Bad Faith Rhetorics in Online Discourses of Race, Gender, Class, and Sexuality

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation theorizes Bad Faith Rhetorics, or, rhetorical gestures that work to derail, block, or otherwise stymy knowledge-building efforts. This work explores the ways that interventions against existing social hierarchies (i.e., feminist and antiracist interventions) build knowledge (that is, are epistemologically active), and the ways that bad faith rhetorics derail such interventions. This dissertation demonstrates how bad faith rhetorics function to defend the status quo, with its social stratification by race, gender, class, and other intersectional axes of identity. Bad faith argumentative maneuvers are abundant in online environments. Consequently, this dissertation offers two case studies of the comment sections of two TED Talks: Mellody Hobson's "Color Blind or Color Brave?" and Juno Mac's "The Laws that Sex Workers Really Want." The central analyses deploy online ethnographic field methods and close reading to characterize bad faith rhetorical responses and to identify 1.) trends in such responses, 2.) the net effects on other conversational participants, and 3.) bad faith rhetoric mitigation strategies. This work engages Sartre's work on Bad Faith, rhetoric scholarship on the knowledge-building affordances of argument, public sphere theory, critical race studies, and feminist scholarship. This dissertation's theorization and case studies illustrate the pitfalls of specific counterproductive argumentative tactics that block progress toward more equitable ways of being (bad faith rhetorics), and makes several preliminary recommendations for mitigating such moves.

DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation to Jack Babicke, my wonderful, brilliant husband. Your unwavering faith in me, your patience, and your incisive observations were a critical ingredient in the process of cooking up this document. I will always be grateful for your support, and truly could not have done this without you.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: BAD FAITH RHETORICS IN ONLINE DISCOURSES OF RACE, GENDER, AND CLASS

A host of rhetorical scholars take up the urgent issue of (counter)productive public debate, the issues on which interlocutors are sharply divided along ideological lines. Interlocutors such as politicians, participants in social media, and television personalities commonly demonstrate an unwillingness to debate the most contested issues—including gun control, women's reproductive rights, and refugee rights—without devolving into sloppy logics, finger-pointing, and manipulative redirection tactics. This is a longstanding issue, and one which countless rhetoricians have willingly grappled. To give two particularly incisive examples: Patricia Roberts-Miller's concept of "stasis shifting" describes the ways in which speakers can 'move the goalposts' of a conversation to stymy opponents' arguments and Craig Rood's recent work on "rhetorical closure" briskly explains the ways that interlocutors may block argument by disqualifying the ideas (and characters) of people with whom they disagree. Rhetorical studies recognize argument-impeding rhetorical tactics such as these as 1.) particularly urgent, and 2.) complicated enough to warrant continued study and extended problem-solving efforts.

I take up efforts to name and troubleshoot counterproductive argumentative strategies by closely examining them in one of our contemporary, networked 'public squares': online comment sections. I complement preceding efforts such as Roberts-Millers' and Roods' by naming a *larger category* of counterproductive rhetorical strategies, one into which concepts such as rhetorical closure and stasis-shifting may be 'nested.' I argue that the creation of a catch-all term for argument-impeding gestures creates efficiencies for those working to mitigate these gestures' harm. Furthermore, the

case studies I offer (see chapters 4 and 5) provide a heuristic for further study of counterproductive public argument tactics in digital contexts.[1]

I offer the concept of *Bad Faith Rhetorics*, or, the related cluster of rhetorical gestures that responds to a single claim or whole argument with responses that derail, block, or generally stymy the knowledge-building efforts of an initiating rhetor. Bad Faith Rhetorics (BFR), I argue, are neither new nor exceptions—they are conversational moves that have always appeared as ways to 'shut down' or block rhetorical interventions that disrupt existing social hierarchies and cultural norms. BFR defines and characterizes a group of discursive actions that have been theorized piecemeal (see above concepts, with additional examples noted in Chapter 2), but also begs attention as a broader phenomenon.

BFR and the Assumptions of Democratic Public Debate

Bad Faith Rhetorics (BFR), rhetorical gestures with which speakers derail, block, or otherwise discourage progress on an ongoing discussion, are eminently public phenomena that converge around social frictions. These discursive moves are particularly common in discussions of hotly-contested issues, including those of race, gender, ability, sexuality, age, and other culturally-laden concepts. BFR tends to proliferate around debates on the 'proper' or 'correct' meaning of these axes of embodied being, particularly the ways that the meaning (and value) of these axes impact both formal policy and unofficial social practice.

As a type of rhetoric that converges around questions of identity and policy, BFR is a phenomenon that has relevance for fields beyond rhetoric studies, including political science, justice studies, and philosophy. One of the most conspicuous connections

[1] As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson usefully note, rhetorical criticism "must be tested heuristically, in application"(24). This dissertation takes this observation seriously, by not only theorizing a macro-level category (BFR), but also offering a heuristic for its study in context(s).

between BFR and longstanding, cross-disciplinary topics of inquiry lies in BFR's connection to premises of democratic debate. Western democracies have a longstanding love affair with the ideals of the Roman Republic, fixated upon the idea of members of the polity gathering and debating matters of public concern as a means to build policy and discover truth. As practices that impede such knowledge-making or consensus-building, BFR is inextricably bound to the ideals of democratic debate.

Theorizations of democratic public debate, from utopian constructions to critiques, bear consideration. These frameworks, regardless of their legitimacy, continue to animate current discursive practice. To give a particularly well-known example, Jürgen Habermas' landmark work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* narrates how publics materialize and operate, through Habermas' rendering of a bourgeoise, European public's development. His account of the ways that members of a public may gather and use rational-critical debate to discuss issues of mutual concern concretizes the public practices central to the dream of democracy.

The reality of public discourse is, of course, not so neat as these imaginings. Practical impediments—including limited access to public fora, and the elusiveness of conditions which enable the *equitable* practice of rational-critical debate—create barriers between members of a community and the prospect of robust and fair discourse (Fraser; Mansbridge; Squires). Nonetheless, people across a wide variety of cultures, even those living under the power of oppressive regimes, gather in the modern—often digital—versions of public squares to debate shared issues of policy, identity, and value.

In sum, the elusive nature of a fully-realized Habermasian public has not stopped rhetors from pursuing consensus through discourse. Myriad social environments show people's ongoing faith in the potential to 'chase down' truth by debating the particulars of a situation or idea with others. The massive popularity of platforms such as Reddit,

Wikipedia, and Stack Exchange demonstrate their users' investment—and at least a modicum of faith—in the potential to socially determine the truth of a given matter. Online public participants' engagements are premised upon the idea that their contributions are meaningful, and that their actions yield some kind of product—of which there are many types, from consensus-building and truth-seeking, to antagonism and deconstruction—in their online exchanges.

Online publics are incredibly robust, and the topics that draw considerable attention in these publics reflect the ebbs and flows of timely ideas that circulate in both virtual and physical environments. In other words, online publics are excellent bellwethers for current discursive trends in publics that function across virtual *and* physical settings. Questions of politics, economics, identity, and current cultural anxieties pursued in digital environs often follow trends in traditional news coverage (e.g., in *The New York Times*), and struggles to change or maintain the status quo occur along these threads. Rhetors' responses to trending topics, offered in bad faith or as part of collaborative knowledge-building, collectively constitute a chaotic microcosm of a culture's current norms and expectations, resonating along the intangible strands of zeitgeist. This richness makes online publics a promising environment in which to study BFR.

The study that follows capitalizes on the fascinating qualities of current public discourse, particularly the ways in which members of publics enact certain cultural values and reveal particular anxieties through their rhetorical behaviors. Put another way, in theorizing Bad Faith Rhetorics (BFR), I am characterizing a certain, extremely common form of counterproductive argumentation that occurs along cultural fault lines. Online public discourse, as the grounds upon which many cultural battles are waged, provides the texts necessary to understand BFR as a phenomenon. The tendency of

online public discourse to gravitate toward contested issues— and the bustling nature of online spaces—makes virtual environments particularly rich spaces in which to examine BFR. Consequently, in the material that follows, I focus upon two particular online public convergences of individuals: the comments sections for two TED Talks. I then use the discourse the participants produce to define and characterize a phenomenon that has proven itself incredibly common in these environments.

Bad Faith Rhetorics: Expanded Definition and Gap

Bad Faith Rhetorics collectively constitute the category of rhetorical gestures that impede knowledge-building interventions. BFR particularly targets interventions that work to improve upon current norms (i.e., antiracist rhetorics). These practices are hardly new. BFR can be found in the discursive details of public debate as far back as records exist—the practice of impeding progressive rhetorics has a long history and recurring, recognizable features (which I explicate in detail further on). Given BFR's long history and abundant presence, it is perhaps a bit surprising that it has not yet been theorized.

The literature does reflect the longstanding existence of argument-blocking and derailing practices, albeit in a way that privileges one or two specific rhetorical gestures, as opposed to a larger *family* of gestures. Countless scholarly efforts have productively explored several constituent pieces of BFR—for example, Roberts-Miller's astute work on proslavery rhetorics' efforts to disrupt discussion of abolition by using "cunning projection" to direct audiences' attention to the abolitionists themselves instead of the issues they broach, and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's work on color-blind racism as a means to stifle antiracist discourse—but have not conceived of an overarching category to which a constellation of related, argument-derailing rhetorical gestures belong (Roberts-Miller 221). This dissertation fills a scholarly gap by 'zooming out,' characterizing a body of

gestures that have not been identified as a constellation of related practices.

Some scholarly efforts do hint at a macro-level category of argument-blocking practices, though the literature does not provide an explicit theorization, that is, efforts to fully describe the phenomenon and develop related terminology. To give one example, Patricia Roberts-Miller's formidable work *Fanatical Schemes: Proslavery Rhetoric and the Tragedy of Consensus* parses the argument-stymying—what I would term bad faith rhetorical—efforts of proslavery parties in the antebellum South. Roberts-Miller observes that proslavery rhetorics worked to "get a strong (and, ironically enough, federal) support of slavery without a thorough discussion of its merits," and well-documents the ways in which proslavery rhetors did not actually engage in 'good faith' debate with abolitionists or even some hypothetically unaligned audience, but rather, feverishly strove to silence, redirect, and generally derail debate on slavery altogether (22). These discursive aims are a quintessential form of bad faith rhetorics: they do not engage with, and actively distract conversational participants from, the topic of debate. As a consequence, the conversational participants cannot engage in *productive*—that is, producing consensus or better-defined dissensus—argument. Roberts-Miller describes the effects of these blocking efforts well, effectively leveraging the phenomenon to animate her larger discussion, but does not name the practices or identify their related gestures. This gap replicates itself across countless other scholarly works, creating the scholarly opportunity I capitalize upon in this dissertation.

Craig Rood's incisive work converges with BFR, as his concept of rhetorical closure clearly shows the *blocking* function of BFR. He defines rhetorical closure as "communication that attempts to stop further communication," further noting that it is not always intentional, and not always visible (314). I argue that rhetorical closure and BFR via blocking are, if not interchangeable, then at least closely related, and that the

larger family of BFR gestures accommodates the gestures of rhetorical closure. In short, Rood theorizes a specific set of rhetorical behaviors, one of several rhetorical 'clusters' that I include in BFR. Again, I work to characterize a larger body of rhetorical behaviors, labors which contextualize and produce clear relations between concepts such as Rood's and Roberts-Miller's, in addition to drawing connections to concepts not previously identified as affiliates (e.g., "sea-lioning," which I discuss in the following chapter).

A handful of disciplines that do not generally study rhetorics (including business communication) make it a priority to study considerations of *manipulation* and/or *misdirection* in communication, which are peripheral to BFR. However, existing perspectives predominantly focus upon relatively specific contexts (i.e., in business negotiation and political maneuvering) rather than the larger communicative category which constitute a cluster of related, discipline-spanning practices. Moreover, these studies often privilege the ethical dimensions of such behavior, and often do not examine the practices beyond identifying them as unsavory, or at best, offering basic responses to such communicative practices; broader theorizations are functionally absent. For example, in a graduate business negotiation course at Arizona State University, students are taught to avoid doing business with parties who demonstrate manipulative behavior, a disengaging tactic that halts communication entirely, forestalling participants' potential to negotiate in spite of the behaviors (Babicke). The one prominent exception to the trend of under-theorizing manipulation comes from Jürgen Habermas' theories of communicative and strategic action, in which Habermas contrasts open, rational communication (communicative action) with asymmetrical, manipulative communication (strategic action). Habermas' theorization, which works from a public sphere theory perspective, is comprehensive and ultimately useful, but current paradigms of communication demand additional characterization of these dynamics.

The type of rhetorical behavior I examine emerges around *movements'* (i.e., LGBTQ+ rights, feminism, and civil rights) challenges to the status quo. My study expands substantially on the asymmetrical communicative conditions Habermas discusses vis-à-vis strategic action, by specifying a type of communication that arises in response to movement-based discourses of status quo contestation. I argue that theorizing BFR will generate tools that scholars (and communicators in general) can use to identify a *broader category of obstructive communication*. To put it another way, Habermas' work, existing business perspectives, and political science contributions are relevant and useful, but beg supplementation. A well-contextualized study of BFR yields previously absent perspective on the ways that derailing communicative practices arise in counterhegemonic and counter-status quo discourse—perspective which uses local examples to illustrate a wide-reaching phenomenon.

Snapshots: Exploring Examples of Bad Faith Rhetorics in a Current Public Debate

BFR appears in public discourse as responses to both 'unique' and recurring arguments. Put another way, BFR gestures are often replicated across larger discourses in addition to appearing in response to individual arguments. Too, recurring arguments, especially advocacy circulated by members of social movements[2], may be subjected to BFR that replicates itself across multiple sources. So, social movements provide some of the best opportunities to study BFR, as the people within and around a social movement respectively challenge and defend existing norms, in interactions that often reproduce a set of particular challenges or defenses. For example, the interventions of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement work to produce better understandings of the raced nature of police brutality, intervening against prevailing notions (that police violence does not

[2] Here, I use the term "social movement" to include both cohesive, highly-organized movements (e.g., the Civil Rights Movement) and relatively inchoate groups (e.g., Occupy Wall Street) that, despite a lack of formal organizational structure, nonetheless work toward some kind of definable goal.

occur at disproportionately high rates against black Americans, and that it is always 'justified'). These interventions occur across a constellation of closely related arguments, which may be both assessed as individual arguments and part of larger discourses (Black Lives Matter's overall conversation and ongoing discourses of race in the U.S.). Likewise, bad faith rhetorical responses to these arguments can be viewed as both individual instances and parts of a larger cluster of, often closely related, responses (including the "all lives matter" response, which dilutes the focus of BLM's arguments in a way that impedes their specific interventions). In sum, bad faith rhetors appear both as responses that occur at the individual level and as responses that are part of trends that are replicated across multiple 'nodes' of a conversation. The latter tendency makes identifying BFR's characteristics much more feasible, as the phenomenon reveals itself as part of more generic trends. These dynamics make movements and related advocacy initiatives (such as the reproductive rights initiatives of feminists) promising rhetorical environments in which to study a related group of responses such as BFR.

As a means to more clearly introduce the phenomenon of BFR, below I briefly explicate one of the ways in which Bad Faith Rhetorics feature in a current topic of public contestation: the body positivity movement. This movement and its surrounding conversations are especially rich areas to investigate, given the recent rise of body positivity into the public consciousness and the controversy which it continues to generate. Following, I identify some common BFR responses that appear in the public discussions of the body positivity movement's work.

In order to understand what constitutes "derailing" or "blocking" BFR responses, it is necessary to first focus on the content and aims of an original argument. In the case of the body positivity movement, advocates argue for the importance of accepting one's own body as-is, with its markers and physical affordances of age, ability, weight, shape,

and so on. Body positive arguments often emphasize that it is one's love for their own body that is most important, and these interventions work to reinforce ideas of beauty and self-care that often conflict with prevailing cultural notions (e.g., "skinny" as the ideal body type, to be achieved at any cost). Connie Sobzcak, founder of *thebodypositive.org,* articulates the movement's main goals: to get people "to examine the messages [they]'ve received —and continue to receive — throughout [their] life about health, weight, food, and exercise," not only "by the media and medical professionals, but also by [their] family, friends, and culture," and to practice critical awareness of which messages "work for [the individual]" (Sobczak, qtd. in Schreiber and Hausenblas). Most of all, the movement encourages people to disengage from hegemonic and toxic notions of "health" that include constant surveillance, paranoia, and self-punishing, to the detriment of their own self-acceptance.[3]

The body positive movement has garnered both support and criticism in the public sphere, the latter of which includes some BFR. A large number of clothing and beauty companies (i.e., Dove and the undergarment brand Aerie) have responded positively, albeit with transparently profit-chasing motives, by increasingly including models with diverse body types, abledness, and skin tone in their advertisements. Critics of the body positivity movement have made interventions of varying legitimacy, from the valid critique that sometimes being "body positive" can become monolithic (suggesting a single approach for people of diverse needs and desires[4]) to the bad faith gesture of "concern trolling" (implicitly criticizing someone's large body by expressing "concern"

[3] Several feminist scholars have productively explored the phenomenon of "health" discourses as fostering bodily surveillance and disciplining. One particularly articulate discussion can be found in Margaret Carlisle Duncan and Lori A. Klos' "Paradoxes of the Flesh: Emotion and Contradiction in Fitness/ Beauty Magazine Discourse."

[4] See Kelly DeVos' "The Problem with Body Positivity."

for that person's health). Concern trolling[5] is a type of BFR in that, instead of making a substantive critique about the movement—or addressing any of its arguments head-on—it instead directs attention to a body-positive individual, and (apparently passive-aggressively) indicates that they should be concerned about the health issues that supposedly attend their appearance.

To understand the differences between BFR and responses that simply disagree, consider the argumentative work of the body positive movement relative to the substantiveness of the responses. The body positive movement engages in cultural intervention, asking people to question received wisdom, offering new perspectives and heuristics with which to interrogate prevailing notions of what constitutes a "good" or "beautiful" body. These interventions build new ways of knowing, about bodies, the meaning of self-acceptance, and what cultural policing of bodies is. Responses that "shut down" this discussion participate in BFR when they impede discussion without offering some well-substantiated disagreement, productive questions, or moves toward consensus. Concern trolling fits this bill because it derails conversations about self-love, self-care, and conversations about problematic aspects of our culture's fixation with 'health' with (often transparently disingenuous) expressions of concern about heart disease, diabetes, and so on. These responses block the discursive work of the body positive movement by neglecting to connect their responses with the ongoing critique of cultural norms surrounding beauty and health, or, the actual arguments of the movement. Instead, the concern troll imposes the same bodily surveillance that the movement works to resist upon the individual who is the target of the 'concerned' party's

[5] This term is endemic to the body positive movement, a way to name the (unfortunately extremely common) practice of "trolls" emphasizing the "unhealthiness" of a person's body in order to disrupt that person's interventions against the problematic norms that deny the lovability, beauty, and competence of large bodies.

assessment. This undermines the intellectual, emotional, and embodied agency of the person attempting to foster body positive values or enact body positive practices, and disrupts the body positivity movement's efforts to build better understandings of bodily self-acceptance.

It is worth considering, too, that disagreeing with the movement can still be productive, and avoid BFR, by actually explaining the nature of a disagreement, and contextualizing it well vis-à-vis a body positive premise. In her *New York Times* article, Kelly DeVos offers an excellent example of thoughtful, non-BFR disagreement with the body positive movement. In a clearly-articulated narration, she explains how the body positivity movement can create pressures (especially for young people) to hide their desires to lose weight or increase athletic activity, which actually runs counter to the movement's goals of improving people's agency over their own bodies, especially by resisting external pressures.

BFR gestures are disruptions—in the context of body positive arguments, frequently via concern trolling—of the knowledge-building efforts make by an original argument. Concern trolling is, essentially, a way of 'talking over' body positive arguments, which impedes progress along the lines the original rhetor intended (i.e., creating more robust, critical understandings of what dominant social narratives demand of bodies, and fostering means of resisting such messages). By refusing to directly address key points such as the harmfulness of dominant perceptions of health and beauty, bad faith rhetorical responses such as concern trolling derail an original intervention, insisting instead upon alternate topics of the BFR practitioner's choosing (i.e., an "obesity epidemic" or an individual's impending doom via diabetes or high cholesterol). BFR, as it appears in this case as well as in other contexts, ultimately constitutes rhetorical actions that draw attention away from a cultural intervention

(here, against harmful beauty standards), via derailing, distracting, or other argument-impeding discursive actions.

Chapter Overview

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters. In the first chapter, I theorize BFR in the context of adjacent scholarship, including public sphere theory, Sartre's concept of bad faith, epistemology and its connections to critical theories of race, feminist theory, and digital rhetorics. First, I introduce BFR as a profoundly public phenomenon, reviewing Habermas' original concept of the public sphere and identifying the ways in which Habermas and his critics expanded upon the original theorization. Next, I discuss Habermas' theories of communicative and strategic action, explicating the ways in which these communication types bear on democratic debate—the civilized discourse defined and pursued in public sphere scholarship—and collaborative knowledge-building. I then contrast one form of Habermas' strategic action types (manipulation) with BFR, identifying the similarities and distinctions between the two types of rhetorical interaction. Subsequently, I connect BFR to stasis theory, illustrating how stasis disruption is often a key vehicle for BFR. Next, I discuss Sartre's concept of fad faith (*mauvaise foi*), identifying the ways in which bad faith *rhetorics* share characteristics with, but ultimately depart from, Sartre's ontological project. In the penultimate section, I establish the knowledge-building function of epistemological work, and identify the ways in which feminist, postcolonial, and critical race theory (CRT) have historically participated in epistemological labors. Furthermore, I discuss how BFR blocks epistemological work, and illustrate that feminist theory, postcolonial studies, and CRT have engaged in BFR-mitigating practices in order to persist in their epistemological work. Finally, I discuss how internet and communication technologies (ICTs) inflect public discourse in online spaces, particularly, how circulation, networked

relations, and modalities inform rhetorical action in digital environments.

In the following chapter, I explain the methods I use to analyze BFR in the clusters of public rhetorical interactions that collectively form this dissertation's two focus 'texts': the comments sections of two TED Talks (Juno Mac's "The Laws that Sex Workers Actually Want" and Mellody Hobson's "Color Blind or Color Brave?"). First, I review the aims of this dissertation (to define BFR and identify its discursive effects). Then, I describe my text selection criteria, emphasize the importance of focusing on rhetorical *effects* in studying BFR, and identify my methods as a rhetorical analysis that uses "online field methods."[6] After explaining my use of hybrid methods, I identify how digital rhetoric dynamics and technological affordances impact my focus texts, especially in the specific context of the TED website. Following this discussion, I narrate my data collection and descriptive coding process. Finally, I illuminate my methodological orientation, which prioritizes intersectional feminist principles, especially the understanding of subject positions as dynamic and contingent, and treatment of axes of identity as non-discrete and variously invoked from context to context (Chávez and Griffin).

The fourth chapter is the first of two analysis chapters in which I describe and explicate occurrences of BFR in the comment section of Juno Mac's TED Talk "The Laws That Sex Workers Actually Want." First, I offer an overview of the history of the TED Organization, and discuss the affordances of the websites on which TED Talks are hosted (i.e., web artifacts and user constraints). Following, I 1.) introduce Juno Mac, briefly describing her background and the aspects of her identity that may impact her audience's responses and 2.) summarize and briefly analyze main themes and key points

[6] This is a hybrid set of methods I have constructed by combining a specific version of field methods with close reading practices, a synthesis I describe in detail in the methods section.

in her Talk. Then, I describe and analyze the BFR responses that appear in the comments for the Talk, including efforts to delegitimize the speaker, her specific argument, and/or the issue she describes; responses that derail the conversation by using non sequiturs; BFR that blocks the progress of the conversation by refusing to progress beyond a point of a BFR practitioner's choosing; comments that impede discussion by demanding an excessive quantity of proof from the speaker and/or commenters who take up her points; and BFR that appears to be stasis but does not allow the conversation to progress beyond a debate of definition, fact, quality, and/or policy (what I term "pseudo-stasis"). In the final part of the chapter, I offer a short overview of some commenters' efforts to mitigate BFR, or move the line of conversation back "on task."

The fifth chapter analyzes the BFR comments that occur in response to Mellody Hobson's TED Talk "Color Blind or Color Brave?" First, I describe Hobson's background, and briefly identify elements of her appearance and identity that may impact her audience's responses. Then, I summarize her talk and parse its themes and main points. As I did in the prior chapter, I examine the BFR responses that appear in the comment section for Hobson's talk. BFR comments in this section consist of delegitimizing efforts (again, of the speaker, her argument, and/or her issue); "bunting" BFR responses that block the progress of the discussion, or move the line of argument aside via a nominally-relevant tangent; and BFR comments that impede discursive progress by deploying non-sequiturs. I conclude the chapter with a cursory description of comments that attempt to mitigate some of the bad faith rhetorical gestures in the section.

The penultimate chapter is an 'overall discussion,' in which I draw together some key divergences and shared trends between the BFR sets in the two focus texts. First, I review key definitions, effects, and types of BFR. Then, I identify and discuss the relatively unique features of the BFR responses to Mac and Hobson's talks, respectively.

Following, I analyze the shared trends between the BFR in both comment sections, including 1.) proportions of BFR types present and 2.) the main 'product' of BFR (unactionable conversational artifacts). Next, I connect the BFR in both talks' comment sections back to epistemologies, exploring the ways in which BFR produces epistemologically-stagnant discursive fragments, and illuminating the function of invitation in BFR interactions. Finally, I discuss some of the implications of BFR, especially as a means of imposing consensus and promoting a problematic "unity."

In the final chapter, I briefly indicate some opportunities for further research, and identify some of the implications of BFR. First, I revisit the idea of BFR as the disruption of pluralistic ways of knowing. Following, I identify the ways that BFR reveals points of cultural friction—as illustrated in the BFR responses to Mac and Hobson's talks—and suggest current social anxieties over a given culture's values and the enactment of these values. Next, I identify BFR mitigation as the project that will follow this dissertation, and identify a few of the precedents for BFR mitigation that exist in feminist and antiracist discourses (both in scholarly and popular spheres). I continue my discussion of the next steps by calling for more study of BFR, including specialist investigations into the roles of digital technologies and the corresponding online social norms in public BFR articulation. Finally, I identify BFR's implications in the context of democratic debate, especially in U.S. contexts. I close the dissertation with a few evocations on the role of BFR in pluralism, and the necessity of understanding BFR for the purposes of inviting others into multiple ways of knowing.

Now I begin, by establishing the precedents for and structure of BFR. The following theoretical contexts, frameworks, and historical examples reveal BFR's long lineage and common discursive environments. Ultimately, the following chapter offers

the ‘long view’ of a distinct rhetorical phenomenon that has surprisingly stable characteristics, even across contrastive rhetorical situations.

CHAPTER 2

AN EXPANSION OF BAD FAITH RHETORICS IN CONTEXT

As Bad Faith Rhetoric (BFR) occurs in discourses that challenge established cultural understandings of socially constructed phenomena such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, this type of rhetoric reveals itself as a thoroughly public phenomenon. Public identity negotiations and their broader cultural implications feature high occurrences of BFR, as certain stakeholders attempt to block discursive and social progress. Cultural practices—crafted and enforced in public—dictate normative and transgressive behaviors. Hence, the supposedly private practices relating to socioeconomic status, sexuality, and so on have profoundly public dimensions, and BFR inevitably occurs in negotiations of these practices.

In this dissertation, I focus upon two TED Talks (Mellody Hobson's "Color-Blind or Color-Brave?" and Juno Mac's "The Laws that Sex Workers Actually Want") and their comment sections. Through careful analysis, I expose and clarify the nature of BFR, as it appears in these networked publics. Before I offer these analyses, however, I argue that it is necessary to note where my theorizing 'weaves into' existing scholarly strands.

In theorizing BFR, I build upon several proximate concepts and resonant terms, but diverge from established scholarship in subtle, critical ways. This chapter simultaneously introduces BFR while clarifying its scholarly contexts. I engage with related scholarship from several areas: public sphere theory, theories of manipulative and strategic communication, Sartrean bad faith, rhetoric scholarship on epistemology and stasis,[7] critical theories of race, feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and scholarship

[7] Throughout this dissertation, I use relevant argumentation concepts, including stasis questions, logical fallacies, and the idea of an argumentative premise. Despite my mobilization of these ideas, this piece is not intended to specifically contribute to the well-developed, highly specialized rhetorical sub-field of argumentation studies. Rather, this piece merely *mobilizes* argumentation's useful vocabulary to contribute to the broader area of rhetoric.

on digital rhetorics. Ultimately, this chapter builds a theory of bad faith rhetoric in conversation with relevant scholarship. Theory never exists in a vacuum, and my chapter organization reflects this—I weave together the threads of BFR and the related literature to theorize in an organic way, one that juxtaposes contrasts and highlights shared concepts as it unfolds.

First, I explore instances of BFR in a recent public debate—the contestation over LGBTQ+ people's right to marry—to enliven readers' sense of BFR as a particularly public phenomenon. Following, I briefly synthesize key ideas from public sphere theory, then identify Jürgen Habermas' contributions of communicative and strategic action. Then, I articulate how BFR engages classical theories of stasis. Subsequently, I identify how BFR has certain affinities with Sartrean bad faith (but ultimately diverges in important ways), and how theorizations of rhetorics' epistemological properties emplace BFR's effects. Next, I overview material from critical theories of race, feminist theory, and postcolonial theory that interfaces with and informs BFR. Finally, I survey a few crucial concepts from digital rhetorics scholarship, to ground readers' sense of my case studies' (two TED Talks and their comment sections) particular conversational dynamics as digital, networked texts.

Public Contestations: Illustrating and Grounding BFR

The anti-LGBT+ participants in the pre-*Obergefell vs. Hodges* debate on same-sex marriage provide some clear examples of BFR's presence in public discourse. Opponents of LGBTQ+ marriage relied heavily on distraction tactics, i.e., derailing discussions of basic rights such as partner hospital visitation with overly dramatic, pathos-laden claims that LGBT+ marriage, supposedly "immoral" arrangements, would undermine the very fabric of society. The bad faith nature of these responses becomes clear in contrast to LGBTQ+ rights advocates' knowledge-building work in these

negotiations. The epistemological task of LGBTQ+ rights advocates was to build a holistic definition of marriage that emphasized *all* couples' rights to marry and claim the concomitant legal privileges. Many opponents responded with bad faith rhetorics, refusing to engage with specific citizens' rights aspects of the argument—for example, exploding the issue into slippery-slope claims of imminent pedophilia and bestiality—in order to broaden the argument to a level of abstraction that rendered decision-making nearly impossible. In another bad faith rhetorical dimension, anti-LGBTQ+ marriage speakers leveraged the longstanding homophobic tenet that sexual attraction to someone of the same gender should be "kept to [one]self" to claim that the conversation should not even be part of public deliberation. This silencing gesture is typical of BFR, as the most direct means to block rhetorical and social progress.

As the above example illustrates, even ostensibly private conversations take on public dimensions when they engage with culturally constructed axes of identity: public implications ever seep into the "private sphere" via the norms of a culture. Put another way, we must not fall into thinking of "public" and "private" reductively, as separable environs. This dynamic is hardly lost on public sphere scholars; for example, as Robert Asen and Daniel Brouwer note, the "sphere" metaphor accommodates a rich variety of interpretations, several of which include 'overlapping' or occasionally intersecting groups (4). Feminist public sphere scholars have also well established that any demarcations between public and private are fundamentally porous and unstable. Among others, Jane Mansbridge and Nancy Fraser illuminate the ways that public forces such as legislation and class-based, gendered cultural norms work their way into private spaces, exerting force on, for example, women's reproductive rights and civic participation. Too, public forces determine which behaviors 'ought to be' relegated to private settings—one way

that publicity[8] suffuses private matters.[9] In short, the larger fabric of a public—its state structures, legislated practices, and implicit norms—cannot be truly separated from private practices.

Landmark contributions to public sphere theory help us understand BFR, as a public sphere framework usefully organizes several mechanics of public negotiation. For example, Jürgen Habermas' extensively cited *Transformations of the Bourgeois Public Sphere* establishes trends in Western public discourse, presenting a still-useful scaffold for public discussion. Habermas' attention to the spaces of public discourse—notably, coffee shops—aids current understandings of the circulation and discussion of public texts. Too, his point about Europe's changing economic structures usefully illuminates prerequisites to robust public discourse; his point that literary society meetings and coffee shop gatherings allowed men of varying social standing to come together and exchange ideas relatively freely illustrates one possible way that diverse publics can gather "on an equal footing."

As countless observers note, Habermas' vision of "rational-critical debate" among individuals who have "bracketed" their differences nonetheless excludes more people than it includes, as people of color, women, members of the working class, and anyone generally deemed 'unfit for polite society' were denied entry to the physical spaces in which this discourse occurred. Additionally, most of the public fora Habermas discusses prevented countless people from participating in these modes of public exchange, barring various people from entry, via (among other considerations) insufficient literacy and prohibitive costs—of publications, coffee, and 'appropriate' clothing. A large slew of

[8] Here, I use "publicity" in its public sphere theory context, which simply connotes "public-ness."
[9] As Berlant and Warner memorably discuss in their piece "Sex in Public," cultural sexuality norms "block the building of nonnormative or explicit public sexual cultures" by enforcing the privatization of sexual behaviors (553).

scholars problematized Habermas' work; for example, Rita Felski and Nancy Fraser took Habermas to task for neglecting the gendered social dynamics that barred women from full participation in his vision of public discourse, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge interrogated Habermas' inattention to proletarian publics, and Catherine Squires addressed Habermas' glaring omission of race-based public dynamics by offering a model for race-based publics.

To his credit, Habermas engages robustly with his critics, using feedback to further develop his public communication models. To give one example: his 1992 chapter "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere" acknowledges important interventions such as Fraser and Felski's. As he explains, "the growing feminist literature has sensitized our awareness to the patriarchal character of the public sphere itself, a public sphere that soon transcended the confines of the reading public (of which women were a constituting part) and assumed political functions" (427). Additionally, Habermas makes note of the differing natures of gender and class-based exclusion, accounting for the varying means by which social stratification evinces itself.

Affiliate Concepts: Communicative Action, Strategic Action, and Manipulation

Habermas' ongoing work—to engage with his critics' arguments and to thicken his public discourse models to accommodate complex social inequities—has yielded considerable fruit. His later theorizations of democratic civic debate are particularly useful in BFR identification, as public knowledge-building (and knowledge-ossifying) efforts ever rely on "equal" conditions for public discourse. Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* usefully outlines the conditions for "rational-critical debate" "on an equal footing," a necessary follow-up to his previous works' inattention to the means by which speakers arrive at equity.

Of communicative action, Habermas theorizes the conditions that allow for "equitable" exchange, in order to unpack the dynamics of public debate and to suggest ideals for these discourses. As he explains, communicative action is "the type of interaction in which all participants harmonize their individual plans of action with one another and thus pursue their illocutionary aims *without reservation*" (*Theory of Communicative Action* 294). Here, he outlines a conversational situation in which the speakers are willing to agree to a mutually acceptable alignment of their discursive purposes in order to pursue their argumentative goals under conditions which actually allow for the better argument to 'win.' Michael Huspek usefully parses the three central qualities of communicative action as: symmetry among participants within the context of discourse, rational persuasion open to question and critique, and "efforts to motivate one another…with transparency as to one's own motivations, i.e., without secrecy, deceit, or deception" (827).

The conditions for communicative action are harmonious with the, generally implicit, ideals for democratic debate. These conditions bear consideration, especially as U.S. rhetors—including politicians, activists, and journalists—struggle to define fair, truthful, civilized discourse.[10] In outlining communicative action, Habermas narrates the prerequisites for perfect agreement, asking his audience to consider the preliminary steps needed to begin fair debate, which are often left uninspected.[11] A definition of BFR

[10] I allude here to the dramatic proliferation of "fake news" claims circa 2016, forwarded by speakers who work—for reasons of varying morality and factual validity—to discredit sources they contest.

[11] Several scholars problematize Habermas' theory of communicative action, arguing that the conditions he sets are unattainable or simply unproductive. For example, Danielle Allen indicates that although communicative action "if used properly and in ideal conditions, generate[s] perfect agreement," does not account for the most challenging practices for democratic citizenship practices (54). She points out that "talking to strangers," or engaging in civil debate across ideological divides, requires the establishment of trust and the acknowledgement of subject positions. Habermas' privileging of objective engagement and lack of attention to trust building, she argues, neglect the most difficult and crucial considerations in the pursuit of democratic debate. Additionally, she joins scholars such as Kendall Phillips in critiquing "perfect agreement" as ideal ends for fair public deliberation.

relies on these conditions, as participants in public knowledge building often operate under the unspoken premise that the results of rigorous and fair argument will allow "the truth to out," and will produce optimally equitable, legitimate decision-making. In sum: by naming the criteria for equitable exchange, Habermas renders the rhetorical characteristics of "good faith" argument more legible. Naming these ideals allows us to identify the presumptions rhetors make in the 'fair' pursuit of truth, which enables us to identify malformed efforts to these ends—the disruptive rhetorical gestures I name Bad Faith Rhetorics.

As is often the case in the struggle for discursive integrity, rhetors may claim to operate within communicative action while actually working to deceive their conversational counterparts. Habermas accounts for these scenarios by outlining communicative action's less savory counterpart: *strategic action*. Rhetors who use strategic action endeavor to persuade each other through the use of various disingenuous tactics and inequitable 'ground rules' (Habermas *Communication and the Evolution of Society* 118). Habermas identifies three kinds of strategic action, each with distinctive traits: *openly strategic action, manipulation, and systematically distorted communication*. In openly strategic action, speakers engage in conversation with the awareness that each interlocutor will use any available means—regardless of fairness or moral integrity—to persuade the others, toward potentially unspecified or hidden ends. In this mode of communication, "background consensus," stasis on term usage and the objective of the exchange, is minimal. In manipulation, one speaker appears to engage on the terms of communicative action while engaging in underhanded tactics. In other words, one or more speaker will create the illusion that they adhere to the rules of symmetry, rational persuasion, and transparency, while pursuing consensus through deceptive means. In systematically distorted communication, one or more interlocutors

incorrectly assume that they are operating under the conditions of communicative action, when in fact institutional factors or social norms prevent all discursive participants from negotiating from equal footing.

Defining BFR extends Habermas' work on action types by establishing a few of the ways that the 'families' of discourse he identifies may appear in contemporary disputes over identity (and cultures' perceptions and valuation of identity factors). My work to identify the means by which speakers may derail or generally stymy debates over identity and physical being-based issues—of ability, race, class, gender, and so on—furthers Habermas' work by applying a 'close cousin' of strategic action, BFR, to timely conversations. By working to situate the effects of deceptive or inequitable communication upon discourses of intersectional aspects of being, I join Habermas in the conversation on discursive action types.

Too, Habermas' work on communicative action constitutes his vision of ideal conditions for fair, democratic deliberation; I use these ideals to establish a few implicit values for public discussion. While the criteria for fair discourse are certainly subjective and unstable, the values that Habermas outlines are at least consonant with democratic ideals of rhetorical equity (also ideals explored by political science scholars such as Danielle Allen and public sphere theorists such as Nancy Fraser). These ideals shape public debate, as a kind of warrant for deliberation among strangers.[12] I parse this warrant as: "strangers may meet in a public setting to negotiate meaning and to recommend action, and these interactions may occur freely, allowing arguments to succeed or fail on their own merits." Understanding ideals such as those outlined by

[12] This phrasing invokes Michael Warner's criterion of "a relation among strangers" for a public (55). Using Warner's parameters, stranger relations distinguish a public from a gathering of friends or colleagues, which, though they may be diverse and feature robust debate, are too closed or bounded to count as 'public.'

