

ANALYTICAL

Where We At? New Directions for Research on Popular Culture and World Politics

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A decade ago, scholars of international relations articulated a research agenda for the study of popular culture and world politics (PCWP), and since then a burgeoning literature has grown in this area. This article critically reflects on the research agenda put forward by Grayson, Davies, and Philpott and explores how recent scholarship has furthered the study of PCWP. In doing so, this article identifies four limitations of current research and suggests that if PCWP scholarship is to remain committed to understanding how power, identities, ideologies, and actions are made commonsense and legitimate, while also problematizing global inequalities and injustices, then it needs to pay greater attention to the analysis of four areas. These are (1) race, colonialism, and intersectionality in PCWP; (2) the impact of digital technology on PCWP; (3) the audience interpretation of PCWP; and (4) practices of making and producing PCWP.

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Introduction

On December 4, 2016, the United States' president elect, Donald Trump, took to Twitter to complain about a television show. "Just tried watching Saturday Night Live – unwatchable! Totally biased, not funny and the Baldwin impersonation just can't get any worse," he wrote, signing the tweet off "sad" (Trump 2016a). This tweet was not the first of Trump's tweets to complain about Saturday Night Live (SNL), nor would it be his last. During the election, he'd described SNL as a "hit job on me" (Trump 2016b), and five days prior to his inauguration he whinged that "Saturday Night Live is the worst of NBC. Not funny, cast is terrible, always a complete hit job. Really bad television!" (Trump 2017). These tweets reveal important dynamics about the importance of popular culture in world politics. Not only do they highlight that representations in popular culture are so important to Trump that he takes to other forms of popular culture to complain about those representations,¹

¹ Trump eventually threatened SNL with legal action for defamation. In other states, political leaders have banned satirical representations of themselves. For example, in 2017 the Russian government classified the "gay clown meme" of Putin's face wearing makeup over a rainbow flag background as extremist media and banned the production and sharing of it (Cooper-Cunningham 2019, 15–17).

they also remind us that Donald Trump became a political figure, and eventually president, through his engagement with popular culture. Tabloid hijinks, self-help books, casino and hotel empires, golf courses, beauty pageants, wrestling shows, and reality TV are what made Donald Trump a household name (Blumenthal 2017). Trump himself is the pop culture president writ large, as the political phenomenon of President Trump is inseparable from Donald Trump as a popular culture spectacle. Indeed, popular culture and world politics are not two distinct fields; they are a continuum where “each is implicated in the practices and understandings of the other” (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009, 158). This is apparent in the interplay between Alec Baldwin’s SNL satirical portrayal of Trump and Trump’s tweets about the popular culture representation of himself. Neither one of them make sense without an appreciation of the other.

The importance of this popular culture–world politics (PCWP) continuum is no longer hidden at the margins of international relations (IR) scholarship. A growing number of scholars recognize that popular culture is important for understanding how “power, ideology and identity are constituted, produced and/or materialised” (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009, 156). This research aims to understand how popular culture makes particular actions in global politics possible, and pays attention to how it renders these actions sensible, “common-sense” and legitimate (Weldes 1999, 133). The growing popularity of this research is reflected in special issues (Moore and Shepherd 2010) and edited collections on PCWP, some of which have even placed on Amazon’s bestselling academic books’ list (Caso and Hamilton 2015).

This article recognizes that there is a wealth of innovative and important research on PCWP within the discipline of IR. However, there are several issues that require greater attention if this research agenda is to move forward and achieve its full potential. I draw inspiration from the Black feminist arts group Where We At, who, in the 1960s and 1970s sought to encourage the civil rights movement, feminists, and artists to take stock, engage in self-critique, and explore where they were at in an effort to understand how their art and activism could be more inclusive, intersectional, and effective in struggles for racial, sexual, and economic equality (Farrington 2005, 168). Following this, if work on PCWP is intended to explore how power, identities, and actions are made commonsense and legitimate (Hall 1981; Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009; Moore and Shepherd 2010), then it is important to engage in a critical review of PCWP scholarship in order to understand how it can better address global inequalities and injustices (Steele 2017, 207).

With this imperative in mind, I begin by discussing the research agenda for PCWP put forward by Grayson, Davies, and Philpott (2009), and I highlight how scholars have progressed PCWP research in important ways. I then build upon these contributions by drawing attention to four critical areas that require greater attention, further reflection, and more research. These include, first, the need for a more detailed engagement with race and PCWP beyond the “West,” alongside a more sustained engagement with postcolonial and decolonial scholarship. Second, I highlight the need for further analysis of the impact of digital technology on PCWP. Third, I advocate for a more sustained engagement with audience interpretation and emotion in PCWP. Finally, I suggest we need a more substantial account of how we go about making and producing PCWP research beyond the traditional confines of IR scholarship.

