CONTRAPOINTS – PERFORMANCE AS POLITICS ON YOUTUBE

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Summary

In today's political landscape, social media and video-sharing websites such as YouTube play an increasingly important role in making people aware of certain social issues, even shaping their opinions and worldviews. Recent years have marked the rise of right-wing pundits, as well as a proliferation of political YouTube channels which use anti-feminist and anti-SJW (social justice warrior, a frequently used pejorative term) rhetoric to unify its audience in a sense of resentment of not only leftist politics, but in some cases of minority groups. However, there has also been an increase of progressive and left-leaning YouTube activity, with several video-essayist channels rising to prominence and gaining large followings. These channels are often collectively referred to as LeftTube or BreadTube, and one of the most popular among them is ContraPoints, a channel dedicated to "sex, drugs, and social justice". Written, directed and played by Natalie Wynn, ContraPoints ranges from (production-wise) fairly traditional video essays to fictional debates with an ensemble cast of characters (all played by herself). The channel is also notable for the fact that it chronicles Wynn's gender transition and deals extensively with her experiences as a transgender woman. Therefore, the paper will argue that in creating ContraPoints, Wynn has found a way to intertwine the artistic, political, and personal purposes behind her performances; this in turn has prompted the viewers to gain sympathy for Wynn as a transgender woman, and her fans to form strong parasocial relationships with her.

Key words: gender identity, parasocial relationships, transfemininity, internet culture, transgender

INTRODUCTION

In a 2019 profile of Felix Kjellberg, the creator of the massively popular YouTube gaming channel *PewDiePie*, Kevin Roose states,

> One crucial thing to understand about YouTube is that there are really two of them. The first YouTube is the YouTube that everyone knows — the vast reference library filled with sports highlights, music videos and old Comedy Central roasts. But there's a second YouTube inside that one. It is a self-contained universe with its own values and customs, its own incentive structures and market dynamics and its own fully developed celebrity culture that includes gamers, beauty vloggers, musicians, D.I.Y.ers, political commentators, artists and pranksters. The biggest of these personalities have millions of subscribers and Oprah-level influence over their fandoms. Many Inner YouTubers never watch TV and develop elaborate parasocial bonds with their favorite creators. For people who frequent Inner YouTube — generally people under 25, along with some older people

> with abundant free time — the site is not just a video platform but a prism through which all culture and information is refracted (Roose, 2019: n.p.).

This quote is particularly significant if one takes into consideration the broader context of the article – an interview with Kjellberg, in which he reflects on his history of making anti-Semitic jokes that have led commentators to link him to far-right politics and white nationalism. While Roose emphasizes the fact that the vast majority of Kjellberg's content does exactly what is says on the tin (that is, provides entertainment unencumbered by political and ideological issues), there is a valid reason for taking an interest in his allegedly radical politics. After all, if "Inner YouTube" is indeed "a prism through which all culture and information is refracted" (Roose 2019: n.p.), then even the seemingly innocuous jokes and off-handed remarks by such prominent creators gain significance.

Juxtaposed to this image of a wildly popular entertainer, suddenly and unwillingly implicated in politics, stands the figure of the political commentator. Although political content on YouTube was initially associated with coverage of elections (May, 2010: 499), major news outlets' channels are not exactly what falls under the definition of a political commentary on "Inner Youtube". Rather, political commentators stand shoulder to shoulder to gamers such as Felix Kjellberg, or for instance beauty gurus such as Jeffree Star – only instead of entertainment or specialized practical advice, they offer opinions and analyses.

One such YouTuber is Natalie Wynn, the creator of the channel *ContraPoints*. Dedicated to "sex, drugs, and social justice", the channel has (at the time of writing this essay) amassed over 48 million views and 850 000 subscribers ("ContraPoints: About"). As Wynn herself states,

> I'm a PhD dropout who makes videos on the internet, mostly discussing social justice issues and adjacent topics. *My political aim is to counterbalance the hatred toward progressive movements that is so common online*. Stylistically, I try to appeal to a wide audience and avoid merely preaching to the choir. I try to make the videos I'd want to watch: well-produced, informative, funny, and entertaining. („ContraPoints is Creating Video Essays and Short Films ", emphasis mine)

"The hatred towards progressive movements" Wynn cites can be linked to the circumstances in which she started her channel. The year 2020 finds Wynn an influential YouTuber with coverage from traditional media outlets, a very generous audience (she is in the top 15 earners on the crowdfunding platform Patreon ("Top Patreon Creators"), and a network of co-creators affectionately referred to by their fans as BreadTube[1] (Kuznetsov and Ismangil, 2020: 204). However, her success grew directly out of her attempts to counter right-wing talking points circulating YouTube. As Kuznetsov and Ismangil point out, "BreadTube does not exist in isolation. It is part

[1] A reference to Kropotkin's seminal anarchist text "The Conquest of Bread".

of a larger movement against right wing and populist thought that have dominated the media landscape over the past few years." (2020: 216) When Wynn started her channel in 2016, she encountered a political landscape vastly different from today's YouTube.

> The year was 2016 and Barack Obama was President of the United States, we were about to elect our first woman president and things were kind of going okay. But the Internet was not okay. I, at this moment, had just dropped out of a philosophy phD program because the examined life is actually not worth living. I don't know, I was like an Uber driver, a piano teacher, a paralegal, and just looking for what to do next. Back in 2009, I had been kind of like an atheist YouTuber, or at least had kind of followed that world. So, in my subscriptions box and my recommended videos box in 2016, it was suddenly a lot of, like "Why Feminism Is Ruining the Planet" and "Black Lives Matter Is Trash". And I was like, hmm, interesting. So, I thought I could use my skills from my education to kind of, like, maybe do a channel that would counter some of these videos and respond to them. That was the original idea for the *ContraPoints* channel. Those were the points it was against ("Natalie Wynn, ContraPoints – XOXO Festival (2018)" 2:55–4:17).

