POOR BLACK WOMEN
AND MESSY DRAG QUEENS
A Discursive Map of the Scandalous Event of
“Haute Mess”

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Abstract

In 2012, *Vogue Italia* became embroiled in an online scandal about “Haute Mess,” the centrepiece fashion spread from its March issue. Shot in a fast-food diner, the models in the spread wore garish clothing, stacks of jewellery, long heavily patterned acrylic nails, outré makeup, and extreme weaves (hairpieces that are similar to wigs). In response to “Haute Mess,” several prominent online magazines accused *Vogue Italia* of cultural appropriation. These claims hinged on the shoot’s hairstyling, as some of the extreme weaves featured on the models in “Haute Mess” resembled weaves worn by anonymous black women in photographs that circulate online, on websites such as *NoWayGirl.com*.

This thesis examines the scandalous event of “Haute Mess,” exploring the relationships between the shoot itself, the online discussion about it, *Vogue Italia*’s framing of it, and the photographs of weaves worn by anonymous black women that resemble those hairstyles in “Haute Mess.” Following Michel Foucault’s work on the archive, and Lauren Berlant’s “histories of the present,” this thesis questions the status of the event as given, and sets out to unpick its seams. This process involves mapping the emergence of two distinct categories of knowledge about marginalised bodies from this event: the ‘Poor Black Woman’ and the ‘Messy Drag Queen.’ By tracing the formation of these figures, this thesis argues that this event functions as a concentrated instance of the production of knowledge about marginalised bodies. In relation to this production of knowledge, the scandalous event of “Haute Mess” frames the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen in binary terms, as authentic and inauthentic, respectively. In order to circumvent this binary, this thesis seeks a way to engage with this event beyond appeals to authenticity.
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INTRODUCTION

In late February 2012, an online scandal erupted in response to “Haute Mess,” the centrepiece fashion shoot for Vogue Italia’s March 2012 issue “#OVERTHETOP.” The editorial’s\(^1\) title is a pun on the slang phrase “hot mess,” which UrbanDictionary.com defines as “a derogatory term describing a situation, behavior, appearance, etc. that is disastrously bad.” “Haute Mess” consisted of a cast of models wearing garish outfits, outré makeup, and extreme weaves,\(^2\) posing in a diner and diner bathroom with various props, including smartphones, doll “babies,” strollers, mobility scooters, and food. Online discussion about “Haute Mess” began on the 27\(^{th}\) of February, 2012 on the fashion industry forum TheFashionSpot.com, and initially focused on whether the shoot was beautiful, or ugly. Later, the discussion shifted focus from aesthetics to issues of representation via the discourse of cultural appropriation. A number of commenters on a thread about the shoot on TheFashionSpot.com unearthed photographs that depicted extreme weaves which resembled those in “Haute Mess.” These acts expanded the significance of the shoot beyond the field of fashion. The scandal hinged on the resemblance between white models wearing extreme weaves in “Haute Mess,” and weaves worn by anonymous black women in photographs that appear elsewhere online, on websites such as NoWayGirl.com and YumYucky.com. NoWayGirl.com showcases “fail” memes, whereby anonymous users post photographs and other visual content to elicit humorous responses, while YumYucky.com is a fitness blog run by an African American woman. In this way, what began as a discussion of the editorial’s aesthetics on TheFashionSpot.com rapidly transformed into a scandal about Vogue Italia’s alleged cultural appropriation.

In turn, the “proof” of the shoot’s appropriation was publicised by prominent online magazines, including feminist website Jezebel.com, and women’s fashion website Fashionista.com. These websites brought the scandal to a larger audience, and emphasised the popular discourse of cultural appropriation. Jezebel.com deemed “Haute Mess” “kinda racist” (Sauers), and Fashionista.com suggested that “Haute Mess” had drawn “inspiration…from websites like Nowaygirl.com” (Mau “Vogue Italia’s ‘Haute Mess’: Racist

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\(^1\)“Editorial” is a fashion industry term that describes a fashion shoot/spread in a print magazine.

