"STOP TREATING BLM LIKE COACHELLA"
The branding of intersectionality

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In September 2020, the American academic, Jessica Krug, a white woman, wrote in a "confessional" *Medium* article that she had been passing as Black for her entire career (Krug 2020). Krug's story was one in a series of public outings of white people passing as Black, including Racheal Dolezal, who was briefly the president of the NAACP chapter in Spokane, Washington (Aikenhead 2017). Writing about the Krug case, Jason England[i] powerfully states (and is worth quoting at length):

> The Black identity has become standardized: commodified, reproducible on an industrial scale, tailored and marketed to fatter the projection and needs of its white audience. Much as hip-hop has remained subversive in posture while its political core has shrivelled, like rotting fruit, into a soundtrack for the crudest mainstream capitalist values, the mainstream iteration of Black identity has, likewise, become something to fill display windows—the artificially ripped and acid-washed trappings thrown on a faceless mannequin. The superficial markers of Black culture have been so successfully co-opted by mainstream culture that our very notion of Black identity has become fattened where it was once double-edged. There's a sterility where once there was subversiveness; a goal to fatter the white audience where once there was the aim to provoke it. (England 2020)

The idea that the "mainstream iteration of Black identity... becomes something to fill display windows" particularly resonates in a context when stores and companies literally filled their display windows with statements in support of Black Lives Matter (BLM) after George Floyd's murder in May 2020. The move to *brand* intersectionality, we argue, is a move that does not examine nor challenge structural relations of power when it comes to race and gender, but rather is a strategy that narrowly focuses on a commodified and commodifiable identity as a way to build a brand and to accumulate both economic and cultural capital. The branding of intersectionality can in no way be reconciled with legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw's definition of the concept, which is about taking into account "multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed." Instead, the branding of intersectionality is precisely *not* how Crenshaw understands the term; it attempts to address the problem of exclusion "simply by including Black women in an already established analytical structure." (Coaston 2019). The "already established analytical structure" in this context is that of neoliberal corporate capitalism; as such, the

branding of intersectionality is one form of commodifying Black identity. Moreover, as Reed argues, branded intersectionality is "tailored and marketed to fatter the projection and needs of its white audience."

In the following chapter, we analyze the historical context that undergirds the contemporary branding of intersectionality, namely, the neoliberal brand culture that authorizes a commodification and marketing of "diversity," often manifest in corporate diversity training programs, advertising and marketing campaigns, which are typically introduced when racism achieves a heightened popular visibility. Then, drawing on examples relating to the heightened visibility of Black Lives Matter in the summer of 2020, we examine the *individual* branding of intersectionality on social media, especially by white female influencers, before then turning to analyze the *corporate* branding of intersectionality, where corporations brand themselves as intersectional through "performative anti-racism" (Hoskin 2020).

We begin, however, by examining some of the ways in which the rich and theoretically complex concept of intersectionality must be distilled and contained in order for it to gain consumerist efficacy. Branding necessarily targets individual consumers, so we trace a number of the ways that intersectionality is distorted and transformed into something that depends on individual and corporate visibility rather than on collective politics. The cultural and media strategies that are involved when branding political concepts like intersectionality share a history with other political movements that have also been co-opted, branded, and marketed. We thus position the branding of intersectionality within a continuum, including the branding of feminism, and think through how these kinds of brand strategies defect attention away from the collective politics of intersectional feminism and anti-racism, while re-routing attention to individual identity and neoliberal logics of "inclusion." The branding of intersectionality often depends on precisely these neoliberal logics of inclusion, where a complex understanding of intersectionality as relating to structural relations of power is obfuscated in favor of a diluted focus on "diversity." Indeed, in a corporate capitalist context, intersectionality is often collapsed with this form of cursory diversity.

