze and why. I seek to draw meaningful connections between the questions I ask, my findings and interpretations, and existing and emergent literature. This research does not purport to uncover a singular truth but follows post-modern conceptions of the multiplicity and complexity of human experience and behaviour. The ways people find and make meaning of events and experiences is relational and contextual, and an examination of language use and the discursive frameworks being deployed provides a window into the systems and structures that support – or challenge – the status quo.

The primary concern in terms of validity in this research project is the difficulty in determining/knowing the identity/positionality of people producing online content. This also calls to mind questions regarding whether the “real” identity of an offline source is essential to know (and confirm) in order to understand aspects of the content itself that are relevant to the specific research question. Since conventional verification methods which rely upon contact with “real” physical subjects in order to “authenticate” identity do not necessarily translate to online contexts, it is important to be clear about whether or why determining offline identity would be necessary. It is important to note also that online contexts have their own platform-dependent requirements for “verifying” the identity of an account holder, whether that is through e-mail or mobile phone or both. Twitter users, for instance, can have more than one account/user

114 Ibid., 90-1.
name, but each one must be associated with either an e-mail account or a mobile phone number. Facebook requires personal accounts to belong to “real” individuals using their “authentic” identity. The forms of identity and knowledge which are considered “true” or “real” will impact the interpretation of online content.115 While the degree of anonymity available in online spaces creates challenges for analysis that seeks to unpack gendered systems and structures of power and how they function in public discourse, an approach which recognizes the fluidity and multiplicity of identity offline provides a model which allows for recognition of these features of online identities. The boundaries between online and offline lives can be hazy and unstable, and the internet is woven into everyday social life rather than separate or separable from it.116 It is therefore be essential to analyze and interpret data with an eye towards emergent themes and ethical dilemmas. It is also be important to question the context in which online or public texts are produced, by whom, and for whom, if that context can indeed be determined.117

Researcher Positionality

It is an ongoing challenge to use reflexivity in research practice while acknowledging its limits.118 I endeavour to make my own position and privilege visible while retaining an awareness of the incommensurability of diverse lived experience. In other words, being

115 For a further discussion of online subjectivity and self-presentation, see Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, ”A Toolbox about Online Self-Presentation,” in Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online, eds. Anna Poletti and Julie Rak (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 70-95, url:muse.jhu.edu/book/28237.


117 Merriam and Tisdell, Qualitative Research, 175-6.

transparent about my position is only part of the equation. As a cisgender white female settler in academia, I have privilege associated with being cisgender (rather than transgender) and white (rather than racialized). My lived experiences as a woman, a lesbian, and a step-parent have situated me at intersections of sexism and heterosexism in relation to dominant cultural norms and institutions in interpersonal relationships, public spaces, health care, and legal and educational institutions. My approach to making and understanding meaning in my own life is informed by these experiences, my philosophical and political leanings, and my commitment to intersectional feminist principles.

With that in mind, it continues to be important to approach conflicting views and perspectives with an eye towards understanding how meaning is being constructed rather than attaching either value judgement or truth value to particular findings/views as I interpret and present my findings. Analyzing themes and discourses by focusing on broader public discourse rather than subgroups or specific fora on the internet is one way to mitigate this risk, as well as the risk of people being identified if they do not wish to/are not already public figures, and the risk to the researcher of delving into toxic/traumatic content. I also aiming to explore how I might participate in anti-racism and decolonizing work in the context of my own place of residence and study as well as my own queer feminist scholarship. In pursuing this exploration, I follow lesbian feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye’s conception of *whiteliness* as a way of being in the world and holding an unexamined belief in one’s authority, benevolence, and goodness.119 My task is to hold the awareness of my own *whiteliness* without holding whiteness at the center. Recognizing my whitely position within the hierarchy of white western academic traditions of

thought and heteropatriarchal settler colonialism is necessarily a relational process that cannot be construed outside of relations with other people and the land we inhabit, however poorly I understand that land, and however limited my understanding of other lives may be. The fact that much of my research includes online spaces does not negate the importance of reflexively examining how I am situated in the offline world. In other words, it is important to reflect on the tendency to conflate anti-racism or intersectional feminism with decolonization and so I endeavour to show possible links without implying equivalence or commensurability. This commitment aligns with Barbara Applebaum’s conception of vigilance as a response to white complicity, and with her assertion that white folks can work to stay in the discomfort of that complicity rather than stepping outside it in search of innocence or absolution. This is particularly important when what eludes our comprehension challenges our fundamental understanding of who we are.¹²⁰ In this case, that requires me to sit with the discomfort of not understanding how a decolonized future could be realized or what that might mean for me personally as a white settler on these lands. Staying in this discomfort, however, fails to be useful if it produces inertia rather than engagement. Engagement demands consistent return to the question of how I, as a queer feminist white settler, may be able to contribute to the work of decolonizing the academic disciplines and spaces within which I work. It is also important for me to remember that identifying as a lesbian feminist can be perceived as confrontational and/or separatist. Returning to focus on the ways in which feminist praxis can be harnessed to benefit people of all genders and sexualities may mitigate some of this concern.

Ethical Considerations

Having discussed the what and how of this research, I will now turn my attention to the ethical considerations which are complicated by complexities of online research. While there are formal ethical guidelines for research in various disciplines and fields of inquiry, research that involves the internet and online content has its own challenges which are neither static nor neatly captured within the guidelines of conventional types of research which have longer traditions upon which to draw. My research involves publicly available information, documentation, text, and images. From the perspective of the university’s behavioural research ethics board, formal ethics approval was not technically required because I did not interact with people directly, and the research involves public information and data rather than interviews with individuals or communities, or observation of at-risk groups/people/populations. I do not anticipate this research posing a risk of harm to others as defined by institutional research ethics boards. Despite this, there are ethical considerations which have informed the data collection, analysis, and presentation of findings. These ethical considerations are based on critical engagement with ongoing debates that are specific to online research ethics, particularly those debates which align with feminist research methodologies and feminist research ethics and the prioritization of relationality, reflexivity, context, and care. These debates consider how, or whether, to apply existing ethical guidelines that were written with mass media research, literary/cultural studies, or biomedically orientated human subjects research in mind. Do these ethical models translate to ever-evolving online platforms and networked spaces? An anthropologist sitting in a coffee shop observing people without interacting with them or identifying themselves as a researcher is within disciplinary and ethical guidelines established for observation in public spaces in the material, offline world. In online contexts, however, user expectations and understandings of
what is considered private and what is considered public can be difficult to determine and can change over time. Online “invisible” observation is referred to as lurking, which is not a neutral term. Some fora and platforms welcome observation as the first step en route to full, active/interactive participation for new community members, or as simply one option for participation on a platform as audience rather than content contributor. In her review of histories of social media research, Stine Lomborg points out that most users are lurkers. For a researcher interested in observing without disrupting, lurking provides an opportunity to learn about the norms and expectations of an online space in order to formulate sound research questions and make informed decisions about how or whether to proceed with the project as it was originally conceived. In data-driven contexts, even “non-participatory” lurking in the form of visiting a site becomes data, even if only for the owner/designer of the platform. Aside from that distinction, even those online contexts which welcome lurking may not necessarily welcome or expect a researcher to be lurking to collect data for research purposes without the knowledge or informed consent of the folks interacting/posting online. It is important to recognize, however, that lurking may mitigate some of the risks researchers are exposed to in


doing critical research. Asking for informed consent when one is researching online harassment of women or violence against women, for instance, can result in threats of violence to the researcher.\footnote{Fuchs, “From Digital Positivism”, 44-45.}

The relative anonymity that is possible online, coupled with changing ways users navigate identity, subjectivity, and self-presentation, also make it difficult for a researcher to verify/confirm identity markers that are presumed possible to confirm in face-to-face encounters. This requires a researcher to consider their own epistemological framework regarding how identity and belonging are constructed, defined, and understood. For a researcher who privileges offline, in person, conventionally-embodied interaction, the “real” world is distinct and separate from the “online”, differently-embodied world, and the process of verifying/authenticating identity then presupposes a singular, unified, static, coherent, knowable self. This position would prioritize cross-checking online identity with offline people in a way which may be reductive and essentialist, and which suggests that research which cannot verify identity in this way is less legitimate by virtue of not being reproducible within a “hard sciences” model. My own intersectional feminist approach resists dichotomous notions that position online and offline, or real and virtual, as diametric opposites, and recognizes the complexity and multiplicity of identities across social contexts online and offline. Conventionally-embodied encounters do not necessarily provide clear and unambiguous information about personal identity.\footnote{Whiteman, “Public or Private,” 103.} Additionally, some features or categories of identity may be unintelligible to a researcher, and what is unintelligible is unverifiable in any absolute sense. From this perspective, online identities are
understood as relational, dynamic, and contextual, and rich description is a valuable way to examine this nuance and complexity. Online identities that cannot be attached to a single, identifiable person are not necessarily perceived as deceptive or “inaccurate”, nor are they perceived as purely theatrical creations/presentations of self.\(^{127}\)

Research in the cybersphere is further complicated by the unknowability of user intentions for the content they post, the “infinite audience that is possible online”, and the unpredictability of how rapidly and how widely information may circulate.\(^{128}\) If we grant that a user cannot know all possible audiences who may see what they post online, then we must also grant that a researcher cannot offer a singular interpretation of what is posted online as though it is the only possible interpretation. Given the infinite possibilities of online audiences, it can be as difficult for a user to make informed choices about their language use and self-presentation as it is for a researcher to make informed decisions about how to interpret a user’s language use and self-presentation. Benedict Anderson’s conception of “imagined communities” can be productively extended to include imagined audience.\(^{129}\) In other words, the imagined audience can be broadly understood based on the style and reputation of the platform (i.e. academic Twitter will have a different imagined audience and different communicative conventions than Snapchat). The temptation to see user choice as necessarily rational, informed, and limitless can lead a researcher to make choices of convenience (i.e. deciding that all publicly available online data is in the public realm and does not require consent) or based on affinity (or lack of affinity, in the


case of researching “unlikeable subjects”). Subsequent sociolinguistic research on social media, for instance, has prioritized the documentation and appreciation of “vernacular creativities” as communicative resources, but this focus can allow the researcher to consider the text without considering the human(s) behind the text. This returns us to questions of whether internet content is akin to human subjects research requiring consent, or more like secondary research of public text, separate and separable from the person who created the online content/activity. This also calls to mind questions regarding whether the “real” identity of an offline source is essential to know (and confirm) in order to understand aspects of the content itself that are relevant to the specific research question. Applying the concept of imagined audience mitigates some of the ethical considerations mentioned while also managing the scope of the developing an ethical framework. In other words, I am taking it as given that users imagine an audience, whether that imagined audience is specific or abstract, and the platform provides clues as to who the likely imagined audience would be.