The Research Agenda for Popular Culture–World Politics

This paper sets out to explore the state of research on popular culture and world politics and it suggests new directions for PCWP research around four areas of critique. Importantly, these critiques can be articulated in response to IR as a broader discipline. IR on the whole remains “Western” centric, white, with post/decolonial

scholarship often marginalized. One study found that “between 2000 and 2007 only 0.37% of the papers presented at the International Studies Association [annual conference] included the words ‘race,’ ‘racial,’ ‘racialized,’ ‘racism,’ and ‘racist’ in their titles” (Haffner 2018). Others have noted how IR itself is founded on racist views of black inferiority and white supremacy in the service of empire (Anievas, Manchanda and Shilliam 2015; Vitalis 2015). In the most recent TRIP survey of IR academics, 77 percent of those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that IR “is a western dominated discipline” (TRIP 2014a) and 61 percent felt that “it is important to counter Western dominance in the discipline” (TRIP 2014b), so the need to “decolonise International Relations” (Capan 2017) extends beyond those working on PCWP. Furthermore, IR continues to grapple with the implications that digital technology has on the issues at the heart of the discipline (Jackson 2018). IR also still struggles with the politics of the everyday and the politics of emotion; issues laid bare as scholars seek to make sense of unexpected “irrational” events in the wake of the rise of “post-truth politics” (Crilly 2018). Moreover, the increased attention to “impact agendas” in British academia alongside moves to ensure that scholarship is “policy relevant” in the United States highlights that there are pressures on scholars across the discipline to consider how they can disseminate research in ways that diverge from the traditional methods of writing academic articles and books (Blagden 2019).

However, I position these critiques directly at PCWP scholarship because such research is concerned with understanding how certain forms of politics are made possible (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009, 161), and at the heart of most PCWP scholarship is an ethos of critique and an imperative to address, challenge, and overcome the inequalities and injustices of global politics. Here, as Roland Bleiker has argued, “we need to employ the full register of human perception and intelligence to understand the phenomena of world politics and to address the dilemmas that emanate from them” (2001, 519). As PCWP scholarship often focuses on understanding the intersections and mutual constitution of PCWP in order to address and resist dominant forms of power and authority (see, for example, Åhäll 2016; Tidy 2015; Brassett 2016; Innes and Topinka 2016; Kirby 2017; Saunders and Holland 2018), it is essential to remember that, as the Black feminist Shani Jamila states, “we can’t get complacent” (quoted in Collins 2006, 196) in our efforts to analyze the world and address oppression. In the context of Donald Trump’s election and the rise of authoritarian regimes and figures such as Orban, Duterte, Modi, and Erdogan, impending catastrophic climate change, alongside global wealth inequality, it is vital that work on PCWP attempts to understand and address the problems that face the world today. However, if we are to do that effectively, we need to pay greater attention to several issues that so far remain underexplored in the extant literature on PCWP. For those of us who purport to be at the forefront of analyzing and addressing global wrongs by exploring how they are made possible through the intersections of culture and politics, we need to reflect, take stock of where we’re at, and be alert to what we may be overlooking in our accounts of the world.

Therefore, this paper revisits the PCWP research agenda so as to ensure that we do not overlook, ignore, or silence political, social, and cultural phenomena of great importance. If the aim of PCWP research is to both open up the discipline of IR to new forms of knowledge and resist problematic forms of knowing and doing world politics, we need to constantly reflect on the ways in which politics and popular culture, as well as our own scholarship, develop over time. To this end then, this paper explores the literature on PCWP, and asks where we at? In response, it sets out four tentative areas for further enquiry and analysis. Before doing so, I outline the research agenda set out by Grayson, Davies, and Philpott in 2009 and note how these pathways have been followed and built upon.

While Grayson, Davies, and Philpott’s (2009) article is not the first piece of scholarship to advocate for the study of popular culture in the discipline of IR, it is one

of the first to collect together multiple strands of PCWP scholarship into a cohesive, coherent, and collective research agenda. To that end, it draws together the insights and arguments that feminist (Weldes 1999, 2003; Sylvester 2001; Weber 2008), constructivist (Franklin 2005; Croft 2006; Neumann and Nexon 2006), poststructural (Der Derian and Shapiro 1989; Bleiker 2001; Edkins 2002; Shapiro 2009), and post-colonial scholars (Said 1979; Appadurai 1996) had articulated in their work. As such, Grayson, Davies, and Philpott's article has become a prominent agenda setting piece that outlines why PCWP research is important and how it can be studied, while also offering directions for future research. It has foregrounded subsequent research on PCWP (see Caso and Hamilton 2015) and for these reasons it warrants attention in order to understand the contemporary state of PCWP research.