Context: the neoliberal business of diversity

In March 2005, in the first season of the US version of the television series *The Office*, an episode titled "Diversity Day" aired in which the politically insensitive boss, Steve Carell's Michael Scott, required employees to undergo diversity training. Each person was required to tape a card to their foreheads that was labeled with an identity, ethnicity or race,

ranging from the vague: "Jewish," "Asian," and "Black"; to the narrowly specifc: "Martin Luther King Jr." The episode is uncomfortably humorous, with the show's characters awkwardly using racial stereotypes to try to guess their colleagues' "race." Actor Larry Wilmore, who plays the corporate diversity officer hired to conduct the training, was interviewed in August 2020, and "when asked if he thought the content of that episode could be made in today's current political landscape, Wilmore responded with a hard no. "Absolutely not," he told reporters. "There is no way... 'Diversity Day' could be produced today, and probably rightly so" (Schremph 2020).

Perhaps it is true that such a highly offensive kind of "diversity training" would not be possible today. After all, the current cultural and national context has seen the Black Lives Matter movement gaining increased traction over the past few years after multiple Black people were brutalized and murdered by the police. This is also a moment in which white nationalism has gained a massive and visible following. Indeed, the presence (often mandated) of institutional and corporate "diversity training" has increased exponentially since 2005. In part, this shift in awareness has to do with the hard work that many communities of color have carried out in order to call attention to institutionalized racism, the widening income gaps between white employees and employees of color, and the casually racist environments of most workplaces. But this shift is also, we argue, part of the logic of neoliberalism, a logic that privileges capitalist marketing—including the marketing of diversity—over social justice movements and practice. This capitalist logic is adept at transforming other forms of progressive politics into a marketable commodity as well—and does this by erasing structure and selling self-empowerment.

Indeed, the branding and commodifying of a political concept such as intersectionality requires an analysis of the corporate structure that undergirds such branding, namely, the business of "diversity." There are differences between branding diversity and branding intersectionality; primarily, the discourse of a particular commodified version of diversity forms the condition of possibility for the emergence of performative and branded intersectionality. Thus, our claim is that in order for corporations to be able to use and capitalize on the language of intersectionality, a structure that strategically valued and commodified a particular kind of racial and ethnic diversity had to be already in place. These "symbolic structures of diversity" are precisely part of the structural racism that feminists of color such as Crenshaw, Patricia Hill-Collins and others have actively *resisted* through cultivating a robust theory of intersectionality and interlocking systems of oppression (Crenshaw 1991; Hill-Collins 2019; Newkirk 2019). As is well-documented by Black feminists, Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality involves three entwined levels: political intersectionality, structural intersectionality, and representational intersectionality

(Crenshaw 1991). It is the last, however, that has been capitalized on by neoliberal corporate culture, where intersectionality is firmly tied to the realm of representation; as such, this version of intersectionality is part of an economy of visibility, where the representation of intersectionality becomes an end in itself, severing ties with both politics and structures (Banet-Weiser 2018).

Neoliberal brand culture has authorized and encouraged corporations to embrace a particular version of diversity, one that is emptied of political and cultural significance and made palatable for a consumer marketplace. That is, the branding of "diversity" needed to be in place before corporations could begin commodifying the more specific political concept of intersectionality. The cultural conjunctures of #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, a heightened visibility of DEI (Diversity Equality Inclusion) programs in corporations, and the increasing use of social media platforms to appropriate, commodify (and "meme-ify") complex political concepts and practices, have provided the context for a mainstreaming and diluting of intersectional politics. This has also resulted in widespread appropriation of concepts without attribution or compensation for the Black feminists who initially theorize these concepts. For example, Black feminist Flavia Dzodan wrote a blog in 2011 titled "My Feminism will be Intersectional or it will be Bullshit." Since that time, the phrase has been intensely commodified and marketed—without attribution or compensation to Dzodan: "thanks to the rise of one of her quotes as a catchall mantra for feminism, she's seen her own words turned into a cash machine, one that she is powerless to stop" (Romano 2016). The use of intersectionality as a uplifting, catchall feminist slogan, easily and widely applied to t-shirts, tote bags, pins (Etsy, for example, has hundreds of products listed under the category intersectionality), detaches not only the concept from racial and gender justice politics but also severs the connection of intersectionality from Black feminists themselves, tailoring it for white audiences as a kind of performative allyship.