Wynn's assertion that "… things were kind of going okay. But the Internet was not okay" correlates to Rebecca Lewis's report "Alternative Influence: Broadcasting the Reactionary Right on YouTube". Just as Wynn, she emphasizes the dangers of making light of the importance of YouTube in establishing and spreading political messages, claiming that "one reason YouTube is so effective for circulating political ideas is because it is often ignored or underestimated in discourse on the rise of disinformation and far-right movements" (2018: 5). Lewis posits that the sort of videos Wynn increasingly began encountering in 2016, such as "Why Feminism is Ruining the Planet", do not stand in isolation. Rather, she coins the term "Alternative Influence Network", signifying a media system wherein various "political influencers" emerge, gain a following on YouTube, and connect with each other in order to "promote a range of political positions, from mainstream versions of libertarianism and conservatism, all the way to overt white nationalism" (Lewis 2018: 1). As Stuart Hall once emphasized in the context of television,

> [t]he mass media cannot imprint their meanings and messages on us as if we were mentally tabula rasa. But they do have an integrative, clarifying, and legitimating power to shape and define political reality, especially in those situations which are unfamiliar, problematic, or threatening: where no 'traditional wisdom', no firm networks of personal influence, no cohesive culture, no precedents for relevant action or response, and no first-hand way of testing or validating the propositions are at our disposal with which to confront of modify their innovatory power (2000: 77).

In the context of the "Alternative Influence Network", the situations framed as "unfamiliar, problematic, or threatening" are progressive causes, whose activists are characterized through the pejorative moniker "social justice warrior". Therefore, the lack of "traditional wisdom" that Hall cites can in this instance be easily replaced (and fears of the unknown assuaged) by what Lewis describes as a "reactionary position".

> Many of these YouTubers are less defined by any single ideology than they are by a "reactionary" position: a general opposition to feminism, social justice, or left-wing politics.
>
> One primary example of a shared idea that exists across the network is the concept of the "Social Justice Warrior" (or "SJW"). The term is used by influencers across the network, from libertarians to white nationalists. It is strategically flexible: while it was initially targeted at feminists, it is often applied to any number of movements advocating for social justice, including Black Lives Matter, the LGBTQ movement, Muslims, and immigrants (Lewis, 2018: 8).

The insistence on a shared enemy against which they could assert themselves, enabled right-wing "political influencers" to build an image and attract not only an audience, but *fans*. Lewis emphasizes the fact that YouTube's very slogan, "Broadcast Yourself", encourages the creation and growth of "microcelebrities, that is, niche celebrities who are well-known within specific communities" (2018: 4). Her assertions support Roose's usage of a term such as Inner YouTube to explain the great celebrity, wealth, and influence of creators that are, by and large, unknown to those outside these YouTube communities (2019: n.p.). When she started *ContraPoints*, Wynn seemed like an unlikely candidate to achieve microcelebrity status – her progressive politics, as well as her unusual optics, were not only unlike those of the dominant reactionary "Alternative Influence Network", but intentionally opposed to it. Unlike "the polished, well-lit microcelebrities and their captivating videos" (Lewis, 2018: 5), Wynn's early videos were deliberately bizarre, featuring sexual innuendo, over-the-top characters and self-deprecating humor.

One could claim that none of these features of the channel have significantly altered. An aspect of the channel that has changed most drastically is Wynn herself – in 2017, she began what she jokingly refers to "her transgender journey" ("Beauty", 1:09), transitioning from male to female. In late February 2020, she removed all of her pre-transition videos from the channel, as "[they were] created before my gender transition, and [they] no longer [represent] the person I've become." ("Archives: TERFs"). [2] Even though most of the traditional media coverage of Wynn's work focuses on her success in "deradicalizing young right-wing men" (Reeve, 2019: n.p.) and "changing alt-right minds" (Fleishman, 2019: n.p.), recent months have seen her work move from disproving popular right-wing pundits to focusing more exclusively on trans issues. As she (always somewhat flippantly) remarks in "Beauty", "[f]ighting fascists on YouTube was an idea I came up with when I was a male alcoholic. Unfortunately, America needs a *ContraPoints* right now…" (25:57–26:03). This paper aims to reconcile these two aspects of *ContraPoints* – the progressive politics and the personal journey of a trans

[2] The transcripts for these deleted videos have been made available via Wynn's website, so her 2016 to mid-2017 content is still partially existent ("Archives").

woman – as well as offer an analysis of Wynn's complicated relationship with performance and connection with her audience.

AESTHETICS AS POLITICS

> JUSTINE. The 21st century is an aesthetic century. In history there are ages of reason and ages of spectacle, and it's important to know which you're in. Our America, our Internet, is not ancient Athens. It's Rome. Your problem is you think you're in the forum when really you're in the circus ("The Aesthetic" 6:23–6:38).

