

# **MICROCELEBRITY AROUND THE GLOBE**

This page intentionally left blank

# **MICROCELEBRITY AROUND THE GLOBE: APPROACHES TO CULTURES OF INTERNET FAME**

EDITED BY

**CRYSTAL ABIDIN**

*School of Communication and Creative Arts (SCCA),  
Deakin University, Australia, and Media, Management and  
Transformation Centre (MMTC), Jönköping University,  
Sweden*

**MEGAN LINDSAY BROWN**

*Arizona State University, USA*



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited  
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2019

Copyright © 2019 Emerald Publishing Limited

**Reprints and permissions service**

Contact: [permissions@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:permissions@emeraldinsight.com)

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without either the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying issued in the UK by The Copyright Licensing Agency and in the USA by The Copyright Clearance Center. Any opinions expressed in the chapters are those of the authors. Whilst Emerald makes every effort to ensure the quality and accuracy of its content, Emerald makes no representation implied or otherwise, as to the chapters' suitability and application and disclaims any warranties, express or implied, to their use.

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78756-750-4 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-78756-749-8 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-78756-751-1 (Epub)



ISOQAR certified  
Management System,  
awarded to Emerald  
for adherence to  
Environmental  
standard  
ISO 14001:2004.

Certificate Number 1985  
ISO 14001



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

# Table of Contents

Contributor Biographies	vii
Acknowledgments	xi
<b>Fame, Shame, Remorse, Authenticity: A Prologue</b> <i>Theresa M. Senft</i>	xiii
<b>Introduction</b> <i>Crystal Abidin and Megan Lindsay Brown</i>	1

## PART I: NORMS

<b>Chapter 1 Vlogging Parlance: Strategic Talking in Beauty Vlogs</b> <i>Sophie Bishop</i>	21
<b>Chapter 2 Facebook and Unintentional Celebrification</b> <i>Angela M. Cirucci</i>	33
<b>Chapter 3 musical.ly and Microcelebrity Among Girls</b> <i>Burcu Şimşek, Crystal Abidin, and Megan Lindsay Brown</i>	47
<b>Chapter 4 Being “Red” on the Internet: The Craft of Popularity on Chinese Social Media Platforms</b> <i>Ge Zhang and Gabriele de Seta</i>	57

## PART II: LABOR

<b>Chapter 5 Origin Stories: An Ethnographic Account of Researching Microcelebrity</b> <i>Crystal Abidin</i>	71
<b>Chapter 6 Fame Labor: A Critical Autoethnography of Australian Digital Influencers</b> <i>Jonathan Mavroudis</i>	83

**Chapter 7 Net Idols and Beauty Bloggers' Negotiations of Race, Commerce, and Cultural Customs: Emergent Microcelebrity Genres in Thailand**

*Vimviriya Limkangvanmongkol and Crystal Abidin* 95

**Chapter 8 Catarina, A Virgin for Auction: Microcelebrity in Brazilian Media**

*Lígia Lana* 107

**PART III: ACTIVISM**

**Chapter 9 The Rise of Belle from Tumblr**

*Megan Lindsay Brown and Hanna Phifer (Belle)* 121

**Chapter 10 Performing as a Transgressive Authentic Microcelebrity: The Qandeel Baloch Case**

*Fatima Aziz* 131

**Chapter 11 It's Just a Joke! The Payoffs and Perils of Microcelebrity in India**

*Rukmini Pande* 145

**Epilogue: The Algorithmic Celebrity: The Future of Internet Fame and Microcelebrity Studies**

*Alice E. Marwick* 161

Index 171

# Contributor Biographies

## Editors

**Dr. Crystal Abidin** is a Socio-cultural Anthropologist of vernacular internet cultures, particularly young people's relationships with internet celebrity, self-curation, and vulnerability. Her forthcoming books look at the histories, cultures, and industries of Instagram, blogshops, and Influencers. She is the author of *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online* (Emerald Publishing, 2018), which critically analyzes the contemporary histories and impacts of internet-native celebrities today. Crystal is Lecturer in the School of Communication and Creative Arts (SCCA) at Deakin University, Postdoctoral Fellow with the Media, Management and Transformation Centre (MMTC) at Jönköping University, and Adjunct Research Fellow with the Centre for Culture and Technology (CCAT) at Curtin University. Reach her at wish-crys.com or @wishcrys.

**Megan Lindsay Brown**, MSW, PhD, is a Postdoctoral Scholar advised by Dr. Jill Messing in the Office of Gender-based Violence at Arizona State University. Dr. Brown's research focuses on the use of information communication technologies (ICT) and the impact of social media on women's lived experiences. Her work has examined young adult dating relationships, online harassment, and interventions using ICT. Currently, her research is focused on the ways that online safety planning and technology can be incorporated to improve domestic violence programs and interventions, and she has helped to test and disseminated myPlan under a grant from the National Institutes of Health (PI: Nancy Glass). Dr. Brown oversees the social media campaign for myPlan, including disseminating information about myPlan on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook.