Of course, corporate appropriation and capitalization on "diversity" has been a hallmark of neoliberal capitalism for decades, from using images of people of color in corporate and university brochures as "evidence" of diversity to marketing campaigns to media productions. The (literal) capitalizing on diversity obfuscates structural inequities and disparities, instead offering a visually affective but politically inefficient picture of diversity. The meritocratic rhetoric that fts so well within neoliberal logics is one that does not challenge structural inequalities due to racism or patriarchy, but instead embraces a palatable form of individualist anti-racism and feminism. As Lisa Duggan, Wendy Brown, and others have argued, neoliberalism in the US in the late 1990s saw a "multicultural" diversity embraced, a narrow, nonredistributive form of "equality" politics, where a particular version of "difference" was repurposed for a new era. The political-economic

discourse of neoliberalism has appropriated the rhetoric of the Civil Rights, liberal feminism, and other social movements to usher in a shifted definition of "freedom," one that is decidedly against the downward redistribution justice of anti-capitalist movements, while fomenting, instead, a form of distributive justice "where capitalism reigns supreme and the market identifies who should get what." (Duggan 2012, 107; Rottenberg 2018; Hosang and Lowndes 2019).

This neoliberal exhortation for "multiculturalism" and "diversity" manifests, not surprisingly, in the capitalization and monetizing of "diversity" in the form of corporate initiatives, work- shops, and other bureaucratic mechanisms that function to provide "evidence" of meritocratic and just hiring practices and resources. This has resulted in another form of papering faceless mannequins and window displays with empty slogans professing racial justice, where the politics of inclusion and marginalization are defanged and exist primarily as a *veneer* of change rather than actual structural change. In other words, neoliberal corporations feel obligated to show their commitment to diversity—but not at the cost of profit. Based on racial capitalism, neo- liberalism depends on structural inequality in terms of both race and gender (Ferguson 2019; HoSang and Lowndes 2019). Structural change, however, requires more than superficial tinkerings; it means radically shifting and changing hiring practices, value of work, pay gaps, methods of promotion and more. As journalism scholar Pamela Newkirk argues, diversity is big business, one that works more as reputational management for corporations and companies than as a commitment to racial justice. As she points out, diversity programs and initiatives are often sur- face level mechanisms and cover-ups for exposed racism: "Dozens of companies and institutions have sought to defect controversy over embarrassing missteps or revelations of homogeneous boards and workplaces by launching high-profile initiatives or enlisting a person of color for a prominent post" (Newkirk 2019).

The business of diversity became even more imperative within the 2016–2020 conjunctures of increasingly visible white nationalism in the US, the global #MeToo movement, and the heightened presence in mainstream media of the #BlackLivesMatter movement after the murder of George Floyd and others. As Newkirk points out,

> A 2019 survey of 234 companies in the S&P 500 found that 63% of the diversity professionals had been appointed or promoted to their roles during the past three years. In March 2018, the job site Indeed reported that postings for diversity and inclusion professionals had risen 35% in the previous two years. The buzzword is emblazoned on blogs and books and boot camps, and Thomson Reuters, a multinational mass-media and information firm, even created a Diversity and

Inclusion Index to assess the practices of more than 5,000 publicly traded companies globally. (Newkirk 2019)

The branding of diversity has also (perhaps not surprisingly) worked to center whiteness within diversity programs in a number of ways: symbolic diversity doesn't disrupt neoliberal corporate structure, and thus does not challenge the power relations within this structure that privilege whiteness. Additionally, with heightened attention to racial and gender discrimination within capitalist culture, those who benefited from progressive policies and social welfare were seen as exploiting and capitalizing on their "difference," and claiming a spurious "victimhood." Ironically, the more visible diversity programs become, the more privileged white people in power have claimed to be the "real" victims (Duggan 2012; Cole 2007; Chouliaraki 2020).Thus, in the contemporary environment, we witness two things happening simultaneously: one, more money is being spent on diversity programs and administrators in corporate culture; two, more white people are claiming to be discriminated against in part because of the heightened visibility of diversity programs. This is not a contradiction, however, but a logical consequence of neo- liberal diversity programs and initiatives, which favor visibility and signaling more than actually challenging racist structures; after all, to engage in such a challenge could amount to self-annihilation, since most corporate culture is built specifically on racial capitalism. Citing law professor Laurel Edelman, Newkirk argues that diversity programs also exist to fend of potential lawsuits:

> courts tend to look for symbolic structures of diversity rather than their efficacy. In other words, the diversity apparatus doesn't have to work–it just has to exist–and it can help shield a company against successful bias lawsuits, which are already difficult to win. (Newkirk 2019)

"Woke-vertising" and "fem-vertising"

Advertising and marketing campaigns that capitalize on these "symbolic structures of diversity" have increasing visibility in the 21st century. Francesca Sobande has coined the term "woke-washing" to describe the various marketing campaigns that draw on feminism, anti-racism, and social justice to market and sell products and brands as "woke." As Sobande argues,

> brands make use of [Black social justice activism and intersectional feminism] in the content of marketing that predominantly upholds the neoliberal idea that achievement, social change and overcoming inequality requires individual ambition

and consumption, rather than structural shifts and resistance. (Sobande 2019, 2724)

Woke-vertising and fem-vertising yoke rhetorics of Black social activism and popular feminism to brands and products, capitalizing on the relative visibility of anti-racist and feminist activism in the 21st century. This kind of branding marks the move from politics of visibility, where visibility is a qualifier to politics, to one that Banet-Weiser calls "economies of visibility," where visibility is the end in itself (Banet-Weiser 2018).

We see this very clearly with the commodifying and marketing of a particular version of feminism (Banet-Weiser 2018; Beck 2021; Zeisler 2017; Rottenberg 2019, Goldman, Heath and Smith 1991, and others). Indeed, Goldman, Heath and Smith coined the term "commodity feminism" in 1991 in an investigation into how feminist politics were re-routed from social and cultural activism to advertisements which used these politics as a way to sell products (Goldman, Heath and Smith 1991). The relationship between consumerism and a particular version of feminist politics has only increased its reach with the advent of social media. In order for feminism to be marketable the radical potential of feminism had to be distilled and contained as a product, which typically meant a safe, palatable, and white mainstream feminism (Beck 2021; Zeisler 2017). As Koa Beck points out,

> Sanitizing "empowerment" away from radical, deeply historical activism was potential for fourth wave white feminism because it had to become transactional— something you could buy, obtain and experience as a product rather than an amorphous feeling that rushed in from challenging power. (Beck 2021, 278)

Popular feminism, as Banet-Weiser has argued, is often more about individual *identity* than it is about a collective politics, resulting in popular feminism remaining at the level of visibility rather than a challenge to structural forms of power. Importantly, this version of popular feminism is deeply entwined with whiteness; the visibility of the #Metoo movement has been critiqued as a movement undergirded by whiteness (Phipps 2020).

And the way in which performative intersectionality is branded, like the neoliberal concept of diversity also centers whiteness. Crenshaw and other Black feminists have conceived intersectionality as a way to think through the ways in which, within the power structures of the US, Black women are left without narratives or resources for their lives as both Black and women. Yet the consumerist branding of intersectionality operates well *within* those power structures, and as such is undergirded, like "diversity," by a logic of whiteness. For example, the branding of intersectionality in the 21st century is often a