Another complicating ethical factor relates to what informed consent means in the context of internet infrastructure and platforms that are opaque to users, and that are designed by a subset of people who sit atop existing hierarchies and power structures, thus reproducing those power structures and constraining/dictating which forms of visibility and participation are celebrated and who is excluded. With many forms of sociality shifting from public to corporate space, the

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corporate-owned technological infrastructure coordinates, structures, regulates, and controls activity on the platform, most often without any substantive user participation in design, platform function, or the ways their data is collected and used. The algorithms in these corporate-owned platforms impose precise structures and promote specific types of production and meaning-making, governed largely by mutually reinforcing politics of visibility and economies of visibility. These mutually reinforcing politics and economies of visibility reproduce patriarchal hierarchies, and are therefore germane to an analysis of the relationship between highly visible online popular feminisms and largely invisible/unacknowledged structural online misogyny.

Following Sarah Banet-Weiser’s conception of popular feminism and popular misogyny, the visibility of popular feminism implies that the work of feminism is complete, and the invisibility of popular misogyny (which is invisible by virtue of not being named as misogyny) supports this erroneous conclusion. In other words, the visibility of popular feminism achieves its place in an economy of visibility without challenging underlying structures, while the political project of upholding patriarchy is supported by the much less visible structural force of popular misogyny. If popular feminism is visible everywhere, and misogyny is attributed only to the rare and extreme actions of a few disturbed individuals, then this leads to a new iteration of an old reactionary story which suggests that women already “have it all”, and furthermore, that they have gained “it all” by taking it away from men. As asserted by Kate Manne, misogyny is a word


135 Banet-Weiser, Empowered, 37.
we need as feminists in order to question more or less visible power structures that uphold the status quo in terms of gender norms and expectations, and it is a word we may be in danger of losing if we fall into the trap of believing the story that tells us that misogyny is rare.\footnote{Manne, \textit{Down Girl}, 13.}

Engaging with the new technology, or new methods, or “newly” visible feminisms is best approached with a critical analysis of whether or not this \textit{new} thing is creating structural social change in a direction which favours greater equality, or if its newness falls into the colloquial category of “old wine in new bottles”. Newness, in and of itself, is not necessarily progressive or emancipatory, but is often exploitive beneath its shiny surface. The new visibility of feminism begs these kinds of questions about both newness and visibility, and what work that visibility does, if any, to challenge dominant hierarchies. In addition, access to new technologies themselves, and to their benefits, are seldom distributed equitably or fairly across cultural, socio-economic, racial, and gendered intersections, and neither their function nor their appeal can be uncritically universalized into Western Eurocentric capitalist notions of modernity. This universalizing approach removes social and cultural contexts from the equation, leading to the perception of an endless field of rational individual “choices” for identity and community.\footnote{Elaine J. Yuan, "A Culturalist Critique of ‘online Community’ in New Media Studies," \textit{New Media \& Society} 15, no. 5 (2013): 669.}

In considering both ethics and the potential for harm, I would like to conclude by pointing out that this area of research presents its own implicit and explicit dangers for the researcher in terms of the often violent and disturbing content being investigated and analyzed. There are also risks associated with being a woman academic and producing research which challenges structures of power and white heteropatriarchal hegemony. As noted by Emma Jane, online
spaces that were originally perceived as having the potential to be radically inclusive (i.e.,
gender, race, and class-free) are also spaces where misogyny proliferates. The Internet, and
computer culture more broadly, were originally connected to the U.S. military through both
funding and design priorities. As the Internet acquired greater cultural and financial value, it
became increasingly male-dominated, and this shift contributed to increasingly prevalent
gendered online abuse and harassment which, as Jane points out, do not come with warnings
about offensive language/content. Fiona Vera-Gray’s conception of “safety work” is
particularly generative in this regard. As a form of invisible (and often unconscious) additional
labour that women perform, safety work responds to and resists the possibility and reality of
male intrusion both on and offline. This affects not only women’s everyday lives, but also the
methodological decisions of feminist researchers. These decisions relate to whether a
researcher explicitly identifies themselves and their project as feminist, as well as which
stories/content to include, and these types of decisions have bearing on potential risks to the
researcher and to the people whose lives and experiences come into the research frame. The
kinds of safety work required varies depending upon asymmetrical distribution of relative
privilege, with the most privileged women (i.e. cisgender able-bodied heterosexual white
women) arguably needing to do comparatively less safety work.

138 Jane, Misogyny Online, 1.
140 Jane, Misogyny Online, 1.
142 Ibid., p. 62.
Being a target of sexist and misogynist abuse may well be unavoidable in the context of researching as a woman, but we attend to safety work nonetheless. When work is understood to be potentially dangerous to the worker, one might expect something akin to danger pay. It is important to note, however, that who is seen as intruding, and upon whom (or what), is a determination that is value-laden and power-saturated. If we understand misogyny as a tool for policing/enforcing the behaviour, physical appearance, and spaces of appearance expected of women, as conceptualized by both Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kate Manne, and feminine people more broadly (i.e. queer folk, effeminate men, etc.), we are called to question the narrative of women’s intrusion on men’s territory as justification for men’s assertion of their entitlement to both their own/owned territory and to women’s bodies. Bearing in mind that neither feminism nor misogyny are new, an interdisciplinary and mixed methods analysis of the forms they take and they ways they circulate through our everyday connectedness to the internet and its networked affordances is precisely the type of intervention needed to challenge the myth of progress and to highlight ongoing structures of power and privilege which continue to prevent moves towards greater social equity and justice. While it may be impossible, and perhaps even unnecessary, to find consensus about the definitions and current state of feminisms and misogyny, I suggest that it is clear that feminist and misogynist language and discourse operate in relation to each other, and that this dynamic relationship is constituted and must be examined in online and offline contexts. With that, I turn first to my analysis of mainstream news coverage.
Chapter 4: The Toronto Van Attack in the News

In the News

The general formula for news coverage of an event tends to follow the who, what, where, when, why, and how series of questions in a narrative form. This overall structure provides the scaffolding for my analysis of Canadian mainstream news coverage of the Toronto Van Attack. As I reviewed the ways these questions were addressed, I made handwritten notes detailing themes which seemed to dominate the story. I have divided these themes into categories, including what the attack was called; the portrayal of the victims, the perpetrator, the police, and the community; sentiment/emotions about the event and the people involved; and underlying ideologies. My analysis considers the gendered dimensions of each of these themes with an eye towards understanding structural inequalities and hegemonic power. My assertion that the Toronto Van Attack is an act of misogynist violence requires attention to these gendered dimensions.

The first review involved reading all of the transcripts of the news coverage on CBC – The National (from April 23 through April 30, 2018) to get a sense of the overall picture as it took shape and was reported by Canada’s public broadcaster at the time. This provided a starting point for considering my initial themes as detailed below. I followed this by reading each article from the online versions of the other three news outlets (National Post, The Globe and Mail, and The Toronto Star). The second time period I examined was April 22 through 24, 2019 (the day before the one-year anniversary, the day of the one-year anniversary, and the day after). The third time period was September 27 through 30, 2019 (the day news came out regarding the court ordered release of the video recording of the police interviewing the perpetrator hours after the attack, and the three days following that initial reporting). Each of these time periods had their
own story arc, as one might expect with the passing of time and with shifts in focus. The story arc is also structured by the specific media outlet as well as by the conventions of the sub-genre/activity within news media. In other words, news which functions as description appears as breaking news/information reporting (produced by reporters and editors); news which functions as commentary appears in columns, editorials and op-ed pieces (produced by regular columnists, editors, and guest editors/opinion writers). CBC, as Canada’s national public broadcaster, has a more stringent legal mandate according to the Broadcasting Act of 1991 than privately owned media. The National Post is generally perceived to have a politically conservative, pro-free market perspective; The Globe and Mail is perceived to be politically centrist, albeit business-friendly, with a relatively educated readership; and The Toronto Star is thought to be somewhat left-leaning in its political perspective. A comprehensive picture of Canadian news media is beyond the scope of this project, but it is worth briefly noting that Canada has a rather consolidated media system with significant cross-ownership.

From a quantitative perspective, the initial period examined included 19 news items (articles or broadcast transcripts) from the selected sources on April 23; 57 items on April 24; 32 items on April 25; 17 items on April 26; 21 items on April 27; 10 items on April 28; 9 items on April 29; and 6 items on April 30 (2019), for a total of 171 new items. April 24, the day after

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146 These news items are all listed in the bibliography.
the attack, was the busiest news day, as early reports and initial speculation from the day of the attack were investigated in order to confirm, discount, or correct the information being reported. The second time period was on and around the one-year anniversary, with 16 news items spanning April 22, 2019 through April 24, 2019. The final period was on and around the release of the police video interview, with 11 news items spanning September 27 through September 30, 2019. Word frequency searches, although limited in terms of unpacking context, can point to themes and patterns, and I employed word frequency queries in NVivo for all of the news items I reviewed in order to compare them with my own hand-written notes about themes. Since the initial time period spanned eight days, there was a large number of news items examined, so I selected a word frequency search which detailed the one thousand most frequently used words. For the two other time periods, I chose to use the same search criteria even though there were far fewer news items examined. I then manually coded these into themes and categories.

**Dominant Themes and Words**

Across the news coverage, the Toronto Van Attack was referred to as a “horrific attack,” a “van ramming attack” and a “tragic incident;” a “van attack;” a “bizarre and gruesome mass murder;” a “deliberate massacre;” “senseless violence;” and a “devastating crime.”

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described as “carnage;” “mayhem;” “chaos;” “heinous;” “shocking;” and “evil.”\textsuperscript{148} Initially, questions were asked regarding whether this was a terrorist attack, and whether there were concerns regarding national security. On the day of the attack, Ralph Goodale, the Public Safety Minister, was in Toronto to host a meeting of Public Safety and Security Ministers from G7 countries, and he told reporters that there was no national security threat, and no need to change Canada’s national security threat level, which has been sitting at medium since a shooting at the Parliament in 2014.\textsuperscript{149} Also on the day of the attack, CBC news confirmed that there was “no terror link.”\textsuperscript{150} Other news items which followed reiterated that this was not a terrorist attack and not a risk to national security. Questions about terrorism, or national security, do the work of “constructing the Other” who can be apportioned singular blame when mass public violence is perpetrated.\textsuperscript{151} The interrogation of whether this was terrorism reflects the impulse to both reinforce the image of Canada as peaceful and non-violent while also constructing the perpetrator of this specific act of violence as “the Other.” As elucidated by Sherene Razack in her analysis of Canadian humanitarian responses, our “national mythology is that we are...


\textsuperscript{150} CBC, “The Timeline and Takedown.”

\textsuperscript{151} Definitions of “national security” and “terrorism” are complex and contested. Generally speaking, national security implies an outside/foreign threat, whereas terrorism can be domestic or foreign.
completely innocent, as a middle power and as nice Canadians.” 152 The word terrorist, as explained by Sara Ahmed, is connected to “histories of naming” which include narratives of past terrorist attacks and wars fought in distant places. 153 In other words, there is an association between the terrorist as “other” and terrorism as something that happens elsewhere.