## Contributors

**Fatima Aziz** is a PhD Candidate at École des Hautes Études en Science Sociales, Paris. Her PhD focuses on visual digital cultures, identity, and sociality as co-constructed practices shaped by photographic production, sharing, and interpretation across social media. She has published on French students hook-up practices on Facebook and Pakistani Instagrammer's citizenship practices. Find her research at <https://ehess.academia.edu/FatimaAziz>.

**Sophie Bishop** is a Doctoral Student and Associate Lecturer in the Department of Arts, Technology, and Innovation at the University of East London. Her PhD research examines the political economy of YouTube vlogging, algorithmic materialities, and self-optimization. Her work has been published in journals including *Feminist Media Studies* and *Convergence*.

**Angela M Cirucci** (PhD, Temple University) is an Assistant Professor of Media Studies at Kutztown University in the USA. Her research explores social network sites and the ways in which their structures influence identity. She is particularly interested in the nexus of software studies, digital labor, and theories of identity. Read more about Angela at [www.angelacirucci.com](http://www.angelacirucci.com), and follow her on Twitter @angelacirucci.

**Gabriele de Seta** recently completed a postdoctoral fellowship at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica in Taipei, Taiwan. His research work, grounded on ethnographic engagement across multiple sites, focuses on digital media practices and vernacular creativity in contemporary China. He is also interested in experimental music scenes and collaborative intersections between anthropology and art practice. More information is available on his website <http://paranom.asia>.

**Lígia Lana** is a Postdoctoral Fellow of Foundation for the Support of Research of the Rio de Janeiro State and Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (Capes/Faperj) at Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). Her research interests are roles played by female figures of Brazilian media, especially celebrities and popular characters.

**Dr. Vimviriya (Vim) Limkangvanmongkol** is a full-time Instructor in the School of Communication Arts at Bangkok University. She graduated with a PhD in Communication from the Department of Communication at the University of Illinois at Chicago in 2018. Vimviriya has been tracking beauty and fashion blog industry and internet celebrity culture since 2015.

**Alice E. Marwick** is an Assistant Professor of Communication at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and a Faculty Affiliate on the Media Manipulation Initiative at the Data & Society Research Institute. She studies the social and cultural implications of social media and is best known for her work on online disinformation; microcelebrity; online privacy; and context collapse. She is the author of *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity and Branding in the Social Media Age* (Yale 2013), co-editor of *The Sage Handbook of Social Media* (Sage, 2017), and has written numerous papers and book chapters about social media.

**Jonathan Mavroudis** is a PhD Candidate at Swinburne University. His research interests include how microcelebrity culture is experienced through visual social media and the implications this has for young people. He has cowritten a paper for *First Monday* entitled “Researching microcelebrity: Methods, access and labour” that explores how the issue of access is negotiated by microcelebrities and the researcher in autoethnographic research.



**Rukmini Pande** is currently an Assistant Professor in English Literature at O.P Jindal Global University, New Delhi. She completed her PhD on Intersections of Identity in Media Fandom Communities at the University of Western Australia in 2017. She is currently part of the editorial board of the *Journal of Fandom Studies* and has been published in multiple edited collections on race in media fandom, including the *Wiley Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies* (edited by Paul Booth). She has also been published in peer-reviewed journals such as *Transformative Works and Cultures* and *The Journal for Feminist Studies*. Her monograph, *Squee From The Margins: Race in Fandom*, is projected to be published in the fall of 2018 by the University of Iowa Press. She is also working on an edited collection on race/racism in fandom in order to bring together cutting-edge scholarship from upcoming scholars in the field.

**Theresa M. Senft** is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Media, Music, Communication and Cultural Studies at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. Terri's work, which tends toward feminist, critical race, and post-colonial critique, explores how social media has changed the way we produce, consume, and circulate performances of ourselves, worldwide. Trained in performance studies, she tends to focus on media that features liveness in some way, and is particularly interested in using critical theory, ethnography, and memoir to unpack the politics of practices ordinarily considered apolitical, or "just for fun." Her books include *Camgirls: Celebrity & Community in the Age of Social Networks*; *The Routledge Handbook of Social Media* (co-editor); *History of the Internet: A Chronology, 1843-Present* (co-author); and an issue of *Women & Performance* devoted to the theme "sexuality and cyberspace." A strong believer in the power of public, free, and networked scholarship, Terri founded the 3000-member international Selfies Research Network ([selfieresearchers.com](http://selfieresearchers.com)) in 2014. In 2016, she founded the Hey Girl Global network ([heygirlglobal.com](http://heygirlglobal.com)), which studies the intersection of girl culture, urban culture, and media culture around the world. Her website is [www.terrisenft.net](http://www.terrisenft.net).