\(^2\)Weave refers to a hairpiece. Similar to wigs, weaves consist of human or nylon hair that is worn over, or woven into the wearer’s own hair. Weaves are sometimes referred to as “lacefronts” because of the net which the hair is sometimes woven through before being attached to the head. Weaves can also consist of “tracks,” which are lines of hair that are attached to the head (much like extensions). Extreme weaves are made in the same way, but may be embellished with other objects, or dyed in bright colours. They may also be styled in unusual ways with complex patterning.
or Not? The Debate Continues”). In the midst of the coverage, Franca Sozzani, the Editor-in-Chief of Vogue Italia, gave an interview to TheCut.com about “Haute Mess,” in which she denied knowledge of the photographs that resembled those from the Vogue editorial. Vogue.it, Vogue Italia’s official website, published a blog post, titled “Simply Outrageous: An Analysis on an Evergreen Phenomenon,” discussing the inspiration behind “Haute Mess,” which they termed “messy drag queen style” (Gherardesca). The actions of Sozzani and Vogue.it functioned as a second intervention in the interpretation of the shoot. Sozzani’s interview on TheCut.com about “Haute Mess” and Vogue.it’s blog post “Simply Outrageous” represented an “official” narrative of the event which claimed that drag was the inspiration behind the styling of “Haute Mess.” Despite the intensity of the initial wave of scrutiny around “Haute Mess,” by late March 2012 most of the discussion about it had petered out.

The scandal over “Haute Mess” took place online over a brief timeframe of about a month. It consisted of three key moments which together produced a narrative about this event and expanded its scope beyond Vogue Italia’s initial fashion shoot. The first moment was the “Haute Mess” fashion spread in the print edition of Vogue Italia: the text that this scandalous event was about. The second moment was the incorporation of websites with images that resemble “Haute Mess” into the discussion of the shoot, and the third Sozzani’s interview and Vogue.it’s blog post “Simply Outrageous,” that together presented an official narrative about “Haute Mess.” The second and third moments provided differing interventionist narratives about “Haute Mess,” with both seeking to identify an origin for the shoot. In the former, the verdict of the popular discourse was that Vogue Italia had appropriated the style of working class African American women. Coverage from prominent online magazines, such as Jezebel.com, Fashionista.com, and fashion industry forum TheFashionSpot.com, drew the previously unrelated websites NoWayGirl.com, YumYucky.com, and the “Haute Mess” shoot together. In the third moment, the institutional discourse was concerned with emphasising the role of drag as the source of inspiration for “Haute Mess.” Coverage resembled an echo chamber, with blogs repeating narratives from larger online magazines, which complicated the narratives about the “Haute Mess” shoot’s origins.

As seen in the second and third moments described above, the complicated narratives offered as explanations for the origins of “Haute Mess” occurred through two dominant figures that emerged from the coverage about the shoot: the Poor Black Woman, and the Messy Drag Queen. The Poor Black Woman highlights the question of appropriation, which is ostensibly the question of this event. It is, however, one without an answer. In contrast, the
Messy Drag Queen is framed by *Vogue Italia* as an inspirational figure for “Haute Mess.” However, the inspirational narrative that accompanies this figure is compromised by the narrative of appropriation which contested the nature of the shoot. Furthermore, by positioning the Messy Drag Queen as an inspirational figure, *Vogue Italia* appropriated aspects of the varied traditions and practices of drag. Although these figures – the Poor Black Woman and the Messy Drag Queen – appear at odds with one another, they both emerge from attempts to intervene in the production of meaning about the “Haute Mess” fashion shoot. Rather than bifurcating the event along the lines of appropriation and inspiration, as the popular and institutional discourses did, this thesis is concerned with what these interventionist discourses produced in the context of the scandalous event of “Haute Mess.”

In the first instance, these interventionist discourses produce the figures of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen that function as categories of knowledge. As categories of knowledge, they purport to explain why “Haute Mess” looks the way it does. In order to do this, the Poor Black Woman must have a clear stake in the real world and the Messy Drag Queen in the historical traditions of drag. But to make claims about the scandalous event of “Haute Mess” these interventionist discourses must also make claims about the marginalised bodies imagined to inhabit the categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen.