Habermas allows me to show deviations from or failure to achieve these ideals, such as in occurrences of BFR.

Out of the three strategic action types, manipulation is the most similar to BFR, as it involves one or more speakers claiming to adhere to the guidelines for 'fair debate'—an implicit agreement, or, the warrant I discuss above—while actually engaging disingenuously. Manipulation involves hidden ends, asymmetrical conditions, and/or the use of devious argument strategies (i.e., omitting information strategically), which can enable BFR. Depending upon how we think about it, we could consider BFR practices a subset of manipulation, given that one way to conceptualize BFR is as a series of argumentative gestures that purport to add knowledge or help participants determine action, while actually blocking progress toward these ends. However, arranging BFR as one of several Habermasian manipulation practices suggests that BFR as a type of argument is relatively niche, one of many descendants of Habermasian communication types. Additionally, because BFR includes a wide variety of argumentative practices that do not always fit the mold of strategic action/manipulation, considering it a subset of strategic action/manipulation may be misleading. Alternatively, it is more accurate to consider BFR a set of practices that *relate closely* to Habermasian strategic action/manipulation, but do not 'map' precisely onto his scheme or fit easily within his taxonomy. In particular, it is important to keep in mind that strategic action and manipulation both allow rhetors to pursue *specific* argumentative outcomes, where BFR enables rhetors to produce a much more *general* outcome: impeding argumentative progress.

Another key difference between manipulation and BFR is in the manipulator and BFR practitioners' respective desired outcomes. In the case of manipulation, the manipulator's end is specific: they intend to negotiate an outcome that suits their own

needs. For example, in the case of pro-Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) arguments intended for U.S. audiences, legislators foreground 'U.S.-first' results that are conspicuously absent in Pro-TPP arguments intended for international audiences; these gestures constitute manipulative pro-legislation arguments—via the omission of key benefits to all the legislation's signatories—strategically deployed to garner support from nationalist U.S. voters (Fulton-Babicke "Brokering Trust…"). In contrast, speakers who use BFR tactics contribute to a less specific end: impeding the progress of the negotiation by disrupting speakers' attempts to establish better understandings or a plan of action. For example, in the debates over NFL players' right to peacefully protest police brutality by 'taking a knee,' opponents of this practice impeded the discussion of the players' right to protest by reducing the players' arguments to a gesture of disrespect toward U.S. veterans. By moving the conversation away from the issue players' intended to press—high police brutality rates against people of color—BFR respondents block the development of conversation on the issue by deflecting to another topic entirely. The distinction between BFR and manipulation is not sharp, and the two clearly converge in cases where the manipulator's objective is merely to disrupt rhetorical action. However, I maintain that identifying the nuances between manipulation and BFR—as, respectively, a means to generate a specific outcome and a way to block *any* rhetorical progress—helps us to understand the ways that speakers create and negotiate meaning, and how they (if at all) produce action recommendations or better ways of knowing via discourse.

Classical Connections: Communicative/Strategic Action and Stasis Theory

James Johnson points out that communicative and strategic action facilitate both rigorous understandings of stasis and its role in equitable communication. Johnson draws directly upon Habermas to observe that communicative action "involves participants in the 'cooperative negotiation of common definitions of the situation' in

which they are interacting" (184). In establishing "common definitions," speakers participating in communicative action establish the basic facts—persons, actions, and contextual details—of a rhetorical situation. Through these practices, the speakers co-construct an agreed-upon place from which an argument may proceed, or, they work to achieve stasis.

Johnson's discussion of Habermasian action types addresses the use of common signs in communication. In doing this, Johnson highlights the way that an argument's success or failure—'success' meaning the establishment of some kind of agreement or disagreement[13] from which speakers may identify further action or may contribute to better understandings of their conversation's subject(s)—rely upon the speakers' ability to agree to basic details of the topic at hand. Johnson observes that "in everyday communication practices, this process of mutual interpretation remains implicit. In more reflective forms of communicative action—what Habermas refers to as discourse or argument—it is made explicit" (184). To put it another way: speakers only need to casually or approximately reach stasis for the purposes of "everyday communication practices," while formal discourse necessitates speakers' systematic establishment of the rhetorical situation's particulars.[14] Contrastively, in strategic action, one participant may favor a perfunctory establishment of stasis, as the speakers may agree to basic details of the issue at hand, but one speaker's ends do not require the other's profound agreement

[13] My vision of "successful" rhetorical action follows Kendall Phillips in complicating our understandings of dissensus and consensus' roles in argument. Phillips points out that dissent has considerable value in rhetorical action. Drawing upon Foucault, Phillips underscores the fact that even debate that further establishes dissensus provides value to critics (by showing where fissures in knowledge/power structures exist), and to interlocutors (by providing argumentative space for the restructuring of knowledge/power) (Phillips 244).

[14] Consider, for example, the formal conventions of leadership committee meetings at a variety of institutions.

to the negotiation's particulars.[15] The importance of stasis in relatively high-stakes or formalized discourse is what compelled classic thinkers such as Aristotle, Hermogenes, and Cicero to establish a systematic yet lithe framework for the establishment of stasis in public deliberation.

Because of the importance of stasis in an argument's success—given the above parameters for success—it is crucial to understand the role stasis plays in BFR. To understand how stasis relates to BFR, we must consider the ways that agreed-upon particulars of the topic at hand allow an argument to progress: identifying the "who, what, when, where, why, and how" of a situation allows discursive partners to agree that they are, in fact, discussing the same issue. Consequently, they may provisionally agree that the conclusions they reach do, in fact, bear on their shared topic, and can in good faith work with the details thereof. Too, any conclusions speakers reach *without* having reached a reasonable degree of stasis will not hold up under interrogation; speakers often spend time hammering out the particulars in order to make sure that any progress will not be overturned in some kind of audit—whether conducted by the speakers themselves or an outside party.[16] In other words, it is only by achieving stasis that participants in an argument can progress their negotiations, in a good faith negotiation of a well-defined issue.

Bad faith rhetorical strategies often rely upon the blocking of stasis, as one or more speakers work to block the epistemological progress—or, rhetorical action—that stasis facilitates. For example, a BFR practitioner who "gaslights" their opponent rejects

[15] By this, I mean that one speaker wishes to achieve an end through some sort of manipulation, which necessarily works best when the strategic communicator does not disclose all of the relevant details or fails to explicitly highlight the most important data in the negotiation in order to manufacture consent.
[16] To imagine the latter scenario, consider a legal verdict: if the court finds that a key piece of evidence has been excluded from consideration, the court may reverse their verdict. In this case, the involved parties failed to sufficiently establish "the what" of stasis—a detail highly relevant to determining guilt or innocence—and this failure rendered the argument's conclusions void.

the evidence (a speaker's experiential data) that contributes to thorough definition of the issue at hand.[17] In other cases, a BFR user will appear to pursue stasis, but proceed to thoroughly impeded stasis by offering up progressively more numerous or tedious obstacles to rhetorical action. To give one example: by "sea lioning," asking for clarification ad nauseum in order to distract or discredit a speaker, a practitioner of BFR puts off deliberation of the meaning or implications of the situation at hand through distraction tactics that purport to produce stasis.[18]

Of course, it is important to address the functional impossibility of achieving complete stasis. Speakers strive toward stasis in attempts to minimize uncertainty—and to maximize the usefulness of their conclusions—by improving their mutual understandings of a scenario. However, as we well know, complete certainty is not achievable; the most thorough of investigations cannot determine the full measure of a situation, given the contingency of truth.[19] Stasis is, then, an imperfect weapon against an insuperable natural phenomenon, and a mitigation tool at best. Consequently, it is crucial to consider situations in which a speaker prolongs the stasis-establishing process toward more rigorous understandings of the issue, instead of in an act of rhetorical bad faith. In this case, one speaker's line of questioning might take on the appearance of BFR, while their queries are actually earnest attempts to 'nail down' difficult-to-establish factors in the conversational topic.

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[17] Discursive blocking strategies such as gaslighting are widely discussed in disciplines such as sociology and psychology, often in the context of interpersonal conflict and/or psychological abuse. "Gaslighting," a reference to the 1944 film *Gaslight*, is a social practice in which an individual repeatedly treats an interlocutor's behavior or statements as invalid; psychologists and sociologists observe that the subject of repeated gaslighting will eventually doubt their own experiences or judgment as a result.

[18] "Sea lioning," a colloquial reference to a 2014 strip in David Malki's webcomic *Wondermark*, is a conversational tactic in which a speaker pretends to pursue clarification for another speaker's statement, often by repeatedly demanding exhaustive explanations of or evidence for claims, as a means to discredit that speaker's claims and to encourage them to give up on their argument.

[19] I discuss this further in the section on epistemology, invoking scholars such as Foucault and James Gee on the ways that "truth" is ever shifting, dependent upon the thinker's subject position and value systems.

The inherent difficulty of stasis-building means that careful deliberators may invest considerable time and energy in the establishment of the facts, definition, quality, and policy; as a result, auditors may easily mistake lack of progress toward stasis for BFR, especially in complex deliberations. The difference between BFR and good faith pursuit of stasis is that BFR generally wanders so far afield of the main line of questioning that the original question is moved 'out of sight.' Contrastively, productive stasis building 'drills down' to the relevant fundamentals of the issue, contributing content that bears well on the original question. To put it another way: good faith stasis establishment efforts may require speakers to ask about value systems or warrants at hand, in which case the questions are foundational, relating to the 'building blocks' of various assumptions. This line of questioning relates closely to the topic at hand, and 'keeps tabs' on the main line of questioning or the central issue in the debate. In contrast, BFR masquerading as stasis production will move progressively further away from the main line of questioning, moving 'laterally' along a series of tangents. In doing so, the BFR practitioner moves the line of questioning so far away from the original issue that the issue is entirely neglected, or, the speaker simply 'stops dead,' refusing to move forward with the argument.

Bad faith stasis questions venture into argumentative territory from which speakers cannot 'see' or 'touch' the original issue, while productive stasis questioning keeps the original question well in hand. Ultimately, this means that stasis questioning is Janus-faced—we can determine the good or bad faith of the speaker not by the fact of stasis questions, but by the results of the questioning vis à vis the stasis questions' 'proximity' to the original issue. For example, when arguers identify fallacies in a debate, they may do so in good *or* bad faith; in one case, if a speaker declares an argument invalid simply because their conversational counterpart has deployed a fallacy, they are

acting in bad faith because they refuse to further engage after having 'disqualified' the other speaker(s). By contrast, a speaker who identifies a fallacy in good faith will attempt to ask questions that identify the origin of the fallacy, ask how the argument might be reframed to exclude the fallacy, or merely consider the parts of the argument that remain unaffected by the fallacy. Additionally and most crucially, the speaker who in good faith identifies a fallacy in the other's argument will make some kind of effort to return to the subject at hand. In this case, the argument can somewhat proceed—though likely in a fitful way—due a speaker's ongoing efforts to engage the other.

Bad faith rhetoric, as an interpersonal communication phenomenon, is recognizable by its effects—responses that create distance from the original line of questioning and impede the production of better understandings or plans of action. In a way, defining BFR necessitates the analyst's willingness to maintain a deliberate, persistent focus upon the concrete effects of a conversation, lest their project devolve into speculation about motives—a highly theoretical project more about human nature than the *rhetorical outcomes* of that nature. In other words, the conversational gestures that constitute bad faith rhetoric begin as decisions (conscious or unconscious), but become a phenomenon measurable in concrete terms, and these concrete terms are what I aim to describe here.

Conceptual Relatives of BFR: Sartre's Bad Faith

Although my project of bad faith definition focuses upon external argumentative phenomena, or 'real' rhetorical effects on the world, it is important to consider the ways in which internal processes lead or contribute to bad faith rhetorics. Of particular interest here is Sartre's theory of bad faith, *mauvaise foi*, which establishes that a kind of *self* deception is at the core of many disingenuous interpersonal communications. As part of his work on ontology, Sartre's understanding of bad faith revolves around his

claim that there is no separating "essence" and "appearance" (xlvi). He suggests that a phenomenon or person does not have "double relativity…it does not point over its shoulder to a true being which, for it, would be absolute" and that "the duality of potency and act falls by the same stroke. The act is everything." Sartre uses these premises to point out that something's nature is ever entwined with its not-nature, as being and nothingness are mutually defined.[20] In the context of bad faith, then, Sartre posits that a practitioner of bad faith must, on some level, acknowledge *both* something's being (truth) *and* its not-being (the lie).[21]

Bad faith, then, "is the object of an inner negation, but also it is not recognized by the liar as his intention […] Of course we have described the ideal lie; doubtless it happens often enough that the liar himself is more or less the victim of his lie, that he half persuades himself of it" (87). It is crucial to note that, in line with his observations on the mutuality of being and nothingness, Sartre argues that the "conscious" or "subconscious" nature of bad faith acts is immaterial (no pun intended). The translator of *Being and Nothingness* explains in an appendix that "through bad faith a person seeks to escape the responsible freedom of being-for-itself. Bad faith rests on a vacillation between transcendence and facticity which refuses to recognize either one for what it really is or to synthesize them" (628). Consequently, arguing about the "purposeful" or "conscious" nature of an act of Sartrean bad faith is irrelevant; the fact of bad faith exists regardless of intent or awareness of that intent.

[20] As he explains: "nothingness lies coiled at the heart of being—like a worm" (21) .

[21] In order to establish the dynamics of self-deception, Sartre observes that "the essence of the lies implies in fact that the liar actually is in complete possession of the truth which he is hiding. A man does not lie about which he is ignorant of; he does not lie when he spreads an error of which he himself is a dupe; he does not lie when he is mistaken," consequently, "the ideal description of the liar would be a cynical consciousness, affirming within himself, denying it in his words, and denying that negation as such (48).

One of the most important implications of Sartrean bad faith is its use for the purpose of denying something or someone's qualities of being, especially to critics:

> If I were only what I am, I could, for example, seriously consider an adverse criticism which someone makes of me, question myself scrupulously, and perhaps be compelled to recognize the truth in it. But thanks to transcendence [via bad faith], I am not subject to all that I am. I do not even have to discuss the justice of the reproach. (57)

Furthermore, Sartre observes that "non-persuasive evidence" plays a role in bad faith: "bad faith apprehends evidence but it is resigned in advance to not being fulfilled by this evidence, to not being persuaded and transformed into good faith" (68). In short: "the goal of bad faith, as we said, is to put oneself out of reach; it is an escape" (58).

There are two ways in which I utilize Sartrean bad faith for my project of bad faith rhetoric definition. First, Sartre's articulation of "non-persuasive evidence" is eminently useful in the analysis of bad faith rhetoric. Namely, the type of evidence rejection Sartre comments upon is a key component of bad faith rhetorics, as BFR gestures frequently involve the rejection of evidence as non-persuasive, or, supposedly insufficient and/or flawed. Secondly, in defining bad faith *rhetorics*, I follow Sartre's theory of bad faith in that I acknowledge the slippage—or irrelevance for the purposes of studying its effects—between conscious and unconscious deception, of oneself or others. To put it somewhat humorously, I value a kind of "Schrödinger's consciousness" in the study of bad faith: in the face of an utterly indeterminable state of (un)consciousness, we must operate under the dual assumption that the act of bad faith is at once conscious and unconscious.

Generally speaking, Sartre's ontological approach to bad faith is useful to consider in the definition of BFR; the way that people discern the world around them and 'crunch' it to create their own sense of how they are—and how they interact with the world—impacts how people negotiate meaning with others. Furthermore, the ways that

people define beings external to themselves (and in doing so define their own sense of what they are and are not) profoundly impacts the ways in which they are willing to make decisions and create meaning with others. In short, ontology fundamentally informs people's rhetorical repertoire and orientation toward others, which bears on BFR.

The above resonances notwithstanding, it is crucial not to digress into debates over the *ontological implications* of these rhetorics, at least for the purposes of defining BFR. The ontological dilemmas at the heart of Sartrean bad faith are not critical to the identification of bad faith rhetorics, as these rhetorics must be grounded in the *effects* they have on a conversation or contestation, not the state of being which leads to these effects. To put it another way: in the interest of my initial definition of BFR, it is not necessary to consider in depth the nature of rhetors' un/consciousness or being. Bad faith rhetorics exist in the world, regardless of their ontological dimensions; consequently, Sartrean bad faith is useful to the project of BFR definition, *but Sartre's emphasis on ontological considerations is not a focus for my analysis*, as this focus would constitute a digression from the identification of bad faith rhetorical effects.

It is worth noting that, although Sartre's project is largely a lengthy speculation on the inner states of being that accompany bad faith, some philosophers have successfully leveraged Sartrean bad faith to produce useful discussions focused upon bad faith's effects on external and interpersonal phenomena. In order to do so, these scholars use what we might call *applied Sartrean bad faith*—efforts that consider, in specific contexts, the implications of self-deception for social being. For example, Lewis Gordon's *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* explores the ways in which self-deception lead to racist ways of being in the world. Gordon powerfully parses "a core assumption of [Sartrean] bad faith" as

> human beings are aware, no matter how fugitive that awareness may be, of their freedom in various situations, that they are free choosers of various aspects of their situations, that they are consequently responsible for their condition on some level, that they have the power to change at least themselves through coming to grips with their situations. (5)

Gordon applies these dynamics to racism, defining it as "the self-deceiving choice to believe either that one's own race is the only race qualified to be considered human or that one's race is superior to other races" (2). Gordon presents a well-grounded discussion of the ways that antiblack racism stems from bad faith, as various forms of denial and redirection[22]; additionally, Gordon productively extends Sartre's thoughts on "non-persuasive evidence" to characterize racists' internal conviction to "resist persuasion" (75). Overall, work such as Gordon's shows the applicability of Sartrean bad faith to analysis of social phenomena, but also illustrates the rigor necessary to ground bad faith in 'real world'—as opposed to internal 'lifeworld'—phenomena.

Again, though, for the purposes of studying rhetorical effects, it is necessary to only briefly engage with ontological processes such as the qualities of consciousness that lead to bad faith. Such discussions fit well within the scope of certain philosophical inquiries, but rhetorical studies such as mine—which rely on a sharp focus on the particular details of an argument—necessitate sharply limiting speculation into the motives of the rhetor beyond what the analyst can concretely identify and integrate into discussions of context.[23] As I point out above, ontological questions of self-definition and self-deception certainly bear on BFR, but the labors of describing BFR beg a *focus on*

[22] For example, Gordon cites a case in which a racist may redirect attention from the root of a problem in order to scapegoat a black person: the racist will not "deal with [their] own lack of skills," rather choosing to believe that black people "are stealing [the racist's] job" (85).

[23] I assert the importance of assiduously avoiding speculation in analysis, regardless of how conservative or carefully-qualified it may be. As motives are famously slippery (barring direct questioning of the rhetor), I argue that a rigorously-grounded analysis—what I aim to create here—insistently draws readers' focus to argumentative effects.

conversational effects more than the internal lifeworlds of the conversational participants.

Building and Blocking Knowledge Production: Connections to Epistemology

Ontology is ever haunted by its cousin, epistemology, and the project of defining BFR is no exception. To thoroughly examine BFR, we must unpack the ways that knowledge is built, as BFR essentially blocks epistemological processes. Furthermore, we must attend to epistemology's inextricable ties to rhetoric, as the creation of knowledge is ever a social process, negotiated and distributed by people through rhetorical processes.

Popular conceptions of rhetoric often neglect the positive potentials of argument, foregrounding "mere" rhetoric, or the idea that rhetoric is only a morally questionable set of persuasive tools, a collection of techniques ready to be used by unsavory parties. As Sharon Crowley bluntly puts it, "Aside from historians and theorists of rhetoric and a few teachers of speech and composition, most people today define rhetoric as 'empty verbiage,' or worse, as lying" (462). Popular notions of rhetoric characterize it as empty or manipulative words, or, the verbal gymnastics most often executed by politicians and lawyers. For example, a recent *New Yorker* piece centers rhetoric in manipulative campaign strategies, describing "The Plot against America: Donald Trump's Rhetoric" (Denby). These understandings have longstanding and variegated precedent: to give perhaps the most famous example, Socrates decried rhetoric as "cookery" in Plato's *Gorgias*. Thinkers such as Hobbes produced similar criticisms, and institutions such as various European Christian churches have likewise successfully worked to discredit the practice and study of rhetorics, associating the literature with pagan religion and

unsavory morals.[24] In sum: throughout its long history, myriad institutions and scholars have worked to malign rhetoric, efforts which have been largely successful, producing large gaps in the study of rhetoric. Of course, the advent of the neosophists, Kenneth Burke's work, and the discursive turn breathed new life into the discipline, but these developments are incredibly recent in light of rhetoric's long 'lifespan.'

Deploying the toolbox metaphor for rhetoric is profoundly problematic on several fronts; for example, reducing the discipline of rhetoric to its constituent techniques neglects the epistemological potentials in argument, or the ways that knowledge is built and rearranged through verbal contestations. Too, the toolbox comparison enables critics to simplistically reduce millennia of rhetorical scholarship into an arsenal of tools ready to use upon the unwary. Although rhetoric can—and has long been—deployed as a means to mobilize listeners toward goals of varying morality, thinkers are grossly remiss if they cannot conceive of the productive potential in rhetorical processes. Particularly, toolbox conceptions dismiss rhetoric's core three endeavors, characterized by Aristotle as means by which to deliberate upon past, present, and future actions: respectively, forensic, epideictic, and deliberative rhetorics. Negotiating meaning through rhetorical processes has historically allowed citizens to use democratic processes to engage in collaborative decision-making despite the ever-subjective qualities of shared experience. To put it another way: rhetorics are means by which people may navigate through the infinite conflicts endemic to hyper-social "civilized" life. Some parties prefer to mitigate the uncertainties and conflicts of social life through manipulation, but other speakers

[24] For example, Medieval Christian institutions and scholars held hostile attitudes toward rhetoric and other Greco-Roman scholarship, seeing these texts—with their moral relativism, occasionally "salacious" details, and lack of Christian content —as "dangerous" (Bizzell and Herzberg 433). Augustine and Jerome championed rhetoric, albeit qualifiedly, as a potential force for good—as a means of sermon invention and a link to well-established intellectual traditions—but the Christian church continued to regard rhetoric with suspicion (432-434).

may just as readily mobilize rhetorical processes toward cooperative communal existence. In reducing rhetoric to manipulative tactics, anti-rhetoric thinkers and institutions neglect the necessarily social process of meaning negotiation, abandoning the productive side of rhetoric to highlight its misuses—a cynical and intellectually impoverished perspective.

I argue that one way to characterize the range of ways people understand rhetoric is to envision a range between holistic imaginings of rhetoric and the above simplistic view of "mere" rhetoric. A holistic view accommodates both misuses and positive potentials of rhetoric—or rhetoric in all of its sometimes-contradictory glory—while a simplistic view favors rhetoric's manipulative trappings or even evokes a utopian view of rhetorical negotiation. Borrowing from Clifford Geertz's turn of phrase, I suggest that a holistic view is a "thick" understanding of rhetoric, while a simplified view is "thin." Here, I hardly advocate for a binary view of rhetoric definition; to the contrary, I assert that understandings of rhetoric may fall at any point along this spectrum. Characterizing the extremes merely provides points of reference, helping us to locate concepts of rhetoric relative to some distinguishable antipodes.

Characterizing thick and thin concepts of rhetoric helps us to engage with conceptually rigorous conceptions of rhetoric. Moreover, privileging thick understandings of rhetoric enables us to interrogate the epistemological processes of rhetoric. My efforts to define BFR necessitates engaging with thick conceptions of rhetoric, as we must recognize the epistemological potentials of rhetoric in order to identify the anti-epistemological processes of rhetorical bad faith.

Modern scholars who work with a thick understanding of rhetoric include Kenneth Burke, Wayne Booth, Susan Jarratt, Matthew Jackson, and countless others. Scholars of this bent certainly account for the manipulative potential in persuasive

processes, but crucially, they also highlight the epistemological promises in argument. In other words, scholars who accommodate a thick perception of rhetoric focus on not just persuasive ends (i.e., "move an audience to some kind of action"), but also draw our attention to ways in which the process of negotiation alters or adds to shared knowledge. As Gerard Hauser and Carole Blair explain, rhetoric arises out of interested parties' efforts to "resolv[e] some indeterminate condition" and cultivate the "outcome of that resolution" (143). Hauser and Blair go on to specify that "whenever individuals interact in ways that create meaning and relationship through conjoint symbolic acts, their joint action constitutes a shared experience, a *rhetorical* experience" (143). When Hauser and Blair indicate that participants in a conversation "create meaning through conjoint symbolic acts," these scholars are pointing to the ways that speakers must negotiate meaning through shared symbolic language. Put another way, rhetorical action depends upon the epistemological processes of meaning negotiation. Hauser and Blair further contribute to the epistemological richness of rhetoric when they assert that rhetoric "is the power to take a stance on an issue—to orient—in such a way that one is able to negotiate the precarious balance between maintaining the self and adapting an idea to the needs of another" (153). In short: Hauser and Blair point out that rhetoric constitutes shared experience reached through accommodation of another's understandings and experiences—labors which create mutually useful knowledge.[25]

Classical rhetoric scholars have also examined rhetoric's capacity to produce new knowledge. For example, Richard Leo Enos and Janice Lauer observe that Aristotle's attention to heuristics, particularly the use of heuristics to produce artistic proofs, illuminates the generative potential in rhetoric (79). Doreen Starke-Meyerring and

[25] For the purposes of defining BFR, it is important to consider the *converse* of Hauser and Blair's description of a rhetorical exchange: a conversation in which an interlocutor forestalls an exchange of ideas, symbols, and experiences.

Anthony Paré use Janet Atwill's work to further cement Aristotle's thoughts on argumentative knowledge production, indicating that rhetoric was classically "seen as a kind of productive knowledge, that is, *knowledge generated to produce certain outcomes*, such as judgments in courts and elsewhere, truths and decisions in policy deliberation, or value statements in ceremonial events" (8, emphasis mine). In short: classical thinkers such as Aristotle well establish rhetoric as a means to *produce* consensus, *generate* policies, *build* legal precedent, *reinforce* social values, and so on.

It becomes especially crucial to consider rhetoric's epistemological trappings in light of scholarship on knowledge's contingent, socially-constructed nature. If, as social theorists and rhetoricians assert, knowledge is ever-shifting and prone to reinterpretation, rhetoric plays a central role in knowledge production. Foucault well establishes that interested parties shape knowledge structures (i.e., disciplines and institutional mechanisms), producing, organizing, and deploying knowledge via multidirectional flows of social power (*Archaeology* 120). Foucault also observes that power has a reciprocal relationship with knowledge: power informs how knowledge is constructed, and the way knowledge is constructed allows certain parties to claim power. Gayatri Spivak's groundbreaking work on colonial framings of Indian women extends Foucault's work, but also productively critiques his work, observing that he reifies Western ownership of knowledge even as he outlines the power mechanisms that dictate knowledge construction. As Spivak indicates, knowledge is never innocent: it serves the needs of its producers, whether these needs relate to ego, value, or economic concerns.

James Gee's work on Discourse communities extends scholarly work on the socially-specific ways that knowledge is constructed. Particularly, he establishes the ways that social formations provide the context that allows group members to assign meaning and to value certain ways of knowing. As Gee explains, "meaning, even literal meaning, is

wedded to local, 'on site,' social, and Discourse practices," and that "meaning is not general and abstract…rather, it is situated in specific social and Discourse practices, and is, in fact, continually transformed in those practices" (102-3 *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis*). Here, Gee points out that meaning is not fixed, but rather is the product of a specific group's practices.

Gee, Spivak, and Foucault's works illuminate that knowledge production and propagation—and the reification of knowledge paradigms—occurs through social interaction. I offer an important follow-up observation: if knowledge is the sum of social *negotiations*, then we must consider that these negotiations constitute *arguments*, in their many forms (including material and visual). It is through these arguments that speakers contest or reinforce meaning and ways of knowing; in other words, rhetorical action (argument) is an epistemological process. Ultimately, it is this kind of epistemological production that makes rhetorical scholarship so critical to understanding social constructs such as race, sexuality, and gender.

Products of Argument: Consensus and Dissensus

The knowledge production central to rhetoric allows parties to enact mutually agreeable policies and practices, as classical rhetoricians emphasized. Contemporary rhetorical scholars tend to also emphasize the intangible products of argument, including better ways of understanding cultures, performances of identity, social movements, and so on. As modern rhetoricians draw our attention to the building of knowledge—efforts that may or may not produce material consequences—the 'products' that emerge are better ways of knowing, or better-defined points of intellectual friction or consonance. This line of reasoning suggests that rhetorical production may or may not yield immediately tangible results, but results such as consensus or well-defined

disagreement nonetheless have real implications in the world, and produce ideas that may have long-term impact.

Consensus seems to be the consummate goal of argument, as parties align using stasis to establish the details of a situation, and move toward mutually agreeable action. Hauser and Blair's observation that a shared "rhetorical experience" allows a person to "take a stance on an issue" in a way that establishes a "balance between maintaining the self and adapting an idea to the needs of another" neatly sums up conversational participants' efforts to create harmonious rhetorical products. Accounting for the "needs of another" necessitates a mutually agreeable outcome, or, at least provisional consensus. However, several scholars productively vex the idea that consensus is the ideal outcome of argument.

Some postmodern scholars—including Foucault and Lyotard—question the utility of agreement at all, but other thinkers less radically suggest that consensus is merely one possible goal for rhetorical interaction. Kendall Phillips offers one of the most impactful interventions on this front, pointing out that, especially in diverse societies, dissent is crucial for producing new knowledge. Phillips extends Carole Blair's work on the history of rhetoric, highlighting that consensus—which often entails reduction—has historically functioned to dominate non-normative parties, often producing a 'flat' overall narrative. Phillips' work indicates that this kind of discursive domination forecloses upon "alternative rhetorics," and that dissent is, consequently, one of the most crucial actions in public rhetorics (232). Overall, he argues that dissent between interlocutors leads to the nuanced consensus that is best suited to—that is, most equitable for—diverse publics. Phillips makes clear that he is not lobbying against consensus, but rather urging his readers to accommodate a more nuanced understanding of agreement and disagreement in public discourse. He emphasizes that dissensus is not merely the opposite of

consensus, but rather a complementary rhetorical phenomenon: "dissent, though motivated by a sense of difference from and resistance to the background consensus, exists ultimately in the service of this consensus" (233). Phillips' thick conception of dissensus urges us not to uncritically seek the gratification of consensus. Such a critical stance encourages us to acknowledge the importance of disagreements for diverse social environments[26], especially vis à vis the potential domination inherent to complete consensus. A complex understanding of consensus and dissensus is absolutely critical to the study of race, sexuality, class, and other intersectional axes of identity, as social domination is often enacted through monolithic rhetorics that demand flat consensus.

Feminist and Antiracist Epistemological Efforts and BFR Mitigation

Leveraging the epistemological dimensions of rhetoric often involves breaking down and repurposing dominant knowledge paradigms.[27] As Phillips points out, dissensus creates room for "alternative rhetorics," or knowledge that moves against the grain of dominant narratives (232). In other words: knowledge production that deviates from hegemonic or otherwise normative narratives must challenge these systems in order to advocate for new ways of knowing. This kind of work is epitomized in Feminist and Critical Race theories, as theorists in these areas intervene against received knowledge in order to offer better ways of negotiating gender and race in social settings.

Feminist scholarship has developed and rigorously implemented strategies for social norm disruption, challenging inequitable notions of gender and suggesting better gender-related social practices. In order to do so, feminist scholars—like scholars in

[26] By "diverse social environments," I mean environments in which the needs and priorities of some parties differ from others; these contrastive needs and priorities are no less legitimate, but rather, the inevitable product of differing subject positions and goals.

[27] Here, I use "knowledge paradigms" to refer to structured systems of knowledge that value certain types of knowledge, methods, and logic. Examples of knowledge paradigms include academic disciplines and other Discourse communities; see James Gee's *Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method* for further discussion of Discourses.

Critical Race Theory—have substantively contributed to the literature on knowledge production, norming, and hegemony. By examining the mechanisms that maintain repressive gender norms, feminist thinkers are able to contribute knowledge on power dynamics—important meta-critique that forms a scaffold others may use to question received knowledge and establish more equitable practices. Feminist interventions, then, are prototypical epistemologically-rich rhetorics that require the disruption of existing knowledge in order to make room for new ways of knowing about gender.

Important feminist scholars such as Donna Haraway, Gloria Anzaldúa, Sonja Foss, and Cindy Griffin exemplify feminist epistemological work. The theoretical frameworks that these scholars craft allow other thinkers to imagine better ways of being in a gendered world. Too, these frameworks empower their audiences to question both historical narratives and craft more equitable futures. Feminist theorists explore relevant, difficult themes such as hybridity, aesthetics, and domination, and apply them to timely conversations around such as bodily autonomy, diversity, technology, capitalism, and so on. By taking up complex concepts and social dynamics, thinkers such as these build knowledge by assembling more equitable and agency-affirming models for social being out of previously locked systems.

One prominent example of feminist theory-building that challenges norms to produce new knowledge is Gloria Anzaldúa's establishment of *mestizaje*, or hybrid ways of being. Anzaldúa uses her subject position—lived experience as a queer woman of both indigenous and Spanish colonial heritage—to establish the generative possibilities in *mestizaje*. Along the same scholarly threads, she further theorizes a potential-rich state of *nepantla*, “an in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries” (4). Drawing the two concepts together, she explains that mestiza consciousness is “a multiplicity that's transformational,” and

champions the role of *nepantleras* in building "links" and "bridges" between and across the "borders" and "abysses" of contrasting or seemingly contradictory identities. In short, she reclaims hybridity, turning a precarious state into a site for connection. Anzaldúa's concepts execute epistemological work both by vexing either/or divisions—for cultural identity, sexuality, and so on—and by offering an alternative, nuance-accommodating model for ways of being against the grain of cultures that privilege "bright lines and clear taxonomies" (Williams 8).

Another strong example of feminist epistemologies is Donna Haraway's work on hybridity—human-animal, human-machine, and physical-virtual. One Haraway's most memorable contributions is her concept of women's "cyborg consciousness," or a consciousness that accommodates and celebrates slippage between human and machine. Haraway both intervenes against traditional male-centric notions of technology and offers a way for women to leverage their protean, potentially agentive ways of being in increasingly technology-saturated environments (13). Like Anzaldúa, Haraway challenges "the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves," pushing for ways of knowing that move beyond problematic binaries (39).[28] As Haraway puts it: "there are great riches for feminists in explicitly embracing the possibilities inherent in the breakdown of clean distinctions between organism and machine and similar distinctions structuring the Western self. It is the simultaneity of breakdowns that cracks the matrices of domination and opens geometric possibilities" (32). Both Anzaldúa and Haraway, in developing their respective concepts of *nepantlera* and cyborg being, build concepts which help to 'crack open' the closed worlds of

[28] "Cyborg consciousness" points not only to breakdowns between human/machine hybridity, but also in the dualisms of colonizer/colonized, mind/body and so on (35). One example Haraway provides of "cyborg consciousness" is Cherrie Moraga's "self-consciously spliced" English and Spanish, which uses a hybrid of two conquerors' languages to destabilize the idea of a totalizing, "whole" language (33).

gendered being. These scholars intervene against social norms with their constructs, and not only engage in knowledge-producing rhetorics themselves, but also invite their audiences to use these concepts to produce new knowledge and practices.

Several feminist rhetoricians take aim at the fundamental assumptions of argument, challenging the norms of argument in order to open spaces for more equitable ways of being in a gendered culture. For example, Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin's formidable work on invitational rhetoric questions the value of domination in argument—a profoundly taken-for-granted goal in the Western rhetorical tradition. They observe that traditional understandings of rhetoric are "characterized by efforts to change others and thus to gain control over them, self-worth derived from and measured by the power exerted over others, and a devaluation of the life worlds of others," and offer as an alternative invitational rhetoric, or "an invitation to the audience to enter the rhetor's world and to see it as the rhetor does" (4; 5). In short: Foss and Griffin identify a problematic argumentative norm, critique its assumptions and outcomes, and suggest an alternative model for argument. Invitational rhetoric is an especially useful example of feminist knowledge-building, as it not only offers new ways of thinking about argument, but also gives audiences rhetorical tools with which they themselves may collaboratively build new ways of knowing through better ways of arguing.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)[29] is another body of scholarship that offer powerful new ways of understanding social constructs—in this case, race and its implications. A few of CRT's particularly useful interventions include theories of colorblindness, whiteness studies, and historical overviews of race's development. Contributions such as

[29] CRT emerged from legal studies (with Patricia Williams as a key pioneer), but the area's profoundly useful application of critical theory to the social construction of race prompted scholars from—among other areas—sociology, philosophy, and literary studies to contribute. As a result, CRT is now a robust area of inquiry that spans several disciplines.

these intervene against racist epistemologies and correct the frequently-softened accounts of race's role in various societies, offering alternative, more intellectually rigorous ways of understanding racism and racialized social structures.

Both Charles Mills and George Lipsitz's scholarship stand as excellent examples of race theory's knowledge-building endeavors. Both scholars create complementary yet distinctive models for the discursive norming that occurs vis-á-vis race, and construct frameworks to understand the mechanisms with which people enforce these norms. Mills' theory of a *racial contract* builds a framework for understanding individual 'buy-in' to cultural narratives of race, while Lipsitz's concept of a "possessive investment in whiteness" builds ways to understand the resilience of myths of American race-neutrality and equality. Mills develops at length a racial contract—an implicit and comprehensive social contract determining hierarchies and knowable features of race—that features "structured blindnesses and opacities" regarding the social entailments of race (Kindle loc. 342). As Mills explains, not only does this contract and the codified social structures it birthed function epistemologically, but it also features evasion and self-deception as "epistemic norms" (loc. 211-23; loc. 1448). So, the racial contract creates certain ways of knowing race *and* ways of not-knowing race—for example, foreclosing upon "signatories'" ability to believe people of colors' narratives of racism.