Grayson, Davies, and Philpott's research agenda consists of nine key points for PCWP research. First, it determines that the "signifying and lived practices of popular culture" (2009, 158) are texts that need to be understood as important sites at which politics happens. Subsequent scholarship has recognized this, and it is not unusual to now see work on PCWP published in prestigious IR and political science journals (Fey, Poppe, and Rauch 2016; Furman and Musgrave 2017; Press-Barnathan 2017; Young and Carpenter 2018). The study of popular culture is now considered a legitimate and essential source of inquiry for scholars of IR (Carpenter 2016, 64), whether they be working on security, political economy, or other diverse areas of study (e.g. Griffin 2014; Elias and Roberts 2016; Press-Barnathan 2017).

Second, Grayson, Davies, and Philpott argue that the endeavor to make sense of PCWP must draw upon cultural studies to "open up new avenues of investigation" (2009, 158). Recent scholarship has demonstrated how cultural studies can be incorporated into the analysis of world politics by drawing attention to how popular culture is productive of identities, agency, and politics, both local and global (Dixit 2012; Pusca 2015; Innes and Topinka 2016; Wedderburn 2019). Related to this is Grayson, Davies, and Philpott's third suggestion that taking popular culture seriously as a source of insight can transform what is considered important in the discipline, and can subsequently transform our perceptions of hegemony and resistance (2009, 158). This then leads to a fourth pathway, which provides new opportunities for research, teaching, and impact, as we become "concerned with how perceptions of political possibility in global affairs are substantiated" (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009, 159). Both these pathways are seen not only in the burgeoning PCWP literature, but also in the novel ways in which scholars have attempted to "do" IR through the creation of documentary films (Der Derian 2010; Weber 2011; Cieplak 2017; Harman 2017), art (Särmä 2016), narrative fiction (Dauphinee 2013; Park-Kang 2015), dance (Rösch 2018), and music (Hast 2018).

Grayson, Davies, and Philpott also suggest that research on PCWP should explore a fifth avenue of research: how audiences interpret artifacts of popular culture (2009, 159). Despite this, as Louise Pears has pointed out, "accounts of the audience have largely been missing" (Pears 2016, 79) in studies of PCWP. This is perhaps changing with a growing attention to everyday narratives of politics and security within the discipline where work has drawn upon focus groups (Pears 2016), social media analysis (da Silva and Crilley 2017), and interviews and ethnography (Bos 2018) to document how artifacts of popular culture are interpreted by audiences and implicated in their broader understandings of world politics.

The sixth way in which Grayson, Davies, and Philpott suggest that the research agenda on PCWP can move forward is to complement the work being done by scholars of cultural studies. Here, the incorporation of concepts and approaches from IR like globalization and securitization can benefit the field of cultural studies (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009, 159). This is most evident in the work of feminist scholarship on PCWP that speaks to debates beyond the confines of IR

(Shepherd 2012; Griffin 2014; Åhäll 2015; Dyvik 2016; Partis-Jennings 2017), as well as the scholarship of critical geographers whose analysis of popular culture and politics draws upon concepts such as sovereignty (Dodds 2013), militarism (Bos 2018), and neoliberalism (Saunders 2019a) and therefore provides interdisciplinary insights.

Seventh, research on PCWP has a pedagogical purpose in that it changes how we teach IR by encouraging students to see and read politics in familiar places such as films (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009, 160). There is an increasing focus on the pedagogical utility of PCWP. Research has demonstrated that IR courses built around popular culture texts enhance student learning (Engert and Spencer 2009). Studies also point toward there being a clear utility in using popular culture to help students learn about gender (Clapton and Shepherd 2017), globalization (Earnest and Fish 2014), US foreign policy (Holland 2014), African politics (Gibert 2016), the prisoner's dilemma (Salter 2014), the nuclear taboo (Fey, Poppe, and Rauch 2016), and how to survive the zombie apocalypse (Drezner 2011; Hannah and Wilkinson 2016; Horn, Rubin, and Schouenborg 2016). By using popular culture then, scholars can teach students important issues in IR in ways that they can relate to and understand.