The Messy Drag Queen and the Poor Black Woman represent marginalised bodies but, as they do so, their production categories recolonize the discursive histories of the bodies which they stand in for. This occurs through discourses which privilege the connection to the real evoked by these figures. I suggest that traces of the real emerge in and around “Haute Mess” through the photographs of real people on websites such as *NoWayGirl.com*, the depiction of extreme weaves and food, and everyday setting of the shoot. These traces of the real are used to render the Poor Black Woman as authentic in the discourses of cultural appropriation. In contrast, the Messy Drag Queen fails to connect to the real in the same way, and instead appears inauthentic or fake because she lacked a convincing relationship to the photographs that resemble “Haute Mess,” photographs which were used as evidence of the shoot’s appropriation of the Poor Black Woman’s realness. However, that which appeared self-evidently real was not as straightforward as it seemed. Instead, what was deemed authentically real in the discussion of the shoot operated as a privileged category of being, and was rendered authentic through the supposedly exceptional circumstances of the event and the discourses about race, gender, and class that it mobilised. These discourses organised origins, objects, and everydayness into the categories of “real” and “fake” in order to justify the scandal and settle the controversy surrounding the shoot. The identity categories of the
Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen emerge from the search for origins, objects, and everydayness in this event and simultaneously organise, through discourses of race, gender, and class, the contents of these categories into the authentic and inauthentic.

In mapping the emergence of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen, this thesis poses the question: How does the scandalous event of “Haute Mess” produce categories of being that apparently offer access to, structure, and come in direct contact with the real? This thesis argues that the event becomes a scandal through the search for the origins of “Haute Mess.” In the process, it produces the binary of “real” and “fake” which is naturalised through the figures of the Poor Black Woman and the Messy Drag Queen. However, these categories are necessarily unstable, and potentially contain a myriad of connections extending beyond the event, that are denied through the naturalizing tendencies of the real/fake binary. In response, this thesis examines the production of knowledge around “Haute Mess” through the lens of the event, and in doing so, undoes this binary, reorienting the production of knowledge as a process that is necessarily incomplete, contingent, and ongoing. The figures of the Poor Black Woman and the Messy Drag Queen emerge from, and are reliant upon, forms of knowledge about origins, objects, and everydayness that the binary of real and fake forecloses. By mapping the origins, objects and everydayness of “Haute Mess,” this thesis reveals the instability of these figures and their ability to function as reliable producers of knowledge about marginalized bodies.

Following Michel Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, this thesis is a genealogical account of the event. Foucault characterises this method as archaeology, which “disarticulates the synchrony of breaks” and “[destroys] the abstract unity of change and event” (*Archaeology* 195). Through his archaeological method, Foucault opposes the idea that history is a stable and continuous force that “[abandons] the irruption of events in favour of stable structures” (*Archaeology* 6). As such, this thesis eschews a static conception of history, preferring instead to attend to the scandalous event of “Haute Mess” as a veneer that obscures its own instability. In order to reveal this instability, I begin by outlining contrasting conceptions of the event as it is theorised in the work of Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, and the mediated event as in the work of Guy Debord and Mary Anne Doane. However, I argue these conceptions of the event fail to account for the complexity of the “Haute Mess” scandal.