Lipsitz's concept of the "possessive investment in whiteness"—"a poisonous system of privilege that pits people against each other and prevents the creation of common ground"—dovetails well with Mills' racial contract in its coverage of macro-level raced knowledge structures (xix). Lipsitz illuminates a "prevailing social warrant" that there are not systematically enforced advantages given to whites in terms of health, housing, education, and overall wealth accumulation (117). As he explains, this warrant is what naïve whites assume when they cannot "see" race-based discrimination. Mills

and Lipsitz's models illustrate CRT's epistemological work, intervening against established discourses of race, providing frameworks that allow their audiences to self-correct and form more racially equitable social practices. As with the above examples of feminist epistemological work, CRT scholars such as Mills and Lipsitz must intervene against dominant understandings—in this case, of race and its consequences—in order to make space for their more ethical and holistic models.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, following the work of CRT scholars such as Charles Mills and Joe Feagin, also pushes back against vernacular understandings of race by creating new knowledge on the social construct of race and its social consequences. Particularly, Bonilla-Silva uses two interview-based studies and historical accounts from the 60's onward to construct a theory of color-blind racism—part of "the curious enigma of racism without racists" (4). Bonilla-Silva outlines the ways that whites tend to subscribe to an "ideology of color-blindness," conceiving of race as individual prejudice as opposed to seeing it more holistically as an individual *and* systemic phenomenon (14). As Bonilla-Silva points out, these prevailing notions starkly contrast with POC's understandings of racism, which tend to include more complete understandings of racism's institutional mechanisms. Most importantly, Bonilla-Silva makes the point that widespread acceptance of color-blind ideology perpetuates white privilege; after all, if thinkers deny 'seeing' race, they can also deny the existence of racism and refuse to acknowledge their own implication in continued racial inequality. Bonilla-Silva's intervention against accepted color-blind myths of race in the U.S. (i.e., "if I cannot 'see' race, then I cannot possibly be a racist" and "American valuation of color-blindness means that institutional racism cannot exist") responds to the backlash against antiracist activism and scholarship. So, Bonilla-Silva's work is part of a kind of social tug-of-war; he offers a follow-up to earlier interventions (i.e., the work of Civil Rights activists) by pushing back

on the color-blind resistance to these antiracist discourses. Put another way, color-blind racists attempt to derail antiracist action by denying the existence or ongoing resilience of racialized discourses in the U.S., rhetorical gestures that Bonilla-Silva counters with his scholarship. Ultimately, Bonilla-Silva's work constitutes BFR mitigation, efforts which are especially necessary in antiracist scholarship, given the traditional resistance to such efforts.

In general, knowledge-building interventions such as antiracist and feminist frameworks are nearly always met with resistance, as evidenced by the ever-fierce backlash against progressive equality measures. This resistance often occurs through BFR tactics, actions by which adherents to the status quo may derail or delegitimize challenges (such as CRT and feminist interjections) to dominant social structures (e.g., hierarchical race relations).[30] To give a few examples: BFR practitioners may demand ever-increasing quantities of evidence, refuse to work toward stasis, and/or deny an issue's importance (such as color-blind racist's refusal to see racism as a problem). Kristan Poirot usefully terms impediments to progressive argument "rhetorics of containment," that is, rhetorics which "aim to tame a potential threat to hegemonic culture and/or the norms of the status quo" (265).[31] In short, CRT and feminist scholarship engages in counterhegemonic knowledge-building, or the kind of epistemological efforts that BFR aims to stymy. Resultantly, rhetorics championing progressive epistemologies must work to mitigate BFR if they hope to gain any traction.

BFR, though has not been termed such, is hardly a new phenomenon, and feminist and antiracist activists have ever responded lithely to such derailing efforts. Put

[30] For more on racialized hierarchies in the U.S., see Natalie Masuoka and Jane Junn's "racial prism of group identity," developed in their work *Politics of Belonging in the U.S.*

[31] In Poirot's work, she is specifically referring to feminist rhetorical intervention, and the efforts to "contain" these rhetorics.

another way: feminist and antiracist thinkers have, necessarily, developed mitigation strategies for bad faith respondents. An excellent example of BFR mitigation appears in Kimberlé Crenshaw's thoughts on "vulgar constructionism" (1296). As she explains, there exists "one version of antiessentialism, embodying what might be called the vulgarized social construction thesis," which claims that "all categories are socially constructed, there is no such thing as, say, Blacks or women, and thus it makes no sense to continue reproducing those categories by organizing around them."[32] Vulgar constructionists leverage the idea that race and gender are social constructs in order to shut down feminist and antiracist arguments. These BFR practitioners' simplistic logic relies on the premise that 'empty' concepts have no material effects. Crenshaw counters this BFR by pointing out that race and gender continue to exert force in social systems: "to say that a category such as race or gender is social constructed is not to say that category has no significance in the world" (1296). Furthermore, Crenshaw ends her piece by, like Bonilla-Silva, calling attention to the ways in which denial of race enables the perpetuation of racialized practices and systemic inequality (1297-99).

In sum, Crenshaw mitigates BFR by naming a BFR gesture (the vulgarized constructionist thesis), parsing its premise (that a social construction cannot do work in the world), and drawing explicit attention to the ways that this attitude perpetuates the problem at hand. Although Crenshaw's responses will not guarantee that her argument will gain traction from certain interlocutors (especially the BFR practitioner), it does reorient the conversation so that it can move forward (in this case, by discussing the mechanisms and consequences of racism). Most importantly, this kind of BFR mitigation

[32] It is worth noting that, given this definition, vulgar constructionism and color-blind racism have some overlap: color-blind racist logics insist that, if race is 'invisible' to its practitioners, then it cannot exert force in social environments.

allows the speaker herself to continue to build her case, and her rhetorical responses facilitate collaboration from whomever may be earnestly interested in doing so.

Lewis Gordon's work on bad faith in racism is another strong example of BFR mitigation, as he uses Sartrean bad faith as a means to name the denial central to racism. In other words: Gordon counters the BFR tactic of denying the presence of a phenomenon (in this case racism)—or demanding exhaustive proof—in order to impede substantive discussion by bluntly naming these gestures as self-deception (Sartrean bad faith). As he points out, "the stubborn racist has made a choice not to admit certain uncomfortable truths about his groups and chooses not to challenge certain comfortable falsehoods about other people," and that

> since he has made this choice, he will resist whatever threatens it—even under the guise of threatening this attitude himself ('I don't want to be that type of person')...it's not that he isn't 'persuaded' by the *logic* of counterexamples; it is that he is unwilling to accept what ordinarily count as counter-examples where questions of race are concerned. (75)

Ultimately, Gordon's work is a forceful, direct BFR mitigation tactic: a tactic that bluntly names racist epistemologies and attitudes a persistent form of denial. Responses such as these directly inform the practitioner of BFR—who may or may not be aware of their choice to be contrary and un-persuadable—and their interlocutors that these behaviors constitute some kind of decision to foreclose upon epistemological progress. Theorizations such as Gordon's offer rhetors, especially those attempting to create better ways of knowing and co-existing in a raced world, a framework with which to call out BFR responses—or at the very least, a means by which to identify unproductive argumentative responses as such.[33]

Writ large, scholarly resistance to BFR often takes the form of naming: "calling out" derailing behaviors and describing the argumentative work these behaviors do. In

[33] It is this kind of direct, scholarly anti-BFR intervention that I aim to produce in this dissertation.

doing so, these scholars render the BFR practitioners' gestures transparent, and open space for better, knowledge-producing (as opposed to knowledge-blocking) rhetorical action. One example of this type of BFR-mitigating analysis appears in Lora Arduser and Amy Koerber's thoughtful analysis "Redrawing the GOP Borders: Women, Reproduction, and the Political Landscape of the 2014 Midterm Election." In this study, Arduser and Koerber examine the "women" section of the 2013 Republican "Growth and Opportunity Report," giving special attention to a section which responds to charges of a republican "war on women."[34] The authors analyze the ways in which this report derails discussion of women's reproductive rights, observing that the report "re-articulat[es] the rhetorical situation in a way that excludes reproductive rights as a legitimate concern of women voters" (161). The authors go on to explain that this document reframes the "so-called war on women" such that the Democratic Party is the enemy, and that "by re-circulating the battle language and aiming it at the Democratic Party, reproductive rights stay off the battlefield altogether" (162). The authors of the GOP document decry the charges of a war on women as a "false attack" and refuse to discuss the behavior that led to these charges. By redirecting the conversation so that its original, main concern (reproductive rights) is no longer a focus, the authors of the GOP report participate in typical BFR. Arduser and Koerber's identification of the report's efforts—to redirect a conversation away from feminist issues—responds to the report's derailing actions by calling attention to the derailing rhetorical actions themselves. As rhetoricians well know, many argumentative gestures (i.e., logical fallacies) become less potent when audiences are primed to identify the gestures and their implications—especially when audiences are

[34] As the authors observe, the phrase "war on women" emerged in response to Republican attempts to block access to contraception, abortion, and other services which facilitate reproductive agency (161).

able to recognize the unproductive nature of certain gestures.[35] It is the phenomenon of mitigation through naming that Arduser and Koerber use to limit the impact of the GOP report's BFR.

Non-academic, “everyday” feminists likewise have long history of responding to BFR, an on-the-ground complement to the more formal identification and analysis work of feminist scholars. Bonnie Dow discusses two useful examples of "attempts to undermine women's authority to speak [in public],” which show respondents’ derailing efforts that have no relevance to the content of a feminist's argument—one common form of BFR. Dow relates one well-known response to Marilyn Saltzman Webb's 1969 speech on women's liberation—"take her off the stage and fuck her”—as one way in which an audience refused to acknowledge the authority of the speaker (63).[36] By attempting to 'shout her down' or undermine her authority, the audience member not only proclaims disinterest in the content of Saltzman Webb's speech, but also interferes with the completion of the speech. Dow draws a parallel between this response and misogynist responses to Clinton's campaign speeches several decades later (i.e., “iron my shirt!”). A counterargument offers dissent in service of better consensus, but neither of the above gestures could contribute to argument development, as derailing attempts do not offer relevant counterpoints. These two gestures both stand as clear examples of audience distraction from women speakers’ arguments, which constitutes a refusal to engage with the content of women’s public arguments, or, rhetorical bad faith. In this case, feminist BFR mitigation was enacted straightforwardly: both Clinton and Saltzman Webb continued their work after these incidents, enacting the resilience that is a hallmark of

[35] It is worth noting that mitigation through naming is a kind of “consciousness raising,” a well-developed part of the feminist rhetorical tradition.

[36] This incident prompted much discussion among feminists, though as Dow notes, did not make headlines.

feminist action. In cases such as these, mitigating BFR is as simple (not to be confused with easy) as the rhetor refusing to be dissuaded, continuing to pursue their ends. Indeed, feminists in academic and popular milieux have a long history of persisting beyond derailing tactics, or, using a resistance to BFR borne of repeated exposure.

Antiracist and feminist resistance to harmful race and class-centric cultural norms is complicated by the ways that dominant ways of knowing are built and "policed." Specifically, it is not enough to note that social norms are protected by those in power: we must also keep in mind that, as Foucault observes, power is not merely exerted top-down, but also laterally and bottom-up. Gayatri Spivak's germinal work adds depth to these dynamics when she points out that the very norms of knowledge production are structured in a way that blocks critiques to the status quo, including the challenges forwarded by feminist, postcolonial, and antiracist scholars.[37] As a result, dominant discourses and modes of knowledge production create "grooves" into which members of a society fall. These discourses create pathways to communication which are easy to follow and exceedingly difficult to flout. To put it another way: dominant cultural expectations around intersectional aspects of being are not simply retained through the machinations of a few powerful parties (though powerful parties are key actors)—"everyday people" play a central role in the replication and retention of gendered and racialized norms. Consequently, we must keep in mind that sexist structures and "racialized episteme"[38] direct discourse through the actions of institutions, privileged parties, *and* individuals (who may or may not enjoy substantial privileges). Ultimately, although institutions and individuals in power may be responsible for *constructing* or

[37] Though Spivak thoroughly critiques Western philosophers and social theorists, including Foucault, I argue that several of Spivak's observations are harmonious with Foucault's model of power articulation.
[38] I draw on Judith Butler's articulation of how racialized and racist episteme, or interpretive frameworks premised upon racialized/racist assumptions, dictate what whites can or cannot "see" in situations of racial inequity (16).

encouraging normative systems—or, establishing the status quo—it is "everyday people" or people at all levels of a social hierarchy who end up heavily *enforcing* normative behaviors.

Understanding multidirectional power dynamics is crucial in the study of BFR, especially vis-à-vis its implications for antiracist and feminist action. BFR constitutes perhaps the most common set of argumentative practices that allows interested individuals to conserve the existing hierarchies and institutional practices that subordinate certain parties and privilege others. Given that inequitable social systems are maintained through the cumulative actions of 'normal' people (not merely wrested into dominance by a few powerful parties), feminists and antiracists must craft their strategies with everyday people, and everyday practices, in mind. There is no one 'master target' in the efforts to ameliorate the bigotries embedded in social systems: those attempting to bring about positive change must aim for the practices and attitudes that appear at the local level.[39] So, identifying BFR—and building best practices for responding to it—should be a top priority for equity-building rhetors, as bad faith rhetorics constitute a cluster of related argumentative impediments to epistemological growth.

Medium Matters: Digital Rhetorics and Online Discursive Dynamics

Given that this dissertation's analysis chapters are a set of online exchanges, it is also crucial to consider several distinctive dynamics of online discourse. dana boyd elucidates the role of *affordances* in online interaction, pointing out how the design of a technology affects its capacities, heavily impacting user interaction with and on the technology. Aaron Hess also explains that "digital rhetoric [...] changes the nature of

[39] Of course, especially as established by antiracist actors and scholars, pro-equity parties must also identify global or macro-level considerations. "Tacking in and out," or attending to *both* specific instances *and* larger trends, is a difficult-to-develop but crucial habit for those hoping to enact change.

how rhetoric is expressed. The creation of messages is often structured by the constraints and abilities inherent within digital technologies," such as the character limit on a tweet (7). For example, it is crucial to keep in mind the densely networked nature of contemporary social environments, and to consider the rapid, seemingly 'frictionless' flows through which rhetors create, remix, and interact with texts. As scholars such as Douglas Eyman have pointed out, rhetoricians must carefully reconsider core rhetorical concepts such as invention, arrangement, and circulation when the technologies used for rhetorical action are digital, and take place in densely networked environments.[40] Two particular digital rhetoric dynamics bear especially well here: the slippages between analog and digital (or, physical and virtual) and the role of networked technologies in public social negotiation.

Internet scholars, especially those who study information and communication technologies (ICTs), have extensively examined the bearing of the "virtual" on the "real." The work of early theorists such as Donna Haraway and Manuel Castells have been heavily critiqued, especially for being overly utopian and/or deterministic views of technology, but several theoretical constructs from the nascent stage of internet scholarship have continuing relevance. For example, Haraway's concept of "cyborg consciousness" is still relevant in that it vibrantly articulates the ways that ICT users function in hybrid ways, often blurring the line between "human" and "technology." Furthermore, Haraway emphasizes the futility of drawing sharp distinctions between the digital and the "real": she explains that physical/virtual 'borders' are "leaky," allowing practices that begin in "real life" to leak to online environments and vice versa. In another foundational work, Manuel Castells articulates "real virtuality," or "a system in

[40] See chapter two, "Digital Rhetoric: Theory," of Eyman's *Digital Rhetoric: Theory, Method, Practice* for more on applications of classical and contemporary theory to digital texts and contexts.

which reality itself is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting, in the work of make believe, in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience" (Castells 373). In pointing this out, Castells is emphasizing the reality of the virtual, and pointing to the ways that virtual action 'counts' as real experiences. Both Haraway and Castells' observations establish the material implications of online discourses, or the ways that virtual interactions both inform and reflect "real life," or physical milieux. These contributions solidify the stakes of online rhetorical interaction as "real" experiences that both reflect and impact material reality.

The idea of the "public screen" is another crucial concept in understanding digital rhetorics, particularly, cultural contestations that take place in public, networked environments. Kevin DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples analyze the 1999 World Trade Organization protests, showing the impact of screens on "participatory democracy," and establishing the importance of "the public screen" as a "necessary supplement to the metaphor of the public sphere for understanding today's political scene" (125). DeLuca and Peeples characterize the public screen as "highlight[ing] dissemination, images, hypermediacy, publicity, distraction, and dissent," and emphasize the public screen's centrality in contemporary social contestations. The idea of the public screen, then, impacts the ways we consider current, public debates over issues of race, sexuality, abledness, age, gender, and other intersectional axes. In other words, the idea of the public screen productively informs the analysis of online social contestations, such as those occurring in TED Talk comments.

In order to robustly analyze online interactions, I assert the particular importance of a few dynamics of publicity that govern social negotiation in virtual environments: circulation, networked relations, and the importance of modalities. First,

consider the role of circulation. Michael Warner points out that a public may be constituted via "texts and their circulation," and this certainly holds true for online environments (66). Online publics converge at the sites of particular media producers, media texts, and the various platforms, i.e., social media sites, on which throngs of these producers and texts gather. The circulation of these texts creates a de-centered, or networked, public.[41] In dana boyd's influential scholarship on social media sites, she describes networked publics as the "space constructed through networked technologies" and "the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice" (39). As she further clarifies, these spaces "allow people to gather for social, cultural and civic purposes, and they help people connect with a world beyond their close friends and family." These dynamics illuminate the character of a public constituted by TED Talk commenters, particularly, the way the public consists of strangers relating in technology-mediated space—a networked public. Finally, I offer the utility of public modalities, as developed by Robert Asen and Daniel Brouwer. As they indicate, "communication modalities—manners, processes, ways of communicating—matter" and researchers would do well to "account for the ways in which modalities influence the variables that are being studied" (17). Asen and Brouwer's work underscores the importance of attending to 'the how' of publicity—including the ways media are not "neutral conduits," but rather are "structuring or constituting agents" (11). In the context of the publics converging at the site of TED Talk comments, then, it is crucial to consider the ways that the TED *platform* and its *affordances* impact the public interactions taking place in the TED comment sections. Ultimately, the concepts of public-constituting circulation, networked publics, and the importance of modalities are

[41] This, of course, is a conception of a public that veers away from the traditional "sphere" metaphor, which various scholars, including Kevin DeLuca, Jennifer Peeples, Robert Hariman, and John Lucaites, have critiqued as reductive or otherwise problematic.

all relevant considerations in my analysis of these two TED Talk comment sections. Particularly, it helps frame form (comment sections, with their semi-linear form and modes of response) and field (a publicly-accessible virtual space, with minimal gatekeeping via comment flag and moderation policies). Networked dynamics, with their particular textual and environmental considerations, critically impact both the following analyses and the heuristic I developed to produce robust analyses. Consequently, I urge alertness to the ways that the following analyses are altered by the particular dynamics of this digital rhetorical situation.

In the next chapter, I offer an overview of this dissertation's methods. This section clarifies the selection criteria for this study's two focus texts—Hobson's "Color Blind or Color Brave?" and Mac's "The Laws that Sex Workers Really Want" Ted Talks—and outlines the analytical methods by which I examine BFR in these texts' audience responses. Most centrally, the methods section describes the ways in which I take up and adjust close reading, digital rhetoric, and "field" methods. The methods chapter also narrates some key rhetorical considerations to keep in mind for the close reading of online texts, and previews key characteristics of both TED Talks and their comments. Finally, this chapter offers a step-by-step description of this study's approach to data collection, collation, and analysis.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

This dissertation explores the settings in which Bad Faith Rhetoric (BFR) appears in the world, with the understanding that BFR gestures are neither new nor uncommon phenomena. On the contrary, BFR has a long history and robust presence: it comprises a well-worn set of rhetorical gestures that respondents have long used to stymy epistemological work and to frustrate challenges to social hierarchies. Because it is not difficult to find examples of BFR, an analyst does not have to expend much energy on *locating* BFR, but can focus their energies on *describing or characterizing* these common gestures. In order to explore BFR, a researcher can use a process of identification, observation, and evaluation. This research sequence proceeds as follows: the researcher finds a BFR-rich environment ('the field'), observes speakers' habits in this environment, identifies and collates argumentative practices that follow or diverge from the main line of argument, then analyzes the data ('field notes') with an eye toward argument progression/digression.

As I established earlier, BFR practitioners' derailing and distracting tactics respond to knowledge-building and counterhegemonic efforts. Particularly, BFR frequently arises around the epistemological work and norm-resistance offered by antiracist and feminist rhetors. As many current contestations of raced and gendered norms occur in online environments, internet settings constitute a promising 'field' in which to observe BFR 'in the wild' (or, at least, in a very gently gatekept environment, as I discuss below). Consequently, my theorization of BFR uses online discussions as case studies.

Text Selection Criteria

Out of a wide variety of potential web platforms that provide opportunities to explore BFR, I determined that the TED Talks website (TED.com) is especially promising. Not only is this website available to a wide public—its videos are free to watch, and have several accessibility options for differently-abled audiences—but it is also immensely popular.[42] Perhaps the most important advantage in examining TED Talks comments for a certain type of rhetoric is that the TED speakers present composed arguments (in the oratorical tradition, no less). Given that the argument is presented relatively straightforwardly, it is especially feasible for an analyst to assess comments' engagement with the precipitating argument. Using TED talks and their comments provides a way for me to assess responses to a clear argument *and* to directly identify exigence, as opposed to making it necessary for me to parse an argument and its exigence across multiple texts and audiences.[43] An additional advantage of examining TED Talks and their comments is that users must have a TED user[44] account in order to comment on a talk. The accounts are free and easy to set up; however, this requirement creates a preliminary step before commenting. The account requirement for commenting presents an impediment for casual "trolls," as they must at least pause to create an account and log in before commenting.[45] Additionally, there exist TED Community Guidelines for commenters, which create a gently curated, trolling-disincentivizing

[42] As of February 2018, TED Talks' most popular videos have between fifteen and fifty millions views each ("The Most Popular Talks of All Time").

[43] One example of this practice is DeLuca and Peeples' theorization of the public screen, which they traced across a constellation of publications (DeLuca and Peeples).

[44] TED consistently refers to its speakers, commenters, and general audience members as members of its community ("About: Our Organization"). I employ the more general term "user" as a catch-all term for persons who engage with TED.com's content. Some users choose to have accounts (with which they may comment), while others do not.

[45] Cindy Tekobbe clarifies that "Trolls and trolling are catchall terms that are employed to describe a wide range of harassing, abusive, inciting, and anti-community behaviors online." She also illuminates the problematic nature of the term, pointing out that it is overly whimsical, eliding the very real threats of violence trolls frequently deploy. Like Tekobbe, I do continue to use the term, due to a lack of a better alternative.

discursive environment. These guidelines clarify that moderators will, for the good of the larger discussion, remove certain comments (including comments advocating violence and comments that advertise).[46] Although these constraints will hardly impede the determined trolls, it does increase the energy required to engage in trolling, which in turn reduces the number of users to those willing to put in extra time and energy before unleashing their vitriol. Additionally, the gentle moderation of comments discourages trolls by indicating that many troll-like engagements, if they violate the Community Guidelines, will not remain on the page for long.

Out of a wide variety of options, I selected two particular TED Talks, and their comments, for case studies: Mellody Hobson's "Color Blind or Color Brave?" and Juno Mac's "The Laws that Sex Workers Really Want." I used four main criteria to select these two discussions. The first two criteria relate to a necessary balance between data abundance and analysis feasibility: the talk must have a relatively robust selection of comment responses (over seventy-five comments), but the comment count should be no larger than two hundred. I select the top end of this range because a comment section with over two hundred comment threads would be unwieldy, too large to *both* characterize holistically (to see patterns in the conversation, as an ecosystem contained in one "parlor") *and* assess individually (to identify particular nodes or highlights in the conversation). The minimum comment count rules out comment sections that are two small to constitute a robust discursive ecosystem—the series of interactions must be diverse enough for me to determine response patterns. The third criterion privileges talks with substantial publicity: the talks themselves must have over one million views, which guarantees that the talk itself has reached a wide public.

[46] I go further explain the TED Community Guidelines in Chapter 4.

The final criterion is that the talks engage with one or more intersectional axes of identity.[47] This final selection criterion provides a potentially BFR-rich environment—as I note earlier, BFR and its mitigation frequently arise around contestations of race, sexuality, gender, class, abledness, and so on. I selected my focus texts—the comment sections for Mellody Hobson's talk on the values of being "color-brave" and Juno Mac's talk on sex work legislation—with the understanding that these talks' intersectional components 'attract' BFR. As I alluded to earlier, BFR responses occur at high rates around current, hotly contested social issues—such as questions of race and color-blindness, and gender and sexuality—as rhetors mobilize BFR in support of a status quo against which progressive talks intervene. The two discursive environments I examine are no exception: I find a rich array of BFR gestures present in these comment sections. These responses provide excellent opportunities for in-depth analysis of BFR practices in particularly timely conversations—in this case, on color-blind ideology and sex work policy.[48]

When observing argumentative practices "in the [online] field," I use two queries to guide my investigation. These research questions are:

Q1: How might we *define* BFR, particularly relative to contestations over social norms?

Q2: What are the ways in which rhetors who argue against social norms, here antiracist and feminist rhetors, mitigate bad faith rhetorical gestures?

The first question allows me to suss out the distinct features of BFR, or, to build a framework for identifying bad faith rhetorical practices. The second question uses the

[47] Intersectional axes of identity include abledness, race, age, class, linguistic background, gender, and many others. See Karma Chávez and Cindy Griffin's introduction to *Standing in the Intersection* for a robust discussion of intersectional ways of being in the world.

[48] Mac's lecture features intersectional issues not only by virtue of its coverage of sexuality legislation, but also as an issue of longstanding feminist concern. Feminism has a long history of combatting social norms that police sexuality (including the legislation surrounding sex work).

characteristics of BFR—which I uncover via question one—to identify the ways in which feminist and antiracist rhetors respond in ways that mitigate (or attempt to mitigate) BFR. These inquiries use two main warrants: that the concept of BFR is merely a new way to articulate old rhetorical practices that stymy anti-status quo argument, and that, given BFR's typical occurrence around anti-status quo argument, feminist and antiracist rhetors have long had to engage with BFR practitioners.

It is important to note that the above questions engage with rhetorical *effects*. Specifically, the "derailing" work of BFR can be assessed by mapping the "direction" of an argument, and evaluating responses based upon how well they contribute to the argument's "forward motion" or move the argument in directions that are at a tangent to the original line of inquiry. This dissertation proceeds from the understanding that responses to an original line of argument constitute effects that we can locate relative to an argument's approximate trajectory. Put another way, we can use directional terms to identify interlocutor responses that, if addressed by the original arguer, move the conversation progressively further from the initial rhetor's initial query. To better visualize direction and 'zones' of focus, see Figure 1 "Visual Representation of Argument Trajectories," Figure 2: "Areas of Focus in an Argument," and 3: "Bad Faith Rhetorical Tactics relative to Areas of Argument Focus." A rhetor's argument moves a conversation toward a particular conclusion, or, moves from "Point A" (the presentation of an argument in its contexts) to "Point D" (the emergence of conclusions) via particular discursive engagements (the "line" between points A and B).[49]

[49] This is not to say that arguments are straightforwardly linear; however, it is reasonable to imagine some kind of "path" between an argument's beginning (exigence) and its end (consensus or well-defined disagreement). To use a physics comparison: although an argument may theoretically proceed in quantum motion (jumping from one point to another point nonlinearly), the chances of interlocutors "following" such an argument are slim, as they would have to 'warp' from one point to another in conjunction with the original rhetor. So, it is in both the rhetor and the audience's best interest to follow a more linear path (complex as it may be) in the interest of successful stasis and knowledge building—or, more simply, persuasion. Consequently, it is reasonable to "map" an argument in linear terms, despite the

Figure 1: Visual Representation of Argument Trajectories

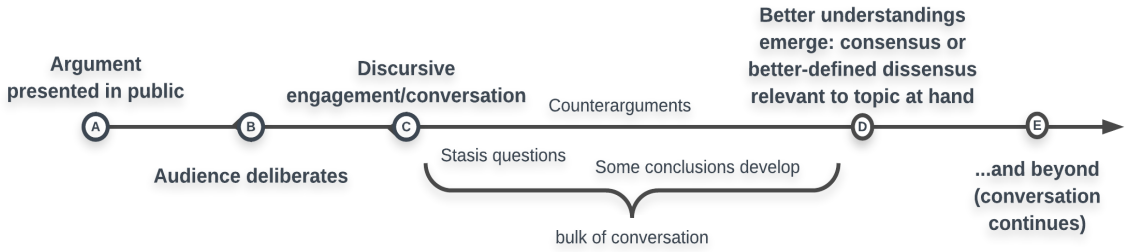
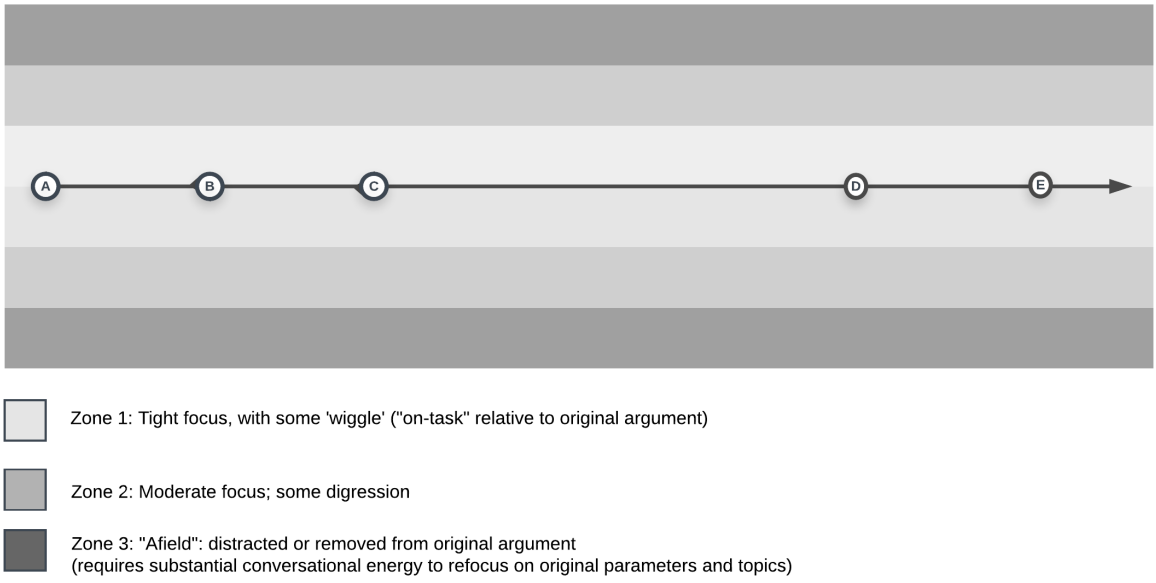
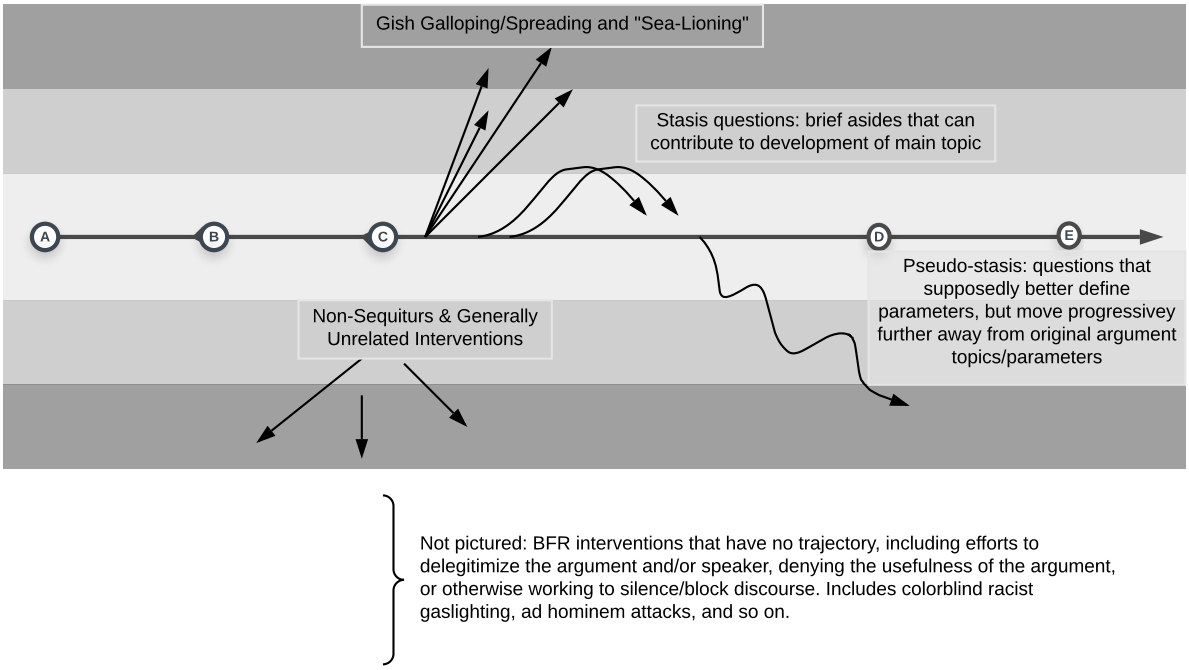


Figure 2: Adding Areas of Focus in an Argument to Argument Trajectory



somewhat reductive nature of this model. To draw on physics once more: quantum mechanics mostly apply to massive celestial bodies and subatomic particles, and arguments that successfully guide an audience through proofs would do well to avoid both this vast scope and extreme granularity.

Figure 3: Bad Faith Rhetoric Tactics Relative to Areas of Argument Focus and Argument Trajectory



Close Reading with Online Field Methods

In order to address my research questions in a robust and well-grounded manner, I employ a combination of established rhetorical methods. This study uses a data-gathering process I term "online field methods" to gather discursive information that I then analyze with rhetorical close-reading methods. This type of method-meshing is hardly new: in much contemporary rhetorical scholarship, scholars have found it necessary to adjust and mix methods in order to best address the particulars of an investigation. Especially in the current paradigm of communication, with its rapidly-developing communication technologies and shifting argumentative environments, it is often necessary to 'flex' methods that were designed to address argument in analog environments or environments that have since evolved substantially. As a response to the protean nature of current argument, I deployed "online field methods" in the service

of a well-emplaced close reading. Here, the internet environment is the "field," and my close-reading of rhetors' behaviors in this field accounts for the distinctive technological affordances and social dynamics of online interactions.

Sarah L. McKinnon, Robert Asen, Karma Chávez, and Robert Glenn Howard usefully define "the field" as "the nexus where rhetoric is produced, where it is enacted, where it circulates, and, consequently, where it is audienced," which includes "the digital milieu" (4). Following this productively expansive definition of field, I deploy field methods in this project, in that I "visit" the sites of rhetorical action in order to assess the text and analyze audience responses in close proximity to both. The sites of rhetorical action in this case are the two web pages on which users may access, respectively, Hobson and Mac's TED Talks. This field includes the comment sections, as well as multiple links and tabs (i.e., the tab for a written transcript of the talk). It is important to note that, if this study were instead to investigate the TED Talk-related discourse that occurs across multiple platforms (i.e., social media sites on which users may link to the talks and provide their own commentary in that space), the field would also include other pages—that is, not part of *TED.com*—across which these talks may be circulated, via users or a site's web design (i.e., the "watch next" links provided by *TED.com*'s suggestion algorithm). However, the scope of my analysis is more constrained: this study is designed to interrogate specifically the discourse that occurs between the TED Talk author and the audience who chose to respond via that TED Talk's comments section. As a result, the field into which I venture consists of two TED Talk pages, which includes the comments section and all of the varied web artifacts on the page.[50]

[50] Here, I account for the *presence* of links to other pages—due to the importance of considering the affordances of the site, which includes links to other online locations—but do not consider these links' destinations part of my target field. Further rationale for this constraint is available in the section on audiences and audiencing.

In order to parse the implications of both the text and audience responses, I employ close reading methods, following the approach used by rhetorical critics such as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, Michael Leff, and James Jasinski.[51] In this process, I analyze my texts' prominent rhetorical gestures, and closely examine phrasings to identify key components of the texts and parse their significance in the context of the texts' presentation. In the case of the TED Talk comments, I pay special attention to the use of the logical fallacies that fit under the umbrella of BFR (i.e., ad hominem attacks and non sequiturs), and assess the degree of relevance each comment has to the original line of argument, which in this case is presented in the TED Talk itself. Put another way: the close reading featured in my analysis focuses not only on the micro-level content (i.e., word choice), but also macro-level content (i.e., comments that have a net effect of derailing the discussion).

My use of close reading methods requires explicit attention to understandings of audience, text, and the relationship between the two, especially as rhetorical criticism has seen dramatic shifts in scholars' approaches key rhetorical elements. In this dissertation, I focus upon what Edwin Black calls the "actual auditors"—the 'real' audience, which may or may not align with a rhetor's intended audience. However, I also attend to the rhetor's invoked or hailed audience, as a relevant—if not definitive—element of the argument. In the context of the Ted Talks, this means that I not only attend to the in-studio audience for the talk in addition to the online audience, but that I also consider how the online audience is not necessarily specifically "hailed" by the

[51] In using these methods, I leverage the multidisciplinary potentials of rhetoric and composition—famously commented on by scholars such as Janice Lauer—to weave in the related and useful rhetorical criticism practices that developed in the adjacent field of communication. Although rhetoric scholars in both communication and rhetoric and composition share rivalries and competing ideologies, the record shows (i.e., in shared theoretical lineages, overlap between the two discipline's presenters and attendees at conferences such as RSA and CCCC, and discipline-crossing faculty appointments) that the two disciplines are deeply complementary, and could derive substantial benefits from continued cross-pollination.

rhetor, and gathered by serendipity in addition to purposeful action (e.g., internet users searching for the talk specifically or a talk with a certain focus).

In executing close readings, I also attend to the relationships between different audience members, addressing the multiplicity in audience text response. McKinnon, Asen, Chávez, and Howard indicate that one of the benefits of 'panning between' a text and its audience(s), as this study does, is that "connecting texts and audiences may amplify the rhetorical dynamics of the text, revealing the ways that texts mean variously for various audiences" (13). Ceccarelli highlights an opportunity in "texts that are experienced by both dominant and marginalized groups in a society and that are interpreted within the structure of intergroup conflict" (402). As I allude to above, this means that my methods are inflected by attention to the multiplicity of the Ted Talks' audiences, both in terms of discrete populations (i.e., online versus in-studio) and intra-audience diversity of subject position and orientation toward rhetor and text. As my analyses demonstrate, my methods accommodate the pluralistic and largely conflicting audience responses, and audience members' varying resistance to and enabling of status quo/normative perceptions of race/gender (which both Hobson and Mac intervene against).

Digital Methods and Considerations: Access, Form, and Flow

Given that my focus texts exist in an online setting (and in the case of user comments, are "born-digital" texts), it is imperative to consider the technological affordances that shape the texts, their environment, and the social dynamics of interlocutors in that environment. As Aaron Hess points out, "digital rhetoric…changes the nature of how rhetoric is expressed," including how technologies both constrain and expand the means of text production (7). Brian Ott also calls upon critics to account for "the unique suasory character of digital messages, their intertextual invitations, their

affective appeals, their interactive features, their navigational modes, their technological affordances, and their algorithmic actions," identifying the "form, function, and flow of digital messages" as key components in digital text analysis (238-9). It is clear, then, that rhetoricians who analyze digital texts must, therefore, be prepared to identify the particular affordances of a text's associated technologies (including the platform upon which a text appears, the media used to produce the text, the dynamics of circulation that enable audience formation, and so on), and how these affordances impact the shape of the text and its audience dynamics. Following these crucial observations, I pay special attention to certain features of the digital focus texts (Hobson and Mac's respective TED Talks and their respective comment sections) and their contexts (two distinct web pages). These features include:

- the accessibility of the web pages (including the videos and their comments sections)
- the form of the TED Talks (a sub-eighteen-minute lecture available in both video and transcript forms)
- the form of the comments (text entered into a field by users who chose their own names and avatars)
- the flow of discourse (particularly, between a "talk" and the audience, and among members of the audience).