Under pink mood lighting, two trans women sit, drinking tea and discussing the intricacies of trans women's presentation. Justine, in full makeup and in complete control of her arguments, argues for the need of trans women to do their best "to pass", that is, to look like the society's image of a (preferably beautiful, young, and put together) woman. Her interlocutor Tabby, an anarcho-syndicalist girl who likes to dress up in combat boots and cat ears, is having none of it. She disagrees with Justine's insistence that the only way to live a viable life as a trans person is to conform to societal pressures, and insists on the need to fight against oppression and stand up for every trans woman, especially those who do not "pass". In the end, they never reach a solution, instead opting to watch YouTube together. After a series of increasingly disturbing clips in which the selfhood of trans women is called into question, they turn off the TV and conclude they should not fight, because they are "surviving in this shit world together" ("The Aesthetic" 19:32). This *ContraPoints* video – lasting a little over 21 minutes and containing 5 characters and multiple narrative levels, all framed through a TV screen – is a prime example of what Kuznetsov and Ismangil term as Wynn's "discursive-dialectical technique" (2020: 211), as well as a complex argument about the pressures trans people put on each other if they are deemed "not trans enough" (Galupo, Henise and Davies, 2014: 466). But it is also a compelling discussion on the nature of politics. Even though the viewer is aware that Tabby's views are more inclusive and compassionate, one struggles not to be taken in by Justine's pragmatism and savviness. The opening question of the video, "What matters more, the way things are, or the way things look?" ("The Aesthetic" 1:04) is deliberately never resolved. However, just by posing this question, Wynn makes the viewer intensely and uncomfortably aware of its pertinence. If the president of the United States is a reality star, as Justine pointedly reminds Tabby during their discussion ("The Aesthetic" 6:19), where does the spectacle end, and rationality begin?

In "The Aesthetic", Justine makes another offhanded, but cutting remark: "[r]eason is a very powerful aesthetic – if you're a man" (6:46). This may be interpreted as Wynn's nod to the fact that, while the more left-leaning humanities usually approach political and social issues by *critiquing* them (Butler, 2004: 129), conservative circles prefer adopting "an aesthetic of logic" (McCrea and Robinson 2019: n.p.). This is particularly

true of YouTube's conservative pundits, such as Ben Shapiro. As Wynn emphasized in an interview,

> [y]ou've draped your public persona, and your presentation style in this cloak of only caring about the facts—which of course, is it true that Ben Shapiro cares about the facts more than anyone else? Absolutely not. But it's something that you constantly say, and it sort of works, interestingly, to constantly say that you only care about the facts, that you don't care about anyone else's feelings. It allows you to frame all objections as coming from some place of fundamental irrationality, which works especially well when the people you are arguing against are, for example, women, or for example, trans people—two groups of people who are sort of stereotyped in people's minds as being irrational, or delusional (McCrea and Robinson, 2019: n.p.).

Wynn has tackled this fallacy – for instance, she uses her video "Pronouns" to dismantle Ben Shapiro's claims about the inherent biological nature of pronouns. She manages to demonstrate that, although he claims to only be interested in the "facts" of human biology, and not the "feelings" of trans people, he is deliberately framing a matter of language usage as one of biology, thus obfuscating the actual issue by shrouding it in "an aesthetic of logic". She humorously uses "[t]ransgender DESTROYS Ben Shapiro" as the description of her video to mock the overly combative tone with which conservative political influencers such as Shapiro appeal to their audience ("Pronouns"). However, Wynn is also implicitly reversing the stereotypes present in popular political video compilations on YouTube, wherein anonymous "social justice warriors" are the ones being destroyed, and a calm and rational (typically male) public figures are the ones doing the destroying.

She reflects on this topic more explicitly in her video "The Left", which is framed in a similar way to "The Aesthetic". It begins with a public debate between Tabby and a more prominent public figure (in "The Aesthetic", it is a trans-exclusionary radical feminist, in "The Left", it is a fascist). In both cases, these people are better spoken and more composed than Tabby, who either reverts to quoting incomprehensible philosophy, or to literal hissing and threats of violence. After the disastrous attempt at a debate, Tabby meets up with Justine, and they try to come up with a middle ground. Where in "The Aesthetic" the compromise they are trying to reach has to do with the societal pressures on the presentation of trans women, "The Left" finds them discussing a more general issue concerning leftist politics.

> JUSTINE. My point is, you can't just win the war in the street. You have to win the war in the heart and the mind.
> TABBY. You mean the propaganda war.
> JUSTINE. Shhhhh don't call it propaganda, there could be liberals listening. Look, what the left needs to get, and what the centrists need to get, and what only I and the fascists seem to get, is that reason doesn't matter very much.
> TABBY. Oh boy. Here we go.

> JUSTINE. What is it that centrists hate about social justice warriors? It's not that they don't have good reasons in support of their arguments, it's that they're not cool, right? Social justice warriors are not cool.
> TABBY. What do you mean, they're not popular?
> JUSTINE. No, no, no. I mean they're not cool. You can be unpopular and still cool. In fact, it can be cool to be unpopular.
> TABBY. So, what does it mean to be cool?
> JUSTINE. Cool is calm, detached, and in control of yourself. And the leading complaint about social justice warriors is that they're emotional. The social justice warriors who everyone cringes online are people, who I'm sure are nice people, but who are having a bad moment, and they're caught on camera in the middle of an outburst. They're out of control. And that's the problem. It's not cool.
> TABBY. Look, this detached, ironic, pretend-not-to-give-a-shit posturing that white men mistake for rationality is really just the self-celebration of comfortable, privileged people with nothing at stake. People on the left are never gonna be "cool," because anger and emotion are rational responses to injustice.
> JUSTINE. I thought you'd say that. But what you're failing to consider is that it's possible to be both angry and cool ("The Left" 10:28-11:48).

In her attempts to unite righteous indignation with a critical detachment, Justine is echoing Lagaay's and Koubová's thoughts on "Performing the Impossible in Philosophy". "Western philosophy arose against mythos as the ability to think from a distance and to grasp/formulate unequivocal paradigms. But at the same time each thought is connected to a certain foundational experience, which cannot be easily and directly grasped from this thought." (Lagaay and Koubová 2014: 44). Just as Lagaay and Koubová point out the untenability of keeping a complete critical distance in one's thinking, so does Wynn (through Justine's and Tabby's discussion) disavow the seemingly unbiased "aesthetic of logic" *and* its antithesis, the emotion-driven combativeness. In effect, Wynn is using *ContraPoints* as a way to provide what Philip Auslander would describe as "critical analyses of mediatized postmodern culture resistantly from within the terms of that culture itself" (1992: 54). She is aware that the line between politics and entertainment is increasingly blurring (Goodman, 2000: 2), and therefore uses her talent as an performer to not only spread her ideas about Internet culture, but also engage in a critical dialogue with the very notion of aesthetics (be it of logic, or of "passable" trans womanhood) as politics.