The final two recommendations of Grayson, Davies, and Philpott's PCWP agenda "[demand] that we reconsider how we as academics engage with the general public and the policy community" (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009, 160) and it encourages us to rethink the policy community to include cultural producers such as film makers, photographers, musicians, street artists, and video game designers so as to suggest that scholars can broaden the audiences of their research and prompt new ways of communicating findings and ideas with people outside of the academy. Through forms of popular culture such as blogs, op-eds, social media, and other creative mediums such as narrative writing and art, academics can, and do, engage with the public in ways that possibly have more "impact" (Edkins 2013; Callahan 2015b) than articles published behind paywalls and hardback books on university library shelves.

A New Agenda for PCWP

The above discussion, while not exhaustive, suggests that there is a flourishing literature on PCWP that has taken heed of the research agenda put forward by Grayson, Davies, and Philpott. Yet, as the study of PCWP goes from strength to strength, there remain four issues that require further reflection and analysis if PCWP scholarship is to remain able to analyze, address, and even overcome the problems that face contemporary global politics (Steele 2017, 213). If PCWP research is to continue to be committed to problematizing "international power dynamics" (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009, 161), a survey of the current literature reveals that it needs to address four gaps and issue areas. These are concerns around race and PCWP beyond the "West" (Choi 2017; Steele 2017), the impact of digital technology on PCWP (Jackson 2018; Shepherd 2017; Shepherd and Hamilton 2016), the audience interpretation of PCWP (da Silva and Crilley 2017; Pears 2016; Young and Carpenter 2018), and the practice of making and producing PCWP as a way of doing IR scholarship (Naumes 2015; Särnä 2016; Gibbon and Sylvester 2017).

Race and PCWP beyond the "West"

In 2009, Grayson, Davies, and Philpott noted that the focus of PCWP scholarship had "often been on the Anglo-American world" (2009, 159). IR scholars have begun to explore PCWP in Russia and post-Soviet spaces (Baker 2016; Szostek 2017), Africa (Gibert 2016), the Middle East (Khatib 2012), Asia (Park-Kang 2015; Shim

2017), and Australasia (Bleiker and Butler 2016). This work opens up the Anglo-American focus that has previously dominated such PCWP scholarship, and the attention to PCWP across the globe must continue, and it must also draw upon philosophies, theories, and methodologies from beyond the “West” (Agathangelou and Ling 2004, 2009; Steele 2017). This is because even though continental and postmodern philosophies provide fruitful tools for the study of PCWP they are often limited in their applicability beyond the “West.” Such theories are grounded in European experiences and thus hindered in their utility of understanding places and peoples beyond the confines of their own contexts, and moreover they often ignore “racialized and colonial relations, subjects and spaces” in their accounts of world politics (Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2019, 3). In IR, a range of post/decolonial scholarship has demonstrated that the study of world politics requires, and benefits from, the insights of thinkers, theories, and concepts from outside of the Anglosphere (Bilgin 2008; Agathangelou and Ling 2009; Chan 2010; Shilliam 2010; Acharya 2011). It is subsequently vital that PCWP scholarship not only focuses on the “non-Western” world, but also places “non-Western” thought at the heart of its considerations (Shilliam 2010, 2). This is because certain forms of popular culture and political community—such as the importance of the Umma in Islamic societies—can be best made sense of from “*within* non-Western traditions” (Shani 2008, 722, emphasis in original).

In addition to looking beyond the “Western” world of PCWP, we need to incorporate race into the heart of our analysis. This is because race is both inescapable and important in PCWP as it configures identities and shapes power relations (Hall 1996, 16). To this end, we require a greater attention to intersectionality and the interconnectedness of race and other identities in our accounts of PCWP. Since the late 1980s, Black feminists have advocated for analyses of intersectionality in studies of the world, and critiqued how social movements and critical social theorists tended to “treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (Crenshaw 1989, 139). Instead, Black feminists articulated an intersectional focus for scholarship and activism that accounted “for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (Crenshaw 1991, 1245). This understanding of intersectionality requires scholars of PCWP to explore and pay attention to race as a core aspect of intersectionality (Crenshaw 2012; Carbado 2013) and as a key component of the assemblage (Puar 2012) of factors (such as race, gender, sexuality, disability, etc.) that shape identities and social relations across the planet.

The importance of race in PCWP has recently been highlighted by Renni Eddo-Lodge who notes that:

when white people pick up a magazine, scroll through the internet, read a newspaper or switch on the TV, it is never rare or odd to see people who look like them in positions of power exerting authority. In culture particularly, the positive affirmations of whiteness are so widespread that the average white person doesn't even notice them. Instead these affirmations are placidly consumed. (Eddo-Lodge 2018, xvii)

Indeed, “positive affirmations of whiteness” are pervasive in popular culture, and an approach to PCWP that pays attention to race and intersectionality, and is grounded in post/decolonial theory can illuminate, for example, how knowledge of places and peoples outside of the “West” is constructed through depictions of them in popular culture as primitive, backward, barbaric, and inferior (Saïd 1979). Recent PCWP scholarship that draws upon post/decolonial theory has revealed how the development of entire genres of popular culture such as science fiction was “indelibly linked to the apex of imperial conquest” (Saunders 2019b, 178), and has explored “how empire continues to shape popular conceptualisations of spaces, places and people” (Saunders 2019b, 179) in artifacts such as novels, films, comics, and video games.