Countless digital rhetoricians have issued cogent calls for careful adaptation of existing rhetorical methods and my work takes these calls seriously. Tekobbe warns against scholarly approaches (e.g., "remix theory") that "assum[e] that real life methods, strategies, frameworks and practices can be transferred wholesale into digital contexts without adaptation for what is unique about these digital contexts" (43). Eyman's work also calls for *attentive* adaptation of traditional methods such as close-reading for digital

rhetorics; even though he advocates for the development of "digital-native methods for born-digital texts," he points out that "close reading, in the sense of applying our individual faculties to the interpretations of any given text, will nearly always be in play as an undercurrent of other methods" (NP). I follow these astute observations in my work here, by using close-reading methods while—as carefully as possible—accounting for the very specific affordances of the TED Talk platform, its users' uptake of these affordances, and the resulting relationships between rhetor, audience, text, and context.

My data-gathering and coding process leverage a uniquely useful affordance of all digital texts: the capability to rapidly capture and collate images, aggregate comment text, and collate text patterns. In order to set up my analysis, I first analyze the TED Talks' contents and explore the talks' contexts, including the speaker's intersectional axes of being and the timeliness of the talk. In this analysis, I particularly attend to the audio, visual, and alphanumeric characteristics of the talk, though I gave special attention to the rhetorical content of the talk itself, including the main point speaker's use of particular proofs, context, and scope. Next, I collect screen captures (or "screen caps") of the TED Talk's comments, and compile the image files in digital folders, one for each Talk.[52] Using each Talk's image files, I collect both textual information and descriptive information (i.e., usernames) in an Excel file, noting where comments respond to other commenters. The bulk of my analytic labors take place in the final step, in which I collate comments by how "closely" they stick to the TED Talk's main argument. In other words, this final step will place comments along a spectrum, from "directly related," to "extremely tangential" to the main argument, with a "moderately

[52] Although it may seem more expedient to merely capture the textual content of the comments (i.e., through "select all," "copy," and "paste" functions), a.) this is not possible given the website's design, and b.) this strategy could elide useful information such as avatar use and response "nesting" (or, alignment, an important consideration in the online text's design).

tangential" range in between. The "extremely tangential" end of the spectrum is where BFR falls, so I pay special attention to comments that map onto this end of the continuum. Finally, I note the characteristics of the comments (especially gesture) that fall between "moderately tangential" to "extremely tangential," giving attention to commenters' gestures that function to distract, derail, or otherwise move the bulk of the conversation a substantial distance from the main rhetor's point(s).

Application of Intersectional Principles

In executing these particular methods, I make several deliberate choices that stem from my methodological approach: an intersectional scholarly orientation. This orientation takes up the millennia-spanning tradition of treating embodiment and argument as inextricable and co-constituting, and engages feminist thought on the role of intersectional aspects of being (race, gender, abledness, and so on) in social negotiations.[53] In the context of my TED Talk comment analyses, I use intersectional principles to guide my treatment of rhetors' and audiences' embodied dimensions of experience. Particularly, I treat intersectional aspects of being—including gender, abledness, linguistic background, race, and so on—as both mobile and interlocking effects. These conceptions of intersectional axes are heavily influenced by several key scholars: first, I take seriously Carly S. Woods' observations on the importance of treating intersectional axes of being—and how these axes are invoked variously from situation to situation—as "shifting webs of relationships" best accounted for with an eye toward the "mobility" of intersectionality (79). Additionally, I answer Chávez and Griffin's call to avoid using "pop-bead metaphysics"—that is, a conception of identity that treats each intersectional dimension as distinct "beads" on the 'necklace' of identity (8).

[53] Debra Hawhee's work on the body in argument (from ancient Greek contexts to Burkean gesture and symbolic action) provides particularly useful points of entry into this robust, ongoing conversation.

Sara Hayden and D. Lynn O'Brian Hallstein succinctly summarize the properties of "various components of identity as interdependent and codeterminative rather than additive and discrete" (100). In my analyses of my focus texts, I leave room for the "curdling" and interdependence of identity factors, or how intersectional axes of being may congeal together in a single person, with multiple axes acting upon one another to create an identity compound distinct from its constituting elements.

Intersectional sensibilities also guide my prioritization of particular identity dimensions in my analyses of each Ted Talk and its audience's responses. As many intersectional scholars indicate, addressing the effects of various facets of identity in varying texts and social situations requires a critic's attention to which details 'bubble to the top'—or reveal themselves as most relevant—in a given rhetorical situation. Hayden and O'Brien Hallstein provide a cogent explanation for this type of structure: "when engaging with intersectional work, such choices [foregrounding of certain axes of identity] are not only *inevitable*, they are *necessary* in order to put intersectional thinking into practice, to develop a method of analysis" (Hayden and O'Brien Hallstein 104).[54] My uptake of this intersectional imperative plays out in my analyses as a prioritization of identity components form case to case. For example, in my coverage of Hobson's "Color-Blind or Color Brave?" talk, I bring race to the foreground, as a central component of Hobson's talk as well as an aspect of her embodied existence. I attend to gender—and its impact on how her race is perceived and responded to by audience members—as well, with the understanding that these axes are explicitly and/or implicitly

[54] It is important to note that Hayden and O'Brien Hallstein present this explanation as part of their advocacy for intersectional *feminist* analyses deploying sex/gender in particular as their "point of departure" (106). These scholars point out that, while other intersectional scholars may make different decisions about "which provisions should be attended to, when, and why," intersectional *feminist* scholars "place sex/gender at the forefront" of their research (106; 97). Following these salient points, I consider my analyses mobilizations of intersectionality, but not definitively *feminist* intersectional work.

invoked in her being and gestures. Other axes may also be relevant, but I examine the former identity components as the axes that rhetor and audience noticeably mobilize as part of the talk and part of audiences' reception of this talk.[55]

[55] Other axes are certainly present—i.e., age and national origin—but I prioritize the identity aspects that I find most operative in rhetor and audiences' rhetorical actions.

CHAPTER 4

BAD FAITH RHETORICS IN THE COMMENT SECTION OF JUNO MAC'S "THE LAWS THAT SEX WORKERS REALLY WANT"

In this chapter, I overview TED's history, objectives, and design; summarize and analyze Juno Mac's talk; identify and analyze the forms of bad faith rhetorics that appear in the comments section on her talk's TED page; and briefly discuss some commenters' attempts to mitigate BFR in the comment sections. The bulk of this chapter is a "BFR tour," or a summarization and explication of various commenters' BFR practices. BFR is a 'family' of related practices that have recognizable shared traits (discussion derailing and knowledge-blocking qualities), but the branches of its 'family tree' are both numerous and tangled. To ease readers' assessment of BFR's various subtypes, I offer a brief overview of BFR types—a basic taxonomy—below.

In this dissertation, I identify and analyze six major types of BFR (several of which also have recognizable sub-types): Delegitimizing BFR, Blocking BFR, "Sea-Lioning"/"Spreading", Non-sequiturs, and Pseudo-stasis.[56] The first type of BFR is *delegitimizing BFR*, or, BFR that works to undermine the importance or legitimacy of the speaker, her argument, or her selected issue. So, put another way, this type of BFR attempts to distract conversational participants (here, the participants in the TED Talk's designated comment section) from the actual content of an argument by *insisting that the speaker, her argument, or her chosen issue are too flawed to take seriously*. Delegitimizing BFR includes ad hominem attacks, the "fallacy fallacy" (claiming that an

[56] This list is not intended to be comprehensive nor absolute, but rather, it is an initial set of categories that *begins* the process of better identifying the many forms that BFR takes in public discourse. Too, like logical fallacies, BFR gestures are often 'slippery,' and could be reasonably characterized as one of several BFR types—this is a problem inherent to categories. I use categories to aid reader comprehension, with the understanding that such groupings must be used flexibly, according to the user's interpretation. My hope is that other scholars will aid in the process of expanding upon and refining this first inventory.

argument is null because it features one or more technical flaws), and *utopian neglect* (interpreting current realities in a utopian way that suggests that no problem exists). The next form of BFR is *blocking BFR*, which, as the name suggests, simply works to *stop the discussion in its tracks* (for example, a commenter who fixates on one very specific flaw or claim and refuses to either engage with the 'bigger picture' or to produce results); this category includes what I call *bunting BFR*, which *redirects the line of conversation, moving the conversation away from its original trajectory/premises*. Bunting BFR includes responses that "explode" the issue at hand (reframing it in terms that are so general that they become unactionable), blame-casting (fixating on blaming people instead of focusing on the problem and its potential solutions), and insisting on discussing a tangentially-related issue instead of the speaker's chosen issue.

Another form of BFR is *"sea-lioning,"*[57] in which the commenter issues a *barrage of questions* (also called "Spreading" in formal debate terms); in this type of BFR response, a commenter will issue a volley of questions (often asking for excessive levels of proof on simple points), distracting other discursive participants from the 'big picture' of the argument and/or more productive, on-task lines of discussion. An additional form of BFR is also a logical fallacy: *non-sequiturs*. This type of response *distracts interlocutors from the main line of discussion* (on-task problem-solving, discussion of specific points, and so on) *by introducing an off-task comment, or non-sequitur*. The final type of BFR is *pseudo-stasis*, or, *a line of questions that appear to pursue stasis—that is, attempting to better establish facts, definition, quality, and/or policy—but block the production of knowledge* (consensus, better-defined dissensus, and/or action) *by refusing to return to the premises of the original argument*.

Talking about TED: History, Objectives, and Design

[57] I further explain this terms and its origin in the BFR analysis sections below.

In 1984, Richard Saul Wurman and Harry Marks produced an event that would highlight the convergences between technology, entertainment, and design—three areas that create the now-familiar acronym "TED" ("History of TED"). This event, the predecessor of TED Talks, showcased a variety of topics and new technologies, including a feature on the compact disc, a demonstration of an e-book, and a talk given by groundbreaking mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot. This event was a financial failure, but Wurman and Marks did not abandon their project, and by 1990 were able to rally the resources necessary to produce an invite-only TED Conference in Monterey, California. The TED Conference was a success, and became an annual event that eventually evolved to include speakers from a much wider array of fields, from music and business to religion and education. In 2001, the nonprofit Sapling Foundation acquired TED, and developed a plan to expand the organization's projects to include an additional conference (TED Global), a prize (TED Prize, offered to help the winner implement "an inspiring, high-impact idea"), and an online presence (TED Talks, which included audio and video content) ("History of Ted"; "TED Prize").

The TED organization (which I refer to simply as "TED" from here on) posted six TED Talks online in 2006, and in the space of a few months, garnered over a million views ("History of TED"). TED Talks' popularity increased stratospherically over the next decade: as of April 2018, the top ten TED Talks clock between twenty-one and fifty million views ("The Most Popular Talks…"). The success of TED allowed the organization to expand its offerings to include additional initiatives such as an ambitious translation program and a fellowship set up to help fund TED conference attendance for "up-and-coming innovators" ("History of TED"). The most important addition to TED's offerings is TEDx, a series of independent, local talks that take place apart from the "official" TED Conferences. The TEDX program's aim is to "help communities, organizations and

individuals to spark conversation and connection through local TED-like experiences" ("TEDx Program").[58] These events greatly expanded the number of TED events, and a brief review of the available TED Talks online shows strong representation from TEDx events. Currently, the talks hosted on the TED website comprise a combination of 'official' TED, TEDx, and TEDed (a variant designed explicitly for educational purposes) presentations.

The "Talks" for which TED became famous are intended to be "powerful" yet brief: most talks are less than eighteen minutes long ("About: Our Organization"). TED Talks comprise a diverse array of lectures, which follow TED's "mission" to be:

> a global community, welcoming people from every discipline and culture who seek a deeper understanding of the world. We believe passionately in the power of ideas to change attitudes, lives and, ultimately, the world. On TED.com, we're building a clearinghouse of free knowledge from the world's most inspired thinkers — and a community of curious souls to engage with ideas and each other, both online and at TED and TEDx events around the world, all year long. ("About: Our Organization")

These talks create opportunities for their audiences to contemplate ideas in an accessible forum, in a short period of time, and in the company (via comment sections) of others who share interest in the topics at hand. In the following section, I discuss the affordances of the TED Talk *web pages*, which mediate the TED Talks and user

[58] It is important to note that TED licenses these events (for free), but that TEDx productions are not organized by TED itself, but rather 'vetted' and implicitly endorsed by TED. As the blurb at the bottom of the TED website page for Juno Mac's TED Talk indicates, TEDx was "was created in the spirit of TED's mission, 'ideas worth spreading," and that the organization "supports independent organizers who want to create a TED-like event in their own community" ("The Laws that…"). In this blurb, we see that TED distances itself slightly from TEDx, even though the latter is clearly affiliated. This may be a liability mitigation move on TED's part, given the near-impossibility of comprehensively screening *all* TEDx content.

interactions—key features of the Talks' and their comments' rhetorical context.

Affordances of the TED Talk Web Pages

As countless digital rhetoric scholars[59] attest, the affordances of a digital text profoundly impact its rhetorical effects. The structure of a website impacts delivery and response. In particular, a website's structure prioritizes certain elements and invites certain types of responses (e.g., commenting). For example, web page layout guides reading order and foregrounds certain pieces of information while 'nesting' other details in a subsection available through a link which the user must click to 'follow.' So, web page layout—much like that of a physical page—privileges certain details and invites particular rhetorical engagements. To illuminate the unique rhetorical dynamics of TED pages, I review elements of the pages in three parts: first, the web artifacts that users *cannot* alter or interact with; next, the web artifacts that users *can* alter; and finally, the general constraints that TED's Community Guidelines establish for users.

Some of the most relevant non-user changeable web artifacts are immediately visible when we navigate to a particular Talk's web page (Figure 1). These features include the dropdown menus at the top of the page (which include options such as "watch," "discover," "attend," and "about"[60]), the embedded video player that allows users to view the Talk, and the "watch next" suggestions generated by a site algorithm (Mac; Hobson). Other non- user-alterable details worth noting include the Talk "details: about the talk" (the default tab displayed below the video player, which include a brief

[59] Including, among many others, Cindy Tekobbe, Aaron Hess, and Douglas Eyman.

[60] "Watch" offers a dropdown menu with options for finding additional TED Talks to watch, including curated "playlists"; "discover" offers a dropdown menu with other resources including the TED Newsletter and blog; "attend" offers a dropdown with links to TED events including its conference; and "about" offers a dropdown menu that links to pages that provide users information about the TED Organization, including about its conferences and programs.

summary, video view

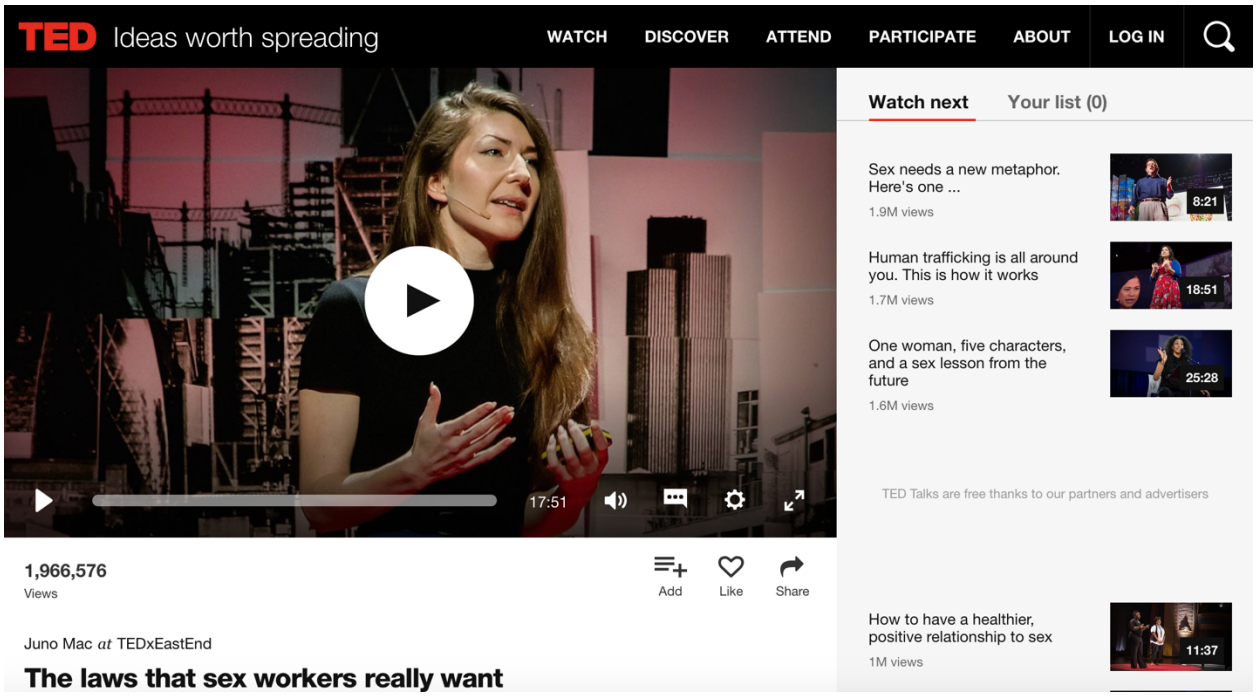


Figure 1: Screen Capture of a the Web Page for a TED Talk

count, Talk presentation date, and "related tags") and an "About the Speaker" blurb. One of the most important design features that users cannot alter is that the comments are not immediately visible, though the user can click on the "comments: join the conversation" link tab (located next to the "details" and "transcript" tabs below the video player). The comments are visible to the public, but users must make a profile and log in before they can add comments of their own. The final element is a standard feature of most comment sections: thread alignments, which dictate that direct responses to the Talk itself are aligned at the left margin, while comments that other users make to this direct response are indented to show that these responses engage first with another comment (as opposed to the Talk in general). In the case of the TED Talk pages, comments that users make to other user's initial comments are indented for ease of reading, and include quoted text if the comment responds to another user's response under the same thread. One of the implications of these features is that, because these

functions cannot be altered by users, the websites design offers specific, relatively limited options which commenters may use to compose.[61]

Several of the web artifacts *are* alterable by users, and these features likewise constitute crucial context in an analysis of a Talk. For example, there is a transcript option (available in approximately twenty languages) users can toggle to suit their preferred language; this affordance facilitates extremely broad access for users. The features that deserve particularly close attention are those the users select for their own user profiles. Users select their user names and avatar—on this front, the TED site fosters the creative agency of its users (and facilitates anonymity if the user desires it). In the Comments section, there are two features that are both common and influential: an "upvote" function and a "report" option. The "upvote" function allows logged-in users to indicate their approval of a comment. Crucially, users can use upvotes to sort comments; in fact, the default order for comment-viewing is by upvotes—users must click the "sort comments by newest" option if they prefer to view the comments in reverse chronological order. Finally, the "report" feature allows users to 'flag' a comment as potentially offensive, threatening, or otherwise in violation of the Community Guidelines (to which users must agree before establishing a user 'handle' and commenting).

The final elements which bear noting are general constraints for users, including maximum character counts for comments and the parameters established in TED's Community Guidelines. Users must limit their responses to two thousand characters, and usually adhere to this guideline. However, in several cases I noted users' comments suddenly cut off (because they did not go back and edit it to under the maximum) or

[61] We must also account for the common phenomenon of users' "workarounds," creative ways to resist site limitations. One prominent example of a web design workaround is Twitter users' numbering of sequential tweets in order to construct a much longer narrative than what fits within the platform's established "maximum" of 280 characters per tweet.

users' comments "stacking" (where they reply to themselves to continue their previous thought). The TED Community Guidelines also impose constraints upon users' comments, encouraging "a commenting culture that encourages robust, thoughtful observations, feelings and insights that bring a talk to life," and discouraging discourse that may impede these "robust, thoughtful observations" ("Our Policies…").[62] The Community Guidelines page explains that "although we don't like doing it, occasionally comments must be removed for the overall health of the TED.com community." This means that the following comments are subject to removal by TED moderators:

- Comments that are "not appropriate for the TED.com audience" (including "pseudoscience, zealotry," and "self-promotion")
- Comments containing inappropriate language (including "text-speak and combatively postured comments")
- Comments responding to an inappropriate comment (users are directed to "please use the Flag button instead")
- Comments which violate Terms of Use
- Comments which "Monopoliz[e] the conversation" ("Excessively posting the same comment or link across multiple talks or in response to multiple comments")
- Comments which engage in stereotyping: ("Sweeping generalizations of any group or individual based on race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or age will be removed, as will comparisons to Nazis")
- Comments that are dishonest ("don't post false information, rumors, or hearsay").

[62] These guidelines are designed to encourage productive rhetorical engagements, in a way, beginning the process of BFR mitigation.

It is particularly relevant to an analysis of BFR to recognize that the above guidelines mean that nearly all comments that transgress against these rules *have been removed*. It is crucial to acknowledge the invisible presence of erased comments between inter-commenter exchanges. Additionally, and even more critically, the parameters TED sets for its commenters means that the versions of BFR I examine here are not by any means the most malicious or 'ugly' versions available. By selecting texts with such guidelines, the TED Talk comment analyses that follow illustrate not only the recurring characteristics of BFR, but also that *comparatively 'polite' or decorous discursive norms do not preclude BFR*. In fact, one of the most crucial observations I make in my comment analyses is that BFR is an insidious phenomenon, generally hiding behind a mask of polite, 'good faith' engagement. In the next section, I overview Juno Mac's background, which informs both her talk and the ways that commenters perceive both the speaker herself and the content of her talk.

Speaker Background: Juno Mac

Juno Mac is a British sex worker and sex-work advocate affiliated with the Sex Work Advocacy and Resistance Movement (SWARM), a collective set up to "advocate for the rights of everyone who sells sexual services" ("Who We Are").[63] SWARM's website explains that their "goal is to build a diverse and inclusive community of sex workers who work together to improve [sex workers'] working conditions and resist violence." As Mac illuminates in her Talk, sex workers' concerns include protection from client violence, police harassment, and labor rights violations (Mac). Mac herself has been highly active in her work with SWARM, engaging in a wide variety of efforts that include leading university-hosted workshops, serving as a consultant for human rights

[63] At the time Mac first presented her TED Talk, SWARM went by its previous moniker, "Sex Worker Open University" ("Who We Are").

organizations such as Amnesty International, lobbying for policy changes, and serving as a conference panelist ("Speakers: Juno Mac"). Mac also develops community support systems ("facilitat[ing] skill-sharing and support spaces for fellow sex workers") and amplifies the voices and creative work of sex workers (e.g., serving as curator for exhibit of sex workers' art).

Mac invokes several specific identity elements in "The Laws that Sex Workers Really Want," the TED Talk she debuted in January 2016. These identity 'nodes' allow her to construct a uniquely impactful ethos. Most relevantly, she identifies as a sex worker, a gesture that lays the groundwork for a talk that is both informed by well-founded research and bolstered by the speaker's ability to offer an insider perspective on her topic (Mac 1:17). Another crucial identity revelation Mac makes is that she is a feminist, a direct gesture that implicitly supports her later points about sex worker agency (12:25). By emphasizing that she identifies as a feminist, she forestalls resistance from listeners who might delegitimize her talk on the grounds that sex workers are thoroughly-objectified victims of circumstance.[64] Here, Mac emphasizes her own ability to think and act as a free-willed woman, supporting her point that sex workers as agentive beings who may speak for themselves. A final detail to which we should attend is that of her class—Mac mentions early in her talk that she was struggling financially when she decided to take on sex work. While this revelation says very little about the class into which she was born and raised, it does place her in a particular position in terms of her topic. She points out that lack of money often motivates people to move into

[64] Mac articulates feminism as the pursuit of equality for all women, a definition that fits with many (but not all) forms of feminism. She does not explicitly specify which of the many branches of feminism she considers herself a part; however, she does emphasize that "LGBTQ people, particularly trans women," people of color, migrants, and other minority groups are particularly at risk for abuse, and advocates for their centrality in the issue of currently dangerous sex work legislation (Mac 10:01). I offer that, in combination with additional reminders she offers throughout her talk, she implicitly identifies as at least nominally intersectional, and that by affirming the importance of accounting for trans women's needs, she implicitly *dis-identifies* as a TERF (Trans-exclusionary, radical feminist).

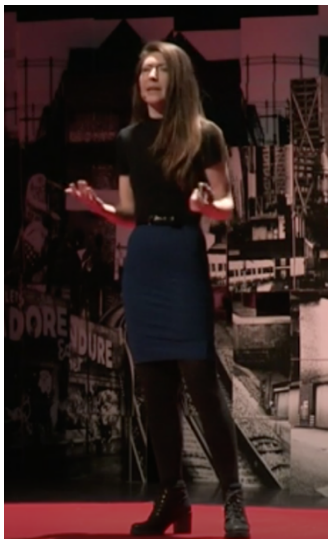
sex work, and that clients' position of being able to pay for sex demarcates financially uneven ground, between a client with money and a sex worker who needs this money. Her evocation of class concerns, like her identifications as a woman and as a feminist, places her in a position to speak to the realities of sex workers, which include financial realities.

In addition to the identity components to which Mac explicitly draws our attention, it is also necessary to identify several unmentioned aspects of Mac's embodied existence that may impact her audience's perceptions. First, Mac presents as female, although she does not explicitly identify herself a cis-gendered woman.[65] Additionally, Mac is, by current standards, attractive: she has symmetrical and memorable facial features, is slender, and has well-groomed hair and nails. Another feature of her appearance that bears noting is her style of dress: she wears dress that is trendy yet relatively conservative, feminine, and professional—a fitted, professional-looking skirt with a belt; a high-necked shirt; tights; and low, laced boots; all solid shades of blue and black. Her outfit projects a businesslike persona, that of a woman who is "put-together," someone who is here to convey information and propose action.[66] (Figure 2)

Figure 2: Juno Mac presenting her TED Talk in January 2016.

[65] It is crucial to make the distinction here between a person who self-identifies as a woman and a person whose appearance evokes characteristics that match the traditional image of "woman." Even though Mac *implicitly* identifies as a woman throughout her talk, I find it important for us to consider that she may not in fact identify this way; consequently, I refer to her here as "female-presenting."

[66] Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson discuss rhetorical enactment—the body's impact on rhetorical efficacy—in their introduction to *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action*. Like Barbara Jordan's speech (in Campbell and Jamieson's example), Mac's embodied factors (e.g., style of dress) invigorate her argument.



Even as I highlight these aspects of Mac's embodied way of being in the world, I offer a caution to remember that her talk mentions her own background only briefly. The majority of her talk is dedicated to her description of sex work policy, and to her advocacy for particular actions. She foregrounds her research and calls to action, using her personal experiences only as supplements. I attend to the embodied aspects of her being as a necessary factor in audience reception. In short, it is crucial to privilege the content of her talk, but still attend somewhat to the factors that impact her audience's rhetorical experience of her complex, multimodal text. In the following section, I briefly summarize Mac's TED Talk, which—together with factors of Mac's appearance and explicitly invoked identity components—provide the content to which comment section participants respond.

Brief Overview: Juno Mac's "The Laws that Sex Workers Really Want"

In her TED talk, Juno Mac tackles the tricky subject of sex work, explicating the effects of four legal frameworks on the sex work industry. These legal frameworks are 1.) full criminalization, 2.) partial criminalization, 3.) the "Nordic model," and 4.) legalization. In a tightly-structured, cohesive lecture, Mac draws her audience's attention to the risks involved with sex work, explaining how most prohibition-based sex work

laws not only do not reduce prostitution, but they also increase sex workers' vulnerability to violence and coercion. She follows her overview of the four most common legal approaches to sex work policy with a proposal rooted in sex workers' needs for protection from abuses—an approach based upon New Zealand's 2003 legislation. This legal approach not only decriminalizes sex work, but also sets up labor rights for sex workers, established in consultation with the workers themselves. Mac's main argument is, in short: sex workers want full decriminalization and labor rights as workers, because the current four models do *not* reduce sex work, but *do* compound the risks associated with the profession.

Mac neatly adumbrates the main characteristics of the four most common legal approaches to sex work, covering the rationale behind these approaches and their respective typical outcomes. The first approach she explains is that of "full criminalization," an approach used in South Africa, Russia, and most of the United States. This legal framework criminalizes all parties involved: sex worker, client, and affiliated parties such as brothel keepers. Mac points out that flaws in this approach include 1.) that it reduces sex workers' chances of procuring traditional jobs later (as the result of a criminal record), and 2.) that "being criminalized leaves you exposed to mistreatment by the state itself," a phenomenon well-documented in countries such as Cambodia (2:59). The next approach she explicates is that of partial criminalization, policies used in the UK and France, "where the buying and selling of sex are legal, but surrounding activities, like brothel-keeping or soliciting on the street, are banned" (4:01). Mac explains that this often leads to solicitation taking place in hidden and rushed (and hence riskier) settings, and reduces the protections associated with working in groups (as "brothel keeping" is defined as two or more sex workers operating out of one space) (4:19). The third approach is the "Swedish or Nordic Model," also termed the

"end demand" approach, which criminalizes not the seller but the buyer. Mac observes that this policy renders clients skittish, which makes both client vetting and secure location procurement difficult. The final common approach is that of legalization, implemented in the Netherlands, Germany, and Nevada, or "state-controlled prostitution, [where] commercial sex can only happen in certain legally-designated areas or venues, and sex workers are made to comply with special restrictions, like registration and forced health checks" (8:02). She indicates that complying with the regulations imposed upon sex work under this model is difficult, and often creates two markets: a legal market (for well-funded, legally-savvy businesses) and an illegal market (for migrants and other vulnerable populations who do not have access to the capital, legal literacy, or legal documents necessary to a legitimate operation).

After explaining the rationale behind the four common means of legislating sex work, Mac goes into further detail about approximate sex worker demographics, cultural perceptions surrounding sex work, and the social consequences of contemporary sex work. She points out that attempting to prohibit sex work is likely a function of fact that sex work "is and has always been a survival strategy for unpopular minority groups: people of color, migrants, people with disabilities, [and] LGBTQ people, particularly trans women" (9:48). In other words, prohibition laws are informed by social hierarchies constructed around historically ostracized populations. Mac also observes that people also oppose sex work because of trafficking concerns, but she makes the salient point that trafficking victims are forced to work in a wide variety of industries besides sex work, particularly the agriculture and hospitality sectors. Mac ends this segment of her talk by addressing the perception that sex work is "degrading." She points out that "people have all kinds of complicated feelings when it comes to sex," but that these feelings should not keep legislative bodies from protecting workers from the risks

associated with sex work—an industry she has thoroughly demonstrated cannot be eliminated via laws (13:43).

Mac ends her talk with a call to emulate the legislation New Zealand implemented in 2003, which decriminalizes sex work and offers sex workers labor rights. She calls on her audience to understand that sex workers "have the right to work safely and on [their] own terms" (17:02). Mac explains that there are organizations, such as the Sex Worker Open University (now named the Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement) and the English Collective of Prostitutes, who advocate for the needs of sex workers, often in collaboration with international advocacy organizations such as the World Health Organization and Amnesty International. She also issues a strident call for people to listen to sex workers, and to consider these workers agentive beings, not victims who are "too damaged to know what's best for [themselves]" (16:12).

There are a few key details particularly worth noting in this talk. First and foremost, Mac not only self-identifies as a feminist, but also repeatedly demonstrates feminist values throughout her talk, including the imperative to not "talk over" women, delegitimize their judgment, and/or limit their legal rights. Additionally, she addresses the intersectionality of sex work policy as an issue, as it heavily impacts people of color, migrants, and LGBTQ people. As Mac emphasizes, sex work occurs along not only gendered, but also classed lines.[67] Overall, Mac's argument *challenges the status quo* not only on sex work (traditionally a women's issue), but also on how we think of migrants and trafficking—the face that she challenges the (deeply entrenched) norms of gender, sexuality, class, and human migration make this talk a particularly rich area for exploring BFR. Second, her talk uses her own experiences, but is also markedly research-

[67] As Mac notes, "most buyers of sex are men with money, and most sellers are women without" (12:32).

forward and cogent. Mac deploys a few well-selected visuals (e.g., a map showing the wide global distribution of sex worker collectives) and what personal anecdotes she uses are balanced by empirical data. Overall, her talk offers a sophisticated, intersectional view of a global issue, and does so in a way that privileges both her 'insider' perspective and the 'big picture' perspective afforded by her research.

Mac engages in epistemological work on several fronts: she *intervenes* against current, problematic norms for sex work, *analyzes* concrete examples of the issue she's identified, and *produces solutions* based upon a problem that she asserts is both 'real' and solvable. She builds knowledge on the sex worker perspective (which includes clearing up misconceptions and offering an intervention)—a feminist effort to disturb received knowledge about sex work. These contributions move toward better social relations and policy, offering what Phillips terms "alternative rhetorics." These gestures allow her to contribute to understandings of the issue at hand, and to put forth potential plans of action that work to resolve the issue. Too, she explicitly invites her audience to join her in these endeavors, a gesture I find particularly typical of feminist knowledge-building efforts: these efforts work to produce understandings and actions, encouraging collaborative rhetorical work. In short: Mac's epistemological efforts consist of her using her particular insights and research to *clarify, analyze,* and *build* knowledge around the issue of sex workers' safety and the impact of policy on this safety. In the following section, I address the ways in which respondents engage with Mac's epistemological labors, in a wide variety of comments that range from "on-task," generative engagements to various bad faith rhetorical gestures.

BFR 'in the Wild': Derailing, Stymying, and Distracting Comments

The comments from Mac's TED Talk display a wide variety of responses, which I sort into three general categories: on-task, substantive responses; superficial responses;

and BFR.[68] On the topic of the first category, it is worth noting that a large proportion of the responses to Mac's talk do allow participants to contribute to Mac's knowledge-building efforts on the topic of sex work policy. On-task, substantive comments discuss the individual merits or shortcomings of Mac's suggestions, 'testing' or adding to her claims and/or proposals without derailing the discussion. The second category, superficial responses, express varying degrees of approval of the talk without engaging its subject matter. Comments in this category amount to "I liked it" or "I did not like it." The third category encompasses various forms of BFR, including: delegitimizing the speaker, talk, issue, and/or TED platform; offering up non-sequiturs that lead the conversation "down the rabbit hole"; sea-lioning/spreading; pseudo-stasis questioning, inquiring in directions that occlude the original argument's content; and generally blocking the conversation, refusing to move toward consensus or better-defined dissensus.

Delegitimizing BFR

Type 1: Delegitimizing the Speaker

The first and most common type of BFR present in the comment section below Mac's talk is comprised of efforts to delegitimize Mac herself, her argument (premise or execution), her issue's validity as a problem that needs solving, and/or TED as a platform. These forms of BFR "pull the rug out from under" Mac and/or her argument by making the implicit claim that her argument has no value, and that her audience should not take her argument seriously.[69] Responses that fall into this category do not

[68] It is important to keep in mind that, as I mention earlier, these categories are all relative, existing on a spectrum of "on-task, knowledge-building" to "blatant attempts to impede epistemological progress," with a broad territory between the two extremes. These categories are meaningful *in relation to one another*, and consequently should not be considered empirical or absolute categories.

[69] Comments impugning Mac herself are, of course, a form of *ad hominem*, though in this case the attacks on Mac still adhere to TED's Community Standards, as they do not incite violence or utilize slurs.

contribute to the epistemological progress in which Mac engages: these comments do not engage substantively (if at all) with the content of her argument, and seek to persuade other comment section readers that they likewise do not need to engage with her content. These comments amount to silencing efforts, attempting to 'hush' Mac and 'shut down' other commenters who engage with her material. The subtext of this form of BFR may be parsed as: "I have *disqualified* this speaker, argument, etc.; consequently, the conversation should be over."

Several of the comments that work to delegitimize Mac make the claim that she is non-representative of her profession, or that she and other sex workers should not be listened to by virtue of their bias and/or criminality. First, I examine claims about Mac's representativeness: in one comment, Areometer[70] claims that they[71] had personal experience working with sex workers from multiple countries, stating "not everything that Juno says here reflects the great majority of sex workers. In fact, most of it doesn't at all" (Comments: Mac). Other commenters echo this sentiment: Epigamic speculates that "Juno is speaking for the percentage of sex workers that freely choose to participate," positing that "probably it is the minority," posting further down the same thread that "most women promoting sex work are the ones with good enough finances to sit around on the internet all day justifying their life choices and speaking for the other 95% of sex workers who can't." Comments such as these claim that Mac is part of a

[70] Although TED Talk comments are posted publicly, under names that users select themselves (with their preferred degree of anonymity), I have taken the extra step of assigning pseudonyms from the random username generation tool at www.bestrandoms.com/random-username-generator. Usernames can often be traced back to a person's identity, and my purpose here is not to 'call out' individual BFR practitioners in the TED comments. So, while it is not *necessary* to use pseudonyms for publicly-posted comments, I choose to do so as a courtesy.

[71] I use the gender-neutral singular pronoun 'they' throughout this document for commenters. While several commenters do include traditionally male (e.g., "Greg") or female ("Cassie") names in their usernames, I find that assigning gendered pronouns is unnecessary and potentially problematic. The gendered dimensions of usernames and avatars in online comments—especially BFR—is something that I will attend to in future publications, but is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

privileged minority of sex workers, or an outlier within a larger population. Critiquing the representativeness of a sample is a valid critical gesture; however, these commenters neglect the sex work advocacy groups (such as the SWOU, now SWARM) Mac mentions that she collaborates with, which coordinate with many other sex workers across the globe (15:34). Furthermore, these rhetors do not follow up their claims with evidence, even in cases where they allude to "studies" that indicate the supposedly *sui generis* nature of Mac's perspective. In making claims that Mac does not accurately convey the needs of the majority of sex workers, these commenters missed a key detail, or chose to ignore it, using these omissions to make claims that undermine her authority as a local expert on sex work and compiler of research.

The next set of comments that undermine Mac's authority as a speaker highlight her *bias as a sex worker*, a claim produced by one respondent across multiple threads. In one instance, Epigamic states their disagreement with Mac's talk, going on to explain that "this is due to [her] talking as a sex worker, so [her] view is very bias [sic]." This person later extends this claim to other sex worker advocates, asserting that "there are many myths that have been established by sex work advocates"[72] (Comments: Mac). These claims, in an interesting contrast to claims of her outlier status, delegitimize Mac's ethos by virtue of her *insider*, biased standpoint. Discrediting Mac's ability to make claims as an 'objective' rhetor, like claims of her non-representativeness, block responses to the content of her argument by claiming a fundamental flaw in the speaker, one which supposedly renders her claims moot.[73]

The final form of speaker-discrediting BFR does so indirectly, by highlighting the

[72] In the context of this commenter's other responses, I read this statement not as a claim that sex work advocates *knowingly* distribute misinformation, but rather, that they inadvertently spread falsehoods via their supposed bias.

[73] Like several other forms of BFR, this gesture is also a logical fallacy—here, *ad hominem*.