PERFORMING (FOR) A COMMUNITY

It has already been established that much of the content on *ContraPoints* is essentially dialogues – Wynn writes, performs, films, and edits conversations between (often recurring) fictional characters and uses them to represent different ideas. Part of the reason for this is caution. As Wynn herself states,

> People want to see what they feel is a real person, but there's more than one way to be authentic. You don't have to be a diarist, you can also be a novelist, metaphorically speaking. It's possible to express yourself through lying, or you can be yourself by becoming someone else. This is a technique that I've used on my channel, to discuss extremely controversial issues, where just literally sitting in my bedroom looking at the camera and saying what my opinion is would be a bad idea. … That's kind of where I'm at with this channel. I do dialogues. It's a way of exploring ideas without necessarily fully committing to them, which sounds cowardly but there's a precedent. To go back to philosophy, all of Plato's philosophy is written in dialogue format between fictional characters and it kind of works, I think, if we're talking about politics ("Natalie Wynn, ContraPoints – XOXO Festival (2018)" 16:20-18:15).

However, Wynn does not resort to such elaborate, time-consuming productions merely because she is circumspect about how her exploration of a certain controversial topic might be received. As Gordon McDougall asserts, "[t]he form in which a work of art is expressed is an integral part of its message: therefore it is not only acceptable but often necessary to use the form to comment, to make of the form *itself* an image of life's means of communication" (2000: 126). This is why, in, for instance, "The Aesthetic" and "The Left", Wynn frames her videos as friends meeting up to dissect how one of them has conducted in a YouTube debate – she is deliberately presenting her audience with a nested doll of public and private expressions of political views.

A particularly good example of this is "Transtrenders", which opens on a Wynn dressed as a parody of herself – an all-knowing, all-powerful Internet goddess. Calling herself "the digital messiah, the online oracle, the social media savior" ("Transtrenders" 0:11-0:16), she acts as the framing device through which the viewers are allowed to watch two separate debates. First, by opening a file on an old iMac, she shows the audience a discussion on *The Freedom Report*, a fictional talk show hosted by a political centrist, Jackie Jackson. Her guests are a conservative trans woman Tiffany Tumbles and Baltimore Maryland, an extremely composed (if somewhat mystical) nonbinary person, and the topic of discussion is "transtrenders" – that is, the idea that some people only claim to be trans to appear "trendy". Their debate lasts almost halfway through the video, at which point the camera zooms out of the iMac's screen and "the digital messiah" reappears to comment on their conversation. She then informs the audience that after the debate, Tiffany went to visit her friend Justine to discuss her appearance on *The Freedom Report*. "The digital messiah" then clicks another iMac file, and the video officially opens with the title "Transtrenders" written on the screen. Thus, fourteen minutes into a thirty-four-minute long video, the audience is implicitly informed that the first debate was merely an excuse for the real discussion – that between Tiffany and Justine.

Tiffany and Justine, just as Tabby and Justine in the previously analyzed videos, function as vehicles for ideas – be they Wynn's unresolved opinions on a topic, or the conflicting views of different members within particular communities. Whereas the first discussion – a talk show debate, at the end of which the host announces the winner – is

a public performance, Tiffany and Justine drinking tea is a private affair, but a politically significant one, nevertheless. *The Freedom Report* pits different worldviews against one another in "the free marketplace of ideas", but it is in Justine's living room that *community politics* is discussed. And, as Baz Kershaw emphasizes, it is precisely the notion of community that is "indispensable in understanding how the constitutions of different audiences might affect the ideological impact of particular performances, and how that impact might transfer (or not) from one audience to another" (2000: 137). By demonstrating the in-fighting and political disagreements among the members of a particular community (trans women, leftists, ...), Wynn is not only providing that community with nuanced representation, but also enabling the transfer of understanding "from one audience to another". For, as Judith Butler emphasizes, "it is not because we are reasoning beings that we are connected to one another, but, rather, because we are *exposed* to one another" (2004: 48).

ContraPoints, a channel through which Wynn discusses and playacts a variety of political positions – radical feminism, climate change denial, militant leftism, fascism – ultimately shows "…how different performances for different communities might successfully produce consonant effects in relation to society as a whole" (Kershaw 2000: 140). This is achieved because Wynn does not caricature these political extremes – rather, she shows how they might seem attractive, even logical, and then dismantles them anyway. As she reflects in an interview,

> Anyone who writes fiction strives to show characters as more than one-dimensional. … [Not so with political satire,] even though your villains have interiority — they love, they hate, they feel. … There's this artistic drive or something in me that impels me to sympathize with villains, but it's maybe not a great impulse as someone who wants to do activism as well (Cross 2018: n.p.).