**Burcu Şimşek** is an Associate Professor of New Media at Hacettepe University, Turkey, and an Adjunct Research Fellow at the Center for Culture and Technology, Curtin University, Australia. She holds a PhD on digital storytelling and women's activism from Queensland University of Technology, Australia, and an MSc degree in Women's Studies from Ankara University. She is the founder/coordinator of the Digital Storytelling Unit ([www.digitalstoryhub.org](http://www.digitalstoryhub.org)) in Turkey.

**Ge Zhang** is an Ethnographer and PhD Candidate at the Digital Ethnography Research Centre, RMIT University. His doctoral thesis focuses on livestreaming platforms, practices, and personalities in China. He has previously written about Chinese internet cafes, dating apps, and videogame subcultures. Please visit his website [anthropos.live](http://anthropos.live) for more information.

This page intentionally left blank

# Acknowledgments

Taken honestly, acknowledgments sections of books are where scholars detail the shadow labor from networks of colleagues, peers, and loved ones whose support and care have culminated in a publishable piece of work. For the co-editors of this book, this journey began when we met at the Oxford Internet Institute Summer Doctoral Programme (OIISDP) in 2014. Alongside the enriching classroom experience, we became lifelong friends with several of our cohort mates while navigating unruly punts (“I am too short for this.”), 14 days of English breakfasts of beans and toast (#BEANS), precious late night talks on grass patches (“middle-class grass”), and student accommodation with poor Wi-Fi signals (Keble College, why?) If not for this intellectual and intimate experience, we would not have found each other and become writing companions. For this, we thank The internet for being invented so that we may study it, our cohort mates at the OIISDP class of 2014, and our mothership Vicki Nash for shepherding us.

We first toyed with the idea of this book project when four members of OIISDP14 and one member of OIISDP15 came together at a pre-formed panel on “Fame and Microcelebrity on the Web.” This was at the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) conference in Arizona in 2015. All five of us were PhD candidates at that time, and it felt super ambitious to be trying our hand at getting a “postgrad panel” accepted on the first try (we succeeded!) The co-editors would like to especially thank our panel members Angela M. Cirucci (Chapter 2), Vimviriya Limkangvanmongkol (Chapter 7), and Renee M. Powers for taking a gamble and adventuring with us on the panel, and our cohort mate Gabriele de Seta (Chapter 4) for hopping on board with this book.

We thank also the AoIR conference reviewers for their faith in the early drafts of our papers, and the conference organizers for allowing us the avenue to congregate in person. At this conference, we (bravely) invited microcelebrity studies pioneer Theresa M. Senft to sit in on our talks, to which she very kindly obliged and then extended her hospitality and mentorship to provide us with critical feedback and warm encouragement (after which we took selfies, of course). Naturally, we are grateful to both Terri and Alice E. Marwick for allowing us to play with their theories and concepts across our chapters and research fields, for endorsing this book project, and for generously lending their expert voices in the Prologue and Epilogue.

At Emerald Publishing, we are grateful to Jen McCall for trusting a group of Early Career Researchers enough to contract this book, Lynda Cooper and

Rachel Ward for overseeing the production of the book, and Sarah Broadley for taking care of marketing and publicity.

Finally, if you have made it this far down our acknowledgments, you have earned the *\*actual\** backstory behind this book project. When we first proposed this book to each other in 2015, we were full-time PhD candidates who were multitasking on soon-to-be expired scholarships, but who were also running on wild ambition and pure adrenaline. Between this moment and the eventual publication of the book, the co-editors have collectively experienced two marriages, five house moves, one childbirth, three deaths, four job changes, and thousands of text messages on email, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Truth be told, this book could only be completed because neither of the co-editors lost stamina or hope concurrently, and were able to dip in and out of the project according to the peaks and troughs of our personal lives, while the other party soldiered on. As such, we would like to acknowledge the collegiality and friendship we have shared as young women academics and to thank our partners, family, and loved ones for their understanding and support throughout this process.

Megan would like to dedicate this book to Emmet and Charles, for your patient support while I sneak off to another room for strange writing hours and Skype calls. Thank you for being the best little unit and team during our hectic lives. A special thanks is owed to Jill Messing and the writing group of the Office of Gender-Based Violence for continued encouragement. Walter LaMendola, thanks for giving the best pep talks ever. Most of all, for Crystal Abidin a very special thank you is in order – eternal gratitude for your heartfelt scholarship and kind nature. Your passion for the work is inspiring, and your ability to produce critically minded products without losing your humor and warmth is much needed in these times. I will always be humbled by the proposition to partner for this project. The book was a labor of love and a project like this only comes to fruition with sheer grit and determination. I look up to you as a role model for your writing, compassion, brilliance, and ability to wear fantastic yellow fashion in the most serious academic settings. You will teach the world about the seriousness of cute because you embody this paradox.