In order to address the unstable and ongoing nature of this event I turn to Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*, which proposes moving “analytically beyond the moment when a happening moves into common sense” (64). According to Berlant, this gesture “enables us to think about being in history” (*Cruel Optimism* 64). In this manner, I address the emergence of
the figures of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen using Berlant’s conception of the impasse, which “designates a time of dithering” where a “situation cannot move forward” (Cruel Optimism 4). Ultimately, the impasse finds, following Berlant, a “genre of event” (Cruel Optimism 4): in this case, scandal. Through this transformation, the scandalous event of “Haute Mess” reveals a reliance on identifying a textual origin for the shoot. To discuss the notion of origin, I use Berlant’s characterisation of the archive (Cruel Optimism 64) to explore what origins do. I then link archives to the genre of scandal, and Judith Butler’s conception of “ambivalent drag” (84) to draw attention to the instability of origin. In the scandalous event of “Haute Mess,” institutional and informal archives are drawn together by the commentary surrounding the event. Two facets of these informal archives are the objects of food and extreme weaves. With reference to Berlant’s discussion of desire and objects (Cruel Optimism 24), and Judith Butler’s discussion of realness (88), I propose that extreme weaves and food function as affective objects to shore up the scandalous event through the categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen. Finally, I turn to depictions of everyday life in this event, which take the form of “selfies” (a self-portrait usually taken with a smartphone) and the everyday spaces that appear in “Haute Mess” and in the photographs that resemble it. Here, I refer to the work of Michel de Certeau to discuss selfies as “spatial practices” (91) which draw attention to how everyday space stands in for something truly “real” in this event.

Thus, my analysis of the scandalous event of “Haute Mess” unfolds over four chapters that address four interrelated facets of the event. Chapter One begins by discussing different theoretical conceptions of the notion of event. I then outline the chronology and progression of this event, from the “Haute Mess” shoot’s initial reception in the fashion industry to its transformation into a scandal, and the emergence in online coverage of the rhetorical figures of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen. The explosion of discourse around “Haute Mess” indicates that an intensified moment of meaning making is happening about the shoot. In this way, Chapter One reveals the production of this event and the two categories of knowledge about bodies in the form of the Messy Drag Queen and Poor Black Woman, which are reliant on ascertainable textual origins. Chapter Two takes up the theme of the search for the “true” origins of “Haute Mess” style that took a prominent role in the event’s coverage on websites such as Jezebel.com and others. Here, being able to prove origins became a way of aligning the categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen as “real” and “fake,” respectively. However, in doing so, all origins for both categories are
revealed as unstable and discursively produced, which draws attention to the instability at the heart of this event.

The unstable quality of the event means that responsibility for the “truth” about the “Haute Mess” scandal is constantly divested onto other aspects of the event, to paradoxically produce the appearance of stability and a sense that it is temporally distinct. The search for origins draws attention to the extreme weaves in “Haute Mess,” which, being adorned with candy wrappers, foreground the role of food in the shoot. Chapter Three therefore takes the objects of extreme weaves and food and considers their affective qualities. By examining the qualities of these affective objects, discourses about race and class emerge, inflecting the perceived authenticity of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen. In this way, affective objects bolster the two identity categories through their evocation of bodies and sensual experience so that they feel real. However as I demonstrate, the materiality that the objects evoke is ultimately unstable, because they also draw attention to the mutability of embodiment. Materiality is conflated with “real” life. The final chapter, Chapter Four, examines how the scandalous event of “Haute Mess” is anchored in representations of everydayness. Everydayness in “Haute Mess” is evoked by digital self-portraits, or “selfies” (hereafter referred to as such) which direct attention toward the everyday spaces of the diner and bathroom. In “Haute Mess,” these spaces are “fake” sets that gesture to the performance of the Messy Drag Queen, while the spaces in the photographs that resemble “Haute Mess” on NoWayGirl.com are taken as given, aligned with the authenticity of the Poor Black Woman. In taking some spaces as self-evidently real, tropes of everyday life reveal the production of a version of “real” everyday life distinct to this event. Yet in its reliance on preconceived tropes and notions of reality, it extends beyond the event, and offers a way out of the constructed limits of the event as well as a means of re-evaluating the operation of the categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen.