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reactive move, a strategy to contain public unrest (and public boycotting) after a spectacular expression of blatant racism, whether it is an unarmed Black person killed by police, a tone-deaf ad campaign which diminishes and obfuscates structural racism, or a social media influencer who capitalizes on the heightened visibility of Black Lives Matter to create "edgy" content and gain more followers. The branding of intersectionality is typically a move that is all surface and no substance, where neoliberal logics of capital accumulation work to maintain reputational management in a cultural moment when the everyday, structural racism that all people of color endure is brought into bold relief. Indeed, the idea that "intersectionality has gone viral" (Coaston 2019) needs to be considered seriously: like many "viral" moments, there is heightened attention—and a great deal of money—afforded to specific instances of racism. This functions to not only erase history, but also to shed a light on singular acts of racism—by a cop, a celebrity, a social media influencer—without ever interrogating how these "singular" acts are merely one in centuries of unquestioned acts of racial discrimination that have been sedimented into law, policy, and everyday life. Branding intersectionality is a strategy wherein the "mainstream iteration of Black identity... becomes something to fill display windows;" England's use of "display windows" referenced earlier indicates not only personal displays on social media but also gestures to brick-and-mortar shop displays, and clearly points to the neoliberal corporate logic of this strategy.

As we've discussed, imagining and crafting political concepts as commodities is not a new phenomenon, but the specific shape this imagination takes is contingent upon the historical, cultural, and economic conditions from which it emerges. What is, or is not, appropriate to brand in the marketplace shifts depending on these cultural conditions. Indeed, in this conjunctural moment we witness a more complex branding terrain in the West, where intersectionality has become an important element not only in advertising and self-branding, but also in corporate business plans. This multi-layered branding of intersectionality, like so much of brand culture, empties out structural racism and sexism, as well as cultural context. As Brittney Cooper argues, "Intersectionality was a first, formative step that allowed for recognition of the black female subject within juridical structures of power, where she had heretofore remained invisible and illegible, and thus unable to obtain any kind of justice" (Cooper 2016). The *branding* of intersectionality, on the other hand, does more to conform to neoliberal understandings of the "post-racial" and hierarchies of whiteness than it truly engages intersectional politics.

There are different ways intersectionality is branded, from actual commodities to individual subject positions to corporate taglines. In the following sections, we explore some of the numerous ways that intersectionality and anti-racist politics were appropriated and

branded by *individuals* and *corporations* during the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 in the wake of the murder of George Floyd by police officers.

The appropriative self-branding of Black Lives Matter by influencers

During the heightened global visibility of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, anti-racist and intersectional politics moved from the margins and into mainstream discourse.[1] One particularly visible site for branding intersectionality were social media platforms, from Twitter to Facebook to TikTok. Suddenly, swathes of (mostly white) influencers who had previously had nothing to say about intersectional politics felt entitled to comment on the complex issue of structural racism and mobilize their audiences in support of Black Lives Matter, or else be accused of not caring about social justice, or worse, of being racist themselves. Unsurprisingly, some ill-informed influencers made stupendous errors in their displays of support for the cause, such as staging tone-deaf photo- shoots at protests and other forms of performative activism. The irony of fair-weather white influencers capitalizing on the visibility and popularity of the movement was not lost on BLM activists. Quoted in a *Guardian* article titled "Stop Treating BLM like Coachella," George Resch commented:

> Some people have co-opted the BLM movement in order to get content, and the problem with that and why it enraged people so much is that it is the single most egregious act of cultural appropriation you can imagine... Repurposing your presence there for content strikes me as one of the most shallow things you can do. (Paul 2020)

One of the most appalling and misguided examples of appropriative self-branding was the wave of images and videos of white beauty influencers painting themselves in Black Lives Matter makeup looks, including blackface, police brutality-inspired cuts and bruises, and messages such as "#BLM. I Can't Breathe" (Tenbarge 2020). For example, a white nail artist tweeted images of nails featuring the face of George Floyd and the words I Can't Breathe, offering the options of "matte" or "shiny." Even when Black women tweeted "Stop turning black pain into nails, makeup & whatever other aesthetic functions," the artist did not take down the tweets (Dawson 2020). In another example, the aggregate site Influencers In the Wild, dedicated to outing influencers when they are inauthentic, received submissions from readers during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, reporting