By crafting multi-faceted, conflicting perspectives and framing them through performance, Wynn is not giving easy answers – as a general rule, her characters never come to a definitive solution. Instead, she is using her characters to offer her audience something different; "an epistemology grounded not on distinction between truthful models and fictional representations, but on different ways of knowing and doing that are constitutively heterogenous, contingent, and risky" (Diamond 2000: 66-67). Her gamble ultimately paid off – not only in the success she achieved as a YouTuber, but as a source of inspiration and strength, not only for trans people, but also for the "villains" she satirized and somewhat unwillingly sympathized with. Many of her videos contain comments from individuals who used to be transphobic, and who have had their horizons broadened and minds changed by the content on *ContraPoints*. An equally common narrative is that of the former alt-right supporter, who had fallen into radical right-wing politics through YouTube's "Alternative Influence Network" (Lewis, 2018: 1), but then managed to extricate himself by being exposed to voices such as Wynn's. Caleb Cain, a young man from rural West Virgnia, created his channel *Faraday Speaks*

so as to tell the story of his "Descent into the Alt-Right Pipeline", and he credits leftist YouTubers, especially Wynn, for getting him out of it:

> Natalie, I mean, I had this aversion to her at first because I had all these goofy ideas about trans people but Natalie, she just, she spoke to me. She spoke my language, she was like one of me, she... [sic]. You know, we were about the same age, and she understood the culture that I was in. She understood the memes, she understood the philosophy, she understood the motivations and she was able to repeat back to me why I found it so compelling.
> Whereas when I would talk to most leftists or liberals, they wouldn't know. They would just call me a racist, and to be honest with you – and this is part of the reason I'm making this video, is to help educate people – that didn't work. That pushed me further and further away. The only thing that that made me believe was that *I'm* the red-pilled[3] one, *I'm* the woke one, and that *I'm* the one that is willing to deal with these ideas when they're not. And they just get emotional with me and fight with me, and I wasn't having any of it.
> So, when I watched *Contra*'s videos, she was very… just *rational* and logical and had these good explanations and… and I realized how fucking wrong I was (20:40–21:59).

Cain's narrative of becoming radicalized online after having to drop out of college and move back to his poor rural community ("Descent into the Alt-Right Pipeline") echoes Colin Johnson's thoughts on how people become homophobic and transphobic. He points out that "political reactionaries do not emerge from the womb despising gender and sexual difference. They are taught to despise it, often for reasons that have far more to do with their own sense of social, cultural, and economic disfranchisement than anything else (Johnson, 2013: 195). This correlates to Wynn's own analysis, as she sees young men in particular as more vulnerable to radical online movements ("Men" 23:40–23:57). She is, however, not completely at peace with her role as the person responsible for de-radicalizing these men, as she feels they merely exchange their far-right ideology for the far-left one.

> There's this media narrative that my role in the discourse is de-radicalizing young alt-right men. And it's true that if you read the leftist YouTube fan subreddits, "I used to be alt-right" posts are so common they're considered cliché. And some of them cite me as an influence in changing their politics, which I love for them and I'm super fucking happy about it, but it's also a lot of responsibility. They're my boys. And I worry about my boys. Because in reality it's not like they go from far-right extremists to complacent centrists. No. Most of them go far-left. A lot of them become communists or anarchists. So, I watch them go from far to my right to significantly to my left. It's not really de-radicalizing, so much as re-radicalizing. ("Men" 24:17–25:04)

Kershaw's idea about the impact of performances travelling through different audiences (2000: 137) seems to ring ever truer in the case of YouTube, as the communities in question get substituted. The far-right racist whose portrayal Wynn

[3] A reference to „The Matrix", the term „the red pill" is often used in online political discourse to signify the hidden truths that a person has grasped after they have disavowed progressive or even centrist politics and started consuming extremely right-wing content (Lewis 20018: 35).

offers in one video might by the next become so entranced by her rhetoric as to surpass her politics and become a baseball-bat wielding anarchist. Even though she strives for balance and finding a middle ground, the question of "will the center hold" seems, at least in the context of some parts of her audience, one for which there are no clean-cut answers.

TRANS IDENTITY AND SEXUALITY

Other than the viewers, her work has helped politically de- (or, as we have seen, re-) radicalize, another very important portion of Wynn's audience are trans people. Much of Wynn's recurring characters are trans women and some of them – such as the skull-obsessed aristocrat Lady Foppington and the swastika-wearing fascist Freya – have transitioned alongside her. In this way, Wynn is demonstrating how "the discourse of performance can take its place as part of a larger political personal strategy of representation" (Adshead-Lansdale, 2000: 185). For, as Esa Kirkkopelto emphasizes,

> [t]he possibility of 'having' a character does not contradict the notion that our bodies are always somehow exposed to other bodies: on the contrary, the latter constitutes the condition of the former, nor could one be perceived or thought of without the other. We can escape our qualities, but we cannot escape them altogether. In other words, the scenic transformation is always *partial* (2014: 135)…

This assertion is doubly true of a creator such as Wynn, who uses her channel to – through characters or by directly addressing them – lay herself bare to her audience. Even though this may be more obvious in the videos where Wynn foregoes the characters and simply speaks to the camera, it is possible to interpret some of the recurring characters as embodiments of her fears or doubts. Two excellent examples of this tendency can be found in the characters of Tiffany Tumbles and Justine. Both are trans women, and both have changed significantly throughout their appearances on the channel. Tiffany first appeared in "TERFs"[4] as a newly out, progressive trans woman debating a trans-exclusionary radical feminist (or TERF) Abigail Cockbane on Jackie Jackson's *Freedom Report* ("TERFs" n.p.). However, by her next appearance in "Tiffany Tumbles", she has had a change of heart, "taking the red pill" after she had been shunned by the online trans community over some problematic tweets ("Tiffany Tumbles" 2:25–2:43). "Transtrenders" finds her as an established conservative, transmedicalist[5] figure, thus solidifying her character arc. Justine, on the other hand, is presented as a figure whose opinions have softened – presented in "The Left" and "The Aesthetic" as a person

[4] "TERFs" is one of the videos Wynn has removed from her channel.

[5] „Transmedicalism refers to the understanding of transness as an essentially medical condition. A critical implication of transmedicalism is the supposition that experiencing gender dysphoria is necessarily a part of being trans, which is inconsistent with the lived experiences of many trans people. A diagnosis of gender dysphoria (GD) requires "clinically significant distress" or "impairment in the functions of daily life,"' and such a diagnosis is a pre-requisite to receiving most forms of gender-affirming care." (Zhang 2018: 258-259)

who values performance (and, in the case of the gender presentation of trans women, performativity) to such an extent that she is deaf to any other arguments, in "Transtrenders" she concedes that she may not have all the answers.