Crystal would like to dedicate this book to the 2014 cohort of the OIISDP; the 2011–2015 cohorts of postgraduates at the departments of Anthropology and Sociology, and Media and Communications at the University of Western Australia; and to coeditor Megan Lindsay Brown – my most empathetic, thoughtful, and brilliant partner in crime, from whom I am learning to be a better human and more resilient woman every time we chat. Thank you for all your friendship, support, and wit. I promise to always be your friend, even when you exclusively speak in Beyoncé lyrics and quips  $\mathbb{C}(\cdot \omega \cdot \cdot \mathbb{C})$ .

# **Fame, Shame, Remorse, Authenticity: A Prologue**

*Theresa M. Senft*

This book contains essays considering how micro-celebrity works around the world. I am the person who coined the term “micro-celebrity.” This makes me an expert of sorts. It also makes me suspicious. Although much of its focus is on the present, my hope is that this book stirs questions about the past as well. Exactly how did we get to our current understanding of what this “field” is, or means? How much of what we know about micro-celebrity comes through direct experience? How much comes from stories of others? From formal education? How much are we simply guessing?

I have titled this prologue, “Fame, Shame, Remorse, Authenticity.” For academics, shame feels baked into the language we use to discuss fame. Consider the identity position “expert,” the closest thing to micro-celebrity we have in academia. In part because they are rarely the ones with the most expertise in an area (but are nonetheless center stage), experts are expected to comport themselves with a mix of enthusiasm and shame. Like Plato’s reluctant Philosopher King, or an award-nominated actress who insists it’s an honor to simply be named, a good expert knows to demonstrate some resistance to being asked to represent the collective wisdom of the academy. Fail to perform in this way, and rumors begin to circulate that she seeks fame for “the wrong reasons,” as they say on reality shows. On those shows, we never hear what the “right reasons” for gaining or keeping celebrity are. You don’t hear much about that in universities, either.

Of all the places an expert is expected to deploy shame, the area of apologies is perhaps the most pressing. Sometimes the expert requests apologies on behalf of harmed parties. Other times, she offers them, on behalf of parties who have injured others. In their Introduction to this collection, Crystal Abidin and Megan Lindsay Brown explain that most research on micro-celebrity skews heavily in the direction of English-speaking users hailing from the Global North. They’re not asking anyone to take responsibility for the history of this research imbalance, but as an expert, I feel moved to offer one, on behalf of others like myself who thought they were doing the best they could with what they had and were not.

Legal theorist Jeffrie Murphy breaks apologies into two types: guilt and remorse. Remorse apologies differ from guilt apologies by degree (they tend to be

given only for “grave wrongs and harms”) and performance quality. As Murphy explains, those with remorse are expected to go beyond the words “I am sorry” (Murphy, 2007: 430).

Murphy believes that remorse apologies are on the decline, mainly due to the “increasing prevalence and even celebration of public apology...” (Murphy, 2007: 433) This might sound paradoxical until we think about the number of public apologies that seem to do more harm than good. Murphy uses the example of the person who says he is “sorry that you interpreted his (presumably innocent) remark in such a way that your (probably overly sensitive) feelings were hurt” (Murphy, 2007: 449). At moments like these, he argues, the message heard is that, “I matter more than you and can use you, like a mere object or thing, for my own purposes.”

Apologies don’t mean a lot without remorse, but remorse doesn’t mean a lot without a narrative about the past that includes an understanding of culpability and a plan for a future that seems to move in the direction of justice, equity, and honest representation. To me, this book points to that future. My plan for the remaining pages is to give a personal backstory for how we got here. I invite others who were part of what I now think of as “Micro-celebrity 1.0” to do the same.

## **Person to Practice**

In history, there are the facts we know, the ones we don’t, and then there are things that we aren’t sure matter or not. I have never been questioned about “owning” the origin of micro-celebrity (it’s hardly a burning issue on the world stage), but if I were, I could provide two historical data points. Academically, the term first appeared in my 2004 doctoral dissertation and then in my 2008 book *Camgirls*. I was also described as having come up with the term in a 2007 article on the topic in *Wired* magazine. More than anything, the *Wired* piece probably also contributed to establishing me as an expert. It’s worth noting that that author of that piece, Clive Thompson, is a friend who lived down the street from me in New York. There has never been a time on the internet when location has not mattered.