> white influencers standing in front of looted stores, posing with protesters and pre-tending to march. Some even pretended to help rebuild destroyed shops. Others

gleefully jumped in front of a camera, trying to capture a photo mid-air with police and military vehicles in the background. Many were wearing heavily styled clothes obviously unsuitable for actual protesting. (Manavis 2020)

As reporter Chidozie Obasi points out,

> A number of influencers have shared Instagram pictures of themselves painted black, in a misguided attempt to show their appreciation of Black culture. The Lebanese singer Tania Saleh shocked fans by posting a picture of herself photoshopped with dark skin and an Afro. She captioned the image: "I wish I was black, today more than ever. Sending my love and full support to the people who demand equality and justice for all races in the world." (Obasi 2020)

Again, these kinds of posts were widely condemned by Black feminists, Black Lives Matter activists, and the broader social media influencer community as reinforcing the very racism that they claimed to disavow, and for centering the self-promotion of the influencers who posted them. As photographer and popular beauty influencer Alissa Ashley put it on Twitter,

> Raising awareness isn't using fake blood to appear beaten up. It's not using a darker shade of foundation to show your solidarity. It's not writing a dying man's last words on your lips. Black peoples trauma/reality isn't a makeup trend. Like y'all can't possibly be this dumb.

There was intense discussion on social media about how white influencers could play a more meaningful and constructive role in supporting Black Lives Matter, as opposed to these shallow self-branding based approaches. Many Black activists pointed out that white influencers should be decentering their own identities, experiences, and opinions and diverting their (sometimes considerable) audiences toward Black creators and other educational resources.

But even in cases where white creators made all the "right" and politically correct moves, there was performative activism at play here as well. In her video "We Need to Talk: The Race Issue Between Lesbian Creators," Black lesbian YouTube creator Jade Fox highlights the hypocrisy of her white counterparts who *only* speak about issues of race when expected and called to do so, such as during Black History Month each year and in the midst of the Black Lives Matter protests. As Jade explains, white lesbian influencers were clamoring to speak up about Black Lives Matter and structural racism when it became a

mainstream popular issue in 2020, but utterly fail to use their platforms to uplift Black creators the majority of the time, despite the clear inequality that they face in terms of algorithmic visibility and pay:

> Just don't sit up on your Instagram all day and talk about how much Black Lives Matter and then when it comes to *your job*, your career on this platform, that you know has a race issue, that you know has an unjust algorithm that you are actually in the favour of, carry that energy right onto YouTube sis, that's all I'm saying! (Fox 2020)

This point is crucial to the argument that we are making about representational intersectionality. The examples of individuals, businesses and institutions that we highlight in this chapter all have one thing in common: they utilize anti-racism and intersectionality as a branding exercise *only when they have something to gain from it*, and not at any other time. There is something profoundly amiss when it becomes *personally advantageous* for people and organizations to critique their own privilege in a capitalist, racist, and misogynistic system. By self-branding as anti-racist and participating in representational intersectionality, they accrue social, cultural and economic capital through self-branding.

Performative anti-racism and corporate culture

As we've discussed, in the first decades of the 21st century, we've seen the uptake of brands performing intersectionality in the form of woke-vertising, as well as white influencers embracing intersectionality as part of their personal brands. Yet it was during the summer of 2020, when the Black Lives Matter movement gained so much mainstream traction, that—similarly to the case with influencers—companies felt both obligated and entitled to publicly support the movement through their products, campaigns and statements, despite their historical lack of support or even awareness of racial justice. As YouTube content creator Nathan Zed put it in a video titled "black lives matter is trendy now"

> We've got to the point where companies feel obligated to say it or else they will lose money ... What has Call of Duty ever cared about my black life? Call of Duty and me getting called the n-word while playing Call of Duty go hand in hand. It will say Black Lives Matter in the loading screen and then the whole game is going to a Brown country and shooting people up. We're in a phase where it's basically like

there's a monetization on Black Lives Matter, a commodification of Black Lives Matter. (Zed 2020)