The “othering” discourse works in tandem with things like the hashtag “#TorontoStrong” and its attendant fundraising for victims and their families. 154 The “#TorontoStrong” hashtag is performative in that it reasserts the story of Toronto as diverse, unified, and resilient, distancing the conception of “us” from the lone attacker. In the words of Toronto mayor John Tory, “this kind of tragic incident is not representative of how we live or who we are or anything to do with life in the city on a day-to-day basis.” 155 Tory’s repeated use of the word “we” binds the people of Toronto together against the perpetrator in an us versus him framework. The attack was indeed an attack in which a vehicle was used as a murder weapon, and reporting asked questions about “how to deal with vehicle attacks and how to try to mitigate them regardless of the motivation.” 156 Mitigating vehicular violence, however, is only part of the conversation that is required. This was a vehicular attack perpetrated by a man, which requires us to ask questions about mitigating gendered violence. I am not suggesting, in some essentialist way, that this attack was perpetrated because the attacker is a man, but I am stating that this man’s relationship


to gendered expectations and societal norms is central to understanding this event. Both fragile masculinity and aggrieved entitlement seek to use violence to redress doing gender wrong or being wronged by others. The violent response to perceived failure and rejection underwrites the incel worldview, which the perpetrator himself explicitly linked himself with through his Facebook post (discussed in further detail later in this chapter).

Questions about the identity of the perpetrator, and his possible motives, were clear preoccupations across media sources. The identities of the victims also figured prominently in coverage, although the identity of the perpetrator was confirmed before the end of the day on April 23, and he was reported as appearing in court the next day, April 24. The identities of all 10 fatalities were not confirmed and released until four days after the attack, on April 27.\textsuperscript{157} As reported in the \textit{National Post}, the large number of simultaneous deaths meant that the coroner’s office was seeking more than visual identifications of the victims, instead waiting until identifications were also confirmed through “scientific methods” such as dental records, which can take days.\textsuperscript{158} In addition to the individual victims and their families, the city of Toronto was also framed as a victim in this story, as indicated by statements like one made by Toronto’s mayor, John Tory, in which he said that the scene of the crash “will forever be a scar on the city of Toronto.”\textsuperscript{159} On April 24, \textit{CBC – The National} reported that “Toronto is just one in a long list

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\textsuperscript{158} Tom Blackwell, “Toronto Struggles to Cope with Horrific Van Assault as Accused Faces 10 Murder Charges,” \textit{National Post}, April 25, 2018, Canadian Newsstream, \url{http://tinyurl.com/wcbg7d3}.

\textsuperscript{159} CBC, “Toronto Mayor, Ontario Premier Pay Tribute to Victims of Deadly Van Attack,” \textit{The National – CBC Television}, April 24, 2018, Canadian Newsstream, \url{http://tinyurl.com/u5j3jb7}.
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of cities though that have been hit by these vehicle attacks.”160 Toronto’s “reputation as a safe
and welcoming place [is] in doubt,” “shattering an illusion held by many that such a thing could
never happen here.”161

On the heels of these early descriptions, the mayor of Toronto was quick to reassert that
Toronto is a safe city, “admired around the world.”162 These reassurances were likely aimed at
offering hope and a cause to unite around – the cause of showing the world how safe and
peaceful and resilient and diverse Toronto is. I am not suggesting that Toronto is not those
things, but I am suggesting that it remains important to ask questions about for whom Toronto is
safe, and about what diversity means. As one reporter stated, North York’s diversity is
“astounding,” and “North York is filled with strivers and achievers and newcomers on the
make.”163 The motivations of news media differ than the motivations of political leadership, and
different media sources (i.e. reporters or columnists; centrist or conservative news outlets) use
different rhetorical styles, but the over-arching message is very much in keeping with broader
discourse about what it means to be Canadian, and how welcoming Canada is. News media
frame both the way the story is told and the sense of readership/viewership as imagined
community. Benedict Anderson’s conception of imagined communities, originally conceived in
relation to the collective identity of a nation, can be productively extended here to include the


imagined communities invoked by news media. The contours of such imagined communities vary depending on whether the audience/community is imagined, and in turn imagines itself, as an ideological community or a political/national community. While it may be comparatively true that Canada is relatively safe and welcoming, it is not universally true for everyone who lives in, or wants to live in, Canada. In her April 27 article in *The Globe and Mail*, Elizabeth Renzetti noted that incidents of violence against women are not isolated, and “what unites them is anger toward women, which is unfortunately all too common … right here at home.” It is the gendered nature of this violence that must continue to be included in the conversation.

Aside from casting the city of Toronto and the neighbourhood of North York as victims, individual victims were portrayed in a positive light and referred to as good people, innocent people, people who were simply walking along the streets of Toronto, going about their daily lives. Descriptions of victims often invoked personality traits that are valued in Canadian society broadly, including being strong, kind, genuine, and passionate. The diversity of victims was invoked as representative of the diversity of the city of Toronto, the area of North York more specifically, and Canada more broadly, including references to the many languages that condolences were written in at vigil and memories sites. Additionally, victims’ family roles were often mentioned, referring to mothers, grandmothers, an orphan, sons, dads, etc. This again reflects an image of Canadian families along heteronormative lines. Victims were referred to as

164 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

165 Elizabeth Renzetti, “Toronto may be Strong, but so is the Drive to Ignore Painful Truths,” *The Globe and Mail*, April 27, 2018, Canadian Newsstream, [http://tinyurl.com/sg2vm9z](http://tinyurl.com/sg2vm9z).

“of Toronto” if they lived in Toronto, and “from Toronto” if they were born there, reinforcing the link between the city and the victims.

The perpetrator, on the other hand, was portrayed in a negative light, using words such as “loser” and “random loon;” he was “socially awkward” and a “tech expert.”167 There was speculation about whether he was a “mentally deranged loner” and/or “an angry young man who hates women.”168 There were questions about whether he was mentally ill, and references were made to him having a “social disability” and possibly an autism spectrum disorder, as well as references to him being good with computers.169 The fact that the perpetrator had made a post to Facebook in which he used the word “incel” and referred to the Isla Vista shooter, meant that there were early connections made to online misogyny and “misogyny in the dark corners of the internet.”170 The links to misogyny, and the discussion about misogyny, were largely framed within a minoritizing discourse which presented misogyny as rare and extreme. This echoes broader public conversations which situate misogyny online in the dark corners of the internet, or discuss it as only as “an aberration, as the work of random loons, not real men at all.”171


this type of vilification is understandable, it detracts from our ability to question the underlying structure of misogyny in patriarchal society. This structure, as elucidated by both Kate Manne and Sarah Banet-Weiser, is a structure of gendered entitlements, obligations, and expectations. Indeed, the structural composition of misogyny is inextricable from the ongoing system of white heteropatriarchy.

That being the case, we might be encouraged to wonder why the word patriarchy was virtually absent in the media conversation. I suspect that the word patriarchy is considered perhaps too political, or even passé, in contemporary Canadian society. One article written by Vicky Mochama for The Toronto Star did bring up patriarchy, and the issue of youth and maleness in the context of mass killings. In the National Post, Terry Glavin suggested that patriarchy, which he conceded is “also a very real thing,” could be said to be at least “tangentially related” to terrorism or terrorist-like ideologies more broadly when those ideologies are fundamentally structured around the subordination of women. Two opinion pieces written for The Globe and Mail one day apart provide a telling example of the competing feminist and non-feminist/anti-feminist discourses. The first was a piece written by Canadian journalist Rachel Giese, author of the book Boys: What it Means to Become a Man (which came out after the Toronto Van attack). Giese’s April 27, 2018 piece entitled “For Women, Misogyny is a Daily Reality,” begins with, “Angry young man slaughters many. This story, in its variations, has become increasingly common.” Later in the piece, Giese goes on to say,
What binds these [incel] groups is a shared sense of their own deprivation and the search for a target to blame, and in some cases, inflict damage on. Many men, both inside and outside these communities, believe the threat is women. Even when men become their victims, too, as some were in these cases, the killers are motivated, at least in part, by feelings of emasculation and the desire to assert their manhood.

Giese continues, saying,

As many have acknowledged in the aftermath of Monday’s attack, misogyny kills. We know it does. Consider that roughly every six days a woman in Canada is murdered by her intimate partner, and that in incidents of spousal murder-suicides, 97 percent of the accused are men.

And later in the piece, she explains further,

Misogyny exists in the grinding daily reminders faced by women, reminding us that we are not fully entitled to enjoy our ambitions, our imaginations and agency over our bodies without men’s permission or interference. It’s in the catcalls … the tearing off of hijabs … the unwanted touches, the social-media murder threats, the doctored drinks, the revenge porn, the foul stand-up comedy rape jokes, the online forums devoted to debasing women. Much of this may never erupt into acts of mass violence. But does it have to in order to be taken seriously?174

Giese is specifically and explicitly engaging with misogyny as an everyday part of life that exists along a spectrum from catcalls to mass violence. The crux of Giese’s argument is that misogyny should not have to cause death in order to be taken seriously, and this reflects a more nuanced and overtly feminist approach to defining misogyny as structural and “normal” rather than necessarily rare or “extreme.”

In a move that echoes the script-flipping logic of popular misogyny as described by Sarah Banet-Weiser, Margaret Wente’s April 28 opinion piece, entitled “Is Misogyny to Blame for the Mayhem in Toronto?” begins by saying, “A lot of people know where to point the finger for Monday’s bloody mayhem in Toronto.” Referring to claims that we need a conversation about misogyny, Wente writes,

On the surface, that claim looks easy to back up. There is some evidence that the suspect, Alek Minassian, seems to have been targeting women. He seems to have lurked in a certain internet netherworld called ‘incel,’ which consists of ‘involuntary celibates’ who stoke each other’s grievances.

Wente goes on to refer Toronto Star writer Vicky Mochama’s piece, saying that Mochama, … drew a direct line between mass murder and violent misogyny. But that is too facile. Mass killers have been around for decades. And women are just one of their targets … My point is that mass murderers carry around great big bags of grievances against all kinds of groups … Apart from social awkwardness, mass murders have many other traits in common. They are almost all young, white and male.

Wente then mentions a “composite portrait” of mass murderers by a U.S. forensic psychiatrist, and states,

From what we know so far, Mr. Minassian’s alleged behavior seems to fit the mould pretty well. But one important detail doesn’t fit. The killer didn’t use a gun. He used a van. That’s why people jumped to the premature conclusion that it must have been a terrorist attack … A terrorist attack has far grimmer political, social and security implications that a random act of violence by a homicidal loser. People will look for all of the usual culprits here, I suppose – internet hate groups, inadequate mental health services, law enforcement groups that aren’t sufficient attuned to the potentially murderous hostilities of disturbed young men – and call for reform. People will also cite our current favourite whipping boy, misogyny. But the truth is that there’s not a lot we can do about any of these things … As
for murderous misogyny, girls and women in the West have never been safer than they are now.175

Wente’s polemic piece is written in response to calls for a discussion of misogyny and gendered violence, and in it she claims that misogyny is not the problem, at least not for women and girls in the West, and that even if it were, it is only one among many problems about which we can do little.