"Transtrenders" is in effect Wynn's attempt to confront the appeal both of these positions to a trans woman – both the "uncomplicated solution to the 'question of the body'" (Salamon, 2010: 39) expressed through Tiffany's transmedicalism, *and* Justine's dependence on Judith Butler's ideas about gender as an "identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (1988: 519). By showcasing the intricate representational politics of a marginalized community, she is instructing all her viewers on the anxieties which prompt trans people to "theorize themselves for themselves" (Bettcher, 2014: 384) in the first place.

> TIFFANY. Justine, I think you're a good person, maybe too good, and that's why you're trying to have compassion for everyone. But at some point, you have to protect yourself. We live in a world of Jackie Jacksons, who don't understand trans people and don't think we're real. So, we need to have an explanation of what it is to be trans that is based on facts and not feelings ("Transtrenders" 22:02–22:21).

Tiffany tries to win Justine over to the side of transmedicalism as the only viable explanation for transness, while Justine persists in philosophizing her way through the problem. But, in the end, as is always the case in Wynn's videos, neither of them triumphs. As Gayle Salamon claims, "[t]o offer the category of real gender in an attempt to discipline what are perceived as the excesses of theoretical gender is to domesticate gender as it is lived and to deny its considerable complexity, which often outpaces our language to describe it" (2010: 72). The conclusion of the discussion, delivered by Justine, seems to support this notion.

> JUSTINE. Well maybe we don't need a theory. Maybe we don't need to prove anything.
> TIFFANY. Bad things, Justine, bad things!
> JUSTINE. Well do we have a theory about why people are gay? No. They just are. The only reason we even feel like we need a theory about trans people is that society is so unaccepting of us that its's constantly demanding us to justify our own reality.
> TIFFANY. Okay, so what am I supposed to tell Jackie Jackson then? What am I supposed to tell the TERFs? That I'm a woman because reasons?
> JUSTINE. No, not even because reasons. Just because you are.
> TIFFANY. So it's what, a leap of faith? Oh great, I'm sure that's gonna convince all the rational skeptics. Justine, it makes us sound completely delusional.
> JUSTINE. Well. Tiffany, delusion is what separates us from the animals. Who do you think built the pyramids and the cathedrals? Clearly not people with a perfectly rational worldview. But why do you care anyway? Aren't you the one who thinks being trans is a mental disorder?
> TIFFANY. Well I wouldn't describe it as the height of sanity. But I would prefer to think that my whole life and identity is based on something I can rationally explain.
> JUSTINE. Well what are we, Tiffany, men? Isn't the single most obnoxious thing about men that they think they have to wrap up the entire world in a little rational box? Maybe the

> most important things in life can't be logically proved. Can you logically prove that you love your own children? No. And the attempt to prove it is as degrading as it is futile. Maybe gender identity is one of those things.
> TIFFANY. Okay but then how do I prove I'm more valid than Baltimore Maryland and the star genders and the cat people?
> JUSTINE. Well, maybe we should stop getting so caught up in proving our validity to ourselves that we end up being horribly cruel to other people. What if we just accept all the freaks of the world? At the end of the day maybe it's not just as important to have logical proofs as it is to be empathetic, and open-minded, and compassionate. ("Transtrenders" 29:05–30:56)

This insistence of Wynn's – that both sides of the argument are right in some respects and wrong in others, because there exists no *one* perfect solution, other than willingness to listen and sympathize – is the guiding force behind *ContraPoints*. This is not only the case with regard to Wynn as the creator, but also to the audience.

By engaging in in-depth discussions and confessions on deeply personal topics such as gender identity and sexuality, she is demanding her audience to extend to her the same kind of understanding she has for her fictional characters. For instance, Wynn's video "Are Traps Gay?" is a forty-five-minute long rumination on the sexual anatomy of trans women, and the sexual orientation of men attracted to them. Even though she employs some characters (a framing character called Lenora LaVey and Lady Foppington for exposition and comic relief) and at times styles herself so as to appear eccentric, she introduces herself as Natale Wynn ("Are Traps Gays?" 3:05) and addresses the viewers directly. In the video, she essentially argues that trans women *are* women, and that attraction to them in no way makes men gay. In order to do so, she forces her audience to "think sexual difference in other than binary terms", thus enabling the very concept to "become unyoked from 'natural' materiality in a way that makes it easier to resist the temptation to posit genital morphology as essentially determinative of the self" (Salamon 2010: 151). One of the ways in which she achieves this is to talk at length about "the feminine penis" ("Are Traps Gay?" 27:30-31:06), including a sketch of herself as a wine-swirling sommelier, determining the mouthfeel of cis and trans people's genitals. She also includes an in-video video of herself lying on a chaise longue, detailing her sexual exploits since her transition ("Are Traps Gay?" 39:10-41:50). This kind of frankness may seem incongruent with Wynn's use of dialogue as a way to abscond responsibility and distance herself from the content of her videos.[6] But the matter of sexuality, and the way it relates to gender, is an issue Wynn has been very open about on the channel. Videos such as "Autogynephilia", "Are Traps Gay?" and "Shame" all show Wynn analyzing broader issues (theories on trans identity and their social impact; trans

[6] "If you can present yourself as a more abstract figure, a more abstract author, creating these characters, then you can ease some of the burden of being held directly accountable for every opinion you express" ("Natalie Wynn, ContraPoints – XOXO Festival (2018)" 19:03-19:14).

women's sex lives; compulsory heterosexuality), but in essence, they are a way for Wynn to explore her own identity.