Other studies have demonstrated how race is integral to the construction of identity in popular culture (Innes and Topinka 2016, 9–10), while other writers outside of the academy have explored the role that various forms of popular culture, such as fashion, play in contemporary understandings of race, immigration, and everyday experiences of racism for people of color (Mahfouz 2016). These interventions reveal that race is an undeniable and integral aspect of contemporary PCWP. They remind us that we need to engage “honestly with the histories that configure our present” (Bhambra 2017, 227) and this requires a recognition of race, colonialism, and exploitation in PCWP. It also involves a move away from “methodological whiteness” in PCWP, where we all need to ask: how are race, colonialism, and racism operating in the continuum of PCWP that we are studying? And how does this configure the political possibilities of the present? By placing post/decolonial thought, intersectionality, and race at the heart of our analyses, we can better make sense of popular culture and politics in, and from, places beyond the “West,” while also understanding how many of the problems that face global politics—and the power relations that underpin them—are made possible through racism and colonialism.

Digital Technology and PCWP

Further to this, there is a need for greater consideration of the impact of digital technology on PCWP. This is because of two issues: first, the unprecedented growth of digital technology and its embeddedness in the everyday lives of billions of people across the planet means that digital technology now impacts PCWP in multiple ways. Second, the design, architectures, and affordances of digital technology need to be taken into account given how they shape how objects of PCWP are produced, circulated, and interpreted across the globe. This is especially prescient given how these technologies intersect with key political issues such as sexism and racism in world politics, where discrimination not only is prevalent across social media sites, but “is also embedded in computer code” (Noble 2018, 1) as the design of digital technologies can entrench existing inequalities (Benjamin 2019; O’Neil 2017).

Digital technology is now a part of everyday life for many people across the globe, and as such requires attention from scholars of PCWP. At the end of 2019, over 4.3 billion people were using the Internet, and 2 billion people were using Facebook. The widespread proliferation of computer networking, digital technology, and the expansion of the Internet have fundamentally altered global communication. As Manuel Castells notes, “this has been the fastest diffusing communication technology in history ... the Internet, in the diverse range of its applications, is the communication fabric of our lives” (2011, 64). Over 350 million images are uploaded to Facebook every day, and images on social media sites are “the new dominant cultural visual form of the 2010s” (Hochman 2014, 1). Even if the majority of these images are rarely viewed outside of small circles of family and friends, the personal is always political and “mundane matters” have significance for global politics (Enloe 2011). In the case of personal photographs shared on social media, they serve to document personal and collective memories, build social relationships, and express identities, and are therefore important sites of politics (Van House et al. 2004, 6–7; Vivienne and Burgess 2013). Despite such developments, scholars of PCWP are only beginning to account for the impact of digital technologies and social media on their objects of study (Hamilton 2016; Robinson and Schulzke 2016; Dean 2018; Jackson 2018).

Within PCWP scholarship, there has been a tendency to focus on iconic examples of popular culture (Hansen 2015); however, an appreciation of PCWP in the digital age requires an attention to everyday practices. For example, in 2017 over a trillion photographs were taken on digital devices worldwide (Richter 2017). While there have been landmark sociological studies into the significance of “everyday” forms of PCWP such as the personal production and consumption of

photography (Bourdieu 1996; Chalfen 1987), scholars of PCWP have overlooked how digital technology enables and facilitates new modes of PCWP in everyday contexts. PCWP research requires greater attention to digital technology because “digitally mediated ... expressions of selfhood can help understand not only the world in which we live, but also the social and cultural forces that have shaped contemporary world society, including persistent patterns of social inequality” (Uimonen 2013, 134). It is therefore urgent that we account for digital technology and the everyday in our analysis of PCWP.