"criminal" nature of all sex workers (which, of course, includes Mac). In a thread discussing sex workers' limited ability to summon police help due to threat of arrest or fine, Nullism compares sex work with other "criminal activity," saying that "one can provide a list of how a criminal practicing each [activity] would want things to be for him or her." The same commenter also suggests that "if they are afraid to report because they are acting illegally [...] stop doing that work." These responses suggest that a "criminal," which they take to include sex workers, wants unreasonable outcomes (safety from both violence *and* legal sanctions), and that the problem in question (fear preventing sex workers' ability to get police assistance) is one that sex workers bring upon themselves by breaking the law. There is, of course, some validity in the point that engaging in work prohibited by law opens a person up to arrest or fines; however, the commenter's responses direct attention away from the actual content of Mac's point, which is that the illegality of sex work contributes to the *existing problem* of violence in their trade. Rather than proposing a solution, this respondent is invalidating sex worker's need for protection because of their "criminal" activity—this blocks epistemological progress by making a statement that functionally operates as "the sex workers just shouldn't have broken the law in the first place, so why should we bother to engage with the actually-existing problem?" In sum, this commenter mobilizes the idea that sex workers are "criminals" to dismiss the need for current solutions to the violence these workers frequently suffer. Instead, this commenter chooses to highlight the merits of an imagined case in which the sex worker never transgressed against particular laws.[74]

Type 2: Delegitimizing the Argument

Other delegitimizing BFR comments seek to discredit the argument itself, by

[74] Privileging an 'alternate reality' that imagines circumstances other than those which actually exist (that is, BFR practitioners imagine *forestalling* sex work or "criminal" activity instead of grappling with current fact of sex work) is a recurring motif in BFR responses to Mac's talk.

content and/or form. These comments do so by disqualifying the argument for technical errors and/or devaluing the argument because of the limitations of its proposed actions (undermining the validity of the argument's scope). It is important to note that pointing out technical errors, even errors that undermine the main content of the argument, does not always constitute BFR. *Robust* description of the error, and an awareness of the 'untainted' parts of the argument allow the comment to avoid bad faith. In other words, while pointing out an error is not necessarily in bad faith, this gesture *does* constitute bad faith if it only points out a specific error and refuses to acknowledge the rest of the argument, or to examine the work the error does in depth. In the case of argument-disqualifying comments, these responses delegitimize the argument by immediately moving to disqualify the argument based upon its supposedly flawed execution and/or its proposed actions, with only peremptory engagement with the argument's actual content. Consequently, this variety of response constitutes BFR.

Several commenters focus upon technical errors to discredit Mac's argument. In one example, Areometer claims that Mac "uses strawman arguments at times and sometimes completely false assertions," though the commenter does not provide examples of such spurious claims.[75] In another response, Regrate states that Mac "mention[s] pointless statements (those that don't impact the thesis) […] wast[ing] the audience's time," and that "the fact that some sex workers enjoy their jobs doesn't provide any momentum to her argument."[76] These commenters make validity claims and focus on structural components of Mac's argument to critique it, and decline to provide

[75] This commenter does provide what first appears to be an example of a claim they find inaccurate ("One thing I will point out is that there is an assertion underlying the whole talk that sex work is the only option for some women"), but then indicates that it may, actually, reflect a real situation ("this sadly may be the case but the point her[e] is that it SHOULDN'T be").

[76] It is worth noting that, in this last claim, the commenter is actually missing one of Mac's key points: that, like most people, some sex workers love their work and some hate it. She uses this point to draw a parallel between sex workers and people with other jobs, observing that sex workers, too, deserve workplace protections.

examples to illustrate their points. In both cases, these responses make critiques, but fail to substantiate these critiques and/or contextualize them vis à vis the original argument (the latter a valid practice in formal textual criticism). Overall, these comments dismiss Mac's argument by insisting on the primary relevance of *technical issues* over the argument's content. These responses do not contribute to better dissensus or consensus, as they fail to recognize or engage with any parts of Mac's argument other than those they perceive to be flawed.

Another way in which commenters discredit Mac's argument is by suggesting that the actions she proposes are only a stop-gap measure, and that some larger action will eliminate the issue. This type of response, unlike several others, does actually attend to the content of Mac's argument, in what would be the beginning of substantive, potentially good faith engagement. However, the features that distinguish this type of response from productive engagement is that it privileges a *hypothetical future situation* (which forestalls discussion altogether) over addressing the *current reality* (sex workers' need for protection from violence), an urgent exigence to which Mac's chosen approach explicitly responds. In misrecognizing (accidentally or otherwise) the parameters of Mac's argument and instead responding to the parameters of what would be a fundamentally different argument, this is a typical example of 'failing to take a text on its own terms,' a reading and critique approach that is flawed from its inception.

Epigamic states that "decriminalization," for which Mac stringently advocates, "is only a temporary 'fix' that does not address the root reasons for sex work even being an option for women world wide [sic]." This commenter goes on to suggest universal basic income and "full immersion virtual reality" as a way to "reduce" sex work. This comment suggests that the solution to the problem Mac outlines is *reduction* of sex work, which misses central premises of her talk: 1.) that sex work exists, so protections for sex

workers need to likewise exist, and 2.) that sex work is not in and of itself "bad." By proposing two measures—universal basic income and improved virtual reality tech—designed to "reduce" sex work, the commenter moves the line of discussion away from Mac's plea for protective measures from actual, current incidences of violence in sex work. In other words, this commenter proposes a "solution" that is more a suggestion of an alternate reality (in which sex work does not exist because of improved technology and social support systems) than a solution for an immediate, concrete problem (sex worker's real vulnerability to abuse). These gestures distract from Mac's main aim, producing solutions to an existing problem, in favor of the commenter's preferred imagined future; the privileging of the respondent's imagined ideal over the speaker's current reality is a hallmark of BFR.

Another commenter takes a similar tack, distracting from the core points of Mac's argument—which act upon current realities—by focusing on prevention. Like the above example, this response claims that social support systems could reduce the prevalence of sex work, which indirectly "solves" the problem of violence against workers in the industry. Areometer responds to Mac's point that sex work is the only recourse for some women, writing that "this sadly night be the case but her point her[e] is that it SHOULDN'T be […] what we need to do is have systems and people in place to help these vulnerable women WITHOUT demanding that they sell their own bodies." Like Epigamic, Areometer attempts to promote a solution to violence against sex workers based upon a gross reduction of the industry's size. The same BFR-related problem holds here: in suggesting that the problem (violence and stigma against sex workers) should be tackled by an elimination of the profession, this commenter is neglecting the current state of affairs (which Mac explicitly tackles in her talk) in favor of a more utopian reality, hypothetically realizable through large-scale social efforts. This response likewise

draws attention away from the specific, current problem Mac seeks to address, and claims that a more sound solution is rooted in a hypothetical reality in which sex work does not exist.

Type 3: Delegitimizing the Issue

The final category of delegitimizing BFR comments focuses on the problem upon which Mac's argument focuses—in this case, sex workers' vulnerability to violence and exploitation. Comments in this vein either present the issue as a lost cause or an issue that has already been solved (or is accounted for with existing social frameworks). For example, Chiffonier starts a new thread with a statement of disagreement with Mac, and the query, "if we cannot legislate the overuse of Drugs, Alcohol, War, and Weapons out of existence, what makes us think we can legislate Sexual behaviors?" This commenter's question brings up the central proposal Mac makes in her talk—that the legal framework surrounding prostitution should be altered to feature laws protecting sex workers—and simply expresses the supposed futility of this approach. Beyond offering this dismissal, the comment does not respond to Mac's main claims, and explicitly undermines the necessity of the conversation, which constitutes a rhetorical 'roadblock.' In another comment, Nullism claims that "if any [sex worker] – or any human being—is physically harmed by another, criminal action is to be taken against the perp; no one sacrifices his/her humanity even when he/she acts illegally." This comment delegitimizes the exigence Mac relates (the current issue of violence against sex workers) by stating that the present legal framework *does* afford sex workers protection from violence. In these remarks, the commenter delegitimizes the problem Mac seeks to remedy by implying that, because sex workers can take legal action against a violent individual, the issue is functionally already 'solved.' These comments both fail produce knowledge on the topic

at hand *and* discourage other commenters from engaging, by gesturing toward the futility or redundancy of Mac's claims.

The 'Big Picture': All Types of Delegitimizing BFR

Comments that delegitimize the speaker, argument, or issue itself engage in BFR by derailing or blocking the knowledge-building process in which Mac engages. First, consider the work that *author-impugning* comments do. Impugning Mac's ethos—which these commenters do to undermine her argument and derail its work—impede her advocacy for changes in current sex work legislation. Her argument cannot proceed—or will do so fitfully—if her credibility is poor. However, there is an important qualification to make here: there *is* a long tradition of rhetors integrating personal invective to parry an opponent's remarks, as Cicero's body of work well demonstrates,[77] into rhetorical ripostes. However, ethos-strikes in classical rhetorics—which, like these comments, often occurred in open forums—avoided engaging in "fly-bys," that is, making poorly-grounded and brief comment then departing the 'stage.' Peppering in a few comments then leaving the forum before directly critiquing the content of the other's argument would leave the critic's own ethos in tatters, and would not actually advance the critic's aims[78]. In other words, as countless texts from the rhetorical tradition attest, assailing an opponent's ethos can be a valid tactic, but in order for this gesture to be part of an overall *strategy* that actually advances their rhetorical aims, the critic needs to specify particular counterpoints (e.g., the alternative actions one might suggest in a debate over policy) *in addition* to weakening their opponent's credibility. A critique of an opponent's ethos does little to counter an argument on its own: it must be an integrative part of a larger

[77] See James Mays *Trials of Character: The Eloquence of Ciceronian Ethos* for examples of Cicero's penchant for manipulating ethos to further his argumentative ends.

[78] The one exception is that of arguments set up to block a person's appointment (political or otherwise), in which case the critic's aim *is* explicitly to disqualify their opponent, as opposed to the disqualifications being external to the argument's content.

counter-argument to do substantive rhetorical work. In sum: it is follow-through that allows a discussion that includes an attack on ethos to be part of productive (non-BFR) rhetorics, and the above author-delegitimizing comments do little more than derail the argument over sex work legislation. Consequently, these comments constitute BFR.

Next, I draw our attention to the comments that delegitimize the *argument* through technical disqualifications. These interventions criticize one or more elements of Mac's talk—in this case, some purported flaw in the structure or scope of Mac's argument—and treat this element in isolation. If I were to criticize these commenters' remarks in the way they impugned Mac's, I would accuse these rhetors of cherry-picking, then simply leave it at that. However, as I have an interest in substantive, productive critique—here, a disagreement that can lead to future action or the crafting of a better-defined issue—I follow this critique with an explanation and alternative. Here, the commenters attempt to engage in critique by drawing their audience's attention to a specific element in Mac's argument, in these cases, an element that reveals a supposed flaw in Mac's talk. If these rhetors wished to engage in productive debate, their comments would have to do more than just dismiss Mac's argument because of one aspect of that talk. In other words, a technical critique does not have to be BFR, but a technical critique cannot be any more than BFR if it does not produce a better-defined disagreement or produce content that advances the debate in some way. To give one example of *non-BFR* technical critique, consider Pteridology's comment that, although they "respect Juno" and label her talk "thought-provoking," that they take issue with "lack of depth" in her description of the Nordic model. This commenter goes on to claim that "there is overwhelming evidence for the effectiveness of this legal framework an implementation," and briefly unpacks their reasoning. In making these interventions, Pteredology problematizes one of Mac's main points, in a way that also somewhat

critiques her research and analysis practices. Put another way, this respondent is offering technical criticisms of Mac's talk. However, this respondent does nothing to impugn the rest of Mac's points (or the speaker herself), making focused and well-qualified criticisms that do not veer into BFR territory. In sum, there is a valid place for technical critiques, but the critics offering up technical critiques would have to engage with the content of an argument (as Pteredology does in the above examples) to be more than hecklers. Technical criticism without thoughtful qualification amounts to nothing more than 'jeering from the stands,' or, BFR gestures that cannot produce better consensus or understandings.

Finally, let us examine the BFR gestures that dismiss the validity of *the issue* under consideration. In the examples above, commenters engage in this kind of BFR by casting the issue at hand (the current high rate of violence against sex workers, and how legal frameworks do not prevent, or actually exacerbate, the problem) as an issue that does not require intervention because it is either a lost cause or an issue to which solutions already exist. These responses dismiss Mac's argument as an intervention against a null cause. These commenters not only do no contribute to consensus or better-defined dissensus, but their comments implicitly make the case that others should likewise not bother to engage in a discussion over an un-ameliorable problem or one that is already solved. The latter reaction is the more insidiously bad faith response, as it implies that Mac's well-defined, carefully-researched talk is an overreaction, or an intervention that ignores a straightforward or preexisting solution. This response can be parsed as "this speaker's intervention is unnecessary." Both the idea of Mac's talk as futile and her advocacy as unneeded block the entirety of her argument, publicly suggesting that audiences need not heed Mac's argument, and need not debate the various merits of her approach. In the following section, I shift our focus away from

delegitimizing gestures, moving onto BFR responses that *distract* readers from the points of Mac' talk, or *block* the progress of discussion that might otherwise follow along the lines of Mac's original argument.

Bunting BFR: Blocking Progress via Redirection

The second most common form of BFR to appear in responses to Mac's talk is what I refer to as argumentative "bunting," one way to block the progress of the discussion. Bunting comments either forcibly insist on redirecting the audience/respondents' attention to something that is tangential to original argument's focus or insists upon blocking another respondent's point by refusing to allow the conversation to progress until the other has satisfied the conditions they specify. In the latter case, this type of BFR typically appears via the BFR practitioner's insistence that an interlocutor provide exhaustive proof for a claim they have advanced. An important feature of this kind of BFR is that it just as frequently occurs as a response to another commenter's point as it does in response to the original argument. Put another way, this is a form of BFR that is often directed at other participants in the comment section, and may occur as an *indirect* response to the original argument—instead of responding to an argument with a *direct* derailing or distracting response, this gesture interferes with other respondents' contributions to the conversation.

In one example of bunting BFR, Epigamic redirects Pietat's suggestion that Epigamic "challenge [themselves] to support [their] claims with research!" (a move that could lead to knowledge sharing and production). Epigamic demurs to take this suggestion, instead demanding that Pietat "show me proof that decriminalizing or legalizing sex work 1) Greatly reduces harm to women 2) Does not harm the human rights of non-sex workers then I will gladly change my point of view." This engages in bunting in two ways: it directs attention to the 'side' of Mac's chosen focus (to harm to

"non-sex workers") and directs the other commenter's attention back to their own intervention instead of addressing it. On the topic of the latter response, it is useful to consider the gesture Epigamic makes here: their response is the conversational equivalent of 'you first!', which, instead of addressing the other commenter's concerns, attempts to shift the burden of research back onto the other respondent without providing proof of their own. In the former, Epigamic draws attention to the rights of "non-sex workers," an issue tangential to the work Mac's talk does (building understandings of the current dangers *to sex workers* and producing potential solutions). In making these argumentative moves, this commenter is moving the line of argument away from the specific problem Mac works to solve, and refuses to acknowledge or address Pietat's exhortation that Epigamic substantiate their own specific claims.

One of the most interesting forms of BFR-bunting is when a respondent directs attention to something they *incorrectly* indicate is outside the scope of the original argument. This gesture requires misinterpreting or co-opting the terms of the original argument, in what often appear to be deliberately obtuse or dense responses. This type of BFR takes the form of "but what about [very specific party or consideration related to argument]?"[79] This gesture, patently familiar to frequent participants in internet discourse, insists that readers attend to the *specific consideration* upon which the respondent themselves prefers to focus, at the expense of the original rhetor's chosen argumentative priorities. In the case of the comment section on Mac's talk, Condign provides a prototypical version of this response, following another writer's suggestion that governments attempt to provide support systems that preempt prostitution: "excuse me, but there are lots of male sex workers." This commenter misses, or ignores, the fact

[79] An example of "whataboutism"-style BFR.

that Mac's proposed legislation adjustments would benefit male sex workers, even though she identifies the issue as mostly affecting women. What is especially telling about this comment is that these ten words are the entirety of this commenter's response. In the interest of transparency, it is useful to note that the previous commenter, after which Condign's interjection appears, does solely refer to female sex workers. However, Condign's response does no work to substantively intercede on the behalf of male sex workers, and more importantly, utterly fails to acknowledge that the solutions Mac suggests in her talk would benefit sex workers of all genders. This sentence is functionally rhetorically null—it offers no specific rebuttal, or even a claim at all. It is an outburst which, to use the bunting comparison, directs the ball straight to the ground, the only end being to prevent it from entering the field where the other players anticipate. This response is, in short, a BFR engagement in that it interjects with content that does not contribute, only blocks argumentative progress.

Grommet provides another example of bunting BFR in their response. This engagement indicates that the user transferred a transcript of the talk into a word processor, and that "The whole presentation is about 3,037 words. The words tax, taxes, and taxed were not used. Legal protections for workers was mentioned but *not customer protection*" (emphasis mine). This commenter continues on to state that "Sadly, many sex workers become victims of some sort of abuse at some point. But, are they the only victims? Are they the only ones who suffer?" This intervention boils down to "I do not want to address the specific proposal of the speaker and instead I am insisting that we talk about a different population I see as victimized." By redirecting attention from sex workers to their clients, this commenter insists that Mac's argument ignores the troubles of a different population (clients), and attempts to get other discursive participants to address this other topic. Of course, this manner of bunting is likely not in good faith

(though clients' needs *are* a legitimate concern), but rather an expression of disapproval with the direction of Mac's argument, wherein the commenter declines to offer a direct critique. This type of bunting cannot lead to epistemological progress, as 1.) it does not offer an explicit critique of Mac's actual argument and 2.) does not illuminate the reasons why client's protections are relevant to a talk advocating for laws that limit violence against sex workers. This response can only be addressed by other commenters at the cost of energy that could otherwise have been spent addressing the actual problem with which Mac engages.

These bunting responses ask their audience to direct their energies toward alternate considerations, in this case, to parties other than those of Mac's focus (from sex workers in general to male sex workers in particular, to "non-sex workers," or to sex workers' customers). In doing so, these interventions impede epistemological progress by engaging with somewhat decentral or patently tangential considerations. Commenters who engage in bunting BFR redirect attention to the considerations they feel are most important, implicitly asserting that these considerations are more urgent or worthy than the main material of Mac's talk. The commenters who offer bunting BFR responses draw other interlocutors in the comment section away from the main labors of a text, that is, Mac's urging for her audience to question the outcomes of current prohibition-based sex work policy, and her invitation to consider less harmful alternative policies. Bunting BFR responses pull other commenters down a conversational "rabbit-hole" that requires substantial energy to escape. A conversation that a BFR practitioner has directed substantially off-course will be mired in comparatively irrelevant details, which on-task commenters will need to individually 'wrangle' or deemphasize. Both of these types of rhetorical actions require careful attention and time, resulting in substantial expenditure of energy.

Distractions: Non-Sequiturs

Another conversation-redirecting category of BFR that appears in responses to Mac's talk is comprised of *non-sequiturs*, which derail the conversation surrounding Mac's points, pushing the 'line' of inquiry off-task. This type of BFR is distinct from bunting, because bunting starts out reasonably close to the original line of argument (somewhat on-task), while a non-sequitur comment *begins* "afield." It is important to note that this type of response does not necessarily occur out of malice: two potential explanation for this type of response are 1.) simply poor comprehension of the talk, or 2.) weak writing abilities that lead to poor narration of (what the author thinks are obvious) connections. However, the intent behind these responses does not change the derailing effect the comments have on the comment section's focus; consequently, non-sequiturs constitute BFR for the *net effect* these responses have upon a conversation, not the commenter's objective in offering this response.

Chiffonier offers one example of non-sequitur BFR, by asking how the situation around sex work can become "better, when we allow 'massive overproduction of guns' that fall into the hands of deadly perpetrators that kill and main [sic] our school children." This response not only declines to address the concrete issue that Mac outlines, but also brings up different "hot button" social issues that, if engaged with by other commenters, would sidetrack the conversation considerably. In another comment, Nullism dismisses the question of what sex workers want in their industry as "nonsense," and follows it with a verbal shrug on a previously unmentioned topic: "but then we give unemployment insurance to illegal aliens." This comment combines a non-sequitur with the sarcastic equivalent of 'why not?', neglecting the content of Mac's proposal in favor of a snide, un-explicated comparison.

Non-sequitur BFR is a slippery form of the phenomenon to analyze, given the potential that non-sequitur commenters simply do not understand what is going on in the talk. However, this type of response still counts as BFR, by virtue of the distracting or derailing effect it has upon the discussion. Too, it is crucial to acknowledge that insufficiently focused reading and/or response does not obviate the need to hold readers and writers responsible for the content they produce. Inasmuch as some proportion of the commenting population may simply *not possess the skills to respond* substantively, the content they produce is still a public text that they have opened to critique. So while we should not immediately assume that non-sequitur BFR is the result of 'lazy reading/writing,' it is likewise not appropriate to prevent ourselves from critiquing the content as material for which a writer is accountable.

It is worth noting that the issues both of the above BFR practitioners bring in as their non sequiturs are other hot-button social issues: gun control and immigration. These responses suggest a kind of free association in the commenters' minds, causing them to hop between highly contested issues. These connections could also be the result of kairotic connections, for example, a high rate of popular newsmedia coverage between two topics at the time of the commenters' writing.[80] Regardless of the genesis of these comments, however, they distract other respondents—and, as my speculative asides demonstrate above, even critics—from the core of Mac's points. These commenters' lack of rigor in their chosen foci creates a burden for on-task commenters who choose (perhaps unadvisedly) to engage with these off-task comments, as re-focusing efforts

[80] 'Clusters' of topics—along with recurring, popular responses to these topics—can be observed within a given public, as a function of the members of the publics' shared interests and texts. For example, viewers of Fox News may respond to what they perceive as a 'liberal' argument or rhetor with recurring derailing or diverting gestures, BFR gestures that are composed by a popular figure (i.e., Bill O'Reilly) then circulated through this public via common texts, then replicated and transmitted by other members of the public.

involve substantial creative problem-solving and, often, sophisticated rhetorical negotiation skills (reconciling off-task responses is rhetorical "heavy lifting"). Consequently, these rhetorical actions constitute BFR that not only does not advance the knowledge building work of the original rhetor, but also BFR that is quite likely to draw other unwary commenters down a rabbit hole. In the following section, I explicate two additional forms of distracting BFR—sea-lioning and pseudo stasis—which take the form of supposedly-productive or legitimate questions.

Distractions via Unproductive Questions: Sea-Lioning and Pseudo-Stasis

An additional type of BFR that appears in the comment section for Mac's talk is sea-lioning. Responses of this variety demand additional proof beyond what the rhetor has originally provided, implicitly or explicitly indicating that the proof provided is either illegitimate in some way or simply insufficient. Too, sea-lioning frequently insists upon a rigor of proof that is nearly impossible to attain—often due to the noncontroversial or basic nature of the author's claim—without offering alternative evidence. These responses, if engaged with by other interlocutors, derail the conversation by requiring respondents to stop working toward solutions, consensus, or better dissensus, instead asking the comment's readers to re-create or acquire evidence for a single part of a larger argument. In other words, sea-lioning engages in BFR by sparking a debate over use of evidence that provides no usable alternatives, and demands energy expenditure from other commenters, in the form of evidence defense or additional evidence acquisition.

A response in one of the top ten most upvoted threads[81] features classic sea-lioning: dismissing a speaker's clearly-presented evidence and demanding that others (not the sea-lioning commenter) satisfy the need for proof. Cthalrate writes: "show me the cases where sex work is engaged in freely, while declining viable alternatives, and I

[81] As of April 2018

will accept [Mac's] proposals as advocating empowerment." This comment dismisses Mac's early, clear narration of her *own* free choices (choosing sex work as an alternative to two "dead-end, minimum wage jobs") and refuses to accept her lived experiences as legitimate support for her proposal (that sex legislation include decriminalization laws constructed in conjunction with sec workers) and one supporting reason (that using the input of sex workers allows them to exercise agency). Here, Cthalrate appears to solicit other commenters for evidence in support of Mac's claim, asking others to provide alternative support for a claim that Mac already supported in her talk. This commenter, in the material following this initial demand, also relies upon an oversimplification of Mac's point (she indicates that choosing prostitution is something that is a choice, albeit one with few viable alternatives, a subtle but important qualification, whereas the commenter claims she only "defend[s] a lack of agency") to suggest the illegitimacy of Mac's overall emphasis on sex worker empowerment. Overall, this comment employs a simplistic interpretation of Mac's argument as their reason for the insufficiency of Mac's proof. If the commenter had carefully attended to Mac's line of argument, they could have provided the qualified response necessary to build clearly-adumbrated disagreement based on issues with the evidence provided (a type of epistemological work). Because they did not, this response constitutes unproductive evidence-grubbing, part of sea-lioning BFR.

The last form of BFR I address is that of pseudo-stasis, where a commenter asks questions that appear to be stasis-building, but cannot actually be used to better establish facts, definition, quality, or policy toward epistemological action. Comments of this type purport to ask questions necessary for building better understandings of a situation, but are either too vague or off-topic to prove useful. These comments constitute BFR in that they cannot be used to build consensus, dissensus, or action plans

vis-à-vis the actual argument the original rhetor offers.

Trancey asks: "how about, instead of trying to legalize sex work, how about [sic] governments create opportunities that avoid women degrading themselves just to put food on the table for themselves sic]?" This question inquires along policy lines ("what should be done to solve this problem?"), and even appears to preliminarily suggest an avenue of approach for solving it (enacting government policy to obviate the need for sex work). However, the remainder of the commenter's response fails to provide enough detail to make the question viable for problem-solving. This comment neglects to ask a question in such a way that it is answerable (that is, providing concrete terms with which a response may engage). This pseudo-stasis question is also flawed in that it fails to address Mac's central argument that sex work will go on regardless of prohibition legislation (and that violence against sex workers exists now and needs a solution based in the current reality). The commenter makes personal moral judgements about the nature of sex work (that it is degrading, something Mac explicitly refutes in her talk), instead of using Mac's actual argument to construct a policy question. Overall, Trancey's response cannot contribute to policy decisions relevant to Mac's original argument, as the respondent has chosen to focus upon "solutions" that are much more vague and much less actionable than Mac's own proposed fixes, and in doing so, offers only an epistemologically stagnant intervention.

When we consider the BFR gestures present in the comments above, it is important to account for the similarities *and* subtle variations between related forms. Like logical fallacies, the argumentative gestures that comprise BFR could appear to be one of several adjacent BFR categories. For example, the comments that I sort into sea-lioning and pseudo stasis share features in that they both direct the conversation off course in the name of 'better understandings.' However, even if sea-lioning and pseudo-

stasis share traits, the nuances of each render them somewhat distinct phenomena. Sea-lioning may appear to be a *form* of pseudo-stasis, as both are question that *purport* to help ground the argument in agreed-upon information and values but merely 'bog down' the discussion. However, because sea-lioning behaviors refuse to acknowledge value in responses, it distinguishes itself from pseudo-stasis, which must at least keep a semblance of interest in the establishment of common argumentative details (at least, if the BFR practitioner hopes to have any chance of retaining the attention of their conversational counterpart).

The greatest rhetorical value in BFR recognition comes from audiences' ability to recognize the overall phenomenon, and to use the traits of related subtypes to understand how BFR gestures interact with discursive participants (and in turn alter the trajectory of the conversation itself). However, even if the overall, net effects of BFR gestures are what allow audiences to first (and confidently) identify the phenomenon, the subtle differences between BFR varieties (such as the arguable distinctions between sea-lioning and pseudo-stasis) are *also* valuable, as part of robust description. Fortunately, recognizing the 'big picture' and identifying small differences (such as the nuances between 'sub-species' of BFR) are not mutually exclusive—an observer can profitably keep both in mind. Consequently, I simultaneously affirm the paramount importance of understanding BFR's net effects *and* the value in attending to the (often subtle) variations in BFR's forms—a twofold value enacted throughout this dissertation. In the section that follows, I return to the 'big picture,' by highlighting a few trends in the BFR responses to Mac's talk and drawing attention to a few potential implications of these patterns.

A Few Key Considerations and Patterns

One of the most important ways to ground BFR is by accounting for the ways it

impacts other commenters' rhetorical decisions. Directing our attention this way allows us to parse the effects of BFR in the context of a larger discursive ecosystem. By examining the actors in this ecosystem, we can assess BFR's epistemologically stymying effects not only vis-à-vis the original rhetor and the case she makes, but also upon the other people in the "parlor." As I established earlier, productive rhetorics foster consensus, better-defined dissensus, and/or some form of action; all ends that are social, involving the attention and deliberation of others. In arguments that, like Mac's, challenge prevalent cultural values and seek to enact change, the argument's success relies upon her audience's ability to assess the merits of her case, draw conclusions from this analysis, and use these conclusions to produce effects in the world. These processes necessitate focus from the deliberating public that is her audience. Consequently, we cannot consider BFR and its promulgators in a void: we must also attend to the efforts of commenters who attempt to re-focus, or redirect the conversation into more productive territory.

Toward this end, we should briefly consider the ways some discursive participants respond to a BFR practitioner by attempting to re-focus the conversation on the terms of the original argument. In these cases, re-focusing commenters respond to a BFR practitioner by emphasizing material that is relevant to Mac's actual argument, or by clarifying the points at which a BFR practitioner has wandered from the terms of the original argument. In one example, Telegnosis intervenes against Nullism's BFR—dismissal of the entire issue of sex worker safety, a type of BFR I address above as a delegitimization or dismissal gesture—by emphasizing the specific parameters of Mac's talk. Nullism dismisses Mac's argument by claiming that sex worker policy need not change, as they are already protected against violence by existing laws, but Telegnosis explicitly draws attention back to the ways in which Mac already solidified the reasons

sex workers often cannot summon police help in her talk: "like the examples she gave, sex workers are often afraid to call the police for help because they will be thrown in jail, and johns know this and use it to their advantage." Here, Telegnosis draws attention back to Mac's focus on an *existing* issue (as opposed to 'way things should be'), and explicitly points to the parts of Mac's argument the BFR practitioner neglects in their response. In short, the re-focusing commenter rejects the BFR practitioner's attempted dismissal—which ignores the evidence Mac presents in favor of a hypothetical reality—by re-emphasizing the *existing issue* to which Mac responds, and *specific elements* of Mac's argument. Both of the latter gestures attempt to ameliorate the derailing effects of the BFR by facilitating consensus/dissensus on the *actual terms of the argument*.

In another instance, Epigamic uses bunting BFR to proclaim an opposition to the sex work industry writ large—already a tangent from Mac's argument—by claiming that "buyers and sellers of sex contribute to sexism, racism, and ageism" and offering a drawn out hypothetical case to support their point. Eschewyer80 responds to this comment by pointing out that the BFR practitioner "misleads the comment into wrong direction [sic]," pointing out "forbidding selling sex do not solve this problem [sic]." In this response, Eschewyer80 not only points to the BFR practitioner's tangential position relative to Mac's argument, but also takes the time to address a part of the BFR commenter's argument about racism and sexism, pointing out that "all our preferences create sexism and racism." In making these gestures, Eschewyer80 offers insights that identify the places at which Epigamic's responses diverge from the parameters of Mac's talk, insights which can help prevent the discussion from "falling down the rabbit hole" entirely.

Both of the above examples show commenters' attempts to re-focus the conversation—on the actual issue at hand and potential solutions—in the wake of BFR.

Re-focusing commenters such as these enjoy varying degrees of success, at times even successfully directing a thread back to where epistemological work can occur. I argue, however, that it is not the success or lack thereof that is *most* relevant here; it is the energy expenditure necessary for a re-focusing commenter to do their work. Rhetorical interventions—especially those that intervene against powerful prevailing cultural values—require strategic attention, and are energy-intensive even in the best cases, when opponents engage in earnest debate. BFR, bluntly put, wastes this energy; it distracts audiences from the actual issues at hand, derails the stasis-building process, and/or stops a discussion in its tracks (all effects that favor the status quo). BFR's main effect is that it diffuses the energy of those engaged in debate such that consensus and dissensus are difficult if not impossible to achieve. Consequently, I cannot emphasize directly enough that *the most insidious element of BFR is that even attempts to correct it contribute to its energetic effects*. In noting re-focusing responses to BFR, then, it is crucial to pay special attention to not just the gestures these re-focusing commenters make, but the rhetorical effort required to wrest—often extremely—far-afield responses back into productive territory.

Proportions of Response Types and Implications

In closing, I review the key details of the BFR in the comments on Mac's talk, including the most prevalent forms of BFR in these texts. These BFR gestures are: delegitimizing (the speaker, her argument, and/or her issue), bunting, and distractions (non-Sequiturs, Sea-Lioning, and Pseudo-Stasis). Among these gestures, delegitimizing moves occur the most frequently by far: this type of BFR appears in eleven of the thirteen BFR-featuring threads I pulled from the overall comment section. Bunting occurs approximately half as frequently, with five clear occurrences, and all three of the BFR subspecies I place under the header "distractions" (non-sequitur, sea-lioning, and

pseudo-stasis) likewise occur five times.

These above proportions—half delegitimizing, a quarter bunting, and a quarter distracting—bear attention, both as a reflection of the particular nature of responses to Mac's talk, and as a potential clue as to the most common forms of BFR writ large. For now, it is at least important to note the high occurrence[82] of BFR responses that attempt to derail Mac's knowledge-building (toward better understandings of sex work law and their impacts on sex workers), and action-fostering (rewriting existing laws in collaboration with sex workers) efforts by *impugning the legitimacy of the speaker, her argument, and/or the issue*. Ironically, Mac actually explicitly calls upon her audience to "*resist those who silence us*, those who say that a prostitute is either too victimized, too damaged to know what's best for herself…this distinction between victim and empowered is imaginary. *It exists purely to discredit sex workers and make it easy to ignore us*" (Mac 16:12; emphases mine). Straying from the course of a conversation through bunting or distracting can be the result of poor argumentative literacy (insufficient reading comprehension and inept direct response techniques) or difference in personal priorities (having an "axe to grind," so to speak, on a specific part or tangent of a conversation), and as such are common and potentially of innocuous motive. Silencing through delegitimization, in contrast, has significance in a larger context, especially along gendered lines. As feminist rhetoricians such as Cheryl Glenn and Patricia Bizzell note, the lack of women's voices in the historical record—as well as the literary and rhetorical canons—is not a product of women's preference for silence, but rather the result of others' work *to silence them*. Here, we see a continuation of the

[82] It is worth noting the total number of delegitimizing BFR gestures in the comments (not all of which I discuss here). After gathering the comments in April 2018, I identified fifteen comments containing delegitimizing BFR in the comment section for Mac's talk, out of twenty-one total BFR-containing comments. This means that delegitimizing BFR appears in approximately seventy-five percent of the total BFR-containing comments (about eight percent of the *total* comments, a significant proportion).

tradition of silencing women, poignantly, in a text that addresses sex work, an industry that predominantly features women workers.

As I mention in Chapter 1, BFR constitutes a set of practices with no identifiable historical origin; these are merely practices that we have not yet robustly characterized as a family of rhetorical gestures. The high occurrence of silencing efforts in responses to Mac's talk offer us an opportunity to consider the BFR present in the comments section as part of longstanding and well-theorized rhetorical processes, especially as many, like silencing, are gestures that scholars have thoroughly examined as independent phenomena. However, we must keep in mind that this "family" of gestures is quite diverse. The epistemologically stymying set of gestures that constitute BFR may materialize both as gestures with deeply embedded cultural significance (like silencing) and as gestures that simply do particular rhetorical work (moving a line of conversation away from the original parameters, like distracting). In sum: best practices for examining BFR 'in the wild' include keeping in mind that the *implications* of various BFR gestures are varied; the net effects of BFR comments run the gamut from phenomena with immediate and troubling connotations to gestures that merely impede knowledge-building (perhaps more neutral nodes in the overall array of responses). In the following chapter, I analyze the BFR comments that appear in response to Mellody Hobson's TED Talk "Color Blind or Color Brave?" This array of BFR comments shares several similarities with the BFR I discuss above—albeit, as I mention, in ways that reflect the distinctive nature of these two TED Talks' aims and topics. These efforts continue the work of illustrating the context-specific, yet still recognizably related, nature of BFR gestures.

CHAPTER 5

BAD FAITH RHETORICS IN THE COMMENT SECTION OF MELLODY HOBSON'S "COLOR BLIND OR COLOR BRAVE?"

Mellody Hobson is the President of Ariel Investments, an investment firm founded in 1983 and headquartered in Chicago ("About Ariel"). She began working at Ariel Investments as an intern during her undergraduate studies at Princeton, and has worked for the firm for nearly three decades, beginning her tenure as President in 2000 (McClean). Hobson is also a director for several Fortune 500 companies, including Starbucks Corporation and Estée Lauder Companies; chairperson of a non-profit that offers after-school programs for teens in Chicago; and a leader in charitable organizations such as The Chicago Public Education Fund ("Our Team").

Hobson grew up in Chicago in conditions of financial instability. Her mother was a sometimes-struggling condo salesperson, and Hobson's family was evicted several times during her childhood (McClean). Hobson cites these conditions as a major motivator for her early career aspirations, noting that she "felt like financial security would be the biggest gift [she] could ever have." Her drive to understand finances continues to influence her work, as she advocates for financial literacy, especially among African American families. Toward these goals, she contributes weekly finance advice on the *Tom Joyner Morning Show,* writes a column for *Black Enterprise*, and contributes to *CBS News*' reporting on current economics ("Our Team").

When TED invited Hobson to give a talk in 2014, she wrote two presentations: one on race, and the other on financial literacy (McClean). These two topics are part of a whole, both components of Hobson's ongoing effort to study and improve investment literacy among minority groups. She opted to produce her talk on race, "Color Blind or Color Brave?", and the piece has garnered substantial attention—her talk has over 2.3

million views on the TED site alone (as of May 2018).[83]

When considering Hobson's talk, it is crucial to also attend to the factors of her embodied existence that may impact how her audience receives her argument. These embodied factors easily discernable given the genre features of the TED Talk: an in-person lecture (the original TED event), and a video recording of the event (the video accessible via TED.com) In particular, it is crucial to acknowledge that frames of race, class, and gender inevitably intercede upon audiences' perceptions of the speaker. Culture renders such intersectional aspects of being legible in particular way, and such culturally-conferred frames of understanding impact how Hobson chooses to present herself. Hobson identifies as a black woman in her talk, and indicates the socioeconomic "classes" she has occupied—respectively, lower class in her childhood, and upper-middle to upper class in her adult life. Her dress also signals class, as the clothing inhabits the unique yet understated style typical of mid to high-end clothing: her black dress is mid-length, with long-sleeves and a semi-wrap skirt, featuring white cuffs and collar both wrought in intricate, lace-like patterns. As is common for business women, she wears black tights and black heels of a moderate height, with muted, "natural" makeup and stud earrings (Figure 1). In dressing this way, Hobson executes typical sartorial gestures of middle and upper-class businesswomen, visually conveying a relatively affluent-yet-pragmatic ethos. Overall, she visually and verbally signals ownership of her black womanhood and her status as a successful businesswoman, factors that impact her audience's reception of her talk.

[83] This figure actually underrepresents the formidable popularity of the talk, as the 2.3 million views do not count views on other heavily trafficked platforms such as YouTube.

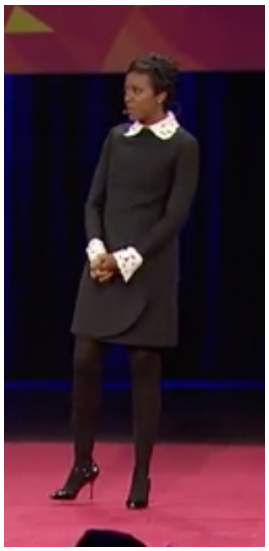


Figure 1: Mellody Hobson delivering her TED Talk in 2014

In addition to considering the above intersectional components of Hobson's person, it is appropriate to grant special attention to the intersectional axes of being that she invokes in the *content of her argument*. In her presentation, Hobson focuses on race, but also on its intersection with class. Her talk explicitly discusses race—how Americans should enact color "braveness," eschewing a color-blind mentality—but also directs her audience's attention to the ways that class intertwines with race, particularly in terms of wealth accumulation and leadership positions (Hobson). In making these gestures, Hobson is invoking embodied aspects of being through both her person and her argument.