The presentation of these two pieces, one day apart, in *The Globe and Mail*, reflects the persistent media narrative about presenting “balanced” news coverage, with balance understood as giving equal space/air time to opposing views. As elucidated by Stuart Hall, however, balance is “exercised within a framework … which, overall, the powerful, not the powerless … crucially define.”176 *The Globe and Mail*, as a legacy news outlet with a broadly centrist reputation, both reflects and is invested in the value placed on objectivity and impartiality as hallmarks of what constitutes news and good journalism. Following Candis Callison and Mary Lynn Young’s call for a “reckoning” with how journalism is defined and practiced, it bears repeating that objectivity is invoked by mainstream media “in a way that obscures the particular and universalizing power of whiteness and masculinity.”177 As pointed out by Callison and Young, mainstream news media in Canada continue to feature editorial positions and executives positions which are still “largely filled with white males,” and working minority journalists are still under-represented.178

While *The Globe and Mail* does not explicitly endorse either writer’s piece, its publication of

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178 Ibid., 17-18.
them one after the other implicitly suggests that presenting both of these views is necessary in order to provide balanced coverage. The diametrically opposed positions of Giese and Wente mirror the hashtag conversations around #YesAllWomen and #NotAllMen discussed in the section on internet research, networked/affective publics, and worldviews Chapter Two, and invite questions about the threshold definition of misogyny. The idea that misogyny is somehow a false issue, or a feminist conspiracy to oppress men, is similar to the notion of “reverse racism” espoused by alt-right and neo-conservative media and social media. A less extreme response is the claim made by Victor Ferreira in his National Post piece, in which he states that that there was no evidence that the perpetrator of the Toronto Van Attack swerved to avoid men and only hit women; a claim which invites similar interrogation of how we define misogyny, and what we understand about the targets of an attack.179 This framing makes misogyny rarer and harder to “prove” than it already is. As Kate Manne elucidates, this type of framing utilizes the naïve conception of misogyny. Since an individual’s attitudes or deep-seated psychological motivation is frequently inscrutable, this makes misogyny “epistemically inaccessible,” particularly for women.180 When misogyny is naively and narrowly defined in this way, then the threshold for naming misogyny is very high indeed. When misogyny is examined as a property of social environments, it is visible as way of understanding the rewards and punishments apportioned through white patriarchal systems. Ambient misogyny, then, tells us about who has the power to uphold and enforce gendered norms and expectations in a system of compulsory heterosexuality.


180 Manne, Down Girl, 44.
Stepping back from the discussion of the perpetrator for a moment, it is germane to the framing of this event to examine how the police officer who arrested the perpetrator was portrayed in the media. Constable Ken Lam, the officer who arrested the suspect, was portrayed as a hero, using words such as “calm,” “discipline,” and “determination;” “cool-headed,” and a “lone hero.”\textsuperscript{181} He was praised for his “remarkable act of bravery” and the quality of Toronto Police training was touted.\textsuperscript{182} One reporter pointed out that Canadian police are “good at not shooting people,” that this was an example of “humane policing,” and that “policing in Canada is not policing in America.”\textsuperscript{183} Once again, this type of comparison with the United States elides structural and systemic problems in Canadian policing, so while it may be comparatively true that Canadian police are good at not shooting people, it is not universally true. The story of the lone hero does more, however, than simply draw attention to the ways in which the Canadian police officer is different than an American police officer. It signals difference while still conforming to American values which praise the individual hero. An intersectional feminist analysis demands that we question which people Canadian police are good at not shooting, as well as which other types of force are used by police and against whom. The community members who rallied to support victims and their families, the first responders, and the city of Toronto more broadly, were also portrayed in a heroic light, invoking diversity, community, pulling together, resilience, and Canadian-ness.


\textsuperscript{183} Tristin Hopper, “Why Canadian Police are so Good at Not Shooting People,” \textit{National Post}, April 25, 2018, Canadian Newsstream, \url{http://tinyurl.com/vct2oza}.
The reporting about motive, or possible motive, took a somewhat circular course, winding in and around the question of whether misogyny played a role in these killings. Many reports indicated that the police said it was too early to suggest a motive, or to comment on motive. Reporting on the day of the attack referred to a Facebook post which appeared to have been made by the perpetrator, in which the “incel rebellion” and the Isla Vista shooter were referenced.\textsuperscript{184} Although this post was not confirmed by Facebook until the following day, the early reporting was proven to be correct. Explanations of what the term incel means, and who the Isla Vista shooter was, were prominent and framed by explanations and discussion centered on online message boards or communities which exhibit a culture/subculture of misogyny. This framing is consistent with minoritizing misogyny and speaking of this perpetrator as a lone wolf, although in this context, the lone wolf is connected to, or inspired by the subgroup of men who identify as incels. Indeed it works to construct the perpetrator as “other” in a similar fashion as initial questions about terrorism did. What the perpetrator posted on Facebook may not provide the full story regarding his state of mind or his motives or his feelings, but it does point to what the perpetrator wanted to say about his actions. CBC reported the post as being confirmed by Facebook the day after the attack, indicating that the post came from his profile page, which Facebook had shut down.\textsuperscript{185}

The full Facebook post read:

Private (Recruit) Minassian Infantry 00010, wishing to speak to Sgt 4chan please. C23249161. The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys! All hail Supreme Gentleman [name of Isla Vista shooter].\textsuperscript{186}


As reported in *The Globe and Mail*, Facebook deleted the suspect’s account, “in accordance with its community standards that disallow mass murderers to maintain a presence.”\(^{187}\) While the search for an unassailable, indisputable motive is understandable in the context of trying make sense of this kind of mass killing, questioning the authenticity of the Facebook post or the identity of the person who posted it distracts from larger questions. At least part of the reason why he committed this mass murder is explicitly connected, by his own Facebook post, to his identification with being an incel — feeling rejected, frustrated, denied sex/romance/intimacy. Lashing out based on these feelings is connected to the structures of men’s entitlement, women’s obligations, and societal expectations to be coupled/in a couple that uphold white heteropatriarchal hegemony. Whether he targeted women specifically and exclusively, or whether he simply blamed women for his unhappiness, the fact remains that yet again, a man had committed mass murder in Canada. I argue that understanding gendered norms and expectations, and the interaction between perceived entitlements and obligations, is central to understanding this pattern of gendered violence.

Efforts to determine the motive for this attack were inextricably linked to conversations about blame, and the discourse of blame pointed towards incels as an “abhorrent movement;” inhabiting the “dark corner of internet;” a “strange underground subculture;” an “insular misogynist world” and a “complex subculture of sexually frustrated men.”\(^{188}\) The blame


discourse, which seemed to agree that incels and “extreme” misogyny may be linked, also appeared to agree that the internet, and social media, were also villains in this story. Alongside the notion that that the internet, or at least parts of the internet, were to blame, some reporting went as far as suggesting that Twitter feeds were full of “ideologically motivated bickering and point-scoring over Minassian’s alleged motives” rather than focusing on “spasms of carnage … authored by random loons.”

The implication is that random loons are rare, and nice guys ought not to be tarred with the same brush. The depiction of Twitter, and the conversations that were circulating on Twitter, as marginal, or politically motivated, or lacking in factual accuracy, was captured in references to “the dregs of tweeting humanity” who were not responding appropriately to the tragedy.

Dismissive language of that kind both enacts and reinforces mainstream media investment in staking their claim as arbiters of what counts as “legitimate” objective news. In other words, mainstream news media position Twitter (and by extensions, tweeters) as outside accepted journalistic standards as though those journalistic standards were neutral, and free of ideology or politics or interpretation. The move to distinguish “news” from Twitter feeds performs a gatekeeping function that presents the specificity of the medium as a legitimating/de-legitimating factor premised on objectivity as a central tenet of traditional news media (as opposed to user-driven, opinion-based social media). That type of framing exercises an editorial function in determining which stories remain in the public eye and which do not.


social media as a villain in this story was an interesting feature of how this played out in the press. The impulse to “blame the internet,” particularly since the perpetrator was referred to as a “tech expert,” provides an appealing scapegoat which once again distracts from the larger structural issues.191 In her discussion of the Internet as a cultural text, Beate Gersch asserts that the Internet “exists at the crossroads of technology and culture,” and that rather than being an alternative medium per se, it is embedded in the same sociocultural, political, and economic structures as other media.192 Extending this to consider social media, we see a range of views appearing in the differently mediated context of social media, but these views gain or lose visibility, and stay in or fall out of the public eye, based on the interests and governing logic of those who hold power in the media landscape. In other words, blaming the internet places a particular focus on online misogyny without locating it in relation to misogyny as an ongoing structural component of daily life.

In terms of the narrative arc of each time period reviewed, the first wave of coverage under examination focused on the victims, the valiant community response, the lone perpetrator as a disturbed individual, and social media/the internet as the place where extremist ideology and marginal subcultures flourish. My recollection of watching the news coverage at the time reflected my instinctive suspicion that misogyny would be part of the initial conversation, but that it would not retain a central position in the story. After reviewing all of the news coverage from the initial time period, I was somewhat surprised to see that my recollection was not quite accurate. Misogyny remained in the conversation, but only in its minoritized, Othered discourse.

192 Gersch, ”Gender at the Crossroads“, 307-8.
where misogyny exists on the internet, or in terrorist/extremist ideologies. Misogyny is “out there” rather than right here, in the system of white heteropatriarchy.

The second wave, around the one-year anniversary, was focused almost exclusively on the victims, as one might expect at a time when honouring the victims and family members is the primary purpose. During this second wave of coverage, misogyny and incels were not part of the story, with the exception of one article written by a young man who identified himself as a former school friend of the perpetrator. This piece expressed concern that all autism spectrum folks would be tarred with the same brush as this perpetrator, who was reported in the initial as well as subsequent coverage, to have had some form of autism. Aside from that one article, this wave of coverage not only offered more information about the victims, as well as some of the survivors of the attack, but also about the Anne Marie D’Amico Foundation, established by her family to honour her memory and to raise funds for services for women escaping violence. It was reported that one year later, survivors were thankful to be alive, and “more than $4 million raised in support of victims and their families have been disbursed.”

Canadian resilience and generosity, the diversity of Toronto, and the heroic community response were the focal points of one-year anniversary news coverage. This echoed some of the initial coverage, which spoke of a grieving but not broken city. “Toronto remembers,” coming together to pay tribute to the

193 Evan Mead, “I was Friends with Alek Minassian in High School. We Were both Outcasts,” The Toronto Star, April 22, 2019, Canadian Newsstream, http://tinyurl.com/ue2e23t.

194 It was reported that the suspect was described by his mother as having Asperger’s. See Les Perreaux, Josh O’Kane, Patrick White and Becca Clarkson, “Suspect in Toronto Van Attack Publicly Embraced Misogynist Ideology,” The Globe and Mail, April 24, 2018, Canadian Newsstream, http://tinyurl.com/uyoetl7.


victims, to support those grieving who have lost loved ones, and “to stay strong in adversity.”