The importance of this is highlighted by the recent remake of the film *Ghostbusters*. One could study the 2016 film itself and explore how it places female actors in the four main roles. Such an analysis might suggest that the film makes an important step forward in the overtly male-dominated world of Hollywood (Rowley 2010, 315). While this is perhaps the case, an analysis focused on the content of the film fails to recognize how the film was widely derided by men on social media. The film’s trailer is currently the most disliked movie trailer ever published on YouTube, and comments such as “feminist bullshit propaganda” are emblematic of the vitriol that was espoused online by an audience of angry men. Consequently, the most pressing issues of politics around the *Ghostbusters* remake lie not in its content but in the social media comments about the film, where widespread sexism and racism would not be seen, nor understood, through a study of the film’s content. Therefore, it is imperative for PCWP scholars to analyze the impact that digital technology has on their objects and sites of study, especially because technologies change how artifacts of PCWP—such as Hollywood films—are produced, circulated, and interpreted.

In addition to the prominence of digital technology in everyday life, new technologies reconfigure PCWP and present challenges for us, and we need to develop theories, methodologies, and methods to understand PCWP in the age of social media and big data (Hamilton 2016; Jackson 2018). If there remain difficulties in methodologically making sense of PCWP in the context of traditional forms of media (Bleiker 2001, 2015), how do we begin to make sense of the personalized aesthetic, affective, embodied, augmented, and virtual realities of (currently) popular platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok? How can we account for the ways in which technologies, platforms, and algorithms shape our engagement with PCWP? Answering such questions involves interdisciplinary knowledge, theories, and methods from other disciplines, and underpinning all of this is a need to become savvy in how digital technology functions. For example, our digital experiences are personalized through algorithms: “automated and predetermined selection mechanisms [that] establish relevancy ... ultimately demarcating the field of visibility for that media space” (Bucher 2012, 1167). These algorithms shape how content circulates online and lead to personalized online experiences. My Facebook news feed, my Google search results, my Netflix, my Amazon recommendations, and so on all look radically different from yours, and the prominent role of algorithms in the digital age challenges us to pay greater attention to how and why PCWP circulates across the globe in new, personalized ways. The importance of these factors is illuminated in how technology is implicated in Russian influence in the 2016 US Presidential elections where social media platforms enabled the Russian state to target specific groups of people with personalized ads in support of Donald Trump that were not visible to anyone who was not targeted (Jamieson 2018, 142).

Recent controversies pertaining to digital technologies such as those around Russian influence in foreign elections, the rise of ISIS, widespread misogyny online, and the radicalization of far-right actors all demonstrate that technologies are embroiled in contributing to global inequalities and injustices such as war, illegal activity, sexism, and racism. This is not simply a case of neutral platforms and technologies being used by nefarious actors. Rather, such inequalities and injustices are designed and built into the architectures of these technologies. Digital technologies and algorithms are made by people who “hold all types of values” (Noble 2018, 1–2), and evidence suggests that even when technologies are designed to be neutral, objective,

or even progressive, they can, and do, “reflect and reproduce existing inequalities” (Benjamin 2019, 5; see also Gillespie 2010; O’Neil 2017). For example, Google’s search function provides information that entrenches racist and sexist stereotypes of people such as “black girls” and “Asian girls,” and promotes the spread of racist far-right misinformation that has influenced the likes of the Charleston shooter who shot dead nine African Americans, all while Google profits from advertising at the height of media spectacles that such events engender (Noble 2018, 11).

The designers and corporations that produce and maintain the platforms, search engines, and technologies that structure our engagement with PCWP hold power over who can access these technologies, how they function, and how content circulates on and through them, and they can influence how these technologies can be used, abused, and manipulated. Ultimately, digital technology impacts the production, circulation, consumption, and interpretation of PCWP, forcing us to explore how new digital technologies disrupt and change PCWP in ways that require new theories and methods (Bleiker 2015; Shepherd and Hamilton 2016).

The Audience Interpretation of PCWP

The issues concerning digital technology and PCWP are inextricably linked with how PCWP is received and interpreted by audiences. This is because understanding how people make sense of PCWP is of paramount concern if we are to understand the political and social significance of PCWP. However, in the literature there is little engagement with audience interpretation, or the affective investments made, or emotions felt, by audiences. As Kyle Grayson has argued “too often work on popular culture in IR is premised on an ersatz version of New Criticism ... where a text means what it means without any socio-historical consideration of its producer or audience or context of reception” (2015). What we see with a lot of work on PCWP are sophisticated readings of what various representations mean, and there is little attention given to how those representations are produced or interpreted by audiences who engage with them. This lacuna may stem from PCWP’s poststructural foundations, where researchers are interested in the content of discourse rather than in how discourses are interpreted by audiences. Yet, poststructural work should engage with audiences because the impact of discourses lies not in their content but in how they resonate with people (Solomon 2014). To this end, poststructural PCWP work has begun to analyze audiences because the consumption, interpretation, and expressions of emotion are central to how “discourses circulate and take effect” (Pears 2016, 85). Following this, further work is needed into audiences of PCWP.