> Self-identity, at the heart of which is sexual identity, is not something that is given as a result of the continuities of an individual's life and the fixity and force of his or her desires. It is something that has to be worked on, invented and reinvented in accord with the changing rhythms, demands, opportunities, and closures of a complex world; it depends on the effectiveness of the biographical narratives we construct for ourselves in our turbulent world, on our ability to keep a particular narrative going. (Plummer qtd. in Weeks, 2000: 164)

A particularly good explanation of the tenuousness of Wynn's ability to "keep a particular [biographical] narrative going" can be found in her video "Shame", in which Wynn relates her difficulties in coming to terms with her identity as a trans lesbian.

> There's two problems that kind of multiply together. One, I'm ashamed of being trans. Two, I'm ashamed of being a lesbian. And whatever one times two is, I'm really ashamed of being a trans lesbian. Ew.
> It's difficult and risky for me to admit these feelings, because visible queer people are supposed to perform pride. Why is no one talking about the shame? Because we're ashamed of the shame. But we shouldn't be. The shame is a natural result of shaming.
> I grew up in a media era where trans women were usually represented as vomit-inducing monstrosities who deserve the violence they bring upon themselves by existing. And I started my transition in the first year of the Trump administration, where there's been constant vilification of trans people in the press, invading women's bathrooms, forcing our insanity on children, and destroying Western civilization with our authoritarian pronouns. It's hard to express just the daily humiliation of being a trans woman under these conditions ("Transcripts: Shame" n.p.).

"The baseless but pervasive suspicion that trans people are dangerous, and dangerous in [a] way that violates women in particular" (Salamon, 2010: 107) that Wynn cites severely impacted the ways in which she was able to think about her own sexuality.

> [I]t doesn't help that most forms of transphobia are harsher on gay trans women than they are on straight trans women. Like, take this trope that trans women are men who transition to creep on women in bathrooms. In response to that, it feels really good to be able to say, "I'm not even attracted to women. I'm just a petite heterosexual biogirl. I'm surely not some kind of six-foot monster who likes women." … It does make me feel like a monster sometimes, like a mutant that has no place in society. And this shame has actually made it more difficult for me to accept that I'm a gay woman, than it was for me to come out as trans in the first place. It's like I made a kind of subconscious bargain where I traded my sexual orientation for my gender identity, and so I finally transitioned only to spend the next couple years living with a different kind of denial. And that denial got pretty deep and pretty dark. ("Transcripts: Shame" n.p.)

Wynn's struggle serves as a perfect illustration of Salamon's thoughts on trans people's sexuality. On the one hand, the "trope that trans women are men who transition to creep on women in bathrooms" ("Transcripts: Shame" n.p.) is the direct consequence of the

"danger in overstating the confluence of sexuality and identity" (Salamon 2010: 45). But, on the other hand, Wynn's subconscious bargain, wherein a normative sexuality was the price of nonnormative gender, shows "what sort of contortions result when trans subjects are required to suppress or deny their sexuality" (Salamon 2010: 45).

PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND CANCELLING

It is perhaps difficult to understand why Wynn would feel the need to reflect on such personal matters in front of an audience that has nominally gathered there to consume videos on internet culture and online activism. The explanation partially lies in the thesis of this paper – *ContraPoints* is not only an outlet for Wynn's creativity and a way for her to politically engage her audience, but also a space for her to work through aspects of her identity and personal life. However, there is another possible impetus behind this kind of frankness; perhaps a more cynical one – the development of parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationship is a term used to describe the feelings of affection and sustained connection that individuals develop for people they have never met, such as celebrities or even fictional characters (Kurtin *et al.*, 2018: 236). Kurtin et al. further point to research stating that the platform's very slogan "Broadcast Yourself" signals the fact that YouTube is the perfect place for creators to first engage the viewership in initial parasocial interaction, and then establish long-term parasocial relationships with them (2018: 237; 238). But parasocial relationships are not only a good way to create what we would essentially call fandoms. "Parasocial Contact Hypothesis" focuses on the way parasocial interactions can work as extension of real-life social interactions, and "reduce prejudice between majority and minority group members" (Schiappa *et al.,* 2005: 92). A study by Galinec and Lauri Korajlija found that, among students who were exposed to information about trans people, the most significant positive change in opinions came in the group who were shown YouTube videos containing more personal transition narratives (2017: 287). In the words of Judith Butler, "Certain faces must be admitted into public view, must be seen and heard for some keener sense of the value of life, to take hold" (2004: XVIII). *ContraPoints* is an interesting channel in this regard because it could be posited that one of the driving forces behind the entire channel is to reduce prejudice through exposure to a trans woman, so its success absolutely depends on its viewers feeling some sort of a genuine connection with Wynn. But at the same time, this sort of intense investment in a YouTuber can prove to be a double-edged sword, both for the creator, and for their audience.

> When we consider the ordinary ways that we think about humanization and dehumanization, we find the assumption that those who gain representation, especially self-representation, have a better chance of being humanized, and those who have no chance to represent themselves run a greater risk as being treated as less than human, regarded as less than human, or indeed, not regarded at all. … [But] it would seem that *personification does not always humanize*. (Butler, 2004: 141, emphasis mine)

In December 2019, Natalie Wynn got cancelled on Twitter. "Canceling is online shaming, vilifying and ostracizing of prominent members of a community by other members of that community", and in Wynn's case, this meant a Twitter harassment campaign lasting weeks, and targeting not only her, but also her friends and associates ("Transcripts: Cancelling" n.p.). The incident occurred because a part of her viewership felt deeply betrayed by the fact that in her October 2019 video "Opulence" she used a voiceover by Buck Angel, a prominent trans public figure who is considered to be a transmedicalist ("Transcripts: Cancelling" n.p.). Even though only a few months prior, she had released "Transtrenders" as a nuanced rebuttal of transmedicalism, the 10-second voiceover by Buck Angel was enough for a section of her audience to turn against Wynn and denounce her completely. Part of the reason they reacted so forcefully indubitably has to do with the more unpleasant aspects of parasocial relationships. By becoming emotionally invested in Wynn and finding in her a role model, her fans open themselves up to possible disappointments and a sense of betrayal should Wynn ever do anything they perceive as morally reprehensible. Such a feeling may be especially strong for fellow trans people who look to Wynn as a prominent and publicly visible member of their community. But this kind of a personification of Wynn as an all-powerful, detached representational ideal decidedly "does not humanize" (Butler, 2004: 141).