Examples of this commodification of Black Lives Matter in 2020 included Unilever owned Ben & Jerry's "Justice ReMix'd" favor, Netflix's "power of storytelling" campaign, and the complete rebranding by PepsiCo of the Aunt Jemima name and logo. As the PepsiCo subsidiary Quaker Oats put it in a public statement, "As we work to make progress towards racial equality through several initiatives, we must also take a hard look at our portfolio of brands and ensure they reflect our values and meet our consumers' expectations" (Valinsky 2020). Whilst appearing to be progressive, the statement betrays the real impetus for this rebranding after 131 years with a blatantly racist image and name: *meeting consumers' expectations*. This move was not about creating meaningful structural change. Rather, it was firmly situated within the realm of representational intersectionality and reputational management.

Indeed, perhaps the most literal example of this kind of representational intersectionality came in the form of the black squares individuals and corporations posted on their Instagram accounts in June 2020. #BlackoutTuesday was ostensibly about *not* posting on social media, using the "time to think about the ways in which many nonblack Americans benefit from structural racism" (Noman 2020), represented visually in the posting an image of a black square on Instagram accounts. Despite the intentions of the campaign to encourage refection, social media is not a particularly useful platform for thoughtful contemplation. Instead, #BlackoutTuesday became more about performative allyship, with individuals and companies not only using the hashtag #BlackoutTuesday but also utilizing other hashtags, such as #BlackLivesMatter and #BLM. As activist Arielle Pardes pointed out, collapsing multiple hashtags into #BlackoutTuesday also collapsed the activism of those hashtags: "using #BlackLivesMatter when posting black squares and boycotting social media erased the work activists had done on social media to share resources with communities: 'The posts had completely taken over the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag.'" (Pardes 2020). Rather than encouraging social media users to reflect on intersectionality, #BlackoutTuesday demonstrated one way in which hashtag activism can be malleable, interchangeable, and diluted in the representational landscape.

Another emblematic example of this shift in the political branding landscape following George Floyd's murder was Starbucks' complete U-turn. In early June 2020, Starbucks banned its employees from wearing any apparel that depicted support for the Black Lives Matter movement, for fear that it could be "misunderstood and potentially incite violence," according to a company memo (Allaire 2020). However, just two days after this memo

was leaked publicly and outrage started to pour in on social media, Starbucks swiftly changed their position, announcing proudly: "We see you. We hear you. Black Lives Matter. That is a fact and will never change... Wear your BLM pin or t-shirt. We are so proud of your passionate support of our common humanity." Starbucks did not stop there, however. Shortly thereafter, they also produced their *own* t-shirt in support of BLM for employees to wear, which featured images of placards with political slogans such as "no justice no peace," "time for change," and "Black Lives Matter." Beneath the images sits the tagline "It's not a moment, it's a movement." Considering that they had tried to silence this very movement only a few days prior to this, it is clear that the change of heart was entirely to do with protecting the brand image of Starbucks. After all, they risked losing a lot of money as a result of PR disaster, much like the Aunt Jemima case; much corporate branding of intersectionality is about reputational management rather than challenging racial and gender injustice.

The audacity and cynicism of corporate performative anti-racism did not go unnoticed by those interested in meaningful structural and political change. Feminist-aligning media companies in particular were heavily critiqued for sustaining structural inequalities at an institutional level, whilst enjoying the cultural capital afforded to them by their progressive images. Publications such as *Refnery29* and *Man Repeller* made public statements in support of the BLM movement, which were followed by a wave of exposés from former employees about the lived realities for Black and other people of color working at those companies. Stories abounded of racial microaggressions, the silencing of those who tried to speak out about inequality, unfair pay, and a lack of opportunities for employees of color to rise to senior positions, demonstrating a sharp distinction between the "woke" audience-facing image that these brands portray and the structural inequalities that they sustain in their institutional practices.