The way the focus of the story shifted speaks to the process of how an event becomes part of cultural memory. As elucidated by Erll and Rigney in their introduction to Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory, the “social performance of memory” happens in the public sphere and across mediated/media platforms, but social actors and organizations dictate which stories enjoy publicity, and what is “put on society’s commemorative agenda.”

The third wave of coverage, which surrounded the September 2019 court-ordered release of the police interviews with the perpetrator, focused squarely on the perpetrator and his motives and state of mind, based on the video of the police interview with him a few hours after the attack. It was reported that “his anger at being rejected by women is what he claims led him to indiscriminate revenge.” Several reports referred to him having found “likeminded people” online in incel message boards, including “two mass killers with similar misogynist ideologies.” In other words, the initial reporting about the Facebook post and the link to incels on the day of the attack was borne out. The majority of the news coverage from this time period delves into who (and where) incels are, and other infamous mass killings by incels. In addition, some of the reporting draws links between extreme misogyny and online radicalization into alt-


right and white supremacist ideologies. While several of the news reports noted that the detective who interviewed the perpetrator was a detective from the sex crimes unit, only the piece written by Rosie DiManno on September 27, 2019 for The Toronto Star explicitly questions why a sex crimes detective, rather than a homicide detective, conducted the interview. The fact that sex, or lack of sex, figures prominently in how incels describe themselves and their anger and frustration may be a contributing factor in this, but Toronto Police have not commented on that specifically as of yet.

**Discourses, Rhetoric and Further Interpretation**

The discourses and rhetoric in mainstream news coverage offered a picture of heroes and villains; a horrible event and the community response; Canadian values and misogynist subculture. Was misogyny a precipitating factor in this mass murder? Was this simply an isolated aberration, a socially awkward loner with mental health problems, a terrorist plot, or a symptom of broader structural and interpersonal violence against women? These competing discourses were woven in and around the “indisputable and chilling” fact that the victims were “predominantly women,” and “if that was intentional, it would be make the van attack Canada’s worst mass killing of women since the 1989 Polytechnique massacre.” Several reports asked the question, how do we protect Canadians from “lone-wolf attacks?” This type of question, as

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I have argued, distracts from the broader question of how we address gendered violence and social hierarchies in Canada. The fact that the victims were predominantly women is not the only salient fact. There is another fact which is indisputable and chilling, and that is that the perpetrator of this mass killing was a man. Whether he “targeted” women specifically because they were women, or whether he simply attributed his unhappiness and loneliness to not being in a heterosexual relationship, the fact remains that once again, a man has committed mass murder in Canada, and the victims were predominantly women.

My original research questions were oriented towards the dominant themes and prominent words in the news coverage; whether the themes and words changed in the week following the attack and on the one-year anniversary; whether other well-publicized acts of mass killing perpetrated by a man in Canada were referenced (i.e., the Montréal Massacre); and how feminist and non-feminist or anti-feminist rhetoric interacted in framing this event. The news coverage did indeed change. The initial reporting, and the one-year anniversary, placed significant focus on the victims, the community, and the resilience and diversity of Toronto and Canada more broadly. This is not surprising, given the understandable desire to find meaning in tragedy and to focus on positive stories about the victims, the community, and the country, especially in the face of such a violent event. This type of mass killing is comparatively rare in Canada, but it is not unheard of. That is why I was interested in whether or not the Montréal Massacre would be part of the media and public conversation after the Toronto Van Attack. It was indeed referred to in some of the news coverage, but only intermittently. On the few occasions in which it was explicitly referenced (in only 4 of the 171 news items examined, which is only 2.3 percent), the conclusions remained somewhat equivocal. Judith Timson reported that it was “too soon to in the immediate aftermath to call it” (to draw the link to the Montréal
Massacre or to the socialization of young men to expect sex).\textsuperscript{205} An article in The Toronto Star noted that the Toronto Van Attack “may have been the work of a distinctly 21st century version of Marc Lépine” (the perpetrator of the Montréal Massacre), but also suggested that the Facebook post by the perpetrator of the Toronto Van Attack may have been a hoax, despite having been authenticated by Facebook.\textsuperscript{206} Reporting on CBC’s \textit{The National} referred to women’s advocates wanting even the possibility of a link to misogyny investigated so that the parallels between the Montréal Massacre and the Toronto Van Attack would not be ignored.\textsuperscript{207} Elizabeth Renzetti, in her April 27, 2018 article in \textit{The Globe and Mail}, asked “why aren’t we enraged by the possibility that this attack was inspired by misogyny?” If the Toronto Van Attack was inspired by misogyny, Renzetti points out, it would mean that “two of the largest mass killings in our country’s recent history were inspired by hatred of women.”\textsuperscript{208} While I do not agree with framing misogyny solely as hatred of women, I see the thread of misogyny as a clear link between the two mass killings. It is this link which leads me to insist that it is important to not lose the word misogyny in the discussion of these events. As reported in the \textit{National Post} on December 6, 2019, which was the 30-year anniversary of the Montréal Massacre, it took 30 years for that attack to be formally recognized as an anti-feminist attack. On the evening before the anniversary:

\textsuperscript{205} Judith Timson, “Judith Timson: How do we Define a Tragedy Like the North York Van Rampage, and Why do we Need to,” \textit{The Toronto Star}, April 24, 2018, Canadian Newsstream, \url{http://tinyurl.com/tgoujjl}.

\textsuperscript{206} Isa Viosa, Mitch Potter, Jennifer Yang, Nicholas Keung, Laurie Monsebraaten and Bruce Campion, “Who is Alek Minassian, the Man Accused in the Van Rampage,” \textit{The Toronto Star}, April 24, 2018, Canadian Newsstream, \url{http://tinyurl.com/rtrcj93}.

\textsuperscript{207} CBC, “Suspect’s Possible Motive in Van Attack Doesn’t Surprise Women,” \textit{The National – CBC Television}, April 26, 2018, Canadian Newsstream, \url{http://tinyurl.com/swbty5k}.

\textsuperscript{208} Elizabeth Renzetti, “Toronto may be Strong, but so is the Drive to Ignore Painful Truths,” \textit{The Globe and Mail}, April 27, 2018, Canadian Newsstream, \url{http://tinyurl.com/sg2vm9z}.
Montréal changed a plaque in a memorial park that previously referred to a ‘tragic event’ – with no mention that the victims were all women. The revised text unveiled on Thursday describes an ‘anti-feminist attack’ that claimed the lives of 14 women.209

While I am not suggesting that these events are exactly the same, both events involved the perpetrator writing a letter or post detailing his explicitly gendered, anti-woman motive. In the case of the Montreal Massacre, the police found the perpetrator’s suicide note, which detailed his motivation, later in the evening on the day of the shootings.210 In the case of the Toronto Van Attack, the post made by the perpetrator was reported on as confirmed by Facebook the day after the attack.211 That is to say, the motive was not mysterious in either instance. Whether this was the only motive remains opaque, as motive can always be questioned when conceptualized through the lens of individual psychology.

What the perpetrator said about his motive and his actions was made clear in the video of his police interview, released on September 27, 2019. How we remember, how we tell these stories, matters. The story arc is not only about finding answers. It is also about continuing to ask questions - questions that intersectional feminisms are built on about what diversity means, and about gender and power, and about how safe Canada is and for whom. It is precisely the conception of misogyny as rare that I am arguing against. Following Manne, misogyny can exist without individual misogynists, and without hatred of women.212 Misogyny exists to uphold the norms and expectations of white heteropatriarchy. Misogyny is not rare and it is not only a

209 National Post, "Consensus Comes 30 Years Later that Montréal Massacre was an Anti-Feminist Attack," National Post, December 6, 2019, Canadian Newsstream, http://tinyurl.com/r4vl64y.


211 CBC, “Investigating Van Attack Suspect Alek Minassian’s Past.”

212 Manne, Down Girl, 73-76.
feature of internet subcultures, although some forms may proliferate there. What work is done through minoritizing misogyny and individual events of gendered violence rather than universalizing the conversation around white heteropatriarchal power? The individual story, while illuminating in some respects, does not stand alone. It is part of larger patterns and broader issues that are underwritten by the power of the gendered, heteronormative structure of white patriarchy in contemporary Canadian society. At the time of writing the final parts of this thesis, the news was inundated with the story of another mass killing perpetrated by a white man in Canada.\footnote{Toronto Star, “‘Heartbreak on Heartbreak’: The Tragedy of the Nova Scotia Mass Shooting,” \textit{The Toronto Star}, April 20, 2020, Canadian Newsstream, \url{http://tinyurl.com/y9rmyll}.} The latest tragedy is the largest mass shooting in Canadian history, and it took place across several communities in Nova Scotia beginning April 18 and ending on April 19 with the perpetrator being fatally shot by police. The ways the media discussed the perpetrator offered a glimpse of empathy in action. In a piece written for \textit{Now Toronto}, Mi’kmaq lawyer, professor, and activist Pam Palmater pointed to mainstream media’s need to “paint white men who do horrific things as nice people who suddenly snapped.” This is in reference to early news headlines which described the Nova Scotia shooter as a denturist with a “passion for policing.” That depiction of this white man, as Palmater stated, is in contrast to descriptions of racialized people by their perceived faults, even when they are the victims rather than the perpetrator.\footnote{Pamela Palmater, “Nova Scotia Mass Shooting Lays Bare Media's White Male Bias,” \textit{Now Toronto}, April 21, 2020, \url{https://nowtoronto.com/news/nova-scotia-mass-shooting-media-rcmp/}.} The Nova Scotia mass killing is beyond the scope of this project, but the basic story is sadly relevant to broader conversations about gendered violence and racism in Canada. How the media coverage and public conversation about the latest mass killing evolves remains to be seen, but
the initial conversation reinforces the importance of continuing to ask questions about that include gender and race in their framing.\textsuperscript{215}

Chapter 5: The Toronto Van Attack on Twitter

On Twitter

Twitter has its own conventions and norms which are structured by the affordances and design of the platform itself, and which distinguish it from the longer, narrative form of a newspaper story. This structure includes short messages (tweets) of up to 280 characters posted by users, as well as the ability to follow the updates and posts of other users. For Twitter’s purposes, a user may be an individual, a media outlet, a governmental or non-governmental organization, or even a bot (an application that completes an automated task, which can include sending out computer-generated tweets or retweets according to programmed criteria). When a newsworthy event occurs, there will be Twitter users tweeting about it.216 In addition, many people use Twitter as a news source.217 According to a 2012 study done by Hermida et al, “social networks are becoming a significant source of news for Canadians.”218

Due to the time restrictions imposed by Twitter on unpaid access to current and historical tweets, as discussed in Chapter Three, I elected to capture tweets from two time periods. The first was December 5 and 6, 2019 (the day before and the day of the 30-year anniversary of the Montréal Massacre). It was my initial hypothesis that the anniversary of the Montréal Massacre, as a historic instance of gendered mass killing in Canada, would offer a window of opportunity

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to access tweets that also referred to the Toronto Van Attack. The second time period was April 23 and 24, 2020 (the 2-year anniversary of the Toronto Van attack and the day after). I used the search criteria “Toronto Van Attack” and the hashtag “#TorontoVanAttack.” In each instance, the hashtag search produced very few results in comparison with using the search term without the hashtag. The captures on December 5 and 6, 2019 resulted in 653 tweets for the search terms and only 24 tweets for the hashtag. The captures on April 23 and 24, 2020 resulted in 875 and 1451 tweets for the search terms respectively, and only 7 tweets for the hashtag. Each capture revealed that the tweets that were attached to the hashtag contained predominantly tweets that did not fit with my selection criteria, either because the Twitter handle could not be obviously linked to people, agencies, or organizations that fit within my framework, and/or because the content of the tweets seemed to be deliberately provocative, suggesting that they may have been examples of trolling.