Overview: Mellody Hobson's "Color Blind or Color Brave?"

Hobson combines personal anecdotes and research to deliver a call for pragmatism when it comes to race, or, a willingness to grow beyond color blindness, into what she calls "color braveness" (Hobson 7:53). She begins her talk with a story about a fundraising luncheon she helped organize for a friend's political campaign, in which she and her political-hopeful friend—both people of color—were mistaken for kitchen help despite their formal attire (0:12-1:00). Hobson uses this story to show how race can lead

people to make assumptions about people's social status, even when they were 'dressed to impress.' She then relates how her mother was always "ruthlessly realistic" about the social effects of race when Hobson was growing up, which meant that, though she was able to relate to it humorously after the fact, she ultimately "wasn't surprised" at the incident with the luncheon (1:58; 1:48).

These stories allow her to transition into observations about how race is "the conversational equivalent of touching the third rail" in the U.S., to the extent that colleagues warned her against delivering a talk on race, cautioning that it might negatively impact her career (2:35-2:56). She then offers the observation that this reluctance to discuss racial matters is not ideal, and that "conversations about race" actually do need to happen. She observes that the election of Barack Obama promulgated the perception that racism has been 'solved' in the U.S.,[84] but that "the numbers do not lie," and these numbers contradict this perception (3:44-3:54). She then delivers a series of statistics on the demographics of Fortune 500 company CEOs, board members, and chairs, pointing out that white people represent nearly double their proportion of the population in CEO positions, and that minorities are grossly underrepresented in the population of board members and company chairs (3:50-4:15). Hobson follows these observations with a definition of color blindness, or, "a learned behavior where we pretend that we don't notice race," that, instead of "ensur[ing]" a lack of racial discrimination, it really means that "we're ignoring the problem" (5:47-6:11).

Hobson then bridges into one of her main points, which is that color blindness "threatens to hold back businesses," and the resulting importance of having conversations about race—being what she calls "color brave" as opposed to color blind

[84] This is part of a larger ideology of "post-racism," a series of ideas and narratives that portray several events (e.g., the election of President Barack Obama) and movements (e.g., the Civil Rights Movement) as having "solved" racism in the U.S., and that we now live in a world in which racism has been 'conquered.'

(5:30; 7:50). Hobson defines color bravery as the "willing[ness] to have proactive conversations about race with honesty and understanding and courage," acknowledging that these practices "can be hard, awkward, uncomfortable," but are nonetheless crucial (7:53-8:05). Hobson emphasizes the practical—as opposed to ethical—reasons to practice color bravery, which include that "our businesses and our products and our science, our research, all of that will be better with greater diversity" (8:14-8:20). Hobson goes on to give two examples of successful businesses that practice color braveness, Ariel Investments (where she serves as President) and ESPN, arguing that these businesses' color brave practices confer a "competitive advantage" (9:09). She also cites a university researcher whose work demonstrates that diverse groups of people have superior problem-solving capacities relative to homogenous groups.

The final section of Hobson's talk constitutes a call to action. She points out that anyone can use color braveness, whether in hiring or admissions processes, professional or civic problem-solving team initiatives, or merely personal social practices. Hobson follows up on her earlier anecdotes about her mother, pointing out that even though she was a "brutal pragmatist," "she never allowed us to give up hope either," emphasizing that hard conversations about race do not forestall hope and achievement (11:49-11:59). Ultimately, she calls for color bravery as a way to promote not only generally improve diversity, but also as a way to cultivate the next generation of leaders, by showing young Americans of color that people who look like them can be prominent leaders and businesspeople. Her parting thoughts invoke the idea that the practices for which she advocates are deeply compatible with U.S. culture. As she puts it, "when [Americans] have a challenge, we take it head on, we don't shrink away from it…We show courage. So right now, what I'm asking you to do, I'm asking you to show courage. I'm asking you to be bold… I'm asking you not to be color blind, but to be color brave" (13:08-13:32).

There are three key details of Hobson's talk worth noting in particular. First, in offering her definition of color bravery, she is coining a term and defining it in well-grounded, accessible terms. Second, her call to action using color bravery provides a clear usage for the concept. Finally, all of Hobson's examples well illustrate the stakes of applying her concept. So, Hobson's argument presents an original, useful concept, advocates for its application, and describes this application in accessible, everyday terms. In short, Hobson's talk drives toward fairly specific ends: this talk encourages her audience to use color bravery to improve diversity in their environments, to the benefit of businesses and their future leaders.

Hobson's argument does similar epistemological work to Juno Mac's: it intervenes against prevailing attitudes (in this case, that being color blind is a virtue), offers evidence in support of a correction, builds understandings of the stakes of the situation, and offers up a solution. However, Hobson's talk also makes a knowledge-building move that Mac's does not—Hobson crafts a new concept. Generating a theoretical construct is, especially from a scholarly perspective, one of the most recognizable forms of knowledge-building: it *creates* a new, useful framework with which audiences can contextualize and understand the issue at hand. Too, the utility of a concept like Hobson's color bravery is not limited to the immediate context: audiences can use this idea both in their immediate responses (to the talk and to other participants in the discussion) and as a tool for future problem-solving and analysis. In sum, Hobson's talk identifies an issue, *builds* context, *creates* a solution (using an original concept she develops in the presentation), and offers a route of engagement for her audiences to co-create solutions to the problem—all epistemologically rich labors.

In the comment section for Hobson's talk, there are a few specific types of BFR responses that occur particularly frequently, all of which stymy Hobson's knowledge-

building efforts. Specifically, the highest-occurring type of BFR comments impede the knowledge-building process of the argument by attempting to delegitimize the speaker, her argument, or the entire issue.[85] Discrediting BFR of this type constitutes the majority in this comment section, arising in two-thirds of the total BFR comments. The second most common type of BFR to arise in the comment section—comprising about one-third of the BFR responses—is bunting BFR, or comments that move the line of the discussion "off the field" (that is, the conceptual territory of the original argument). Several non-sequiturs also occur in the comment section of Hobson's talk; although these comments only arise three times total (about five percent of the responses), they do bear notice as recurring ways to distract readers from the actual content of Hobson's argument (that is, the drawbacks of color blindness and the benefits of her alternate approach).

BFR Comments: Disqualification, Delegitimization, and Dismissal

Type 1: Delegitimizing the Speaker

Several of the discrediting BFR interactions move to delegitimize the speaker herself, especially the accuracy with which she relates her illustrative anecdotes. For example, Hubbubvand16 draws attention to Hobson's first anecdote about being mistaken for event staff, indicating that they "don't fully believe the story she gave to illustrate [her points]." This respondent goes on to indicate that they worked in the hospitality industry at the corporate level, and that they doubted that the reception staff at the event would have assumed Hobson and her friend were event staff. Hubbubvand16 further suggests that, if the hotel employees had really assumed they were working the luncheon, they would have asked which staffing agency Hobson and her friend were with. This commenter wraps up their intervention by relating that they "don't want to say she is making the story up completely, but [they] just find it hard to believe," and

[85] This type of BFR is also the abundant type of BFR in the comments for Juno Mac's talk.

suggesting that "perhaps a journalist" could contact the hotel to verify the story. In making these rhetorical moves, Hubbubvand16 uses their own experiences in the hospitality industry to imply that Hobson's experiences were unlikely to have occurred as she related them.

Hubbubvand16 is suggesting that Hobson's anecdote is less than perfectly accurate, and, while this commenter does not *directly* impugn Hobson's honesty (or accuse her of embellishment), they do take two opportunities to explicitly question that events transpired as Hobson relates. It is worth noting that at least one other respondent in the thread Hubbubvand16 initiated echoes these sentiments. In one case, Rhizogenic expresses their agreement, but connects a purported problem with Hobson's anecdote to the validity of her *overall* expertise on her topic, responding "Well said. Too many people assume that someone giving a talk has actually investigated their facts and knows what they are talking about." In responding directly to Hubbubvand16's statement with a generalization about speakers "know[ing] what they are talking about," Rhizogenic shows the short argumentative distance between 1.) questioning experiential evidence and 2.) dismissing the expertise of the speaker as a whole, putting Hobson on trial rather than her argument, so to speak. In short, these comments engage in BFR by distracting other commenters from the line of Hobson's argument, focusing instead on the *validity* of her examples and her concomitant *believability* as a speaker, rather than maintaining focus on her topic (questions of color blindness and practices for improving interracial equity). A final detail worth noting is that implicitly suggesting that a non-person of color (POC)'s own expertise may better bear on the topic at hand than a POC's personal experiences—as Rhizogenic[86] does here—is a recurring phenomenon in discussions of

[86] Based upon the ethos of this commenter, it is likely—albeit unverifiable—that they do not identify as a POC, as they could have used this subject position to strengthen their claims if so.

race and its social consequences.[87] I discuss the high co-incidence between BFR and discourses of race (as well as class, sexuality, and gender, and so on) in the next chapter, but it bears brief recognition here.

Type 2: Delegitimizing the Issue and Those Who Broach it

Several BFR comments impede argumentative progress on the topic of color blindness/color bravery and racial equality by dismissing the legitimacy of the issue itself and/or the judgment of those who present the issue as a legitimate problem. In the case of the comments I examine below, the respondents move to disqualify the problem of racism by implying that Hobson (and other Americans of color) are imagining the issue, or exaggerating the problem's scale. To give one example, Chiffonier bluntly opens a thread with "At some point enough is simply enough. Racism left a stain on the history of the nation… 150 years from a Civil War, and 50 years since the Civil Rights Act. At some point society has done all it can do to rectify those injustices." In emphasizing the Civil War and Civil Rights acts, Chiffonier privileges past 'victories' in the battle against racism and implies that these actions did 'enough' to combat racial inequality. This response, in claiming that "society has done all it can do," dismisses the color brave actions Hobson advocates as over-the-top, or responses to a situation that has supposedly already been rectified. This statement also equates to the commenter throwing up their hands, denying continued social accountability for racism. Both facets of this response dismiss the issues Hobson raises. Metameric echoes this sentiment, conceding that "Yes, there is still racism today," but that "it generally is no longer socially acceptable to be 'racist' and the blatant discriminations that once existed *have been*

[87] The phenomenon of delegitimizing personal experiences of racism, sometimes termed "racial gaslighting," is widely documented in the literature on race as well as in popular newsmedia (two useful examples include Claudia Rankine landmark work *Citizen*, and Brittney Cooper's piece "Black America's Gaslight Nightmare" in *Salon*).

greatly reduced" (emphasis mine). These comments privileges past 'improvements' over troubleshooting extant issues, and derail discussion of current consequences of racism—and of Hobson's suggestions—by dismissing the issue she describes. These gestures, in assigning greater value to *past* strides against racism than *current* social consequences of racism, devalue Hobson's interventions and imply that her argument deserves little attention or engagement from her audience.

Several other comments block consensus or better dissensus on the merits of color bravery by insisting that the issue of racism is simply the result of Hobson and other POCs' skewed perception. Relache claims that "one of the central problems with race in the US. Blacks are indoctrinated, just like Mellody admits she was, to assume racism in every situation." Relache's response dismisses Hobson's argument by claiming that racist instances are only imagined, or as they put it, "assumptions" resulting from "indoctrination." Abderian also suggests that the racism to which Hobson alludes is imagined by chiding Hobson's mother for "telling her that she will be treated differently because of the color of her skin," adding that "you can find anything for which you are searching, if you search sufficiently long enough." Autogenesis also suggests that racism is the result of a skewed perspective by calling "the racism problem" "exaggerated." Gaberlunzie goes as far as to write that "Black people just like talking about racism for some reason. Not [sic] matter how successful someone is, if they subscribe to a certain mindset, they can find racism any and everywhere." These responses suggest that Hobson's advocacy for color bravery is in response to an imagined problem or a generalized paranoia. By impugning Hobson's judgment and neglecting to grapple with the particulars of Hobson's suggestions, these respondents move backward in the stasis-building process, regressing from Hobson's advocacy on policy to a question of facts ("*is* there a problem?"), and neglecting to grant her evidence (personal anecdotes and

researched statistics on the dearth of minority business leaders) as sufficient to establish a problem in need of solving. Comments such as these discourage discussion of Hobson's suggestions, and constitute BFR engagements in that they distract other readers from Hobson's observations and the actions for which she advocates.

Type 3: Disqualifying the Speaker by Blame-Casting

Several other related comments move to disqualify Hobson in a compound move that also delegitimizing the issue she discusses. In these gestures, the commenters block discussion of the solutions Hobson proposes—solutions for current racial disparities, particularly in the private sector—by indicating that the problem would go away by itself if only people such as Hobson would simply stop bringing it up. In these comments, respondents cast Hobson's coverage of persisting racial inequalities as part of an aggrieved victim stance, implying that her grievances are not legitimate, but merely a sore that would heal over if only "blacks" would stop worrying at it. This type of BFR minimizes the value of an *argument* by accusing the *rhetor* of actually promulgating the issue they work to address.

Relache bluntly asserts that "the greatest enemy of black young people is not white people. It is black adults who continue to instill in them that they are black. [That] black is different. [That] they are going to be mistreated because of it." Here, Relache indicates that the harms that young black Americans suffer via continued racial inequality are actually the result of their elders emphasizing their difference and warning of raced social consequences. This commenter's statements imply that it is actually older black people who promulgate racial inequality by—like Hobson's mother—warning young black people that white people may maltreat them because of their race. Chiffonier comments in a similar vein, forwarding the opinion that "this subject is beating a dead horse," and relating how immigrants from countries such as Ireland, Poland, Puerto

Rico, and Italy "were all picked on when they got here…becoming a member of a new society, while holding on to their heritages," ending with "so many different peoples. So many opportunities for success. The only impediments, yourselves." In their response, Chiffonier makes an indirect comparison between black Americans and immigrants,[88] implying that black Americans are "impeding" their own progress by declining to assimilate, or, "becoming a member of a new society." In addition to insinuating that Black people would not suffer racism if only they would assimilate, this commenter bluntly insists on the lack of a need for discussing continued racial inequality ("beating a dead horse"), dismissing Hobson's argument as superfluous. Several instances of commenters blaming black people for racism are nearly bizarrely blunt. In one thread, Chiffonier directly assigns blame for race-based hatred to Black Americans who discuss issues of race, alluding to "black advocates who stir up harsh feelings about the downtrodden blackness that has little to do with the real world, except to contribute to expressions of hatred." All of the above comments direct their readers' attention to the their theory—that black people promulgate racial strife by acknowledging difference and by spreading racial resentment—at the cost of attending to Hobson's particular explications and suggestions.

These commenters forward the theory that Black people's acknowledgement of their difference and its consequences is *causing* race-based problems.[89] These comments engage in BFR by not only delegitimizing the issue that Hobson works to resolve, but by actually pointing the finger, so to speak, at Hobson and others who discuss racism. It is

[88] This is a particularly flawed comparison, given that millions of black U.S. "immigrants" were in fact slaves who slave traders shipped across the Atlantic as 'goods' to be sold.

[89] This reasoning has resonances with what Judith Butler calls a "contagious word," or, the idea that merely naming/identifying with something (sexuality, race, etc.) 'spreads' the phenomenon. For more, see Butler's work *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. In the third chapter, she explores the U.S. military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy against serving as openly LBGT, making the point that this policy simultaneously restricts and produces the term.

worth noting that the topic of blame is functionally absent from Hobson's talk, aside from her early observation that racist practices are the result of "institutionalized, at one time legalized, discrimination" (4:55). By alternatingly denying the fact of racism and fixating on the notion of 'blame' for racism, these comments fixate on considerations that are far more general than, and tangential to, the discussion and proposals Hobson offers up for her audience's consideration. The solutions that Hobson outlines in her talk are obscured under these respondents' insistence upon directing blame and/or voicing challenges to the authenticity of Hobson's descriptions of racism. Consequently, building knowledge on the topic of color blindness and color bravery is impeded by these BFR practitioners' insistent redirects to arguments over culpability.

Another way in which comment move to disqualify Hobson's argument is by indicating that her motives are politically motivated, or that she is engaging in "race-baiting."[90] Suggesting that Hobson's work stems from political motivations undermines her work by casting it as merely a way to advance the political position of a group. These commenters decline to specify which group Hobson hopes to advance, or to illuminate what specific advantages such advances would confer, so these comments serve to generally express suspicion of Hobson's motives, to imply that her intentions are less-than-savory. Likewise, insinuating that Hobson's work is part of "race-baiting" efforts casts general aspersions at Hobson and her talk, implying that the problem she seeks to address and the solutions she proposes should not be taken at face value. Both these types of discrediting BFR undermine the validity of Hobson's argument by suggesting that her motives are not what she states—to improve racial equity in the U.S. via color brave practices—but part of a questionable agenda (again, of an unspecified nature).

[90] Merriam Webster defines race-baiting as "the unfair use of statements about race to try to influence the attitudes or actions of a particular group of people."

One example of a comment that suggests "political motivations" for Hobson's talk comes from Hubbubvand16, who first expresses disbelief at one of Hobson's anecdotes, then proceeds to write that "you cannot trust much of what people say, especially if they have a political agenda." Hoosegow comments in a similar vein, alluding to the phenomenon of "play[ing] politics based on skin color." Neither of these comments indicate what specific political ends Hobson might be working toward, merely suggesting that Hobson has motives other than those she claims (ameliorating the disproportionately low rates of minorities holding leadership positions in the United States). These comments cast suspicion on Hobson's objective, discrediting her argument on the grounds that she has ulterior motives. The net effect of these responses is redirecting attention from the content of her suggestions to her purportedly "political" aims, blocking engagement with the specific content of her talk.

Several comments cast aspersions on Hobson and her proposals by invoking the ideas of "race-baiting" or "playing the race card." For example, Hoosegow complains that the "equal treatment" that is Hobson's aim actually constitutes *special* treatment, and bemoans the prospect of "trying extra hard not to phrase things wrong because you might play the race card."[91] This comment suggests that people who ask for equal treatment are in fact asking for special treatment, an indirect criticism of Hobson's proposals. Too, this response delegitimizes a person's specific critiques of raced social practices by reducing it to "playing the race card"; here, the commenter attributes unreasonable or manipulative qualities to a person who—like Hobson—makes legitimate observations. JimisJitney begins a thread criticizing affirmative action policies and bringing up "race baiting," exclaiming that it "is a new industry perfected by Black

[91] "Playing the race card" is a phrase generally deployed as a resentful or suspicious response to a person bringing up race, and amounts to an accusation that the person used their race as a rhetorical tool for ostensibly socially manipulative ends. This practice might be considered a subcategory of "race-baiting."

leaders like Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, Reverend Wright." Although this commenter does not explicitly accuse Hobson of "race-baiting," this respondent nonetheless implies that she does so, as the commenter equates affirmative action policies—a component of Hobson's color brave practices—with "race baiting." The allusions to "race-baiting" or "playing the race card"—both deeply-laden, negatively connoted phrases—constitute BFR in that they move to delegitimize both Hobson's argument and those similar, insinuating that arguments for better social practices around race are merely manipulative reactions. These common BFR gestures are, in sum, moves that discredit the speaker and in the process discourage epistemological work on the topics and proposals of that speaker.

A form of discrediting BFR that is closely related to the political motive/race-baiting insinuation are comments that, somewhat bizarrely, suggest that Hobson's argument augurs imminent conditions of society-wide ideological control. These comments are similar to the "race-baiting"/political motive comments in that they suggest factional conflict across raced lines. However, the comments below are more direct than the above comments, and are more extreme (even 'conspiracy-minded'). In one instance, Tidbitaiel begins a thread by alluding to "the mass brainwashing campaign which *separates us all* by race, gender, political affiliation…etc." (emphasis mine). This commenter indirectly juxtaposes Hobson's talk with efforts to "separate" people by race, gender, and so on, implying that her discussion of difference plays into this process. Furthermore, in responding to Hobson's talk this way, Tidbitaiel implicates Hobson in a "mass brainwashing campaign," as opposed to crediting her as an individual who contributes to TED's mission to "spread great ideas" ("About: Our Organization"). Dodecahedron begins a thread by referring to Hobson's talk as part of "the accepted narrative with regards to race in America," and insinuating that "being honest" would

result in "public shaming" deployed as "a form of social control." This commenter then ominously suggests that "society somehow forc[ing] people to sacrifice their feelings and their thoughts" (implying here that Hobson's work is part of this social process) is reminiscent of the conditions imagined in "the great dystopian novels of the past century." In making these remarks, Dodecahedron indirectly suggests that Hobson's talk is part of narrative domination, deployed to impose social control over those individuals who might question the raced social problems to which Hobson refers. This comment, fairly blatantly, suggests that Hobson is part of social forces that work to silence dissenting, "honest" voices, a conspiracy-minded response that invokes the idea of dystopia to suggest that Hobson's talk—and other interventions on current raced social dynamics—contributes to a kind of hegemony. In attributing sinister qualities to Hobson's talk, this commenter prompts a paranoid response to her argument, a response that forestalls earnest engagement with her proposals. Too, this comment discredits Hobson herself as part of nefarious forces—aligned against "honesty"—that work to silence those with whom they disagree.

Type 4: Undermining the Solvability of the Problem

Another form of delegitimizing BFR appears as dismissals of an issue on the grounds that it is unsolvable in general, or that solving the problem requires tools unavailable to the speaker and/or audience. The latter variety of comments suggests that solving the problem of persisting inequality requires massive expenditure of resources and/or enormous social mobilization (e.g., sweeping legislation), both of which are inevitably far more general and less feasible than the actions proposed by a pragmatic speaker. In the context of Hobson's talk, these gestures suggest that race-based inequality—which Hobson discusses in the specific form of persisting underrepresentation of minorities in leadership positions—cannot be ameliorated, or

that the suggestions she offers are trivial. These comments undervalue Hobson's argument as a doomed intervention, failing to engage with her material *and* dismissing the validity of her specific suggestions through cynical readings.

Chiffonier, in a comment discussing financial and housing inequality among minorities, writes, "those problems are not solvable with Mellody Hobson's ideas. They need political help, and the government is corrupted [sic]." This response cynically undervalues Hobson's specific proposals on the grounds that "political help" is the only means by which to address racial inequality, and that Hobson's "ideas" are ineffectual. Additionally, this commenter compounds their low valuation of Hobson's ideas by implying that, not only is Hobson's strategy inadequate, but that even the larger clout of the government is moot because of its "corrupt" nature. The latter gesture constitutes a throwing up of the hands, a flippant treatment of Hobson's proposals that offers an alternative only to declare the ineffectual nature of even that purportedly superior alternative. Chiffonier's response discourages knowledge-building engagements in that it dismisses the actions for which Hobson advocates (discouraging discussion of those actions), then moves the line of argument away from the actual content of her argument to a supposedly better alternative (political intervention), only to 'drop the ball' on that alternative (demurring to develop an actionable alternative plan, that is, part of productive dissensus).

In related instance, Ecdemic indicates that they "have become less optimistic that the issue of race will be solvable for humanity." The commenter goes on to cast "the level of difficulty to fix" racism as astronomical, suggesting that a solution involves battling the human proclivity toward self-interest. This comment does raise a valid issue (self-interest impeding privileged parties from upending the status quo), but still constitutes BFR in that a.) it does not engage with the specifics of Hobson's talk (that is, the

comments distract) and b.) expresses cynicism at the solvability of the problem at hand (discouraging engagement). Like Chiffonier's comment, Ecdemic invites dismissal of Hobson's talk by privileging the *difficulty* of the *entire issue* Hobson tackles over the specific feasibility of her proposed actions. This implicitly critiques Hobson's responses for being facile, and amounts to: "we do not need to bother considering Hobson's responses, because the issue she is trying to resolve is so much more insuperable than she acknowledges." Ecdemic's response does explore an interesting philosophical quandary at the heart of social inequality; however, it fails to ground this discussion in the terms of Hobson's talk. Consequently, any audience members who choose to engage with these ideas would have to expend substantial energy to draw the discussion back to the concrete solutions Hobson proposes. Responses that engage in this way enact BFR in that they move the line of discussion away from Hobson's contributions and objectives. By functionally suggesting an entirely distinct (in this case more abstractly philosophical) line of inquiry, this respondent impedes contribution to the conversation as it stands.

Several comments engage in delegitimizing BFR by blatantly diminishing the importance of the issue under discussion or generically devaluing discussion as a vehicle for social progress. In the comment section of "Color Blind or Color Brave?" this appears in the form of responses that suggest the nonessential nature of race-centric discussions, either as a statement of the topic's unimportance or the futility of using discourse to resolve social issues. Relache criticizes the use of racial inequality as a TED topic by grousing "when are we going to cease droning on and on about race?" going on to ask "why…people should value themselves by thinking 'he looks like me?'" Here, the commenter equates discourse on race to a process that keeps "droning on," implying that the conversation has gone on too long, past the point of productivity. The second portion

of this comment compounds the dismissive gesture by implying that people having this conversation are valuing themselves based upon similarities (implicitly, racial similarities), a reductive gesture which suggests a superficiality to discussions of race. The snideness of these comments is worth noting, but it is the net effects that are most relevant. First, Relache refuses to engage with the content of Hobson's—very specific—argument, choosing instead to cast imprecations against the conversation on race writ large. Additionally, this comment imposes censure by mocking the conversation Hobson sparks (and, by extension, those who earnestly engage), potentially deterring other members of the audience from contributing. Aleeve0000 expresses a general lack of faith in discourse, voicing their opinion that the discussion Hobson attempts to spark is unnecessary, saying that "talk is cheap—so having a conversation on this topic does not help much." This commenter then exits the conversation by alluding to "leav[ing] the blathering to others." By deploying the verb "blathering," and alluding to the low value of the conversation, this commenter is blatantly demeaning Hobson's talk and the surrounding discourse. Both of the above interventions engage in BFR by derailing the conversation in profoundly blunt terms, indicating that they personally find no value in engaging *and* advocating for the overall abandonment of the topics at hand.

Bunting Comments: Moving the Conversation 'Out of Play'

Bunting BFR comments constitute a significant proportion of the bad faith gestures in the comment section for "Color Blind or Color Brave?" Responses that block argumentative progress by moving the line of conversation 'to the side' comprise roughly one-third of the total BFR responses in the comment section for Hobson's talk. Here, bunting BFR takes three forms: generalization, redirecting to another tangentially related issue, and casting blame. In the first case (generalization), a respondent dramatically broadens discussion of Hobson's argument—the problematic nature of a

color-blind mentality and ways to use color bravery to encourage diversity—by bringing up a much more general version of the issue. Generalizing comments dilute the conversation, discouraging focus on specific solutions in favor of abstract arguments that are seldom grounded in specific details. In another form of bunting BFR, redirecting to a tangentially related issue, a respondent neglects Hobson's chosen focus in favor of a related but distinctly different issue, then insists that this related issue is more important than the problem selected by Hobson. In insisting on new grounds for the discussion, a BFR practitioner insists on the importance of their own preferred issue, moving audience focus from the parameters of the original argument. In blame-casting comments, a respondent redirects a discussion of concrete racial inequities—current realities and potential solutions—into a debate over blame. Comments of this type favor simple castigation over troubleshooting and solution production; instead, these comments indulge in extended "finger-pointing."

Generalizing BFR in response to Hobson's talk often bemoans the continued use of race as a social category, advocating for its removal from the cultural lexicon without offering solutions for its current consequences. This type of BFR response is a kind of utopian neglect: it privileges an alternate, supposedly 'best-case scenario' (an imagined future in which race as a concept has been eliminated) at the cost of problem solving in the actually-existing scenario (race still exists, and it still has real, deeply harmful consequences that urgently beg solution). For example, HalisJocund begins a thread with references to inter-group conflicts (e.g., the Israel-Palestine conflict), ending their brief comment with the proclamation that "the sad news is that the human race has not matured beyond perceived differences. The artificial labels are killing us." The human failing of persecuting others for their difference is a legitimate problem, but this comment makes un-actionable observations that almost entirely neglect the content of

Hobson's proposals. In addition to its merely tangential relation to Hobson's talk, HalisJocund's comment makes no effort to propose action on the issue to which the commenter refers. In another instance, Uggernaut affirms the existence of "a structurally racist society," but advocates for "see[ing] not colour but relationship, unity, and achievement." Throughout this response, the commenter makes vague references to "decent" and "fair" treatment, but gestures toward the goal of "unity" without making concrete suggestions. Here, Uggernaut acknowledges structural racism (in line with Hobson's talk), but then directs their readers' attention away from the tangible actions Hobson proposes, ironically suggesting color blind practices ("seeing *not* colour") as a route to abstract, improved social circumstances ("unity"). In privileging "treat[ing] everyone decently and fairly," this respondent alters the parameters of the conversation to feature unwieldy, generalized considerations that are functionally un-actionable. A final version of generalizing BFR worth noting comes from Elixerronq, who asks why "people wish to perpetuate the crazy idea of the existence of race [when] there is only one race The Human Race we are all in this together [sic]." This commenter goes on to mention the "contrived" nature of race as a concept, and implies that "genuine progress" involves transcending race by recognizing that it is a construct.

In all three of the above comments, the respondents 'explode' Hobson's topic, moving the discussion to abstract notions. These commenters make valid observations (i.e., on race as a social construct, and on the harmful consequences of the construct), but the 'zoomed out' nature of their responses keeps their comments from being remotely additive. These responses make generalized observations that are not grounded in Hobson's talk—the specific problem she frames and the concrete solutions she proposes—and consequently cannot produce knowledge along the *original line of argument*. Arguably, these engagements attempt to participate in problem-solving

(offering thoughts on the origin of interracial conflict and social inequality), but the responses feature such dissipated focus that they barely speak to Hobson's talk.

Several comments direct attention away from the particular knowledge-building aims of Hobson's talk by bringing up tangential (often barely-related) issues, then refusing to get back 'on-task.' For example, Relache indirectly responds to Hobson's quip "now, don't you think we need more than one black person in the U.S. senate?" by starting a new thread with simply "no what we need in the senate is people who believe in constitutional government [sic]." When another commenter asks "why not both?", Relache doubles down on their earlier comment, replying "because the only measure that matters is whether they respect the constitution." In making these comments, Relache obscures Hobson's points and distracts other readers by insisting upon bunting aside a conversation about minority representation (in this specific case, among U.S. legislators) in favor of debating purported best practices for legislators in general. Another commenter is remarkably explicit about their similar redirecting efforts—Metameric, writes: "the speaker is wrong and the issue of 'race' only masks the *real problem*—and that problem is socioeconomic status…It is the lower socioeconomic status of the person that explains the ills the speaker says are a result of racial discrimination" (emphasis mine). This respondent directly states that Hobson has not identified the "real problem," and that socioeconomic status, not race, should be the topic of discussion in her TED Talk on racial inequality. This writer deprioritizes the grounds of Hobson's talk, claiming that the social "ills" she discusses should be addressed through a lens of economic inequality. This speaker brushes up against a relevant concern—how class has a role in specific inequalities and social consequences—but, in rejecting Hobson's content, fails to provide this observation in a productive manner. It would take another commenter making a connection between race and class—introducing an intersectional perspective—

to bring the conversation back in line with Hobson's actual argument. The latter intervention would require energy expenditure from a different commenter, an energy and time-wasting necessity that is archetypical of BFR interactions.

Several commenters, in a breathtakingly ironic twist, redirect attention away from minority underrepresentation in leadership by insisting on the greater urgency of "anti-white racism." For example, Isomagnetic refers to "anti-white racist threats" as "common," writing that "much of the left denies there is or even can be such a thing as anti-white racism." This commenter neglects the core of Hobson's argument—that continued lack of minority representation in leadership is a solvable problem—insisting instead upon the importance of addressing the specter of "anti-white racist threats."[92] In making this comment, Isomagnetic devalues the inequalities Hobson works to resolve, implicitly indicating the greater importance of racist antagonisms against white people. Additionally, this commenter does not engage with Hobson directly, but instead complains that "the left" does not acknowledge this purportedly urgent problem, moving the line of argument yet further from Hobson and the specific suggestions she makes in her talk. In a similar vein, Andiron writes: "there were times that I experienced 'reverse racism,' too … which, makes me cry because it is an odd 'turning of the tables' feeling." Andiron invokes the fallacious concept of "reverse racism"—which colloquially connotes anti-white racism—to direct attention to the woes of white people suffering racism. This comment makes the conversation 'about them' and their wounded feelings instead of engaging with the points Hobson makes. These gestures constitute BFR in that they attribute greater importance to a related—yet distinct—issue. Another commenter would have to dedicate time and energy to connect the response with Hobson's observations

[92] It is worth noting that this commenter is also engaging in the kind of generalizing bunting BFR I discuss earlier, by 'exploding' Hobson's specific topic into the much more general topic of "racism" and whom racism most affects.

and suggestions—time and energy that could have been spent producing consensus, better dissensus, additional related examples, and/or other solutions. Again, these gestures count as BFR in that they create inefficiencies in an already-difficult conversation.

Several comments derail discussion of Hobson's particular interventions by reducing the conversation to questions of culpability, or *who is to blame* for the persisting lack of minorities in leadership positions. Several commenters respond to Hobson's observations on continued inequity by claiming that the black community is *creating* these conditions. Heattyker203 writes "New solution, Blacks start stop reverting from progress by glorifying stereotypes and acting out. Everyone can live in peace knowing that race won't be thrown in their face by blacks looking for a crutch [sic]." Here, Heattyker203 accuses American black people of "acting out," then using race "as a crutch," both rejecting Hobson's diagnosis of the issue and its solution and moving the line of conversation onto questions of blame. This commenter goes on to proclaim that racial inequality "isn't the world's problem anymore, its [sic] the black communities," and that "blacks need to step up and assimilate, not hate." By proclaiming that racism "isn't the world's problem anymore" and accusing black people of promulgating hate, this respondent delegitimizes the issue as needing collective effort for resolution, and defers responsibility. In making these rhetorical moves, the commenter engages in BFR by redirecting the conversation, essentially refusing to discursively engage beyond deflection and blame-casting. Bressumer focuses upon blame as well, but in this case, does so by claiming that Hobson is looking for "a villain," bringing up the possibility that "Ms. Hobson [is] vilifying white men for just existing," This respondent goes on to portray Hobson as someone who casts "Men who had followed their paths created families and contributed to their communities [as] now evil because Ms. Hobson

doesn't like their race." This commenter focuses on blame in two senses: they 1.) focus on the idea of assigning fault and 2.) suggest that Hobson herself is guilty of vilification (of "white men"). These comments reduce Hobson's talk to attacks on white men, engaging with her talk on simplistic terms that cannot facilitate substantive discussion, or at least, not a discussion along the lines of the original argument.

To give one last example of blame-casting bunting BFR: Uggernaut writes that "Obama, Holder, and several black others are the worst offenders in town. They rank with the worst of the lot. They use race to divide the US. What are the blacks doing about it? Why are not the whites speaking out?" This commenter casts blame in several directions, first at specific leaders, then casting generalized blame—via rhetorical questions—at "blacks" and "whites" for not "speaking out," or "doing [something] about it." This response declines to participate in the discourse Hobson invites—a discussion of a specific problem with several proposed, actionable solutions—and instead chooses to accuse several prominent black leaders of fomenting social strife, and to imply that others fail to hold these leaders accountable. It is worth noting that this commenter seems to be suggesting hypocrisy on the part of the general populace: that black leaders are causing "division" and that no one critiques their actions. This comment directs the conversation away from its original grounds in order to emphasize that certain parties are supposedly to blame for racial strife. In making these gestures, Uggernaut reduces discourse on lack of minority representation (and a few viable solutions) to finger-pointing. These gestures distract other readers from the original argument, inviting the devolution of the conversation into accusations and throwing up of the hands ('it's not my problem').

Several non sequiturs appear in the comment sections, derailing or generally impeding discussion of Hobson's talk by virtue of the sheer conceptual distance between

the response and the talk to which they reply. As I mentioned in my chapter on Juno Mac's TED Talk, non sequiturs do not necessarily indicate an intent to derail a conversation. However, regardless of intent, the net effect of non sequitur responses is to distract other respondents from the content of the original argument—consequently, these gestures fall under the auspices of BFR. In one non sequitur response, Chiffonier writes "our greatest hopes should be concerning human evolution via the continuing growth of autism and the pictures we can create within our minds," and that "We need to stop the superiority gossip, and look for the bright future that awaits us all." This comment seems to suggest that autism is the next step in human evolution, forwarding this commenter's theory and suggesting that it (not race and color blindness) should be a central topic of concern. Additionally, in referring to discourses on race as "superiority gossip," this commenter relegates discussion on race and its social consequences to "gossip," devaluing the discourse in which Hobson participates. Both components of this comment distract readers from the topic at hand. Moreover, the addition of a non sequitur to the conversation makes re-focusing more difficult than average—a respondent would have to baldly redirect the line of discussion (explicitly pointing out the non sequitur or offering an on-task comment that is conceptually distant from Chiffonier's contribution) to pull Hobson's material back 'into sight.' In another comment, Chiffonier goes off on another tangent, on people "rattling the chains of discontent," going on to mention that "the nut jobs however, do make bombs, and kill innocent people. But that is no reason to spend Trillions of Taxed [sic] Payer dollars to make continuous Wars…" Again, this commenter brings up a social issue (war) that is *not* racial disparities, simultaneously neglecting the original topic and suggesting that the new topic deserves the audience's attention. In broaching this new topic, Chiffonier is again providing a response that complicates the conversation without contributing a

response to Hobson's original topic.

Attempts to Re-Focus

As I mentioned in the analysis of Juno Mac talk's comment section: in order to robustly characterize BFR and identify its effects, it is crucial to address the ways in which on-task respondents work to mitigate the derailing, blocking, and/or distracting effects of BFR comments. Throughout the comment section for "Color Blind or Color Brave," many commenters engage with BFR practitioners in ways that attempted to re-focus the conversation, that is, to bring the parameters of the exchange back to Hobson's intended topics and aims. The delegitimizing, blocking, and distracting BFR comments *direct attention away from Hobson's specific proposal*, and the commenters that attempt to re-focus the conversation work to *re-ground the line of discussion in Hobson's talk*. That is, re-focusing respondents labor to connect the BFR comments, via corrections and allusions to specific points of Hobson's, back to her specific points (color bravery as a means to improve racial equity and produce superior solutions to problems).

Some re-focusing efforts explicitly point out the derailing or distracting effects of BFR comments, "calling out" the responses as unproductive. In one instance, Apiculture responds to a BFR practitioner's repeated rejection of Hobson's anecdote about being mistaken for kitchen staff—in which the BFR commenter claims they "just don't believe this story," and repeatedly demands "proof"—by pointing out the excessiveness of the BFR practitioner's demands. Apiculture asks if Hobson "need[s] to tote around and take out a 35-page document every time she tells that story" to "satisfy [the commenter's] whim?", further observing that commenters such as the BFR practitioner can always "find something else to discredit her story." In making these observations, Apiculture highlights the way in which demands for proof are often insatiable, pointing out the

ridiculous ends Hobson would have to go to in order to even attempt to satisfy the "whims" of every skeptic. Moreover, this BFR mitigating response actually alludes to bad faith rhetorical practices by bringing up the likelihood that even "proof" would only lead to commenters finding some other means to "discredit" Hobson. This intervention marks the BFR comment as a response that makes unreasonable demands and works to delegitimize Hobson and her talk. Here, Apiculture refuses to 'fall down the rabbit hole' of BFR demands for proof, and points out the existence of a discursive energy trap, which flag the comment as unproductive for commenters who may wish to earnestly engage. In short, this comment critiques the prior response as unproductive and suggests to other readers that they may have to look elsewhere for productive conversation on the topic.