Collectively, these four chapters demonstrate how the Messy Drag Queen and the Poor Black Woman become rubrics that organise the appearance of textual origins, affective objects, and everyday life in this event. These two categories of identity become ways of making meaning about a set of texts whose relationships might otherwise appear arbitrary by imbuing them with the sense of a stake in the “real.” As the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen become identified as “real” or “fake,” they reveal the contingency of authenticity. This contingency provides a space in which to reanimate the potential of the scandalous event of “Haute Mess,” and address the production of categories about marginalised embodiment. While the categories of the Poor Black Woman and the Messy Drag Queen work to fix the
meaning of the scandalous event in different ways, they also work to fix the bodies imagined to inhabit them. By examining the event these seemingly fixed categories come apart, providing the materials for a renegotiation of the meaning of both categories, and the event.
CHAPTER ONE: “HAUTE MESS” AND THE SCANDALOUS EVENT

The scandal about “Haute Mess” appeared to be straightforward: an apparently clear, if extraordinary, case of appropriation accompanied by *Vogue Italia’s* implicit denial of that appropriation. However, contra the formulation of the “Haute Mess” scandal through interventionist discourses, this chapter argues, using Foucault and Berlant, that the scandalous event of “Haute Mess” becomes an event over time by finding its genre in scandal. Through this transformation, the scandalous event of “Haute Mess” produced two figures that organised meaning about other aspects of the event – origin, affective objects, and the everyday – and functioned as categories of knowledge about marginalised bodies: the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen. In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant describes how situations become events by beginning with an impasse – a “holding pattern” (5) – before finding a genre. In this case, the holding pattern consisted of a discussion of the fashion shoot’s aesthetics. Later, this transformed into a scandal about cultural appropriation through the unearthing of photographs that showed anonymous black women in extreme weaves that very strongly resembled the ones depicted in “Haute Mess.” In contrast, *Vogue Italia* developed an “official” inspirational style narrative for the event in the form of the Messy Drag Queen. The categories of the Messy Drag Queen and Poor Black Woman signify an attempt to organise the production of knowledge in this event by paradoxically citing discourses that precede it. In this manner, these categories become a way to map this event through their relationship to, and reliance on, the apparently neutral categories of origins, objects, and the everyday.

Examining the transformation of this event into scandal involves unpicking the interventionist narratives around “Haute Mess” and, in doing so, “mapping [their] discursive formation” (Foucault *Archaeology* 130). In order to do this, I begin by outlining various theoretical conceptions of the notion of event so as to frame the “Haute Mess” scandal as a site for the production of knowledge. Beginning with the work of Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, I discuss the notion of an event as a radical rupture in ordinary life. Then, I turn to Mary Ann Doane and Guy Debord to outline approaches to media events, before highlighting Michel Foucault and Lauren Berlant’s respective articulations of events as concentrated instances of the production of knowledge. Finally, I link the conception of the event as the production of knowledge to Berlant’s concept of the impasse as a space of time before but
attached to the event. The impasse draws attention to how an event adopts a genre, which, in this instance, is scandal.

As the event becomes a scandal, the rhetorical figures of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen come into focus through the “Haute Mess” shoot, and distinct aspects of the coverage which emerge from a large textual sprawl. These consist of a thread on TheFashionSpot.com, articles from prominent online magazines, an interview with Franca Sozzani, and a blog post from Vogue.it about “Haute Mess.” Following the discussion of the concept of the event, this chapter traces the emergence of these figures by examining the ‘original’ text that all subsequent discussion springs from: the “Haute Mess” fashion shoot. After a brief overview of Vogue Italia and the styling in “Haute Mess,” I turn to the fashion industry forum called TheFashionSpot.com. Here, I examine the thread about “Haute Mess” – “Vogue Italia March 2012 – Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel” – which generates the impasse which precedes the transformation of the event into a scandal. I then outline the online discussion about “Haute Mess” on websites such as Jezebel.com which reveal a calcifying of the event into the genre of scandal through the figure of the Poor Black Woman. Next, I examine the emergence of the Messy Drag Queen through Sozzani’s interview and Vogue.it’s blog post, “Simply Outrageous.” In contrast to TheFashionSpot.com and online magazine coverage, the ‘official’ institutional narrative represented by these two texts attempts to reorient the meaning of “Haute Mess” around the figure of the Messy Drag Queen. In Sozzani’s interview, this involves a rejection of the narrative of cultural appropriation, and in the Vogue.it blog post, it involves proposing a narrative about what inspired “Haute Mess.” Finally, the production of these two figures in discourse draws attention to other elements of the scandal: origins, objects, and everydayness.