There was only a small number of tweets attached to the hashtags, which suggests that the topic/event did not have wide enough circulation to create a significant hashtag conversation. The timing of the searches is also a factor which reflects the temporality of hashtags, with real-time events in the present affording the ability to observe the unfolding conversation rather than a retrospectively-oriented search such as the mine which related to a past event or the anniversary of such an event (which also occur in real time, but as a commemorative event).

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219 For the purposes of this discussion, I use Emma Jane’s definition of trolling as “the posting of deliberately inflammatory or off-topic material with the aim of provoking responses and emotional reactions in targets.” Jane, Misogyny Online, 6-7. Note that while some platforms feature trolling as a communicative norm (i.e. 4Chan), those platforms are outside the scope of this project.

addition, hashtags that are created in response to a specific issue or movement, such as hashtag “#BlackLivesMatter” or hashtag “#MeToo,” tend to be employed/deployed across multiple events and at many different times. Movement-based hashtagging, therefore, is not my primary focus. I chose to focus on mentions of the Toronto Van Attack within a tweet rather than in a hashtag because the tweets about the Toronto Van Attack were commemorative/memorial in nature rather than being issue/movement oriented.

In terms of the searches which did not include the hashtag, it was immediately apparent that a significant number of the tweets were in fact retweets, with no comment added. This is quantitatively interesting if the volume of tweets is of primary consideration, but offers no unique content to analyze in terms of the content of the tweets. In addition, the captures from April 23 and April 24 had significant repetition, with the larger number of original tweets on April 23 (as opposed to a predominance of retweets on April 24). For this reason, I elected to focus on the tweets captured on April 23.

In this instance, there were methodological considerations regarding which data to include. I began with the general assumption that people tweeting about the Toronto Van Attack had at least some desire to participate in the public conversation about the event. That being the case, I chose to focus on Twitter handles that were connected to journalists, news outlets, community agencies, academics, and writers. This is because these folks are public figures, to varying degrees, by virtue of their occupations, and analyzing their tweets is ethically within the public domain. Twitter handles that were not connected to public figures cannot be assumed to be in the public domain for the purposes of research, according to my ethical framework set out

\[\text{221 For further discussion of the temporality of hashtags and their conception as creating “momentary connectedness”, see Chamil Rathnayake and Daniel D. Suthers, ”Twitter Issue Response Hashtags as Affordances for Momentary Connectedness,” SocialMedia + Society 4, no. 3 (2018): 1-14, doi:10.1177/205630511878478.}\]
in Chapter Three. That is to say, I cannot assume that non-public figures would necessarily view their tweets as in the public domain, and therefore consent is not implicit.

The data cleaning process involved removing tweets by individuals who did not identify themselves within one of the categories listed above, or who were not verifiably linked to an organization’s Twitter presence. Retweets were also removed, and I created a separate table which contained only the text of the tweets that would be analyzed. It is likely that at least some of these retweets were bots, which falls outside the scope of this project but which would be a fruitful avenue of research for a project interested specifically in bots as automated social actors/content producers.222

Once I had cleaned that data and created the tweet tables, I used a two-step process to analyze the content of the tweets. My selection criteria included specific dates, original tweets (rather than retweets), and tweets by public figures only, which produced a small sample for analysis, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter. In total, there were 34 tweets from December 2019, and the tweets were dated November 27 through December 6, 2019; and there were 60 tweets from April 2020, dated April 19 through April 23, 2020 (the date range reflects the search results as of the search date, and includes tweets spanning several days in accordance with Twitter’s accessibility functions). Although the data cleaning process involved reviewing the captured data, the focus was on the Twitter handles and biographical information attached to those Twitter handles rather than reading the tweet text itself.

222 In this thesis, I am using the word “bot” to refer to automated or semi-automated computer programs that interact with users or content on social media platforms. Bots can perform many functions, including but not limited to producing spam or disseminating news and information. For a discussion of news bots, see Tatyana Lokot and Nicholas Diakopoulos, “News Bots: Automating News and Information Dissemination on Twitter,” Digital Journalism 4, no. 6 (2016): 682-699, doi:10.1080/21670811.2015.1081822.
I then began the first step of my two-step analysis by using *Voyant Tools* as a computer-aided “first reader”, entering the tweet text into the tool to see what patterns emerged based on quantitative and visualization features. Quantitative features include things such as the number of words in the corpus (word count) and the number of times certain words appear (word frequencies and co-location). As a web-based tool which incorporates several tools within it, *Voyant Tools* allows the user to see the visualization as well as to view the text in the corpus, working with both at the same time (as opposed to switching between documents, applications or programs). I was curious to see what visualization features might literally make visible, as an introduction or overview which would guide my “human” reading of the text in step two. I approached this two-step process as a “cyborg reading practice.”

Visualization tools such as word clouds, while reductive, do offer a view that can assist with thinking about the text in different ways and is particularly useful for iterative interpretation and analysis. Assisted thinking, as I employ the term here, fits within the broader conception of distributed cognition, whereby the cognition is distributed among the writer of a text, the reader of that text, and the platform/designer, as well as the human and the machine/computer they are working with.

Using the “stop words” list to remove extraneous or irrelevant words (i.e. the, and, of, to, on, a) from the visualization provided a picture that I was able to customize according to my area of focus and the scope of the project. The stop words list is an automated feature in Voyant, but the user can edit the list manually as needed. The more frequently a word appears in the text, the larger it is in the word cloud. In the web application, hovering over a word in the word cloud will

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224 Ibid., 84.
show the word count for that word, and clicking on that word will highlight it wherever it appears in the corpus. This is a quick and simple way to see common words as well as where they appear and with which other words throughout the corpus. Looking at the word clouds generated from each tweet corpus, shown in static form in Figures 1 and 2, invites consideration of which words appear most prominently, and which words one might have expected to see that are absent.

Figure 1 Word Cloud for December 2019 tweet corpus

The five most prominent words in the first corpus of 814 words, as visually represented in the word cloud, focus on naming the event, locating the event geographically, and references to the perpetrator (by name), as well as his impending trial and the charges. That is to say, the event is a van attack (24 occurrences), the location is Toronto (21 occurrences), and the perpetrator is Alek (13 occurrences) Minassian (12 occurrences), the man (12 occurrences) who is charged with murder (17 occurrences). The word murder occurs most often alongside either trial (17 occurrences), or to list the charges (i.e. 10 counts of first-degree murder and 16 counts
of attempted murder). The sixth most prominent word is computer (14 occurrences), which is likely due to news coverage at the time regarding a delay of the trial due to technological issues that law enforcement was having in attempting to access the perpetrator’s encrypted devices.

The Montréal/École Polytechnique Massacre is referred to 3 times, which I contend is due both to the anniversary date and to the feminist journalists/writers who were making connections between the two events. The word misogyny only appears 3 times, also in the tweets of journalists/writers known by reputation as feminists, and a non-profit group for survivors of sexual violence. In a visualization like this, with the five most prominent words appearing between fourteen and twenty-four times, it is noteworthy that there are comparatively so few references to the Montréal Massacre specifically and to misogyny generally. As described by memory studies scholar Astrid Erll, people draw on different, and often multiple frameworks when they remember (and when they forget). Externalization through speech, writing, visual art, and using the Internet does the work of moving individual memory, cultural knowledge, and versions of history into shared and shifting domains. In the example of the Montréal Massacre, it appears on the feminist “commemorative agenda” which links remembrance with activism, but remains contested in broader public remembrance.

In terms of an iterative data analysis process, the data cleaning formed the initial scan of the data, with the word cloud visualizations providing a first read. The computer-aided first read

225 Sidrah Ahmad-Chan (@SidrahMay), whose Twitter bio describes her as a writer/researcher/community-based educator, PhD student @OISEUofT studying gendered violence & #Islamophobia; Dandelion Initiative (@dandelioninit), a Toronto-based non-profit organization led by survivors of sexual violence for survivors of sexual violence; and Rachel Giese (@rachelgiese), writer and editorial director of Xtra LGBTQ2 magazine, who referred to a piece written by Globe & Mail columnist and feature writer Elizabeth Renzetti (@lizrenzetti).


informed my detailed “human” reading of the tweet text in the second step, inviting questions not only about the specific content of the Twitter conversation in context, but also about the functionality of Twitter search terms in framing the results captured. In other words, what I had anticipated finding prior to viewing the visualization was words to indicate the scale of the tragedy (i.e. the number of victims), and the particular identities of the victims. I had not anticipated results that were primarily oriented to place (i.e. Toronto) even though the where is clearly important both to the story and to the volume of tweets (i.e. Canadian events vs. U.S. events).

Figure 2 Word Cloud for April 2020 tweet corpus

The five most prominent words in the second corpus of 1,435 words, as visually represented in the word cloud, also focus on naming the event and locating the event geographically, with an added focus on the context of the date. That is to say, the event is an attack (57 occurrences) using a van (55 occurrences), and the location is Toronto (54 occurrences). The context of the date is the second (25 occurrences) or 2\textsuperscript{nd} (13 occurrences)
anniversary (49 occurrences). The sixth most prominent word is virtually (16 occurrences), which reflects the current and ongoing COVID 19 pandemic and the required physical distancing measures in place across Canada, which necessitated virtual rather than in person gatherings to commemorate the attack and honour the victims on the anniversary date. The word misogyny is not present in this corpus.

While the appearance of terms naming and locating the event are connected to the search terms used (i.e., Toronto Van Attack) and are thus of limited value on their own, looking at the word clouds generated from these small corpora offers more than a picture of words about how an event is named and the place it occurred. The two visualizations also show a shift in terms of which words are present or prominent in the first corpus and absent or much less prominent in the second. Viewing these visualizations side by side, we see the prominence of the word murder and the presence, however small, of the word misogyny in the first word cloud. Both of these words are absent from the second. This difference is due in part to what else was prominent in the news more broadly on the dates the tweets were captured, with the first set related to news about the perpetrator’s impending trial and the second set related to commemoration of the tragic day and the victims. With this difference in mind, I moved beyond this computer-aided first read and into the second step, which was a detailed reading of all of the tweets in this small sample.