A turn toward the everyday within IR (Stanley and Jackson 2016; Vaughan-Williams and Stevens 2016) and PCWP (Basham 2016; Davies 2016; Saunders and Holland 2018; Saunders and Crilley 2019) lays the pathway for a more robust engagement with audience interpretation, affect, and emotion. It does so by pointing toward the utility of using focus groups, interviews, ethnographies, and social media methods to analyze what people think and feel about the PCWP texts we spend so much time studying. Even so, in the digital age we also need to rethink the very notion of the audience itself. This is because social media enable, encourage, and are reliant upon the active participation of audiences. In this way, audiences are now “the people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen 2012) because their publication and circulation of content is vital to the function of social media platforms. Therefore, we must reconsider how we approach the audience, as they are simultaneously audiences, users, and producers of media content.

Furthermore, if emotions are central in shaping the effects of discourse, then there is a need to understand how audiences interpret and feel emotions toward the popular culture texts they view and engage with (Solomon 2014). Recent work on emotion and affect provides important pathways for future research; however, this research is often concerned with understanding how emotions are represented

in media and popular culture texts (Åhäll and Gregory 2015) rather than on understanding how people feel emotions toward these media. There is space for scholars of PCWP to examine and explore how and why people interpret and feel emotions toward the popular culture artifacts that they engage with. This requires multiple methods beyond textual, discursive, and visual analysis. The turn to audiences necessitates the use of methods such as surveys that can reveal how audience opinions have changed through their engagement with PCWP (Young and Carpenter 2018), computational methods to explore networks and sentiments of audiences (Bay 2018), focus groups to understand the thoughts and feelings of audiences (Pears 2016; Crilley, Gillespie, and Willis 2019), and ethnographic research to understand how people go about consuming, interpreting, and partaking in practices of PCWP (Birkedal 2019). Not only do we need to recognize that there are multiple interpretations of popular culture texts (Schulzke 2017, 944), but we need to attempt to understand how audiences interpret these texts and we need to do so through the use of multiple methods (Bleiker 2015). Essentially, “if you want to know how people understand their world and their lives, why not talk with them?” (Kvale and Brinkman 2008, xvii), and as scholars of PCWP we would be wise to not only write about our readings of PCWP, but also speak to audiences about theirs.

Practices of Making and Producing PCWP as IR

The final pathway for future research to be raised here concerns how PCWP scholars can and should produce their own forms of popular culture as a way of doing IR. The utility of producing cultural artifacts as part of our research, whether through narrative fiction, art and collage, photography, dance, or documentary videos, is something that is not only increasingly talked about, but also being done by various IR scholars (Dauphinee 2013; Park-Kang 2015; Callahan 2015a; Sărmă 2016; Cieplak 2017; Harman 2017; Hast 2018; Rösch 2018). This marks a significant step in opening up what IR is, and there are benefits in using popular culture to communicate with and engage people in our research. Compare, for instance, the number of people who have downloaded one of Professor William Callahan’s articles on documentary filmmaking and IR with how many people have actually watched one of his documentaries. Over 16,000 people have viewed one of his videos (Callahan 2015a), and in comparison, at the time of writing only 264 people have downloaded his article on documentary filmmaking published in *Millennium* (Callahan 2015b). Although the number of views does not necessarily indicate that engagement with the documentary was of a higher value than engagement with the article, the disparity between such a large number of views and a comparatively small number of reads suggests that “nonspecialists have an easier time engaging with a well-made IR film” (Callahan 2015b, 910). It also reveals that there is value in making and producing popular culture as a form of researching and doing world politics if one of the goals of that scholarship is to reach broader audiences. However, there is a need to think critically about how we do this.

Writing in 2015, Sarah Naumes reflected on autoethnographic IR and asked “is all ‘I’ IR?” (Naumes 2015). Naumes suggested that work using a narrative approach to IR should (1) “disrupt notions of congruity in political thought” and (2) “make room to incorporate those who have been excluded from political science discourse” (2015, 822). To this, I would add that when we produce narrative writing, or other forms of popular culture as a form of scholarship, we need to recognize that there are bodies of practical knowledge, industries, and academic disciplines concerned with producing various forms of popular culture. While narrative writing and the creation of PCWP in itself serves to “enrich our academic practices” (Ravecca and Dauphinee 2018, 12), there are limitations surrounding the reluctance to evaluate the quality of such endeavors. Here, scholars engaged in

producing popular culture as a way of doing IR state that their work is “not about writing good fiction” (Park-Kang 2015, 374), but about questioning the boundaries of IR. Such a project is valuable, however, in stating that the quality of the art and popular culture we produce does not matter; we overlook the insights from academic disciplines and bodies of practical knowledge concerned with what constitutes quality in art, literature, drama, film, and other forms of popular culture. We also limit the audience who we may wish to engage with. As research has found that better quality art is more effective at reaching audiences and prompting positive responses in them (Meskin et al. 2013), good quality art and cultural artifacts may be better at intervening in and challenging the problems that plague global politics.