When I started studying it, it was common for reporters to ask if I thought Person X or Y was a micro-celebrity, based on the number of hits their web sites received or (later) the number of followers they had. It was a difficult question answer at the time, and an impossible one to answer in an era where everyone posts information about their daily activities on services like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WeChat. Today, I speak of micro-celebrity as a practice, rather than a person: it’s the presentation of one’s online self as a branded good, with the expectation others are doing the same. When this presentation involves an intention to monetize, I call that person an influencer.

I decided to study micro-celebrity to figure something out about myself, my relationship to technology, and my relationship to others online. I bought my first computer and modem in 1994. I remember because that was the year I returned to graduate school. Both these things were made possible by money I received in a

lump sum after my mother's death. I share these facts because I've always seen my personal and professional life are connected: if my mother hadn't been a staunch feminist, endured a wild and abusive marriage, chosen not to attend college, insisted on papering my bedroom walls with posters donated by travel agencies, flown into a drunken rage when I said I wouldn't be coming home ever again, built a life for herself after her divorce, contracted a mind and body destroying illness shortly thereafter, and had the foresight to purchase life insurance (leaving me with a lump sum of a cash and years of unresolved psychological issues) I'd have an entirely different story than I do now.

1994 was an important year for internet history, marking the introduction of what would later be known as the World Wide Web. The introduction of visual material and hyperlinks to the internet led to the genesis of personal home pages. I guess, for many, personal home pages were the original stomping grounds of micro-celebrity (there was no blogging or micro-blogging then), but I wasn't very interested. It seemed to me that the Web in general was mostly full of corporate material, and home pages seemed to all belong to Silicon Valley dudes. Instead, I practiced micro-celebrity on Echo, a dialup New York City bulletin board service, where I went by the name Jane Doe. Echo was structured not unlike Reddit is today, except back then it was only reachable through a local phone number. People on Echo often met in the flesh for drinks and to socialize, and because the bar we drank at was in New York, lots of journalists were there.

Now that I think back on it, almost every early opportunity I had to play an expert came from someone originally connected to Echo. Talking with friends who were also journalists showed me how to set up a story that would grab attention. When I began studying "webcam girls" by sticking a camera in my own apartment, I already knew my story was odd enough to be interesting to New York journalists. I also knew I looked old enough to be credible and young enough to be digestible as an expert across the United States. I had some other advantages I detail below.

## **The Generational Lottery**

Like every other tech expert, I first had to win a generational lottery. Winning starts by being born at the right moment in time to study a technology and looking the right age to study it. If you are (or look) overly young, people doubt academic or business-related *bonafides*. It almost goes without saying that being too old is also a problem. I am fortunate to know one of the men who helped write the operating system OS X for Apple. After retiring, he applied for and was denied a part time job at the Genius Bar at his local mall. This is a true story.

The generational lottery requires a few other things. You need to be living in a body that comports itself easily to existing norms and requires very little other technology to get around. Of course, people understand that there should be wheelchair access at speaking venues or that young mothers might need a place to breastfeed over the course of a day. Everyone wants a world where those issues

are addressed, just as they wish the viewing public would dial down the racist, homophobic, or fat shaming comments on every public video. It's just that realistically, we are told, we are *just not quite there yet*.

Two final things are necessary to claim generational lottery winnings. First, you need to be living and working in or near a city center (ideally one that wakes up and goes to sleep at the same time as the area commonly referred to as the Global North.) Second, you need to understand that as an expert, it is your job to be a translator, moving from technical to layperson's language, from pop culture to academic or business expertise. The thing is, your translations must be in written and spoken English—ideally with an American or British accent. Of course, it is possible to have all these qualities and not win the lottery, but if you miss out on even one, you probably won't even get a ticket to play.

## **The Seen, the Unseen, and Unseeable**

Generational lottery winners have a knack for seeing some things and missing many others. In 2000, “Jenny from the JenniCam” had about the same cultural cachet a YouTube personality like Logan Paul has today, which meant there were plenty of people who would nod their head when I mentioned her name. When I asked, “What is the JenniCam of Asia?” it was hard for me to get answers. There were a few reasons for this. First and foremost, I didn't speak any Asian languages. I was told Japanese internet users enjoyed photo beauty contests and could find sites devoted to “idols,” but I struggled to get anyone to help me read the Kanji characters on my screen. I spent a little time in *Camgirls* discussing how my questions about the “Japanese JennyCam” changed after I discovered Japanese internet use was metered by the minute, which would obviously impact who would choose to broadcast their lives 24/7 online. I spent a little thinking about webcamming in South America. I spent a little time thinking about webcamming as an African American. I could have done more. I remember revising my PhD dissertation into a book manuscript and having an editor strike every instance of “it is beyond the scope of this project to...” Once it's in a book, you are expected to write what you know and leave the rest, hopefully, to others.