My focus here, as previously stated, is on Twitter as news-sharing and commentary on breaking news, which differs from approaches to the study of social media that are primarily

oriented towards identity and personal narrative. Tweets that function as news-sharing can form “tiny stories” which tell a fragment of the story, or “delayed resolution narratives” that unfold across a number of tweets in a traditional narrative style, and where the writer/Tweeter does not know how the story will end. These types of tweets can also provide a window into reactions to evolving news and events, including media response, community opinions and reactions, and a sense of shared experience of the event and participation in the affective economies around the event. I am following Sara Ahmed’s formulation of affective economies here, where “emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities … through the very intensity of their attachments.” Thinking about affective economies provides a framework for asking questions about what kinds emotions are being appealed to, and what kinds of coming together is invoked through such appeals.

Dominant Themes and Words

In the case of Twitter, frequently occurring words reflect searchability functions and the micro-blogging format in addition to sharing some elements of the narrative flow of traditional news stories. Recurring words often resemble news headlines, sometimes with links to news sites or stories, which in part reflects my selection criteria of public figures and organizations. This is also the case in terms of full tweets that are repetitions, some of which may be produced by news bots. Across the two time periods chosen to capture tweets, the Twitter conversation revolved


around themes of memory and remembrance, as well as what is forgotten or left unacknowledged in the wake of violence. The other prominent topic in the first set of tweets relates to the impeding trial of the perpetrator and possible delay due to issues with accessing his devices.\(^{232}\) The reference to the perpetrator’s devices is particularly salient due to the fact that his computer skills and his self-professed link to incels in his Facebook post have been crucial elements in this story from the beginning.

In the first time period, which by virtue of the date included explicit references to the Montréal Massacre, the tweet quoted below by Toronto Star columnist Heather Mallick connected the Montréal Massacre and the Toronto Van Attack:

> These young female students were shot to death in Montréal 30 years ago by a man who hated women. It was the worst day in Canada's history. Last year, we had another mass killing, a van attack in Toronto by another man who hated women.\(^{233}\)

While Mallick does not use the word misogyny specifically, she is clear about the gendered nature of these mass killings, which is unsurprising given that Mallick was the winner of the 2015 Landsberg Award, which “recognizes exceptional research, analysis and presentation through a gender lens in print, broadcast or online news.”\(^{234}\) In a similar vein, writer, researcher, and community-based activist Sidrah Ahmad-Chan tweeted:

> I wonder why the Toronto van attack isn't being spoken about more in connection with the Montreal [sic] Massacre, or commemorated in the same way. The perpetrator of the van


\(^{233}\) Heather Mallick (@HeatherMallick), “These young women were shot to death in Montréal 30 years ago by a man who hated women. Last year, we had another mass killing, a van attack in Toronto by another man who hated women,” December 5, 2019, 13:55:26.

\(^{234}\) For further information regarding the Landsberg Award, see [http://cjf-fjc.ca/awards/landsberg-award](http://cjf-fjc.ca/awards/landsberg-award).
attack was also motivated by misogyny to commit mass murder. This fact has been erased for some reason.\textsuperscript{235}

These two tweets, by Mallick and Ahmad-Chan respectively, are explicitly feminist interventions which insist on the gendered nature of these mass killings. A later tweet by Financial Post reporter James McLeod also contributes to the conversation about misogyny:

If the École Polytechnique massacre happened today, it’d be horrifying, but would it be remembered for 30 years? Or would it fade from memory, like the Toronto van attack? I am struck by the fact that there still seems to be so much misogynistic violence in our world today.\textsuperscript{236}

Two tweets by the Dandelion Initiative, a Toronto-based non-profit organization led by survivors of sexual violence for survivors of sexual violence, are also particularly salient. The first tweet names misogyny, and reads “it looks like the largely unacknowledged misogyny which fueled the Toronto van attack.”\textsuperscript{237} The second tweet reflects the ongoing work and advocacy of the Dandelion Initiative as well as bringing attention to another prominent subject in the Twitter conversation at the time, the foundation established by the family of one Anne Marie D’Amico:

Today and every day we honor those taken from us by femicide. Please check out The Turtle Project (@damicofdn), an organization committed to continuing the legacy of Anne

\textsuperscript{235} Sidrah Ahmad-Chan (@SidrahMay), “I wonder why the Toronto van attack isn’t being spoken about more in connection with the Montreal Massacre, or commemorated in the same way. The perpetrator of the van attack was also motivated by misogyny to commit mass murder. This fact has been erased for some reason,” December 4, 2019, 14:22:58.

\textsuperscript{236} James McLeod (@jamespmcleod), “If the École Polytechnique massacre happened today, it’d be horrifying, but would it be remembered for 30 years? Or would it fade from memory, like the Toronto van attack? I am struck by the fact that there still seems to be so much misogynistic violence in our world today,” December 6, 2019, 04:24:34.

\textsuperscript{237} Dandelion Initiative (@dandelioninit), “It looks like the largely unacknowledged misogyny which fueled the Toronto van attack,” December 4, 2019, 13:36:01.
Marie D’Amico, one of the victims of the 2018 Toronto van attack.238

This tweet speaks not only to the specific foundation and fundraiser for a women’s shelter in North York, but emphasizes the importance of remembering victims, and also invokes community resilience and the focus on finding/creating something positive in the wake of tragedy. Several other tweets about the fundraiser offer no additional commentary, but simply repeat the National Post tweet, “Toronto van attack victim's family hosts fundraiser with goal to raise $1M for women's shelter.”239 One notable exception is a tweet from CBC which reads, “family of van attack victim turns tragedy into 'positive story' through women's shelter.”240 Like the tweet from the Dandelion Initiative, the tweets referenced here from the National Post and CBC also invoke community resilience, and the narrative of turning a tragedy into something positive. The focus on positivity functions to highlight the “feel-good” elements of the story. In other words, the emphasis on remembrance and healing as a community reinforces the narrative of a positive and admirable response to tragedy, appealing to Canadian values of unity in coming together and strength in rising above, as exemplified by this tweet from the Canadian Press Ontario: “‘We will not be broken,' Toronto mayor says on deadly van attack anniversary.”241 The “we” is implicitly understood to mean Torontonians and Canadians, but that descriptor flattens the multi-faceted identities and community connections between and among those who live in

238 Dandelion Initiative (@dandelioninit), “Today and every day we honor those taken from us by femicide. Please check out The Turtle Project (@damicofdn), an organization committed to continuing the legacy of Anne Marie D’Amico, one of the victims of the 2018 Toronto van attack,” December 4, 2019, 13:36:41

239 National Post (@nationalpost), “Toronto van attack victim’s family hosts fundraiser with goal to raise $1M for women’s shelter,” December 2, 2019, 18:31:56.

240 CBC (@CBCToronto), “family of van attack victim turns tragedy into 'positive story' through women's shelter,” November 27, 2019, 04:07:16.

241 The Canadian Press Ontario (@CdnPressOntario), “‘We will not be broken,' Toronto Mayor says on deadly van attack anniversary,” April 23, 2020, 07:10:02.
Toronto and in Canada, some of whom may not think of themselves as Torontonians or Canadians.

The second selected time period, which was the two-year anniversary of the mass killing, focused predominantly on the anniversary and ceremonies for it, with an emphasis on community resilience, remembering victims, and healing. A tweet from The Globe and Mail exemplifies the content of many of the tweets, including a reference to remarks made by Toronto mayor John Tory and to virtual ceremonies, “‘We will not be broken’: Virtual commemorations held to mark second anniversary of Toronto van attack.”242 Once again, this echoes the invocation of resilience and community. Some tweets attached to local news outlets made specific reference to the precise location of the Toronto Van Attack (i.e., Yonge Street), and the specificity of this reference may function in part to foster community pride and a more locally focused sense of coming together as a community in a way that is less relevant to folks who do not know the area.243 The importance of coming together as a community to remember and to heal were both affected by the pandemic and its accompanying restrictions in relation to public gatherings. Aside from the impact this had on ceremonies being changed from in-person gatherings to virtual events, the trial of the perpetrator had been recently postponed (and at the time of the completion of this thesis, had still not proceeded), also due to the pandemic:

Toronto van attack families await ‘important step’ in healing as 2nd anniversary approaches. Alek Minassian’s trial was scheduled to start April 6 but was postponed due to pandemic.244

242 The Globe and Mail (@globeandmail), “‘We will not be broken’: Virtual ceremonies held to mark second anniversary of Toronto van attack,” April 23, 2020, 07:00:06.


244 CBC News Alerts (@CBCAlerts), “Toronto van attack families await ‘important step’ in healing as 2nd anniversary approaches. Alek Minassian’s trial was scheduled to start April 6 but was postponed due to pandemic,” April 22, 2020, 13:48:05.
A detailed discussion of the framing of the pandemic and Canada’s response to it is outside the scope of this project, but the public discourse around it can be broadly described as consistent with narrative of Canada responding well to crisis and tragedy.

Two current situations/events figured prominently and are important for understanding the specific context of what else was happening in Canada at the time. The first, as mentioned above, was the COVID-19 pandemic. The second was the Nova Scotia shooting. While that mass killing falls outside the scope of this analysis, it is relevant to mention because it is the most recent mass killing perpetrated by a man in Canada. Referring to all three mass killings mentioned in this thesis, News 1130 reporter and producer Sonia Aslam tweeted:

> With a death toll of *more* than 10 people, this appears to be the worst mass shooting in Canada since École Polytechnique in Montreal in 1989. The Toronto Van attack happened on Apr. 23, 2018 and had 10 victims.  

Further information about the Nova Scotia shooting will continue to be reported on by media, but it is noteworthy that early news coverage links the three events as mass killings perpetrated in Canada, largely without explicitly stating that the perpetrator in each case was a white man – a piece of information which was known on the day each event happened.

**Discourses, Rhetoric, and Further Interpretation**

The discourses and rhetoric on Twitter offered a picture of community support and resilience; the importance of remembering victims of violence and their families; and the need for healing. There were feminist voices who insisted on including gender in the conversation, as

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245 Sonia Aslam (@SoniaSAslam), “With a death toll of *more* than 10 people, this appears to be the worst mass shooting in Canada since École Polytechnique in Montreal in 1989. The Toronto Van attack happened on Apr. 23, 2018 and had 10 victims. The latest details on this tragedy on @NEWS1130,” April 19, 2020, 14:56:21.
indicated by tweets I have referenced from feminist journalists, writers, and community advocates, but these voices were on the margins of the story. The overall focus on remembrance and healing illustrates that it is not only what was said that is important for understanding public discourse, but also what was not said. Although there were tweets which referred to fundraising for a women’s shelter in the community, which one might expect to mention why a women’s shelter is needed, the focus continued to be on the positive response to tragedy rather than addressing gendered violence and misogyny, either generally or specifically in relation to the Toronto Van Attack.