> People on Twitter don't try to persuade me like I'm a human being. They order me around, they tell me what to believe, they demand that I say exactly what they want me to say, or else. It's extremely objectifying. They don't treat me like a person with my own opinions and feelings. They treat me as this brand of moral commodity to be consumed or denounced. And this is all terribly ironic because of the conflicting demand that creators be authentic all the time ("Transcripts: Cancelling" n.p.).

The problem is compounded by the precarious power relations inherent to celebrity status, which obfuscate the level of influence her viewers can collectively exert on Wynn.

> There's not really anything ambiguous about this. It's just abuse.
> But I don't think it feels like abuse to the people who are doing it. They feel like they're punching up because I'm a "celebrity" with a platform and lots of Twitter followers. And it's true that I do have more power than any of them individually. But as a collective, they have a terrifying power that they don't seem to be aware of as individuals ("Transcripts: Cancelling" n.p.).

Wynn's experience shows how changes in the functioning of media determine the level of power an audience has over the creator. Writing about the radio almost 30 years ago, Auslander remarked that

> [t]he mass-media audience exists as a collective only by virtue of each individual member's relation to the medium; that relation in itself ensures that the collective will never be more than a grouping of isolated individuals whose only common bond is their relation to the medium and who will never be able to respond collectively to the medium. (1992: 79)

This assertion, while perfectly logical in the context of the media landscape in the 1990s, proves to be almost comically inapplicable in a world where entire progressive movements spread through the use of hashtags. "Responding collectively to the medium" has become the norm, and everything from YouTube comment sections to sharing political content on Facebook is predicated on the willingness of individuals to shape themselves into a powerful collective force.

In order to reflect precisely on these issues, Wynn filmed "Cancelling", a 100-minute-long video in which she, using both the cancellation of James Charles (a prominent beauty vlogger) and her own negative experience as examples, breaks down cancel culture into "tropes". In a way, she managed to turn an emotional and reputational adversity into an ultimately very well-received video ("Cancelling"). She ends her video on a defiant note, sarcastically claiming,

> YouTubing! This is a healthy profession. This is great! Anyone want my job? Step right up! All you have to do is make informative and entertaining videos about extremely controversial topics while, of course, representing the full range of experiences in the LGBTQIAA+ spectrum and being perfectly woke and irreverently funny. Well, go on. I'm waiting to be entertained. Feed me, mother. Oh, don't mind me, I'll just sit back and pour another glass of wine.
> Oh, and I will, of course, be obsessively scrutinizing every word you say for any hint of moral transgression, as well as critiquing your look, ya third-rate crossdresser. Zero out of 10, get off my stage ("Transcripts: Cancelling" n.p.)!

The trials Wynn went through, as a result of being shunned by a section of her fanbase, ensured she attained a sort of ironic metacognition on her own role as a YouTuber. The fact that she decided not to film "Cancelling" in the form of a fictional dialogue, however, points to the fact that she understands, and is still willing to utilize, the emotional force of direct communion with one's audience – precarious as the effort may be.

CONCLUSION

ContraPoints is a YouTube channel that is characterized perhaps most obviously by its inherently contradictory nature. The topics it covers are at once explicitly political and incredibly private; it is simultaneously a vehicle for creative expression and a minefield of potential parasocial blunders. Therefore, this paper did not aim to present either the channel or its creator Natalie Wynn as a simple Internet success story, wherein a combination of easily identifiable factors led to the creation of a (micro)celebrity. Rather, it focuses on several distinct characteristics of Wynn's approach as a creator, and tries to establish where performance, political activism, and personal confessions intersect.

In "The Left" and "The Aesthetic" Wynn tackles the importance of appearances – how an activist might be taken more seriously if they *appear* cool and detached, or how a trans person might be granted more dignity and safety if they visibly *appear* to be of the gender with which they identify. She simultaneously emphasizes and deconstructs the importance of aesthetics (be it of logic or womanhood), exposing it to be something which is deliberately constructed and wielded. A video such as "Transtrenders" demonstrates Wynn's preoccupation with representing different spheres in which politics is conducted. She reminds her viewers that public debates are merely performances staged for general audiences, and that the really nuanced discussions happen behind closed doors, within the marginalized communities themselves.

While much of her work relies on characters as vehicles for ideas (be it her own conflicting views on an issue, or different sides in an ongoing, broader political conversation), the videos in which she directly addresses her audience also serve an important purpose on the channel. On the one hand, they make her appear more personable and straightforward, which appeals to new, sometimes even initially hostile, viewers. Even more importantly, however, such "traditional" formats in which performances do not take the central stage give Wynn the space to talk directly about deeply private issues. A video such as "Shame", for example, is certainly entertaining, educational, and political – but more than anything else, it is a personal exploration of Wynn's sexuality and romantic history. By forgoing characters and completely laying herself bare to her viewers, Wynn ensures *ContraPoints* is not merely a channel dedicated to discussions of political and social issues, but an online space centered around *Natalie Wynn* as a person in her own right. While this kind of engagement ensures her audience feels sympathy for Wynn (and by proxy, for all the trans women Wynn is in effect representing in the eyes of many of the viewers outside this marginalized community), it also exposes her to the more pernicious aspects of parasocial relationships – impossibly high standards, harassment, and vilification.

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