Revisions to the histories we carry are easy to make when new information can be made to correspond in some way with what we already respect and value about ourselves. A live music enthusiast might laugh at people holding up camera phones at concerts, but should you offer him the opportunity for a private Skype session with his favorite musician, he suddenly sees how “live” can mean many things. Likewise, a certain sort of history buff understands why taking a selfie with a politician now holds the same cultural value securing an autograph once did. She might even argue that the selfie holds *more* potential value than the autograph—especially if it resides on the politician's camera (perhaps one day finding its way into an archive.)

Historical revisions are harder to swallow when shame is involved. If you are like me, you've seen your fair share of private arguments made public through



online video. Some of these needed to see the light of day; others make me weep with joy that I loved through my twenties without social media. The same can be said for stories of partners victimizing one another by sharing images from private sex acts, or even people with opposing political views who feel like it is a good idea to share another person's mobile number or address with the greater world for reasons we can't discern. Online and off it, most of us say knowledge and forethought keep us safe, when the truth is, the only protection anyone real has is pure dumb luck.

To focus deeply, we involve ourselves in a process that involves seeing and not seeing. As we work to link seeing to thought, we find ourselves understanding (or thinking we understand) some things and being baffled by others things (some of which are deeply self-evident to other parties.) I did not come to know the internet as a child. I don't know what it means to have strangers view sonograms of me in the womb, witness my birth via remote camera, or grab awkward childhood photos out of context to circulate as memes. When I hear about such things, I can feel my body recoil at the thought of so many images and so little agency, but I also understand I am reacting within my own historical context. People used to debate things like chastity, too—once upon a time. In terms of expertise on where shame should or should not be deployed, I have none: I can try to empathize with those directly affected, but my imagination is limited in ways that it wouldn't be, were to be I born five years from now.

## **From Remorse to Game Change**

Experts often regret their blind spots. Live long enough, and regret turns into remorse. The Latin root of remorse is *mordere*, which means to bite. "Thus, remorse is something that 'gnaws' at you over and over," explains my Merriam-Webster. At my university, I work with a woman named Kate Rossmanith, who wrote a book called *Small Wrongs: How We Really Say Sorry in Love, Life and Law*. In that book, Kate interviews judges and other members of the court about how criminal sentencing works in Australia. An important part of the book's structure is that it features Kate as a nonexpert in legal affairs, posing questions that ordinarily go unasked in legal writing. For instance, as she was watching sentencing hearings, Kate figured out that the judge's determination of a defendant's remorse was a major factor. She also learned there were no published guidelines or protocol used to determine who was apologizing insincerely and who was experiencing their past remorsefully—that is, as something that gnawed at them over and over.

Legal scholars Proeve and Tudor, classify remorse in four different ways (Proeve & Tudor, 2010: 96 in Rossmanith, 2015: 100). In their first category—cooperative remorse—the defendant shows sincere regret by acting early to signal her own shame and blame, in hopes of being treated more leniently for transgressions. Marching into a police station to confess a crime would be an example of cooperative remorse. Cooperative remorse makes it easier for a defendant to argue the original offense was spontaneous and unplanned and thus more deserving of mercy.

In cultures of internet fame, cooperative remorse is almost a way of life. Many (though not all) celebrities and influencers understand that it behooves them to say early and often, “My bad, everyone.” Almost no hill of argument is worth dying on if it means being seen by fans as deliberately difficult (or even socially tone deaf) in online exchanges. We likewise practice cooperative remorse in academia when we write the words, “it is beyond the scope of this study.” From one perspective, declarations like this are practices rooted in the ideological position known as scholarly rigor: I know I can’t know everything, and explaining this up front, I throw myself on the mercy of the court. From another perspective, it seems rich to expect mercy, while declaring our premeditated choice not to move beyond our personal scholarly comfort zones regarding cohorts, geographies, methods, languages, etc.

The second form of remorse discussed by Prove and Tudor occurs when the defendant indicates she is prepared to make reparations. In court, reparations can include financial, administrative, or other payouts made to victims. Sometimes these are directed toward a single wronged party in response to a single transgression. Other times they are meant to serve the symbolic function of addressing a larger group, or a larger constellation of concerns. Recipients of these sorts of payouts tend to be aware of two things. The first is that they personally represent a tiny fraction of people these reparations are supposed to be for. The second is that the payout probably won’t last long before attention moves to the next thing.

In academia, where we are paid to make choices about which topics and perspectives we think should matter, which should appear in the footnotes (and which should be cut entirely), reparations occur in a much subtler way. Every academic who has worked longer than a year has made some poor decisions, and many of us think about how to make reparations to those we’ve harmed with regard to positions we’ve rethought or discarded entirely. Under these conditions, it seems harsh to disparage anyone (an influencer, a young academic, etc.) in a “hot until it’s not” population for taking their moment in the sun. It’s the system that needs changing, not the students or the objects of study.