Condé Nast owned *Bon Appétit* was one of the magazines that came under fire in a spectacularly visible way for sustaining racist practices, forcing it to respond in an equally public manner. The magazine itself has existed since 1956, but over the four years prior to summer 2020 the brand's YouTube channel became sensationally popular, regularly reaching millions of viewers with its loveable cast of authentic chefs, witty and relatable editing, and regular shows like *Gourmet Makes* with Claire Saffitz and *It's Alive* with Brad Leone. In early June, following a blog post written by Editor-in-Chief Adam Rapoport in support of BLM, an old photo of him dressed in a racist costume for Halloween resurfaced on social media. The fallout of these events was catastrophic for *Bon Appetit*, leading not only to the public condemnation of Rapoport by current and former employees, but also scathing critique of the broader culture in the company. In a damning series of Instagram

stories, popular *Bon Appetit* on-screen talent and editor Sohla El-Waylly said that the photo was "just a symptom of the systematic racism that runs rampant within Conde Nast as a whole," adding "I've been pushed in front of video as a display of diversity. In reality, currently only white editors are paid for their video appearances. None of the people of colour have been compensated." Rapoport resigned, and *Bon Appetit* issued a public apology stating that they were committed to making structural anti-racist changes both in front of and behind the camera. But the damage was done; over the following weeks the majority of *Bon Appetit*'s most visible on-screen chefs left the company, no longer wishing to work for a racist publication or be associated with its toxic reputation. Despite having "diversified" their food content, talent and editorial staff in positions of power, they've received heavy criticism from audiences for tokenism and performative anti-racism.

What unites all of the examples we have looked at in this section in the *reactive* way in which corporate culture responded to the popular and political energy behind Black Lives Matter in 2020. Within capitalist systems, where businesses are constantly required to *meet consumers' expectations*, what happens when the majority of consumers lose interest in a particular issue or movement? In 2020 it became a *financial necessity* for companies to speak up about BLM and to brand themselves as intersectional, but as the momentum behind the movement simmered down (at least temporarily), so too did the branding response. Indeed, it is not in the economic interest of private companies to challenge the very power structures upon which they thrive. The fickleness with which companies picked up these issues and dropped them once the public appetite had waned speaks to the way in which the branding of intersectionality operates. As Nathan Zed put it at the end of his video,

> Just a reminder for some people who are going to be done after this week and never have to think about Black people again until the next time this blows up, some of you guys can do that and the rest of us are still going to be Black. (Zed 2020)

Conclusions

In a 2017 lecture at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, Angela Davis reflected on the nature of intersectionality and revolution in the current moment. She highlights the fundamental disconnection between capitalism as a structure and the progressive intersectional politics of anti-racism and feminism:

If we stand up against racism we want much more than inclusion. Inclusion is not enough. Diversity is not enough. And as a matter of fact, we do not wish to be included in a racist society. If we say no to heteropatriarchy then we do not want to be assimilated into a misogynist and heteropatriarchal society. If we say no to poverty, we do not want to be contained by a capitalist structure that values profits more than human beings. (Davis 2017)

In the current moment we are seeing a significant rise in the commodification and branding of intersectionality. It is tempting to believe that this marks progress in society, inasmuch as intersectional politics and intersectionality as a concept have become so mainstream that even corporate culture has jumped on the bandwagon. But in this chapter, we have argued that in a capitalist society where companies trade on their images of "wokeness," anti-racist messages have become yet another commodity to be packaged by marketing and PR executives, incapable of providing any meaningful challenge to existing inequitable relations of power. Branding intersectionality is, as England pointed out at the beginning of the chapter, "something to fill display windows—the artificially ripped and acid-washed trappings thrown on a faceless mannequin." Through this process of filling cultural display windows, from influencers to Instagram to corporations, the structural and political substance of intersectionality have been hollowed out, leaving only an empty signifier behind: a vessel for selling products.

Note

1 There is a noteworthy, if marginal, segment of influencer culture which has been and continues to be dedicated to intersectional, feminist, and progressive political content (Glatt and Banet-Weiser 2021).

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[i] In the print version of this chapter, we mistakenly attribute this quote to Toure Reed, our sincere apologies for the error.