In another instance of a commenter "calling out" BFR, Carbuncle questions why some commenters "even spent the time to view [Hobson's talk], let alone…comment," going on to observe that "some [commenters] mentioned 'them,' repeatedly, their lower standards, and their feeling of entitlement. No practical solutions or even acknowledgment that a problem actually exists." Here, Carbuncle explicitly points to the unproductive nature of BFR comments that eschew "practical solutions" in favor of some unspecified other person's—in the context of the comments, it can be assumed that "they" are black people—supposed "lower standards" and "entitlement." This response identifies two BFR practices in the comment section for Hobson's talk: 1.) denying the existence of the problem against which a speaker intervenes, consequently declining to engage with the actual content of the proposal, and 2.) failing to offer any kind of meaningful suggestions on the topic at hand. Carbuncle's critiques point out the problematic nature of several BFR engagements, highlighting the BFR comments' failures to produce solutions or even diagnose a problem. These observations criticize

BFR practices, and implicitly underscore the importance of audience members—who "take the time" to view Hobson's talk and respond—actually acknowledging a problem and producing "practical solutions," or, really engaging with what Hobson has to offer.

Another form of BFR mitigation involves a commenter citing specific details from Hobson's argument in response to a generic or de-railing comment. In these engagement, a commenter responds to a BFR practitioner by explicitly referring to particular content from the talk, drawing attention back to the concrete problem analysis and proposals Hobson offers. In one instance, Disciform responds to a BFR commenter who deploys stories from their own life as evidence for the claim that "black Americans want SPECIAL treatment, not equal treatment [sic]." Disciform responds by clarifying the content of Hobson's actual proposal, pointing out that the BFR practitioner "missed the message," and that Hobson "speak[s] of fair and equal opportunities for those that have done their due diligence, and are just looking to contribute their knowledge and skill to make the corporation successful, but are turned away at the door because of race. That's not someone seeking special treatment, just equal treatment." In this response, Disciform responds to a generalizing and derailing comment by drawing attention to the specific premises of Hobson's argument: that businesses *and* people benefit from proactive, diversity-fostering hiring practices—being color brave—and that these practices are designed to yield "equal opportunities" for "diligent" people. Instead of engaging in BFR—perhaps, by delegitimizing the BFR commenter's anecdotes—or following a tangent, Disciform corrects a course that led to overgeneralizations and neglect of Hobson's specific proposals, moving the conversation closer to the terms of the intervention Hobson makes. This intervention provides opportunities for the BFR commenter to engage with ideas that are closely related to Hobson's talk, or to return to a discursive location that keeps the original argument "in sight."

In another instance, a BFR commenter delegitimizes Hobson's argument by suggesting that she is cherry-picking her examples. This BFR practitioner claims Hobson misses the superiority of color blindness because she is ignoring the successes of "conservative" black Americans such as Condoleeza Rice, who the commenter claims were successful because they focused on their work instead of "complain[ing] about the lack of diversity." Besomvin1220 responds to this commenter, writing "Respectfully, you missed the point. [T]he point is to talk about the race-related issues that show up everyday [sic] and not be afraid to talk about them. that diversity makes us stronger comprehensively and THAT's why we should cultivate it in our friendships, workplaces." Here, Besomvin1220 accurately and succinctly parses Hobson's proposal; this response points out that the BFR practitioner is missing key points and redirects attention to the importance of "talk[ing] about race-related issues," instead of ignoring them (as the BFR respondent endorses). Besomvin1220 re-focuses the conversation on Hobson's argument, in the process correcting the prior commenter's tangent, facilitating conversation on the actual content of Hobson's talk and working toward solutions as Hobson does (as opposed to criticizing Hobson's examples and ignoring the specific benefits of color bravery that she outlines). Besomvin1220's gestures reject a bad faith dismissal of Hobson's advocacy, and invite the BFR commenter (as well as all others) to focus instead upon solving the concrete problem Hobson adumbrates.

The net effect of the BFR responses is that these comments direct the line of conversation away from Hobson's particular explications and proposals. In the context of Hobson's talk, BFR responses direct discourse away from 1.) the persistent effects of racism (as Hobson relates throughout her talk, continued lack of diverse leadership in the U.S.), 2.) the concept of color bravery as a means to combat racism's effects ('seeing color' in order to cultivate diverse teams in business, community leadership, and

research), and 3.) the benefits of implementing her color brave practices (improving profit and research, and facilitating children of color's ability to envision themselves in important roles and work toward these roles). In short, the BFR that appears in response to Hobson's talk moves readers' attention away from the well-defined problem for which Hobson suggests concrete solutions.

The BFR mitigation process attempts to produce well-defined disagreement (often via reminders of specific details as a response to BFR generalizations) or consensus, toward the commenters' co-production of knowledge relevant to Hobson's explications and/or proposals. As is the case with all BFR, attempts to re-focus the conversation can be successful, but still require energy expenditure of varying degrees. Depending on the argumentative savviness of the BFR mitigator, this process will range from efficient to quite laborious. The respondent who attempts to 'correct the course' must recognize that a BFR commenter wanders afield, acknowledge (explicitly or implicitly) the ways the comment wanders, and offer a response that attempts to 'connect the dots' between the tangent and the original argument. Too, it is important to keep in mind that attempts to re-focus the conversation are 'an uphill battle'—usually responding to parties uninterested in being redirected—and often entangle the mitigator, resulting in both the mitigator and the BFR practitioner (and sometimes other commenters in the virtual vicinity) 'falling down the rabbit hole.' In short, BFR mitigation entails an expenditure of analytical and argumentative energy—an energetic investment intended to realign off-task responses with the content of Hobson's talk (including the specific issue of racism and lack of leadership diversity). As is the case with the BFR in the comments for Juno Mac's talk, BFR's most prominent effect is the leeching of time and energy from commenters who wish to co-produce knowledge and

effects in line with Hobson's argumentative offerings. This leeching certainly extends its effects to those who recognize and seek to mitigate BFR.

A Few Key Considerations and Trends

One of the most prominent patterns in the BFR responses to "Color Blind or Color Brave" is that the BFR tends to stop at the lowest-order stasis questions, of fact. Specifically, much of this BFR halts discourse on a concrete issue by responding in the negative to the question "is there a problem?"; or, in the context of Hobson's talk, the question might be more specifically articulated as: "is there, as Hobson asserts, a problem with lack of racial diversity in leadership positions?" In the comments section for Hobson's talk, BFR practitioners deny the existence of a problem at times directly (to the tune of 'racism has been solved, so I don't know why we're talking about this') and at other times indirectly (via the delegitimization of Hobson's experiential and statistical evidence, which bear witnesses to persisting circumstances of race-based inequality). In both cases, BFR responses draw attention away from the particulars of Hobson's talk by indicating that the problem she attempts to remedy does not actually exist. By stopping at the stasis of fact, these responses quite effectively impede discussion of Hobson's concept (color bravery) and her eloquent case for its benefits (for businesses and the next generation of leaders) by refusing to proceed past the question of fact ("does a problem exist?").

A significant proportion of BFR comments do acknowledge a problem, but block argumentative progress by expressing cynicism about the solvability of this problem. In these responses, BFR practitioners make the choice to communicate their skepticism about the general solvability of the problem and/or the feasibility of tackling this problem through discourse. Expressing this kind of hopelessness is a conversational 'stop' that implicitly insistes 1.) upon the general hopelessness of a situation, and 2.) that

on-task commenters are making only futile moves in their engagements. So, not only do these BFR practitioners 'stand still' in the flow of discourse (declining to add insights or critiques that bear relevance to Hobson's points), but they also encourage others to likewise disengage. Discursive moves that express the difficulty of addressing a problem *can* be argumentatively productive, if these evocations discuss the complexities of the problem in detail; this kind of analysis can help 'pull apart' an issue in a way that provides useful information for problem-solvers. However, in the case of the BFR comments that cynically dismiss the issue because of its inherent complexity or size, these responses do not offer enough detail or grounded analysis to actually further the problem-solving process. Put another way, these comments cannot produce better understandings, or, co-produce knowledge; consequently, they qualify as BFR.

The final form of BFR that is most notable in the comments for Hobson's talk is the variety of BFR that redirects focus, either diluting it (through generalization) or pushing it to the side (by obsessing over blame or claiming greater importance for a tangentially-related issue). In the comment section of Hobson's talk, these gestures take the form of 1.) generalizing issues of race to be issues of unity or transcendence, 2.) claiming that tangential issues such as "anti-white racism" are more important than ongoing inequality in minority leadership, and 3.) that questions of blame for racism are more important than discussions of solutions for present raced social consequences. This subtle form of argumentative stymying often does not overtly disagree with Hobson, but instead indirectly co-opts the conversation by generalizing or redirecting the line of discussion such that it no longer closely relates to the content of Hobson's argument. This form of BFR is relatively insidious, as it does not announce its disagreement, but moves directly into shifting the discussion away from the argument's original premises and content. Especially because higher-order abstract questions and semi-related issues

seem to constitute worthwhile philosophical queries, generalizations and tangents often tempt other commenters away from the more specific details at hand. Blame-casting likewise lures commenters way from the content of the original argument, as moral/causal questions (e.g., "who caused this problem?") may appear to be relevant queries, purportedly part of a problem's diagnosis. Re-directing or bunting BFR moves such as these often appear to be helpful inquiries (and are potentially even offered with legitimately productive *intentions*), but impede the specific knowledge-building process Hobson sparks, blocking epistemological work by drawing the line of inquiry to generalizations and tangents that are not grounded in the concrete issues Hobson outlines.

Overall, the patterns of response in the BFR comments for Hobson's talk follow trends in vernacular discussions of race. As I discuss in the next section, denial, blame-casting, and reluctance to address concrete solutions are typical of current contestation over race and its social consequences in the U.S. The BFR offered in response to Juno Mac's talk likewise evinces qualities common to discussions of gender and sexuality (e.g., silencing), which suggests that BFR varieties rely on the patterns common to specific discourses, such as discourses of race, gender, class, and so on. In the next section, I parse the consistent qualities of BFR, but also identify where BFR 'flexes,' or adjusts to discursive contexts, altering its forms. Toward this, the following discussion in the next chapter parses trends in BFR responses to "Color Blind or Color Brave?" and "The Laws that Sex Workers Actually Want", identifying the ways that BFR may flow at times down quasi-standard channels, and at others, in unique, context-specific directions. Additionally, the next chapter highlights the ways that, even though the literature does

not identify BFR practices as a 'family' of rhetorical gestures,[93] critical theories of race and feminist scholarship do illuminate and recommend practices are promising beginnings for a broader—self-aware and hence more effective—BFR mitigation strategies.

[93] Instead, the literature tends to treat individual derailing practices (i.e., silencing and color-blind racism) as specific phenomena without identifying how *net effects* (derailing, distracting, or just blocking) tie several of these phenomena together, comprising a broader category of rhetorical action.

CHAPTER 6

OVERALL DISCUSSION

As the previous analyses establish, bad faith rhetorical gestures do vary substantially, but are connected by the common thread of epistemological disruption. Although all BFR gestures—Delegitimizing BFR, Bunting BFR, "Sea-Lioning"/"Spreading", Non-sequiturs, Pseudo-stasis, in their varying incarnations—lead to argument derailing[94], the routes into this energy 'sink' vary widely For example, one BFR practitioner may move a conversation "off course" by insistently pursuing a non sequitur (a contribution that begins afield), while another may actually maintain attention on the issue at hand, but block argumentative progress by undermining the issue's importance (a contribution that is comparatively "on-task," but still obstructive). Both of these BFR varieties—non sequitur and issue delegitimization—impede epistemological production, but use different means to do so. It is important to consider the variety of routes to argumentative disruption, not only to inventory the 'full collection' of BFR moves, but also to grasp the fact that trends appear across seemingly-disparate practices. By treating BFR types as a family of rhetorical gestures, rhetors interested in building better understandings of issues—and/or developing solutions to actually-existing problems—may develop more robust strategies for mitigating the disruptive effects of BFR.[95]

It is also crucial to consider the ways that BFR appears in context-specific forms, despite the consistency of these forms' shared effect (disruption). In particular, rhetoricians would do well to attend to the ways in which types of BFR gestures (e.g.,

[94] And, as I establish earlier, increased energy expenditure on the part of conversational participants who attempt to re-focus the discussion in order to keep the conversation "on-task."

[95] As I discuss elsewhere, the ultimate aim of this project—BFR definition and identification—is to provide the groundwork for the development of BFR mitigation strategies, a project I will continue in future work. Identifying and explicating BFR practices are the necessary first steps in this endeavor, as these labors provide the analytical particles with which may be used to construct efficient, well-tailored anti-BFR practices.

delegitimization tactics) follow patterns in vernacular discourses of race, gender, class, abledness, and so on. As I note in the analyses of BFR in the two TED Talk comment sections, BFR comments follow trends in pro-status quo blocking of progressive arguments, including arguments forwarded by antiracist and feminist thinkers. For example, the speaker-delegitimizing efforts that appear in several BFR responses to Juno Mac's proposal and explications are iterations of the silencing practices that feminist rhetorical scholars point out have long been used in attempts to quell women's rhetorical work.

In the section that follows, I address a few of the ways in which the BFR responses to Mellody Hobson's "Color Blind or Color Brave?" and Juno Mac's "The Laws that Sex Workers Actually Want" converge and diverge. Focusing on the BFR responses to each talk in turn, I first discuss the distinct, context-specific traits of the BFR that appears in the respective comments sections. After each of these explications, I then establish the ways that the distinct qualities of each set of BFR comments still share the broader characteristics and net effects that make BFR a recognizable set of rhetorical practices. Subsequently, I discuss how both TED speakers use their epistemological labors to produce invitations into their perspectives, and some of the epistemological implications of BFR in public discourses. Finally, I offer a few preliminary thoughts and cautions on consensus and imposed unity, and explore how BFR plays into broader narratives of U.S. identity.

Distinctive BFR Behaviors: BFR Comments in Response to Mellody Hobson's TED Talk

The BFR that appears in response to Mellody Hobson's "Color Blind or Color Brave?" demonstrate the archetypal characteristics of BFR—responses that distract, derail, or otherwise impede the construction of consensus or better-defined dissensus.

However, these BFR comments also evince distinctive qualities that rely on the comments' specific contexts. A few examples of contextual factors that enable the mobilization of certain types of BFR include the content of the talk, the cultural "baggage" associated with a given topic, the kairotic factors to which the talk responds, the nature of the public that has chosen to assemble in the specific comment section, and the raced, gendered, and classed social norms that impact how the audience 'reads' the speaker. The norms and popular understandings of a given argumentative context create 'grooves' into which conversational participants are likely to fall—grooves which include recurring types of BFR.

Although I sort bad faith rhetorical gestures into categories that reoccur across contexts, it is crucial to identify the ways that BFR practitioners' responses in the particular TED Talk's comment sections hit upon *nodes common to the particular, larger popular discourse in which the TED Talk engages* (for example, the discourse surrounding diversity and color blindness in the U.S.).[96] To further clarify, consider the following juxtaposition: for the purposes of explaining a complex set of responses, I sort BFR comments into relatively generic types, including "bunting," delegitimizing, and distracting. However, I also identify the ways that certain BFR gestures are tightly bound to the topic at hand, responding specifically to the contexts of that particular talk. For example, several BFR practitioners' use of issue-delegitimizing BFR in response to Hobson's talk takes the form of racial gaslighting (parsed as "you are only imagining racism"), an articulation of BFR that responds to the particular topics and current cultural values surrounding the speaker's talk. In sum: although BFR gestures can be sorted into 'families' of gestures that reoccur across different contexts (e.g.,

[96] These topic-specific trends in epistemological disruption form the rhetorical tropes and patterns that are central concerns in critical race theory, feminist rhetorics, and cultural criticism.

delegitimizing BFR), these types of BFR are often mobilized through (or occur through the lens of) discourse-specific tactics.

The BFR comments that appear in response to Hobson's talk exhibit a few patterns particular to discourses of race. Two particular trends that bear noting are the high occurrences of issue-delegitimizing BFR comments (which, as I mention above, equate to racial gaslighting) and reductive blame-casting. BFR practitioners who use these rhetorical moves mobilize nodes in the current discourses of race in the U.S. to derail Hobson's epistemological labors. Put another way: BFR comments are generally deployed toward the derailing of the conversation, but these particular derailing efforts are *mobilized* via tropes that are common in current popular discussions of race.

The first of the BFR trends that stands out in the responses to Hobson's talk is the prominence of issue-delegitimizing comments, a gesture common enough in vernacular discussions of race that it is a well-documented phenomenon—even a trope[97]—in critical race scholarship. This type of BFR response works to undermine the importance of the racial inequality Hobson works to remedy with her advocacy for color bravery, and stymies knowledge production beginning at stasis of fact ("is there a problem?" or "did something happen?"). To provide a few brief examples (explicated in further detail in the analysis chapter): Chiffonier claims that the civil rights movement and the civil war eradicated racial inequality in the U.S., and Relache suggests that racism is only imagined by people of color, supposedly the result of "indoctrination." Gestures such as these are relevant by virtue of their status as well-documented

[97] I term the phenomenon of ignoring the problem of race a trope in the scholarship, even though other scholars do not necessarily identify the set of obfuscating tactics *explicitly* as such. I find it reasonable to term these denials a trope given that the various ways of expressing the ignoring of race-centric problem (i.e., Gordon Lewis' bad faith in antiblack racism and Charles Mills' observations on the role of denial in the racial contract) are complementary enough—and similar enough in their net effects—to be considered collectively as a trope.

phenomena in critical race studies. For example, Charles Mills succinctly sums up the recurring phenomenon of white people refusing to see race-centric problems as part of the "structured blindnesses and opacities" typical of the racial contract that determines raced social hierarchies (19). Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's concept of color-blind racism also (somewhat ironically, given Hobson's explicit advocacy against a color-blind mentality) bears here, as he points out that it is white people's insistence that they 'do not see race' that allows them to ignore both the fact of, and their implication in, continued racial inequality. In other words, the BFR gestures that the two commenters above use are not completely unique incidents of derailing rhetorics, but are rather tropes in vernacular discussions of race in the U.S., which provide vehicles for the BFR.

Another trend in the BFR responses to Hobson's talk that bears noting—a pattern that is prevalent in responses to Hobson's talk, but is not in the comments responding to Mac's talk—is the usage of blame-redirection as a distraction from Hobson's points. For example, Isomagnetic declines to discuss the specific problems Hobson outlines, insisting instead upon the importance of "anti-white racism"; and Uggernaut and Bressumer suggest that people such as Hobson are using race to divide the U.S. and/or "vilify" white men. These responses, in typical BFR fashion, do not engage with the content of Hobson's argument; moreover, these BFR redirections respond to a reductive view of Hobson's proposals—an interpretation of her argument that oversimplifies it to an assignment of blame. These responses resonate with Gordon Lewis' observation that when a person is "unwilling to face the situation [of racism and its consequences]," they rely upon "crude and less well adapted solutions," including rhetorical actions that are symbolic (tearing up a document that describes a problem) or blame-casting (construing the people who suffer from racism as the creators of social ills or "the problem

themselves"[98]) (85). Here, the BFR practitioners, instead of addressing the concrete problem Hobson discusses, indirectly identify Hobson—and other black Americans who work to remedy racial inequality—as the origin of race-based social problems. These responses do so by focusing upon racism directed at white people (by POC), and by accusing Hobson of being 'divisive' and of "vilifying" white people with her advocacy. In sum, the BFR gestures that distract from Hobson's key points in the above ways—by a.) reducing the conversation to assignment of blame then b.) directing that blame at Hobson and advocates for racial equity—use tropes common in vernacular discourses of race (as scholars such as Lewis comment upon) as a vehicle for bad faith rhetorical action.

The distinctive nodes in the BFR responses to Hobson's talk illuminate the ways in which BFR may be described as recurring, particular actions—delegitimizing, distracting, and so on—but that the execution of these actions is impacted by the contexts of the argument to which the BFR responds. The BFR responses to racial equity-focused advocacy such as Hobson's follow patterns (e.g., common resistant responses to antiracist argument) that critical race theorists have thoroughly established in their work, as these bad faith rhetorical actions participate in conversations that have long histories, embedded cultural significance, and kairotic influences. In understanding BFR, it is crucial to consider that bad faith rhetorical responses do not happen in a vacuum. On the contrary, BFR varieties are often particular to their particular discursive environments. This is not to say, of course, that *every* BFR response is a direct result of the discourse in which it appears. Like any other conversational context, a rhetorical environment *influences* the forms of BFR, but does not predetermine any discursive

[98] Gordon Lewis cites W.E.B. DuBois here, noting that DuBois "identified this dimension of racist behavior in the United States" (85).

outcomes. However, as the rhetorical tradition thoroughly demonstrates, text and context are ever entwined, and the larger discourses circulated through a culture on a given topic do impact the dynamics of a conversation on that topic. In the following section, I briefly overview the ways in which BFR responses to Juno Mac's TED Talk demonstrate distinct qualities, and discuss the ways that these qualities correlate with current discourses of gender and sexuality[99].

Distinctive BFR Behaviors: BFR Comments in Response to Juno Mac's TED Talk

A trend that is noteworthy in the BFR responses to Mac's "The Laws that Sex Workers Really Want" is the recurrence of speaker delegitimization via her (and the other sex workers for whom she advocates) supposed criminality and/or bias. In these responses, commenters derail discussion of the specific problems and proposed legislative solutions Mac covers in her talk by dismissing sex workers as "criminals" and emphasizing the idea that Mac herself is not impartial enough to provide legitimate recommendations on the topic of sex work legislation. These derailing efforts (with varying degrees of explicitness) indicate that sex workers' choice to break the present regulations around sex work negates their rights to protection from violence, and the BFR practitioners use these claims to draw attention away from the content of Mac's proposals.

This pattern is similar to the pattern of BFR practitioners undermining Hobson's ethos by claiming that her "bias" or "political agenda" cancels out her ability to provide legitimate analysis and recommendations on the topic of racial equality. Both types of BFR practitioners—those who rely on Mac's purported bias and "criminal" status and

[99] Here, I mean sexuality in the general sense: not just sexual orientation, but sexual behaviors and their varied cultural significations in the sense Foucault uses in *History of Sexuality*.

those who rely on the idea that Hobson's argument is merely part of a questionable agenda—dismiss the argument of the speaker by undermining her ethos. However, this type of BFR is particularly prominent in the responses to Mac's talk, and bears additional attention because the BFR that delegitimizes the speaker by dismissing her as a criminal specifically flies in the face of her explicit plea for her audience to resist efforts to silence sex workers. In other words, BFR practitioners who dismiss Mac because of sex workers' transgressions against current laws are blatantly ignoring the premise of her talk (that sex workers need protection, and that listening to them can lead to laws that do just that) *and* her blunt observation that sex workers have attempted to speak out, and that others (like the BFR practitioners) attempt to silence their efforts. These gestures are especially significant in discussions of gender and sexuality, as women's participation in these discourses have historically been subject to variegated and insistent silencing measures. In sum, BFR attempts to dismiss the needs of sex workers by virtue of their "criminality" and/or bias engage in speaker-delegitimizing BFR that has deep contextual significance—as another means by which to silence the interventions of women, especially on topics that are of special concern to women.

In one instance, Epigamic forwards the idea that Mac's argument does not bear serious consideration because of her "bias," further claiming that she and other sex work advocates promulgate "myths" about sex work. In another comment, Nullism dismisses Mac's argument as a "criminal's" wishful thinking, and indicates that a sex worker who is exposed to violence in her workplace should not have chosen to engage in sex work in the first place.[100] Both of these comments engage in silencing work, albeit through slightly different mechanisms. In the first example, the commenter brushes off Mac's—carefully

[100] Blaming sex workers for the violence inflicted upon them has a long history; works such as Patricia Cline Cohen's *The Murder of Helen Jewett* usefully illuminate parts of this history.

researched and painstakingly explained—proposals as merely the advocacy of a speaker willing to distribute misinformation as a means to further her interests. In the second example, the commenter suggests that sex worker wishing to avoid harm should have not chosen their profession, and that sex workers' pursuit of legal protections is merely a rule breaker's wish for decreased legal enforcement. Both of these commenters direct attention away from the particulars of Mac's argument by devaluing her motives and damaging her ethos as an authority on her topic; furthermore, these BFR gestures deflect blame for violence against sex workers to the workers themselves, in an act of victim-blaming. The BFR responses that, a.) further the idea that Mac's argument is merely the product of self-interested bias and b.) emphasize the law-breaking component of sex work, undermine Mac's authority on her topic (which is, of course, deeply ironic given that a central features of her ethos is her ability to speak to her topic from personal experience). These comments work to disqualify Mac as a speaker, making the implicit argument that her argument is moot, and that her audience should not bother to hear her out.

These gestures attempt to silence Mac, impeding her work to intervene against the problem she outlines, rhetorical actions that bear particular significance when they are enacted against a woman speaking in public. As feminist rhetoricians repeatedly point out, "attempts to undermine women's authority to speak [in public]" are part of a long tradition of attempting to stifle the voices of women, especially those who intervene against the status quo (Dow 63). The above BFR responses to Mac's talk also fit neatly into Kirstin Poirot's "rhetorics of containment," in that the speaker-delegitimizing BFR attempts to neutralize "a potential threat to hegemonic culture and/or the norms of the status quo" (265). In this context, the "norms of the status quo" include ignoring sex workers and their needs because of cultural notions of the profession's "unseemliness" or

supposedly immorality. The ideas that Mac is merely a criminal whose biases cause her to favor her peers serve as vehicles for the silencing work that is so well documented and explicated in feminist scholarship. Put another way: the above commenters' bad faith rhetorical gestures—derailing a discussion of a concrete problem by attempting to disqualify the speaker—function via the mechanisms of a well-established derailing tactic that has been historically deployed against women. BFR takes the shape of a well-documented rhetorical phenomenon, appearing in a form that is informed by the context of the speaker and the (historically) gendered issue she tackles.

Bad faith rhetorics that appear in responses to Mac's talk, like the BFR responses deployed against Hobson's argument, rely upon context-specific vehicles. In both cases, BFR practitioners end up using tropic responses, typical rhetorical pathways in vernacular discussions of race and gender. As I have discussed in an earlier section (see Chapter 1), public contestations over issues of identity—sexuality, class, citizenship, race, gender, and so on—fall into "grooves" established by the social norms of the culture in which the conversation takes place. In line with these dynamics, BFR responses do not occur in forms that exist apart from culture (which is, of course, an impossibility)—on the contrary, bad faith rhetorical gestures often take shapes that are recognizable sets of responses dependent upon a larger discourse (e.g., on feminine authority to speak publicly). So, even as BFR exists in categories that recur across conversational settings (such as derailing and bunting), the particular shape these gestures take is often profoundly impacted by established discursive habits that members of a public have been enculturated to deploy on the topic at hand (including tropic responses to issues of race and gender).

Common Features in the Comments for Both Talks

The common thread across all the types of BFR present in the responses to

Hobson and Mac's talks is that these rhetorical actions alter the parameters of the discussion such that it becomes unactionable (or at the very least, extremely unlikely to produce action). Each of these common BFR responses functions as follows:

- Ad hominem-style responses delay or block knowledge building around the issue by drawing attention to the supposed deficiencies of the speaker
- attempts to disqualify an argument because of purported technical flaws move focus away from the prospect of a currently existing problem and potential solutions
- responses that cast the issue at hand as unimportant or nonexistent thoroughly discourage the imagining and enactment of solutions to the problem, by insistently denying the existence of the problem
- claiming the greater importance of a tangential issue co-opts discussion of the issue the speaker originally chose to tackle, removing knowledge building and action-deciding efforts to another conceptual arena
- making suggestions based upon a hypothetical future (or simply alternate) reality in which the current version of the problem does not exist privileges a kind of 'wishful thinking' that deemphasizes the *current* existence of a problem, hobbling efforts to produce timely results to an urgent problem (what I call utopian neglect).
- dissipating focus on the issue or its solutions takes a concrete, actionable issue and morphs it into something amorphous and difficult (if not impossible) to 'wrangle'

As I established in the theorization chapter, the defining features of BFR are that it *distracts, derails, or otherwise stymies the production of knowledge* (that is, consensus or better-defined disagreement). The above common forms of BFR, taken together,

suggest that the disruption of knowledge production facilitates a general reduction in the actions that emerge from the discussion. So, BFR not only impedes the production of knowledge, but it generally obstructs any sort of rhetorical action.[101] In short: BFR hinders the production of outcomes, conversely stimulating unproductive responses, especially hampering the production of the specific outcomes for which the original argument advocates.

In the project of identifying and defining BFR, it is crucial to privilege the flexibility of BFR to given contexts, but to also give attention to the trends that make the set of rhetorical gestures 'groupable.' As a family of gestures, BFR incidents do have traits in common, or macro-level shared features that constitute it as a recognizable phenomenon. In the BFR responses to both Mac and Hobson's talks, there are a few patterns which bear noting. Particularly relevant are the recurrence of 1.) ad hominem-style speaker-delegitimizing tactics. 2.) argument-delegitimizing tactics that claim technical flaws in the argument, 3.) issue-delegitimizing moves that claim it is imagined or unimportant; 4.) utopian neglect (redirecting gestures that privilege an alternate reality in which the problem does not exist), 5.) bunting to tangential issues of supposedly greater importance, and 6.) distracting tactics that dissipate focus away from the original, concrete parameters of the talk. Most important, however, is the overarching net effect of the BFR responses offered up in response to both talks: *all these comments alter the conversation so that the content becomes unactionable*, whether via the proposed actions of the speakers or the alternatives suggested by BFR commenters.

One of the types of BFR that appears in consistent, recognizable forms across both comment sections is that of speaker delegitimization, specifically via claims that the

[101] Here, I use an expansive definition of rhetorical action, which includes agreement, construction of understandings, material and embodied argument, and so on.

speaker has moral or subjectivity-related failings that make her an unreliable source on her topic. Several of the BFR responses to both Hobson's and Mac's arguments direct attention away from the speakers' proposals, choosing instead to criticize the speakers themselves. Speaker-delegitimizing BFR gestures such as these, as is the case with other ad hominem-style responses, derail the rhetors' arguments by insisting that the conversation focus on criticism of the *speaker* instead of engaging her argument's *content*. In the BFR responses to Juno Mac's talk, various BFR practitioners engaged in speaker-delegitimizing BFR by insisting upon her purported non-representativeness as a sex worker (that she was an exception, and consequently could not speak for the profession), her 'bias' as a sex worker,[102] and/or her "criminality." In the BFR responses to Hobson's argument, several BFR practitioners undermined her authority on her topic by questioning the truthfulness of her anecdotes, implying that she and other advocates for racial equity are to blame for ongoing social conflict around race, indicating that she is feeding racial resentments, and suggesting that her advocacy is merely part of a larger (implied as sinister) political agenda. Comments such as these constitute BFR when they fail to engage with the content of the speaker's talk, privileging critique of the speaker herself over the points she makes. What is particularly interesting about these delegitimizing moves is that they all amount to claims that a given speaker has some kind of personal failings (intellectual and/or moral) that disqualify her as an authority. So, despite the dramatically different argumentative contexts of each talk—by virtue of disparate topics, speaker's professional backgrounds, connections to kairotic popular conversations, and so on—this type of BFR appears in a relatively consistent form.

[102] It is worth noting that BFR practitioners insisted, in different incidences of BFR, that Mac was both *non-representative* (an exception) and *too representative* (cannot be impartial because of her bias as a sex worker).

Another BFR type that appeared consistently in the comment sections for both TED Talks was that of argument-delegitimization via technical critique. These responses latch onto what the BFR practitioner claims is a flaw in the argument, and imply that this flaw is damning, significant enough to supposedly disqualify the entire text. In the case of the responses to Hobson's talk, several BFR comments attempt to critique her use of logical proofs, including her evidence selection and reasoning,[103] particularly claiming that her research is faulty. In a few BFR responses to Mac's argument, commenters claim that she is cherry-picking her examples,[104] that she presents content that does not "impact [her] thesis," and that she uses "strawman arguments" (Regrate; Areometer). As I mention in the analysis chapters, technical or micro-level critique has a valid place in argument, but these types of critique fall under the auspices of BFR—they cannot be productive—unless the critic is able to explicate the flaw's specific effect in the context of the overall argument. In other words, mentioning a technical flaw briefly, then declining to engage with the rest of the argument is a disqualifying bad faith rhetorical gesture, one that "throws the baby out with the bath water." In the argument-disqualifying BFR responses to Hobson and Mac's talks, the commenters make nearly identical rhetorical moves: *fixating* upon a purported technical flaw in the speaker's argument without attending to the argument as a whole, and *mobilizing* the 'flaw' to dismiss the overall proposal.

An additional type of BFR that reoccurs in a consistent form is that of issue-delegitimization. The commenters that make these gestures claim that Mac or Hobson's topic is not an issue that is important, or that the problem is nonexistent. In the

[103] One commenter criticizes Hobson's use of facts by snidely alluding to "logos…crying in a corner."
[104] These commenters do not use the term "cherry-picking," but clearly refer to the phenomenon by suggesting that she chooses not to discuss policy impacts on sex work in countries that (supposedly) struggle with aggression against sex workers.

responses to Mac's proposals, this type of BFR appears as claims that sex workers already have the legal protections they need from violence, or that the issue of violence against sex workers is irrelevant in light of larger problems (i.e., drug abuse and war). In the comments responding to Hobson's argument, BFR practitioners assert that past progress (achieved through the Civil War and Civil Rights Movement) 'fixed' the problem of racial inequality, such that it does not currently exist; or that racial inequality is only imagined, the result of "indoctrination" and/or a victim mindset. The gestures BFR practitioners make in the above examples are quite similar: the commenters decline to engage with the argument at all, rationalizing their disengagement by undermining the entire issue on which the speaker intervenes. So, these responses impede better understandings of an issue by stopping the conversation in its tracks, claiming that a discussion need not happen at all. This type of BFR is perhaps the most counterproductive, as it deploys a powerful excuse not to engage with a proposal, and presses other listeners to 'buy in'—these responses ask "if the proposal intervenes on a non-issue, why are we bothering to listen?", with the implicit recommendation that the audience need not take the speaker's argument seriously.

Another type of BFR that occurs across both comment sections is the privileging of an 'alternate reality' in which the problem at hand was forestalled entirely—utopian neglect. By this, I allude to respondents neglecting the parameters of a problem that actually, currently exists. These BFR practitioners, instead of grappling with a very-real issue, focus instead upon a hypothetical situation in which the problem never arose. In BFR responses to Hobson's talk, these gestures appear as—painfully ironic in the context of Hobson's advocacy for color bravery—suggestions that racial inequality would disappear if only people did not acknowledge the existence of race (a suggestion grounded upon the naïve notion that race only produces negative effects if people 'talk

about it').[105] This type of BFR appears in response to Mac's talk as advocacy for prohibition-based sex policy,[106] or suggestions that sex workers change their profession to avoid the violence to which sex workers are vulnerable. These responses to Mac's talk privilege a reality in which prohibition-based laws actually eliminate the sex work industry—another naïve response that ignores the speaker's points, in favor of an 'if only the situation were different…' scenario. These alternate imaginings will not fix current, harmful realities.

In all of these cases, the BFR commenters choose to focus on ways in which the problem at hand *could have been prevented*, without acknowledging the speaker's advocacy for—in both cases, very concrete—immediate actions to urgent, actually-existing issues. The BFR practitioners neglect both the speakers' articulate points that 1.) solutions to their chosen issue are sorely needed, and that 2.) the actions they propose can work toward solving an extant issue. In sum, several BFR responses to both Mac and Hobson's talks under-acknowledge the current existence of the issue at hand, and neglect entirely the necessity of dealing with the problem in concrete and immediate ways. In doing so, these commenters derail the discussion of the practical solutions that both speakers so eloquently support.

BFR that bunts the conversation toward tangents is also present in both comment sections. Several comments direct the discussion to issues of supposedly greater importance than the argument at hand, detracting from the conversation's focus and devaluing the speaker's issue and proposals. In the BFR responses to Hobson's talk, the comments that privilege tangents appear as claims that socioeconomic issues are the

[105] This falls under what Kimberlé Crenshaw's "vulgar constructionism," which uses the constructed nature of race as a social category to deny the nonetheless real and consequences of race.
[106] Of course, in making these suggestions, the BFR practitioners are ignoring Mac's observations that much sex work policy is already based upon a prohibition approach, and that this approach does not prevent either the existence of the profession or sex workers' exposure to violence.

"real problem," suggestions that lack of minority representation among congressional leadership is less important than a supposed crisis in adherence to the constitution, and insistences that anti-white racism is more important than the minority underrepresentation of which Hobson speaks.[107] In the BFR responses to Mac's argument, commenters draw attention away from the speaker's points and toward tangents by privileging "harm" to "non-sex workers" and insisting on the importance of discussing taxes in debates over sex work legislation.[108] These responses—sometimes implicitly, at other times explicitly—argue in favor of the commenter's alternate topic, de-prioritizing the original line of argument and distracting other members of the audience from the original parameters of the discussion.

The final set of BFR gestures that is conspicuously common in the responses to both TED Talks is a collection of distracting responses that dramatically *dissipate* the focus of the discussion. In this type of BFR, respondents 'explode' the conversation into much more general terms, rendering a concrete discussion of particular problems (e.g., how current legislative models that move sex workers out of public spaces and into isolated locations render them more vulnerable to violence and coercion) more generic (e.g., how sex work may be reduced in the future), consequently making it difficult for participants to produce specific solutions. One of the key vehicles for this type of response is an initial claim as to the insufficiency of the speaker's suggestions—the respondent uses the idea that the concept and/or proposals covered in the talk are 'not enough,' which the BFR practitioners uses to legitimate their own dramatic broadening of the topic. In the dissipating BFR responses to Hobson's talk, BFR practitioners both

[107] I parse this last response here—such gestures have clear rhetorical significance. By refusing to engage with the racial inequality issues Hobson outlines, and instead insistently drawing attention to "anti-white racism," these commenters are implicitly (and yet quite clearly) indicating the greater importance of the latter.

[108] Incidentally discrediting Mac's argument for the omission.

dissipate focus on her local, concrete solutions and dissipate the topic itself. For example, Chiffonier derails discussion of Hobson's feasible color-brave practices (e.g., diversity-aware hiring practices) by proposing general solutions supposedly enactable through "political help" or other sweeping institutional initiatives. In another instance, a commenter directs attention to the idea that racism is fundamentally related to jealousy, dissipating focus by moving away from Hobson's specific articulations of racial inequality (and her proposed solutions) and toward the abstract principle of jealousy and its theoretical relationship to racism. In the BFR responses to Mac's talk, dissipating comments include suggestions that her proposals are "only a temporary 'fix,'" indicating that universal basic income and improved virtual reality technologies are better ways to address the problem Mac discusses (Epigamic). By widening the focus of the conversation—either via generic, abstract solutions, or via a 'zoomed out' interpretation of the problem that eliminates the specificity the speaker originally used to make a concrete argument—these BFR practitioners dilute the focus or argumentative 'power' in a way that makes strategic problem-solving nearly impossible. To put it another way: by reinterpreting the speaker's argument as much more general, BFR practitioners neutralize the strategic specificity upon which a successful proposal relies. These responses engage in BFR by distracting the participants in the discussion via a dilution of the problem and/or its solutions.