Prove and Tudor’s third category—reformatory action—speaks of remorse in terms of a demonstrated commitment to change. In the courtroom, the burden of proof is on the defendant to demonstrate a plan to change. In both micro-celebrity and academia, plans to change at individual levels can have knock-on effects at structural ones. Let me give you one example from the world of online videogame streaming. It involves a decision made by a player named Tyler “Ninja” Blevins to exclude women players (except his wife) from his Twitch broadcasts.

At 27 years, Blevins is “the multimillionaire face of Fortnite,” declares the *New York Times*. They aren’t wrong. Blevins is also a newlywed. A year ago, he married a fellow streamer named Jessica. At this point, Jessica is the only woman who appears on his channel. When asked why by reporter Allegra Frank, Blevins explained, “If I have one conversation with one female streamer where we’re playing with one another, and even if there’s a hint of flirting, that is going to be taken and going to be put on every single video and be clickbait forever...” (Frank, 2018a)

At one level, Blevins's choice to shut out female streamers beyond his wife is understandable. It's not hard to sympathize with anyone's desire to preemptively eliminate sexually oriented speculation from fans, which pulls focus from game-play and game commentary. In a follow-up interview with Frank, Blevins responds to critics, saying: "While I understand some people have implied my views mean I have something against playing with women, I want to make clear the issue I'm addressing is online harassment, and my attempt to minimize it from our life." Explains Frank, "By 'our life,' Blevins is referring to both his wife...and himself" (Frank, 2018b).

The problem is that Blevins isn't just *anyone*: he's a corporate entity to be reckoned with. As the *New York Times* explains, his media reach is "staggering": he has more than 12 million followers on Twitch, almost 12 million on Instagram and nearly four million on Twitter. He has landed on the cover of *ESPN: The Magazine*, and wherever he goes, he is mobbed by teenagers and tweens who immediately recognize his brightly hair. Blevins explains to the *Times* that he earns in excess \$500,000 per month, with YouTube and Twitch as primary income streams, and "20 percent deals and partnerships and things like that" (Draper, 2018).

Blevins is also quite aware of his cultural impact. In the *Times* profile, he explains how he used to hide the amount of money he made, but no longer:

...I kind of want everyone to know: This is how much the top guys can make. It's important that parents can see. All the contracts for professional athletes — all their salaries are public: This is how much the best quarterback makes, this is how much LeBron makes a year. That's a huge driving factor in bringing things to, "Hey this is how much Ninja might make this year or next year." That is now a bar that parents and kids can look up to (Draper, 2018).

While most of Blevins's fans seem to respect his personal choices around harassment, Allegra Frank explains, for women streamers, there remain systemic economic issues to consider. It is common knowledge on sites like Twitch that male streamers have significantly more potential to draw sponsorship money than women do. As Frank puts it, "With a platform as large as his, to shut women out of his channel is to do a disservice to them and misuse the influence he wields..." (Frank, 2018b) She also notes what we might think of as gender tone-deafness in his response to harassment, noting:

Respect is a major part of playing *Fortnite* and other games. Yet women often are the receiving end of anything but: "Twitch thots," harassment, warding off obsessive or judgmental viewers are all serious concerns for well-known female streamers. In contrast to the reality of being a woman on Twitch, Blevins' choice to draw a line feels like a conservative gesture — even a familiar, divisive one (Frank, 2018b).

Feminist labor theory uses the term “emotional labor” to describe the unwanted work of managing others’ emotional expectations that have nothing to do with our lives, ambitions, or desires. In academia, emotional labor is a constant for women. On average, female professors are assigned larger, introductory teaching intensive classes that leave us less time for research. When we ask why, we are told it is because we are “good with the students.” As students, women too often find themselves serving their advisors (of both genders) as ersatz psychotherapists, gossip conduits, emotional buffers between the advisor and more “difficult” students, etc. Just as it was on the faculty end, there are few logical reasons for this gendered division of emotional labor given to students beyond vague allusions to personal and natural propensities for listening, understanding, supporting, and so forth.

And then there is the labor of managing the fact that one’s sexuality is considered part of the public domain. On a site like Twitch, male gamers are frustrated that when they play with females, they have fans speculating on their sex life with the women in question. But female Twitch stars deal with sexual language, requests, and questions no matter who they play with. When men are frustrated, their response is not to ban fans but to exclude women and continue to make endorsement money. When women are frustrated, the response again is to keep fans and their demands at all costs. Every once in a while, a conversation transpires about the mechanics of the platforms on which the gaming and streaming transpires—a moderator here, a mute button there, etc. To a cynic, there is a certain “hush money” feel to all this, since mere attempts to even discuss these issues in a holistic way have been met by physical and sexual threats to the women involved.