The tweets analyzed in this small sample reflect one of the uses of Twitter as a social media platform, which is as a news source and to follow current events, with the word follow defined both in the traditional sense of “keeping up with” as well as in the social media sense of “following” a person, group, hashtag, etc. In addition to circulating information and breaking news, social media can create a sense of sharing in the experience of and reaction to an event. The event is situated in the larger context of Canadian society, as well as what else was prominent in the news and on social media at the time. The primary focus of how the Toronto Van Attack was framed invoked Canadian values of resilience, coming together, and positive response/reaction in the aftermath of tragedy, placing healing, remembrance, and triumph over adversity at the centre. Misogyny and gendered violence were either at the margins, as in the first set of tweets analyzed, or absent from the frame altogether, as in the second set of tweets. In the economy of visibility that underwrites media and social media through sharing, likes, retweets, and “followers”, the feminist contribution to the conversation did not gain traction or wide circulation. This was not due to explicitly misogynist or anti-feminist content competing for visibility, but rather to the greater appeal of turning the tragedy into a positive story. That is to
say, the story was cast/recast with misogyny and gendered violence out of the frame, and resilience, community togetherness, and healing/triumph in the frame. The shift distracts from discussion of and focus on structural and systemic issues in everyday Canadian society, which in turn inhibits structural change. I am not suggesting that the parts of the story which paint Canadians, and Toronto, in a positive light should be erased, but a fundraising event, one minute of silence, and a commemorative ceremony form an incomplete picture and are not sufficient to create change.

The focus on resilience and healing does not necessarily require use of either word explicitly, but rather invokes and reflects the valued and value-laden discourse of overcoming tragedy, or what Beth DeVolder refers to as the “imperative to overcome,” or “compulsory heroism.” DeVolder discusses compulsory heroism within a disability studies framework through her analysis of British Columbia’s “Courage to Come Back Awards,” but it can be productively brought into conversation with critical literature on resilience more broadly. As pointed out by Ben Anderson in his exploration of what resilience is, resilience can be described as many things, including a normative concept, an ideology, a discourse, a metaphor, a buzzword, or an idiom, to name only a few. The prevalence of resilience as a concept invites interrogation of both its appeal and its operation.

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For the purpose of this thesis, Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad’s analysis of resilience as a “regulatory ideal” through which particular kinds of subjects are called upon to perform a wide range of social, psychological, and physical labours in order to be a “resilient subject” is particularly generative.\(^{248}\) Thinking alongside Gill and Orgad, I assert that resilience is not a free, unlimited resource; that it requires significant and ongoing labour; and that it “depends on material, educational, and emotional resources that are neither free nor infinite.”\(^{249}\) The resilient subject can also be brought into conversation with Angela McRobbie’s work on the construction of individual identity and femininity in a post-feminist neoliberal context, as well as Sarah Banet-Weiser’s framing of capacity and empowerment through popular feminism (discussed in Chapter Two). In these analyses, the story, or the promise, of individual success eclipses the need for collective action and upholds the *status quo* and its structural inequalities. Looking at the media and social media response to the Toronto Van Attack specifically, the discourse of resilience is mobilized through the story of overcoming adversity, offered as inspiration and as a story of survival rather than victimhood. It is prescriptive in its insistence that “we will not be broken,” as though we can – and must – simply choose to rise above, to move forward, to refuse to be broken. We are, as DeVolder suggests, “emotionally invested in the overcoming narrative,” which is positioned as an “antidote” to tragedy.\(^{250}\) The hashtag “#TorontoStrong, while not analyzed here, is worth noting as another example of how the overcoming adversity story is invoked — a story which presumes the desired ending, in this case, a city that was, is, and will continue to be strong. This inspirational/aspirational approach precludes both anger and demand


\(^{249}\) Ibid., 483.

\(^{250}\) DeVolder, "Overcoming the Overcoming Story", 749.
for change that seeks to address the causes of societal problems like gendered violence. In other words, anger and sadness are displaced by the narrative of coming together and healing. Coming together and healing are therefore non-performative, describing a positive outcome without challenging the structural problems at the root of why we need to come together and heal.

The injunction to overcome tragedy, to be resilient as an individual or as a community, positions resilience as an achievement that is attainable through our own agency, while paradoxically foreclosing any option that does not fit within the narrative of overcoming. In other words, the resilient subject is asked to overcome tragedy or trauma without criticizing systemic barriers which unequally distribute the resources needed to be resilient and to effect change. The way we communicate about tragedy, in the present and as remembrance, is increasingly structured through hybrid media and what Dumitrica and Bakardjieva refer to as “technologically enabled personalization of engagement.”

Digital network memory, as conceptualized by Andrew Hoskins, is “forged through a momentum of changing times [and] the relationship between the now and the most recently connected moment.” Thinking of the now and the most recently connected moment as a significant feature of navigating breaking news and remembrance across media and social networks, my experience of the Toronto Van Attack at the time and as it was mediated over time was embedded in what I described earlier as cyborg reading practices across platforms, devices, news media, and social media.


I know that what my partner and I were looking for, as the media and public conversations around the Toronto Van Attack evolved, was not an invocation of resilience and the implicit return to “normal” everyday life. We were looking for a broader public conversation about the everyday experiences of misogyny that underwrite the norms of our patriarchal system. We were looking for other feminist voices in order to hear what connections they were making and what questions they were asking – about violence against women, about misogyny, and about whiteness and patriarchy in Canada. We were looking for ways to share in the experience, not in a prurient way, but in a way that would help us frame our understanding of it. We were looking for an “us,” not in a unitary or homogenous sense, but rather an “us” in the sense of not being alone in trying to understand and in wanting change. We were looking for a way to stay with what philosopher Amia Srinivasan has called the “aptness of anger” in order to refuse the erasure of misogyny and heteropatriarchy from the story of the Toronto Van Attack.\textsuperscript{253} The intervention of naming the Toronto Van Attack as an act of misogynist violence, in the present and for the future, is an important contribution to future scholarship and activism around gendered and racialized violence in Canada.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

I began this thesis with an anecdote about where I was, and with whom, when I heard the news about the Toronto Van Attack on April 23, 2018. I have re-centered misogyny as a focal point for my analysis of the everyday language used to describe, discuss, justify, and frame this event in mainstream news media and on Twitter. My approach began with the premise that “misogyny is as misogyny does.” Misogyny, therefore, is a structural and socio-political feature of heteropatriarchy, rooted in entrenched prejudice against women and entrenched ideas about gendered norms and expectations for women’s behaviour. The definition need not include hatred of women, either universally or generally, and the ways that misogyny is experienced vary depending upon other facets of identity such as race, class, and sexuality.

I approached the Toronto Van Attack as a case study in order to analyze the event as an instance of misogynist violence, using an intersectional feminist lens and an interdisciplinary approach guided by an awareness of our increasingly connected and networked lives. My analysis is informed by a conception of media which positions legacy print media outlets on one end of the media spectrum, linked across the technological spectrum both to their own online versions as well as newer “born-digital” media and social media. The research questions, methodologies, and analysis were informed by my positionality as a white, cisgender lesbian settler living and working in Kelowna, which occupies the unceded and ancestral territory of Syilx Okanagan peoples.

I undertook this analysis with neither optimism nor fatalism as my guiding impulse, but rather with the notion of hope for a better future, and accountability in building that future. Where much research has focused on online misogyny in the United States, or gender-based
violence in the United States, my research has been specifically interested in approaching both the online and offline aspects of misogyny and gender-based violence as they take shape in a Canadian context. It is my contention that this type of analysis is vital for ensuring that misogyny remains a central focus in ongoing discussion and analysis of the heterosexism, gender inequity, and structural violence that misogyny, in its many guises, continues to uphold.

My research questions were oriented towards interrogating the dominant themes in the news coverage of, and social media response to, the Toronto Van attack; examining which words were most prominent in public discourse around this event; determining whether language use/word choice and dominant themes shifted in the week following the attack; establishing whether references were made to other well-publicized acts of mass killing perpetrated by a single individual in Canada (i.e., the Montréal Massacre); and investigation how feminist, non-feminist, and anti-feminist rhetoric interacted in framing this event. In order to answer these questions, I collected, read, and analyzed mainstream news coverage as well as a sample of tweets captured from Twitter. My analysis combined qualitative and quantitative methods, using both feminist critical discourse analysis and computer-aided textual analysis in a manner which I describe as a cyborg reading practice.

The discourses and rhetoric in mainstream news coverage offered a picture of heroes and villains; a horrible event and the community response; Canadian values and misogynist subculture. The discourses and rhetoric on Twitter offered a picture of community support and resilience; the importance of remembering victims of violence and their families; and the need for healing. The primary focus of how the Toronto Van Attack was framed invoked Canadian values of resilience, coming together, and positive response/reaction in the aftermath of tragedy,
placing healing, remembrance, and triumph over adversity at the centre of the story. Misogyny and gendered violence were either at the margins or absent from the frame altogether.

It is my contention that Canada must be named and recognized as a place where mass killings of women are perpetrated, and that we must continue to talk about the misogyny, racism, homophobia, and colonialism that continue to structure everyday life. Misogyny is neither rare nor necessarily extreme — it is ambient. This thesis asserts that media and social media content, in its interconnectedness with our social lives in offline spaces, can disrupt dominant narratives which frame Canada as a progressive post-patriarchy society. While it may be impossible, and perhaps even unnecessary, to find consensus about the definitions and current state of feminisms and misogyny, I insist that it is clear that feminist and misogynist language and discourse operate in relation to each other, often within narratives of resilience, and that this dynamic relationship is constituted and must be examined in online and offline contexts, and across the media and technological spectrum.

At the time of writing the final parts of this thesis, the news was inundated with the story of another mass killing perpetrated by a white man in Canada.254 The fact that this has happened again reinforces my claim that while the individual story of an event like the Toronto Van Attack is illuminating in some respects, it does not stand alone. It is part of larger patterns and broader issues that are underwritten by the power of the gendered, heteronormative structure of white patriarchy in contemporary Canadian society. They way these stories are told constitutes how the

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events are remembered, and remembrance informs not only our ideas about the past, but also our vision of the present and activism for a better future.

**Feminist Neologisms**

In conclusion, I suggest that while misogynist language is being studied extensively in feminist circles, the potential power of feminist neologisms is an area that requires further exploration and analysis. Questions of language use, and linguistic creativity, are fruitful avenues for further research into the potential for feminist neologisms to intervene in vernacular language. Thinking about linguistic creativity allows us to see how varied audiences and communities communicate about and around issues of gender, race, and power. Although an in-depth exploration falls outside the scope of this project, I offer a brief look at a few of these terms in order to conclude on a hopeful, albeit not optimistic, note which may provide useful direction for further research. Interrogation of how some new words “catch on” can illuminate who has the power to circulate and legitimize language used to frame the way we make meaning of our lives. Consider words like *mansplaining* (which refers to a man explaining something to a woman in a condescending or simplified manner, whether he has actual knowledge of the subject or not);255 *himpathy* (as seen in the invocation of sympathy for the suffering/injury to a man and his reputation as a result of being accused by a woman of abuse, violence, or misconduct); and *misogynoir* (a form of misogyny with specifically racialized characteristics affecting black women).256 Words like these are likely to have contested meanings, and how widely they will be

255 The term *mansplaining* was coined after the online circulation of an essay by Rebecca Solnit which later appeared in her book, *Men Explain Things to Me* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2014).

adopted remains to be seen, but I look forward to the evolution of their potential for expanding conversation and amplifying feminist killjoy voices.
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