Discussion: Epistemological Stagnation and Invitation

Bad Faith Rhetorics are rhetorics of impediment: they block argumentative progress, especially knowledge-building efforts. It is important to consider, however, that a case can be made for BFR gestures being epistemologically active. For example, assigning (low) value to evidence and certain ways of considering that evidence (i.e., the testimony of a sex worker, offered as an anecdote in support of safer legislation) is

epistemological work: these gestures arrange knowledge in ways that privilege certain truths and facilitate certain argumentative outcomes. The arrangement of information, and its sifting through a value system, is prototypical epistemological labor. However, there is an important difference between epistemological work that *builds* understandings and *works toward* outcomes (especially outcomes stifled by the status quo) and epistemological work that *detracts from* new understandings and *impedes* new outcomes. BFR falls into the latter category, part of what I might term epistemological stagnation. Yes, BFR practitioners intervene in systems of hierarchizing and processing knowledge (epistemologies), but they only do so in ways that interrupt the knowledge-building efforts of another speaker or speakers. Making validity claims is part of epistemological labor, but the full potential of epistemological work has not been tapped until a rhetor harnesses its creative potential, or the ability to *build* new understandings by adjusting a knowledge system.

The labors of BFR practitioners work *in service* of existing knowledge systems (including current ways of valuing gendered work, and ways of defining racial equality) and *against* rhetorical interventions that develop new conceptual structures and honor previously neglected or dismissed perspectives.[109] Put another way, BFR does a kind of epistemological work in that it shores up or argues for particular ways of knowing; however, this kind of epistemological work pales in comparison to knowledge building efforts that intervene against existing systems and suggest new, better systems. The former (BFR) only works in support of existing ways of knowing, and the latter crafts and advocates for new understandings. BFR makes no new offerings, providing

[109] It is worth considering what BFR does for its 'community' (an inchoate one, but joined by common practices) of practitioners: it allows BFR users to defend their preexisting notions of the world and their place in it. In other words, BFR allows its practitioners to protect the worldview they have already developed, against the incursions of cultural criticism. These practices are part of what Spivak and Foucault examine: the building and distribution of knowledge in ways that reinforce power relations.

'interventions' that only reiterate and reinforce dominant values and norms. While BFR does *a kind of* epistemological work, it is a strictly limited set of epistemological efforts that serve only to support existing structures; these efforts are dwarfed by the inventive, robust, and persistent efforts necessary to intervene *against* hegemonic norms. In sum, epistemological action is *exemplified* by constructive efforts, such as those made by Hobson and Mac, and the efforts BFR practitioners use to derail their work are epistemological deceleration, toward stagnation.

It is important to consider the "big picture," or the larger gestures that the TED speakers make through their epistemological efforts; they produce and present new ways of knowing, but toward what ends? I offer that Hobson and Mac's rhetorical efforts are not only knowledge-building efforts—'stepping in,' building understandings of a particular problem with clear analyses and evidence, and proposing solutions to the problem via specific action recommendations—but that these efforts also constitute *invitations*. These speakers work to persuade their audiences to value the perspectives of the speaker and the people for whom they advocates, and they use evidence that invites speakers to experience the issue the way they see it—that is, the ways that the primary stakeholders (respectively, people of color and sex workers) understand the issue. Hobson and Mac's addition of storytelling techniques, with anecdotes that include their own experiences, invite the audience to see the problem, value the perspectives of those affected by the problem, and to take a hand in helping these others solve the problem.

These invitations, however, do not quite fit into the category of the invitational rhetorics theorized by Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin. These scholars might point out that both Hobson and Mac use traditional persuasive techniques, with which a speaker has a "conscious intent to change others," insistently asserting the merits of their own

perspectives, with the intent to bring someone else to their way of knowing (2).[110] Foss and Griffin's theorization involves much more reciprocal listening than is accommodated by the TED Talk genre, and, according to my reading of their work, less use of traditional data proofs. However, it would be a mistake to neglect the invitational dimensions of Hobson and Mac's talks—via abundant use of anecdotes and descriptive detail, they offer their audiences 'way into' the lifeworlds of the people for whom they advocate. So, although Hobson and Mac do not use Foss and Griffin's invitational rhetorics as the scholars theorize it, the TED speakers do produce rhetorics that invite.[111] These invitational qualities are key features of both Hobson and Mac's talks, and their invitational characteristics shed additional light on BFR's function and implications.

Arguments such as Hobson and Mac's are designed to create a window into perspectives that their audiences might not have previously considered—their explanatory gestures and rich use of description are clearly designed for a non-expert audience, or, people who have not previously considered the topic at hand in-depth. By distracting or derailing arguments that ask the audience to reconsider their understandings of a topic, BFR practitioners *reject the invitations* to see the issues from a new perspective (a perspective which has been neglected or rejected under the status quo). The out-of-hand rejection of an invitation to share a new worldview or orientation toward a topic illuminates an interesting property of BFR, namely, that it blocks dissonances in the practitioner's pre-formed perspectives. In other words, BFR strives toward *static* ideological conditions—it derails arguments that challenge preconceived

[110] As Foss and Griffin put it, the traditional notion of rhetoric-as-persuasion is patriarchal in nature, working in a paradigm of "control and domination" (3).

[111] I find it worthwhile to consider Foss and Griffin's theoretical construct, even though Hobson and Mac's work does not qualify as the type of rhetoric Foss and Griffin outline, as TED Talks do have invitational dimensions *in addition to* dominant modes of persuasion. Hobson and Mac's talks 'brush up against' Foss and Griffin's model, and the resonances reveal a key mechanism with which they work to connect with their respective audiences.

notions (about people's ways of being in the world, especially along classed, abled, raced, and gendered lines), attempting to *protect* preexisting, stable notions of the status quo.

Consensus and Imposed Unity via BFR

BFR encourages rhetorical stagnation, facilitating conversational stoppage within the bounds of normative understandings. These argumentative mechanics, through their urging of listeners to align with dominant ways of knowing, work to *impose consensus*. Kendall Phillips' cautions against uncritically accepting consensus as the ideal outcome of argument bear well here: without disruption of consensus, the hegemony of the normative would be utterly unassailable. Pro-social equity interventions such as Hobson and Mac's rely upon productive disruption to present their arguments, and enact dissensus in order to trouble culturally-instilled values that harm certain people. Phillips might point out that the TED speakers are offering "alternative rhetorics," opposing the values and processes instilled by culture in order to produce more robust understandings of people's (here, sex workers and people of color) ways of being in the world. Hobson and Mac work against predetermined views—the 'virtues' of color blindness and the 'humanitarian merits' of prohibition-based sex work legislation—by using dissensus as a means to pursue justice, safety, and equal opportunity.

It is also important to note that Hobson and Mac do not promote single solutions to the problems they outline They *do* propose approaches with concrete, actionable steps (i.e., surrounding oneself with people of diverse backgrounds and seeking the input of sex workers in the crafting of sex work legislation), but their suggestions do not amount to "this is the one solution, and everyone in my audience should agree with me." On the contrary, Hobson and Mac lay out their proofs in such a way that their audiences may use their evidence and suggestions to craft their own suggestions, even if the audience members contest specific solutions offered by the speakers. For example, a respondent

who takes Hobson's argument in good faith may not take up her call to practice color-brave *hiring*, but may use color-blind principles to produce other useful, pro-racial equity actions, perhaps interrogating non-diverse task forces at their place of work. In so doing, this listener uses Hobson's insights—on the harms of color-blind imperatives—to identify detrimentally uniform problem-solving teams, actions that facilitate the remedying of homogenous team construction. In so doing, this audience member chooses not to take one of Hobson's suggestions—affirmative action-style hiring—but uses her perspectives to craft a related solution. Bad faith rhetoric practitioners abuse these invitations to creative and productive disagreement by offering responses and "suggestions" that do not bear well on the particular problems (and current realities of these problems) the speakers outline. Respondents who stay on-task, responding in kind to Hobson and Mac's invitations to co-produce knowledge and solutions on the urgent issues at hand, may "riff" upon the speaker's suggestions, take them up in the exact form in which these solutions are offered, or any combination thereof. I argue that Hobson and Mac designed their talk to facilitate a rich array of responses, to invite diverse reactions to wicked problems. One of the most important qualities of both talks is their prioritization of perspective-sharing, offerings that open up new routes to problem-solving, which may or may not include the initial suggestions of the speaker. To sum up, Hobson and Mac do not attempt to impose ideological uniformity upon their audiences, instead offering sets of suggestions that are actionable as-offered, but also invite variation and the imagining of other, related solutions.

Bad faith rhetorics, in their pro-status quo derailing of a given speaker's argument, insist upon a consensus based upon preexisting norms. These responses amount to "nothing should change about [a given social norm relating to race, gender, sexuality, age, etc.] and I can prove that we should not be entertaining the perspectives

and actions offered by these speakers." BFR gestures 'bat away' pro-equity disruptions of current dominant beliefs and practices (such as those offered by Hobson and Mac), insisting that their listeners agree with the BFR practitioner's low valuation of the original argument—its speaker, focus issue, parameters, solutions, and so on. These bad faith responses attempt to impose consensus; in the case of the BFR in the TED Talk comments, consensus on the idea that current ways of knowing the issue at hand (here, respectively, people of color and sex worker's needs) are sufficient, and that the suggestions made in the argument have little merit (by virtue of insufficiency of suggested solutions, the supposedly null nature of the problem, and other BFR responses). BFR practitioners *insist*—by derailing, blocking, and otherwise foreclosing upon further discussion of the issue at hand—that their listeners agree that the status quo is enough, and that its norms should be left unmolested. In short, BFR supports a unity of perspective—the unified perspective constructed by ignoring the needs of minorities, women, undocumented immigrants, and other people whose voices are often muted by dominant white, straight, male perspectives.

Phillips' cautions are particularly salient in light of BFR practices—it is dissensus that offers routes to ameliorative social action, and consensus is often aggressively sought by those who benefit from current, inequitable social hierarchies.[112] The interventions of pro-equity rhetors—advocates for change vis-à-vis, among others, feminist, antiracist, and queer rights concerns, to name a few—trouble taken-for-granted notions of current harmony and equity. Interventions such as these produce, as I discuss in the final chapter, profound discomfort in many United-Statians[113], as patriotism in the

[112] George Lipsitz, in *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* illustrates this phenomenon thoroughly, by explicating the ways that whites work to protect the raced social hierarchy that places white people at the top, in order to collect the dividends they receive from unequal social structures and practices.

[113] Numerous Latinx and Chicanx scholars point out the troubling usage of "American" to indicate only "a person of the United States," considering that the Americas (South, Central and North) contain many

U.S. has become increasingly rhetorically linked to uncritical adoration of the country, absent any criticism.[114] The U.S.'s national identity is tied up in notions of its immigrant pasts, its status as a land of opportunity, and its exemplification of democratic leadership. Challenging arguments—for example, arguments which prompt their audiences to consider stubborn (or new) problems the U.S. is experiencing on equal opportunity and safety—often receive resistant to overtly hostile responses. BFR gestures comprise the first 'line of defense' for rhetors who do not wish to complicate their world view, particularly vis-à-vis the actual rights and protections afforded U.S. residents. In the next chapter, I explore the implications of BFR, including the role of pro-status quo argument in pluralistic publics. In this final section, I offer a few overall observations, and both cautions and preliminary recommendations for rhetors who grapple with BFR in their work to build more equitable ways of knowing and being in the world.

more countries than merely the U.S. (about twenty other countries, in fact), and that viewing the U.S. as 'the' America uses colonial logics.

[114] A particularly illustrative example of this trend is the recurring reduction of Colin Kaepernick's kneeling protest against police brutality —a statement that he could not stand for the anthem in good conscience, until the violence has been addressed—to an "attack" on veterans and the U.S. in general. Kaepernick's peaceful, articulate critiques were vehemently deemed unacceptable by a wide variety of news outlets. In general, critique of current, harmful social realities in the U.S. have been met with astonishing hostility, a trend I identify as uncritical patriotism, a variety that clings to ideals with fanatical fervor, and refuses to attempt to fix real problems.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

As I discuss in earlier chapters, bad faith rhetorics defend the status quo on a particular contested issue. The derailing, blocking, and generally stymying rhetorical actions that constitute BFR appear (as I examine in the analysis chapters) with particular frequency in debates over the meaning and practice of gender, sexuality, class, race, and other intersectional aspects of being. These topics, points of extended contestation and current social frictions, often evoke BFR from audience members who are invested[115] in the current values assigned to and practices related to intersectional axes of identity. In particular, BFR is deployed by those who occupy privileged positions in existing hierarchies, whether in terms of race, class, gender (and so on), or multiple combinations thereof. BFR practitioners' responses function to discourage productive argument on the topic at hand, blocking knowledge-building processes and consequently supporting existing value systems and social practices.

One of the most relevant mechanics of BFR is, as I also explore in the previous section, that it attempts to impose consensus on the issue at hand. In particular, BFR works to produce in the audience agreement along the lines of "the current way we practice [race, gender, and so on] is fine the way it is, so we do not need to consider the problems the speaker outlines, and certainly do not need to take action on it in the ways the speaker suggests." Because current ways of knowing privilege certain viewpoints at the expense of others (for example, consider the fact that nearly all mainstream romantic comedy movies tell the story of a straight, cis-gendered couple), shutting down discussion of different ways of knowing and being in the world supports a relatively

[115] Again, I highly recommend George Lipsitz's *Possessive Investment in Whiteness* for a discussion of the ways in which privileged parties (in his book, white people, vis-à-vis their position in the racial hierarchy) strive to retain the social structures from which they benefit.

homogenous perspective. In sum, the pro-status quo consensus supported by BFR is not a consensus that supports multiplicity of perspective, but rather consensus informed by the particular perspectives privileged within hierarchized notions of gender, sexuality, race, and class.

Hierarchization of information and methods of inquiry is a fundamentally epistemological process, and both BFR and productive discourse engage in these processes, albeit in different ways. Two of the most relevant considerations to address in order to make necessary distinctions between these epistemological mechanics are to consider 1.) *what is being disrupted* by a respondent, and 2.) whether that disruption follows pre-constructed routes to understanding or builds new inroads, so to speak. Arguments that work to produce new knowledge and/or intervene with new *ways of knowing* (including Juno Mac's and Mellody Hobson's) have to 'make room for' new perspectives, often by disturbing existing, exclusionary perspectives. Arguments such as these disrupt existing ways of understanding (in the TED Talks, respectively, sex work legislation and colorblind values), offering new routes to understanding the focus topic. These interventions then highlight underrepresented perspectives and suggest solutions that are underutilized (or completely absent) at the time the argument is presented. BFR responses attempt to redirect interventions such as these so that the conversation adheres to existing ways of knowing, or, put another way, BFR urges discursive participants to use existing routes to understandings (for example, supporting the use of colorblind logics in hiring practices, logics which are already prevalent in postracial attitudes). So, although both anti-status quo interventions and BFR argue for the value of particular types knowledge by challenging a narrative, the former disrupts toward new or neglected understandings, while the latter disrupts in defense of existing, dominant understandings.

Overall, it is useful to revisit the respective net effects of epistemologically active, socially progressive rhetorics (knowledge-building) and epistemologically stagnant BFR (knowledge-blocking). Interventions such as those offered by feminist and antiracist rhetors use rhetoric productively, to *open* the idea of different lifeworlds and to *build* fresh ways to tackle existing problems. BFR gestures *foreclose upon* underrepresented arguments and voices, and *block* further development on an issue another speaker broaches. Productive disruptions such as those offered by Mac and Hobson intervene to create space for knowledge previously locked out of closed cultural systems, and the respondents who practice BFR in the comment sections attempt to preserve the systems that shut out the speakers' new ways of knowing.

The Exigence of BFR in U.S. Cultural Contexts

It is a timely moment to examine rhetorics that, like BFR, seek to preserve the status quo, and to consider what the implications are for allegedly pluralistic nations such as the United States. Beneficiaries of the hierarchies that are cultivated by monolithic, inequitable understandings of race and gender jealously guard these value systems, and frequently use BFR to stagnate (or prevent entirely) challenges thereof. In other words, BFR practitioners champion 'thin' understandings of gender, sexuality, and so on, vociferously resisting more plural imaginings of what it means to be experience the world as a member of various genders, races, sexual orientations, etc. In U.S. contexts, clusters of BFR occurrences[116] suggest a fundamental friction between the *ideals* of an ostensibly pluralistic country (a diverse "land of opportunity") and "everyday people's" ability to *enact* these values in discursive situations. In other words, U.S. public discourse's prominent inclusion of BFR demonstrates public resistance to (attempts to

[116] BFR, as I discuss throughout this dissertation, often congregates around conversations on intersectional axes of being (including their proper social role within a culture and what they 'mean').

stymy) the very same diversity that is a prized virtue in U.S. civil religion. So, studying bad faith rhetorics may provide scholars of public discourses insight into the mechanics of conflict over diverse group identity—the ways in which the group's members may resist pluralism and the inclusion of alternate (nondominant) ways of knowing.

Countless scholars (i.e., David Cisneros, Natalie Masuoka, and Jane Junn) and cultural commentators (e.g., John Oliver) have identified and analyzed recurring 'disconnects' between U.S. ideals and current realities—including the supposedly equal financial and educational prospects of the nation's people. These analysts also identify the exceptionally persistent nature of these dissonances and the profound tenacity with which their existence is denied. For example, the immigration crackdown implemented by Donald Trump in 2018 uses the illegality of undocumented U.S.-Mexico border crossings to primarily label border-crossers "criminals," and to deemphasize their status as would-be immigrants. The logics employed by those who support these policies *selectively* employ the U.S.'s status as a land of immigrants (who, as history well documents, have frequently come to the country fleeing violence and poverty) to only include those who cross "legally," disqualifying those desperate enough to risk the dangers of unofficial immigration. These respondents use the fact of undocumented immigration's illegality to disqualify border crossers as aspiring members of the national community, refusing to connect U.S. culture's longstanding pride in its diversity and immigrant identity to current policies of exclusion. Everyday people who engage in the demonization of undocumented immigrants predominantly refuse to acknowledge the friction between U.S. values (a nation of immigrants, and a place of 'opportunity for all') and how they are enacted (opaque and complicated immigration procedures, and intimidation of "illegals").

Grappling with disjunctions between cultural values and the related practices is a

messy task, but one that many pro-social equity advocates—including Mac and Hobson—are willing to undertake. An attentive observer will note that Bad faith Rhetorics collectively constitute the most common tools that discursive participants deploy in their refusals to grapple with these paradoxes. Overall, I argue that one of the most profound difficulties faced by pro-equity rhetors is various audience members' use of BFR to impede the difficult conversations that stem from such interventions.[117]

The kairotic nature of "The Laws that Sex Workers Actually Want" and "Color Blind or Color Brave?" makes the talks' comment sections sites of particularly robust contestation. In both the BFR responses to Mac's talk and Hobson's, BFR commenters are using gestures that work to block or shut down discussions that occur along current cultural 'fault lines.' Particularly, BFR commenters in these contexts are responding to the frictions that appear around timely identity struggles—the frictions that lend both Mac and Hobson's arguments exigency.

In the examples I examine here, these difficult conversations encompass issues of equal opportunity along racial lines (Hobson), and workplace safety and workers' rights (Mac). Hobson herself bluntly identifies mentioning race as "the conversational equivalent of touching the third rail," a commentary on the currently taboo nature of her topic (10:28). Hobson is certainly aware of the discomfort her talk causes in many of her audience members (a state made clear by both explicit mention and her strategic uses of proofs and tension-defusing humor), but in spite of her savvy moves, many visitors to the TED Talk page responded with comments that reveal their deep unease with the topic. This discomfort is revealed by commenters' various redirections, defensive blame-casting, and other signs of their unwillingness to grapple with the actual content of

[117] While pro-equity rhetors can—and do—combat counterproductive responses, BFR still provides troublesome rhetorical impediments for rhetors working toward positive change.

Hobson's argument. In other words, some of the most common BFR gestures indicate a certain squeamishness in a respondent.

I argue that the discomfort that BFR practitioners demonstrate in their responses to (respectively) Mac and Hobson's talks stems from larger ideological frictions. As I mentioned earlier, Western cultures (including the U.S.) seem to value diversity and equal opportunity for all,[118] but current practices and legal frameworks do not necessarily support the enactment of these beliefs. Discourse along these cultural frictions are where BFR becomes operative: in the case of Hobson's talk, her argument 'hits a nerve' in that it pushes back on the postracial beliefs that racism in the U.S. is defunct. In making her case for color bravery, Hobson emphasizes a current state of affairs in which racial equality has *not* been achieved, specifically in corporate boardrooms and "C-Suite" offices. In exposing a reality that postracial ideology stringently denies, Hobson 'hits a nerve' in current race-based anxieties in U.S. culture. She presents a problem that popular narratives prefer to cast as already-solved, disturbing the comforting narrative that racism is merely a nightmare of the past, as opposed to an extent and evolving social ill.

The ideological frictions Mac evokes with her talk are perhaps more subtle: in championing the worker's rights of sex workers, she is bringing the age-old moral censure of sex workers into conflict with democratic cultures' value of employees' rights to advocate for a safe and equitable workplace.[119] The high occurrence of BFR that 1.) redirects the conversation toward hypothetical realities in which sex work is rare or nonexistent and 2.) delegitimizes Mac as a reasonable and authoritative source on the

[118] These beliefs (part of American Civil Religion) are part of an uncritical ideology of 'freedom and equal opportunity' that underpins U.S. ideologies. While not enacted, these beliefs still exert rhetorical force: in contemporary public debate, it often shows up as a belief that the U.S. fosters equitable conditions for all.
[119] It is worth noting that Mac does refer to the stigma against sex workers in a nod to the cultural bias against the sex work industry.

topic, both (with varying degrees of explicitness) indicate the 'unsavory' or otherwise undesirable nature of the sex work industry and those who work in it. In valuing realities in which sex work does not exist, BFR practitioners implicitly indicate their privileging of an altered reality over the current, dangerous vicissitudes of work in the sex industry. The friction here accompanies the moral value assigned sex work: by emphasizing the 'unsavory' nature of sex work (however indirectly), these respondents highlight their own discomfort with the topic of sex work. This discomfort contributes to commenters' difficulties with perceiving sex workers as employees and proprietors who, like all other workers, support legal frameworks that protect them from violence. In sum, many BFR practitioners signal an unwillingness to grapple with sex workers as 'regular' workers, responding to frictions between 1.) the cultural (de)valuation of sex work and 2.) the widespread consensus that people should be protected from violence at work, and that legal frameworks are a reasonable way to encourage these conditions.

Questions of pluralism, equity, and national identity (past and present) are at the core of the most timely rhetorical inquiries, and it is crucial to recognize that BFR is part of these conversations. The struggles that take place in the comments sections for both talks are fundamentally related to the U.S.'s troubled relationship with its own pluralistic identity—how this identity is *articulated* in national mythology and how it is *enacted* at institutional, community, and individual levels. BFR can lend legibility to the cultural conflicts ongoing in the U.S. Bad Faith Rhetorics often appear at the epicenter of public rhetors' efforts to productively fracture current social understandings, which alone nominates the rhetorical phenomenon as a productive object of inquiry. Perhaps more importantly, however, BFR is a prominent obstacle in the knowledge-building work—toward consensus and better-defined dissensus—that allows an argument to foster change, in attitudes, beliefs, and concrete actions. It is for these reasons that researchers

in rhetorics, public argument, and the social sciences need to recognize BFR and further examine its role in social contestations of meaning and value. In order to suggest routes for future research on BFR, and to illustrate the benefits of better understanding the phenomenon, I offer a preliminary set of suggestions for BFR *mitigation* in the following section.

"Now What?": Responding to BFR with Mitigation Moves

Defining and analyzing a discursive practice is, as any rhetorician will attest, productive rhetorical work in and of itself. I affirm that the definition and analysis work included in this dissertation constitutes useful knowledge production as-is. However, it is always crucial to look forward to the logical next steps, including identifying concrete applications for a concept. In this case, the project of defining BFR leads directly into questions of mitigation. Given that, as this document illustrates, the rhetorical work of BFR is to block the production of knowledge, it is crucial for those who advance new knowledge to prepare for BFR responses. In my own labors to understand BFR, I have found that three strategies are the most promising approaches to mitigating the negative effects of BFR: naming, explicit refocusing and "signal boosting," and strategic energy expenditure.

The practice of naming involves a rhetor identifying a BFR comment as counterproductive, and communicating this to others in the conversation (including but not limited to the BFR practitioners themselves). This practice, often referred to as a "call-out," is common in popular discourse; the practice involves a speaker forcing a speaker who delivers problematic, aggressive, or otherwise counterproductive actions to be accountable for their actions by explicitly naming what the unproductive actions are. This type of mitigating response occurs in both scholarly and popular environments, albeit in different forms. To give a popular example: one of the BFR mitigating responses

in the comment section of Hobson's talk explicitly points out that the BFR comment do not "acknowledg[e] that a problem exists," and do not contribute "practical solutions" (Carbuncle). These observations identify the BFR comment's counterproductive actions to others (in specific terms, moreover), warning readers who are interested in taking up Hobson's claims that certain (BFR) comments suggest a lack of similar investment. Carbuncle's "call out" is a meta-aware conversational move that creates efficiencies for respondents who want to engage substantively with Hobson's argument, particularly toward concrete solutions. This mitigating move helps good faith commenters allocate their energy to other on-task, engaged responses. In the scholarly sphere, BFR mitigation via naming often takes the form of scholarly analysis, particularly analysis that parses rhetorical gesture and the net effects of those gestures. For example, Lora Arduser and Amy Koerber's work on the GOP's "Women" section of the "Growth and Progress Report" identifies the BFR (via distracting) that the report's writers engage in, and concludes that the net effect of these gestures is to derail an argument (in this case, about reproductive rights) such that the search for solutions is blocked.[120] In naming the gestures made in their focus text, Arduser and Koerber mitigate the text's bad faith rhetorical moves by parsing its rhetorical actions for readers—helping other readers understand the gestures included in the report. In sum, the practice of naming (or "calling out") BFR as counterproductive mitigates it by rendering it visible to other conversational participants, fostering these participants' ability to understand what is occurring and make their decisions accordingly.

The second BFR-mitigating practice, explicitly refocusing, is a particularly effective strategy, as it directs an off-task conversational tangent back to the terms of the

[120] As the authors explain, the report "re-articulat[es] the rhetorical situation in a way that excludes reproductive rights as a legitimate concern of women voters" (161). Koerber and Arduser's analysis neatly characterizes the work of the report, helping readers identify its ends and implications.

original argument. This strategy is particularly accessible and intuitive; consequently, refocusing appears quite frequently in BFR mitigating moves. To give one example, in the comments for Mac's talk, Eschewyer80 responds to a BFR practitioner's hypothetical, sex work-eliminating scenario by pointing out that they lead readers in "the wrong direction," and that "forbidding selling sex do [sic] not solve this problem." Here, this respondent identifies the specific ways in which the BFR practitioner is digressing, and explains which parts of the comment are moving away from the original terms of the discussion. These gestures facilitate the movement of the conversation back "on track," identifying a potential impediment to argumentative progress and providing an opportunity to refocus the argument.

Closely related to the practice of explicitly refocusing is the practice of "signal-boosting." In this form of BFR mitigation, a commenter reintroduces specific concepts or examples from the original argument in order to emphasize the actual content and proposals of the speaker. In one instance, a commenter uses this mitigation strategy to mitigate issue-delegitimizing BFR by focusing on the particulars of Mac's argument. Here, a BFR practitioner claims that Mac's argument responds to a nonexistent issue, indicating that sex workers are already sufficiently protected by existing legislation. Telegnosis mitigates these derailing efforts by citing some of the evidence Mac deploys in her talk: "like the examples [Mac] gave, sex workers are often afraid to call the police for help because they will be thrown in jail, and johns know this and use it to their advantage." Telegnosis' response mitigates BFR by re-emphasizing, or "signal-boosting" key portions of Mac's argument. This strategy reasserts portions of the original argument, not only encouraging other conversational participants to re-engage with the parameters of the argument, but also giving readers a "leg up" on specific details by

providing products of the signal booster's analysis (their recognition of relevant concepts and/or examples).

As I have repeatedly emphasized here, the most significant effect of BFR is its ability to waste energy, and these energy-wasting affordances are sometimes exacerbated by efforts to mitigate them. To clarify: attempting to 'correct course,'or move the conversation back on-task, requires labor on the part of the would-be mitigator, which ironically compounds BFR's most notable net effect (draining energy and focus from a precipitating argument). As a result, it is critically important to consider *strategic energy expenditure* as a core concern of BFR mitigation. This mitigating strategy relies on awareness of the ways in which a respondent chooses to distribute their rhetorical labors. The practices that emerge from this approach are both concrete actions and an overall mental orientation of awareness. In this mitigation strategy, respondents are mindful of their own decisions regarding who and what they engage in a discussion. Strategic energy expenditure relies on a respondent's possession of one or both of the following abilities: 1.) awareness of their own decision-making processes in choosing which people and content they engage with and/or 2.) meta-awareness of argumentative gesture (which in the future may include BFR itself). An example of strategic energy expenditure in discourse (in general, not only BFR) is when a commenter determines that another commenter is "trolling" (identifying the gesture) and makes the decision to ignore the person and instead devote their attention to other engagements (using awareness of their own attention-directing process).[121] In the context of BFR, strategic energy expenditure involves a conversational participant's recognition of BFR, their

[121] These actions are typically referred to as "not feeding the trolls," a phrase that acknowledges that "trolls'" main aim is to waste the emotional and psychological energy of respondents who 'take the bait.' The self-awareness that these gestures require is surprisingly common in internet discourse; I suggest that these abilities are fostered by the widespread acknowledgement of trolling as a phenomenon in internet culture, and the resulting familiarity with 'troll-wrangling' approaches.

knowledge of BFR's energy-wasting affordances, and their decision as to how much energy (if any) they are willing to allocate to it. Ultimately, strategic energy expenditure relies on acknowledgement of BFR as a discursive phenomenon. Currently, these strategic responses require a high level of rhetorical sophistication on the part of a conversational participant, given that there is no established language with which to identify the broader category of BFR, and no set of well-developed and user-friendly strategies with which to mitigate it. By defining and characterizing BFR, I aim to make strategic energy-allocating responses more available to, and efficiently enactable by, everyday rhetors.[122]

It is beyond the scope of this project to develop a more comprehensive and detailed set of BFR mitigation strategies, but I offer the above suggestions to begin this necessary work. Too, I remind my readers that there are longstanding precedents for productively managing BFR. As I mention in the theorization chapter, rhetors from several movements and traditions—including feminist rhetoricians, critical race scholars, advocates for LGBTQ+ rights, and anticolonial activists and scholars—have well-developed BFR mitigation practices, even if they do not recognize BFR as a larger phenomenon. Examples of these strategies include theorists' efforts to name argument-stymying gestures (i.e., silencing and gaslighting) and everyday persons' persistence in the face of these gestures (refusing to stop advocating for more progressive understandings and practices surrounding race, gender, sexuality, and other intersectional considerations). In my efforts to define BFR, I cultivate efficiencies for these pre-existing strategies. Future work on the part of myself and other rhetoricians will build on these approaches, and create a more robust understanding of an often-

[122] Because of scope issues, this dissertation focuses on the first of two steps (BFR definition), while the second step (thorough establishment of mitigation strategies) will have to be part of a future project.

subtle and diverse set of rhetorical practices. In the next section, I identify other BFR concerns that would benefit from further study, and note current rhetorical trends and events that render BFR a relevant and urgent topic for continued inquiry.

Future Directions and Current Connections

As I indicate throughout this dissertation, debates over culture (especially the meaning and social role of race, gender, sexuality, etc.) frequently play out in online publics. So, the social norms and affordances of digital publics heavily inflect the status quo challenges and fortifications central to BFR practice and mitigation. The ways that the distinctive rhetorical contexts of digital environments impact BFR bears further attention, in more detail than is possible within the scope of this dissertation. In this study, I briefly examine some of the ways that technological affordances (including web design, users' options for identity performance, and the affordances of the TED Talk's default audiovisual mode) inflect BFR, but the legibility of BFR relies upon a strategic prioritization of close-reading over discussions of online social milieux. A broader discussion of the ways online cultural norms inflect BFR remains outside the project of initial BFR definition, leaving room for continued productive inquiry in these directions.

In particular, experts in digital rhetoric may shed further light on the ways that online discursive norms (including potential culture-specific habits that form within a given online platform's distinctive community) impact BFR in virtual publics. For example, this type of inquiry might use case studies of BFR in particular online communities to connect individual instances of BFR to larger discursive trends within an online community. To provide another possibility, a study of gendered "handle" usage in comment sections may reveal connections between traditionally gendered performances and the pro/anti-status quo engagements within BFR ecosystems. An additional prospect for the intersection of BFR and digital scholarship lies at the convergences

between technological affordances, User Experience (UX), and online occurrences of BFR. For example, an examination of ways that a website's search algorithms impact text selections for frequent commenters might reveal the role of nonhuman agents in BFR practitioners' text selection process. The above research prospects reveal the wealth of opportunities in continued work on BFR in online rhetorical contexts. I briefly touch upon a few related considerations here, but specialists in digital rhetorics would be able to more robustly analyze ways that ICT's affordances and online social dynamics impact BFR in virtual settings.

More generally, BFR could also be fruitfully applied to studies of specific Discourses. So, scholars who specialize in distinctive Discourses (e.g., environmental rhetorics) might integrate BFR as part of their studies—which presumably do not focus on BFR primarily—as a way to characterize gestures that are part of larger rhetorical ecosystems and exigencies. Such future projects may deploy BFR as a way to demonstrate knowledge-building and knowledge-impeding patterns within ongoing conversations; this may in turn reveal additional forms of BFR, and illuminate the ways in which BFR takes on context-specific characteristics in distinctive settings. In defining and characterizing BFR here, I hope to make such applications possible.

One of the rhetorical ecosystems that can benefit from application of BFR is the series of conversations that engage with ideologies of democracy.[123] Continued investigation of BFR—as discursive practices that block or derail knowledge-building rhetorical efforts—has particular exigence, especially for members of democratic cultures. U.S. civic identity relies heavily on ideals of civic debate—that this debate

[123] The public discourse ideals Habermas imagined in *Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere*, particularly the privileging of the practice of rational-critical debate between people who may participate on equal footing, are a central part of democratic values. The premise that equal rational critical debate is possible—especially with a "bracketing of difference"—must be accepted for participants in democratic debate to take their own efforts seriously, and this premise is a keystone of ideologies of democracy.

produces legitimate results via 'fair,' logical discourse—in its rationale for institutional practices. For example, 'debate among equals' is central to the practice of using congressional debate to determine policy. Likewise, court procedures claim validity premised on the idea that "the truth will out" over the course of the debate between lawyers, and that the consensus reached by a jury as a product of debate(s) is fair and legitimate. Acknowledging the incredible commonness and long history of BFR, 'throws a wrench' into this logical system by acknowledging that participants in a debate may, via BFR, *undermine* the knowledge-building processes instead of earnestly working to produce consensus or better-defined dissensus. To be clear, is not the *existence* of bad faith derailing gestures that disrupts this system (argumentative disruption is a well-recognized phenomenon), but rather its acute *prevalence* that gives the lie to the idea that a significant proportion of democratic debate facilitates the building of consensus or better dissensus.

The idea that "the truth will out" necessitates earnest debate, and practitioners of bad faith rhetorics divest from the mutual crafting of knowledge, investing instead in conversational distractions and other rhetorical impediments. Habermas begins to address some of the barriers to democratic public ideals through his theorization of communicative and strategic action types, but this is a conversation which begs extensive continued attention. My theorization of BFR engages in these efforts by specifying the mechanics of knowledge-impeding gestures and identifying the conversations in which BFR is likely to prominently feature. As I mention in Chapter 6 (Overall Discussion), identifying BFR tactics and their larger implications reveals some of the frictions in a culture. In the context of the U.S., the commonness of BFR reveals frictions between the imagining and enactment of national ideals (i.e., of equity and the efficacy of democratic debate).

Current negotiations of U.S. identity, including its role in the global community and its status as a land of equal opportunity, are contentious and widespread, and BFR features prominently in many of these conversations. I argue that the prevalence of BFR demonstrates current, deeply-rooted anxieties over the 'soul' of the country, especially over the place of pluralism—how welcome it really is in the 'land of the free.' The status quo that BFR supports almost invariably privileges certain perspectives (e.g., white, straight, and male) over others (e.g., underrepresented perspectives such as those of trans women), bolstering the comparatively monolithic understandings of an unequitable status quo. BFR practitioners foreclose upon the prospect of multiple truths and ways of knowing. Put another way, these responses attempt to prevent the inclusion of plural perspectives (and the acknowledgement of their equal validity). The stymying work of BFR supports flat notions of 'reality,' for example, a reality in which sex work needs only be met with prohibition-based policy, and a reality in which no action needs to be taken in order to secure equal opportunities for people of color in the United States. I offer that the monolithic perspective-retaining affordance of BFR means that this family of rhetorical gestures has implications not only for current studies of U.S. vernacular understandings of race, sexuality, class, and so on (as I briefly explore here), but also for ways of understanding ideologies of nation, especially for a nation's relationship with diversity (in the case of the present-day U.S., an uneasy relationship).

If the U.S. is to realize its vision of a pluralistic, democratic nation, it would have to first 'square' with its own ongoing resistances to such a future. As Danielle Allen so poignantly observes, members of democracies need to grapple with the "dissonant remainders" of agreement in order to be able to accommodate "political friendships" and to foster amicable relationships between "strangers" (63). Identifying BFR in U.S. public discourse, and the internal cultural conflicts and frictions these BFR gestures highlight,

begins the process of attending to the difficulties of embracing difference in the U.S., by examining the mechanics of resistance to pluralism. The blocking and derailing gestures of BFR work against plural perspectives; these gestures are local iterations of recurring hindrances to currently-developing, more equitable ways of performing and knowing gender, class, race, and so on. Topics upon which BFR gestures converge create opportunities for rhetoricians, a means by which careful observers may 'put a finger on the pulse' of a culture's anxieties—and to, perhaps, find that this pulse is a bit threadier than most had hoped. With knowledge of BFR's local incarnations and macro-level trends, observers may be able to better address the exigencies around discursive conflict, and perhaps develop better ways to respond to epistemologically-stagnant gestures with invitations to collaborative, pluralistic knowledge-building.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Holly Fulton (Fulton-Babicke) is a researcher who focuses upon intersectional rhetorics and consensus-building in networked publics. She particularly inspects the ways that speakers/writers offer new perspectives in public settings, in ways that 'crack open' existing social expectations and hierarchies. These productive rhetorics, which she terms "knowledge-building interventions," are often blocked by *bad faith rhetorics* (originally theorized in this dissertation). She explores the frictions between productive and bad faith rhetorics, and identifies how these frictions impact consensus on public issues, in settings such as TED Talk comments. Past projects explore knowledge-building in online publics (a book chapter on embodiment and identity construction in an online fitness community) and 'us versus them' framings (an article exploring articulations of race in popular newsmedia, and a book chapter on strategic constructions of global/national 'teams' to generate 'buy-in' for transnational legislation). She has received several recognitions for her research and teaching, including the 2018 Theresa J. Enos Anniversary Award for Best Essay for her *Rhetoric Review* article "'I Can't Breathe': Eric Garner and In/Out-Group Rhetorics."