## **You Don’t Know Who Is Sincere (and Maybe That Is Okay)**

The last of Prove and Tudor’s categories is self-punitive remorse, which includes things like apologies. As I noted early, apologies can be both sincere and insincere. In her interviews with judges, Kate Rossmanith found them to be quite aware of the fact that defendants can be coached into making apologies with “no basis in feelings of contrition.” To guard against this, criminal court judges tend to spend a fair amount of time assessing not just the language and actions but the actual body of the defendant during questioning. Notes Rossmanith: “When it comes to assessing remorse, this feeling – the embodied affect felt by the judiciary – is understood by judges as indisputable evidence” (Rossmanith, 2015: 172). Sitting a face to face with a criminal, a judge’s process for determining remorse isn’t all that different from any audience member’s. As she writes, it is simply this: “I feel the person’s remorse, therefore the remorse exists”(Rossmanith, 2015: 172).

Personally, I am glad to learn that there isn’t a mechanistic recipe dictating how judges should, well, judge. Still, it is worth underscoring (as Rossmanith does) that, “cultural difference makes it especially hard to read how other people are feeling” (Rossmanith, 2015: 179). Here, she quotes a number of Australian judges at length, including this refreshingly honest admission:

It took decades for judges to be educated that the demeanour of an indigenous person might not reflect guilt... Even I had to learn

that. In the '80s when I first started doing judicial work, you thought 'Well, why isn't this young Aboriginal guy looking at me?' And [later] you [learned why]... (Rossmanith, 2015: 179).

As different as they are in most respects, courts, academic circles, and online fame environments do have one thing in common: they all turn on performances of authenticity. One of the ways that authenticity is performed is via expressions of remorse, great and small. In a courtroom sentencing, the successful transmission of authenticity can mean the difference between living life in freedom or dying in prison. For the rest of us, the stakes aren't usually as high, but we would be blind to miss the fact that every minute of every day, someone is being denied their money, their rights, their space, or their dignity, by someone else—someone who understands themselves as doing what any other normal, reasonable, sensible, “drama-free” person would do under the same circumstances.

Every time I wonder whether influencers bring much value to the world, I think about the fact that as even as an academic who has studied them for years, I just don't get most of their appeal, although they clearly move their audiences and communities in important ways. Sometimes I don't get them because their behaviors don't emulate Western media tropes, which are what I know best. Sometimes it's because they are chiefly known for engaging in activities (gaming and eating are two of these) where authenticity is expressed through cues that don't make much sense to outsiders. Sometimes I don't get them because they are being intentionally stupid or absurd. Sometimes I don't get them because their performance wasn't intended for me to begin with.

It is my hope that this anthology serves as an Exhibit A of sorts for the argument that global histories of online culture need revisiting, revising, and reparations, both at the level of data collection and at the level of theory. As one of the so-called pioneers of its cultural study, I understand that many things on the internet seem weird. I've been confused, tricked, swindled, lied to, manipulated, stalked, and had other unpleasant things happen to me here.

But if there is one thing I've learned from my time studying online fame, it's that we need to better ways to pause before ruling on the sincerity of behaviors we don't understand, engaged in by those we do not know. One of the strengths of this volume is that it goes “beyond the scope” of existing work regarding online fame. In so doing, it reminds us that intellectual and emotional labor doesn't end at the border. It begins there. If a criminal court judge making life and death decisions can be trained to humbly acknowledge this much, so too can students of media and cultural studies.

## Works Cited

- Draper, K. (2018, December 18). Ninja would like to get more sleep. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/18/sports/ninja-fortnite.html>.
- Frank, A. (2018a, August 14). *Ninja explains his choice not to stream with female gamers*. Polygon. Retrieved from <https://www.polygon.com/2018/8/11/17675738/ninja-twitch-female-gamers>.

- Frank, A. (2018b, August 13). *Ninja responds to criticism of his refusal to stream with women*. Polygon. Retrieved from <https://www.polygon.com/2018/8/13/17686818/ninja-female-streamers-twitch->.
- Murphy, J. G. (2007). Remorse, apology, and mercy. *Ohio State Journal of Criminal Law*, 4, 31.
- Proeve, M., & Tudor S. (2010). *Remorse: Psychological and jurisprudential perspectives*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing.
- Rossmanith, K. (2015). Affect and the judicial assessment of offenders. *Body & Society*, 21, 167–193.
- Rossmanith, K. (2018). *Small wrongs: How we really say sorry in love, life and law*. London: Hardie Grant Publishers.
- Senft, T. (2008). *Camgirls: Celebrity & community in the age of social networks*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Thompson, C. (2007, November 27). Clive Thompson on the age of microcelebrity: Why everyone is a little Brad Pitt. *Wired*. Retrieved from <https://www.wired.com/2007/11/st-thompson/>.