Subsequently, the need to adopt interdisciplinary approaches to practices of making PCWP stems from how they may help us make better forms of PCWP that can enable and enact new political possibilities. While judging the quality of art and popular culture is subjective, open to interpretation, and shaped by different contexts of taste and experience (Bourdieu 2013), research has found that “mere exposure to bad art makes people like it less” (Meskin et al. 2013, 2). In this study, “bad art” was a series of paintings that were widely viewed by critics and other artists as poor, and were described as “so awful it must be seen to be believed” and as a “crime against aesthetics” (Heath, Potter, and Burkeman quoted in Meskin et al. 2013, 8). While I do not contend that the cultural artifacts produced by IR scholars are “bad,” I suggest that because bad art produces bad outcomes (such as boredom in the audience, or a rejection of the values and intended aims of the artist) we *should* be concerned with making good quality art and cultural artifacts.

Making quality art as a form of doing IR requires a serious engagement with the likes of film, art, and cultural theorists and practitioners. In doing this, we might be able to tell better stories, and make better films and better forms of popular culture that may be more effective in intervening in the distribution of the sensible and enacting other, more inclusive forms of politics. This is, after all, what scholars like Jenny Edkins see as being the point of producing and creating popular culture in IR (2013, 292). When we take to writing stories, making films, or producing songs, we should see the value of that not only in how it broadens the discipline of IR, but also in how it can make other forms of politics possible by prompting certain changes in the way audiences of our art think, feel, and act. This will be all the more likely if the art produced by scholars of IR is of a high quality according to the theoretical and practical conventions of those modes of culture.

There may be an intrinsic value in art for art’s sake, yet when the stated goals of producing art as a way of doing IR are to open up new political possibilities and to challenge and change the status quo, then we need to look to make art not to simply open up our academic discipline. In this regard, Patricia Hill Collins has noted that Black feminists of the “hip-hop generation ... bypass scholarly venues and other traditional outlets for feminist thought. Instead they express their feminist politics through mass-media and popular culture venues” (2006, 161–62). For Black feminists, the point of making hip-hop music, spoken word poetry, and fiction is to have an impact beyond the confines of academic publications, classrooms, and conferences, and is to instead “turn their voices outward” (Collins 2006, 187). It is, in short, to engage in a form of popular “consciousness-raising” (Collins 2006, 187). This outward looking desire for change can be more effective for scholars of PCWP if we engage with traditions of producing art and culture, and in doing so attempt to make quality artifacts that will then serve to make other forms of politics possible beyond our own academic discipline.

Conclusion

The study of PCWP is no longer peripheral in the discipline of IR, and research on PCWP has come a long way since a research agenda was formulated and articulated by Grayson, Davies, and Philpott. However, if work on PCWP is to continue in the

vein of contributing to the resistance of injustice, inequality, sexism, and racism that plague global politics in the contemporary era, then we need to begin to further interrogate several areas into our studies. Current gaps in the literature suggest future directions that require scholarship to critically analyze (1) PCWP beyond the “West” and the role of colonialism and race in PCWP; (2) digital technology and how it disrupts and changes how PCWP is produced, circulated, and received; (3) audience interpretation and emotion; and finally (4) how we ourselves can produce better cultural artifacts as part of our research.

These areas also require attention from IR scholars across the discipline. However, given that popular culture and world politics are interconnected and implicated in contemporary global wrongs, and given that an imperative to understand and challenge these wrongs underpins PCWP scholarship, it is vital that PCWP scholars take the lead. By analyzing PCWP beyond the “West” and drawing upon post/decolonial scholarship, by focusing on digital technology, by studying everyday interpretations and emotions, and by producing quality forms of cultural artifacts, PCWP scholarship can not only open up the discipline to new forms of insight and knowledge but also have an impact in addressing the ills of the modern moment. The stakes here are high. Across the globe, state leaders with neo-authoritarian leanings, corporations and climate change deniers, and racists, misogynists, and homophobes are utilizing forms of digitally mediated popular culture to invoke emotions and gain support in audiences. If we are to understand—let alone resist—such problematic forms of politics, then we need to reflect on where we’re at with PCWP scholarship, address the future directions for research here, and ensure that we do not overlook important issues in our study of the world.

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