The Concept of the Event

There are two distinct ways of categorising the notion of event as a concept. The first is to treat the event as a rupture, while the second, contrasting way of characterising an event is as a becoming, as something that is produced. Initially, the “Haute Mess” scandal appears to be a rupture in the everyday akin to Badiou’s conception of the event (67-71), as online media report Vogue Italia’s act of appropriation. For Badiou, the event is subsumed under a three part structure which he terms the “truth-process” (67). This consists of the event, the fidelity, and the truth (Badiou 67). While fidelity “amounts to a sustained investigation” of the event, the truth is that which is constructed by fidelity (Badiou 67). Although fidelity and truth
suggest a form of production, Badiou nevertheless considers the event as the unknowable which “brings to pass ‘something other’ than the situation, opinions, instituted knowledges”; it is a “hazardous, unpredictable supplement, which vanishes as soon as it appears” (67). In this, Badiou’s work resonates with Žižek’s articulation of “The Real” as that which is unknowable. However, for Badiou, truth is inherent in the event because it is an unpredictable rupture that offers access to the truth. This differs from Žižek’s conception, via Jacques Lacan, of The Real as “a hard kernel, a leftover which persists;” that which is always there, but must remain unknowable or disavowed (Žižek 48). As such, Badiou and Žižek’s conceptions of the event are actually of the event without history. In contrast, Butler reads Lacan’s formulation of “The Real [as] that which resists and compels symbolization” (Butler 39), and therefore foregrounds its operation as a productive force. In this instance, “Real” becomes a productive discourse in the “Haute Mess” scandal that recasts the production of truth as reality, positioning “Haute Mess” as a text about “real” bodies. This event yokes the ostensible truth about “Haute Mess” with the “realness” of the Poor Black Woman and the Messy Drag Queen through interventionist discourses of appropriation and inspiration. In this way, discourses about “real” and also “fake” conflate the effect of realness with the rupture of The Real. Therefore, rather than being a rupture, the scandalous event of “Haute Mess” takes on characteristics of the event-as-rupture through realness.

Media events modify the notion of event-as-rupture by mediating “reality,” thereby rendering it “unreal.” In her discussion of the televishual event, “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe,” Doane suggests that “there is a sense that information and catastrophe are both subject-less, simply there, they happen – while crisis can be attributed to a subject, however generalized” (223). While Doane differentiates between these three genres of the media event, Debord characterises all media events as “pseudo-events that vie for attention in the spectacle’s dramatizations [that] have not been lived by those thus informed about them” (114). Debord thus differentiates between “real” events and media events, and suggests that the latter are produced to serve an ideological function. The notion that an event simply happens, that the event can be attributed to a catalyst and source, or that media events are not “true” events are three paradigms for understanding media events generally. “Haute Mess” straddles all of these paradigms, as the nature of the event seems at once to be a crisis attributable to Vogue Italia, an unprecedented act of appropriation that happened, and a “pseudo-event,” in that those contributing to the popular discourse of this event engage with it as a mediated object, rather than something that directly affects them.
Instead of treating "Haute Mess" as something that simply happens, this thesis examines the discursive production of knowledge. In this way, the concept of an event is something that is understood as a becoming and a process. The scandalous event of “Haute Mess” is not a hermetically distinct or contained event, as it draws in disparate texts and cites discourses about race, gender, and class. In the article “What is Enlightenment?” Foucault suggests that Immanuel Kant takes the event in “an almost entirely negative way… an ‘exit,’ a ‘wayout’” (Foucault 34) yet also as “a phenomenon, and ongoing process” (Foucault 35). Foucault’s approach to Kant’s conceptualisation of “The Event” evokes a constant escaping – things that are related to, but cannot be contained by the event – and a constant becoming, insofar as an event is never finished. The becoming-event then, is an event that gestures beyond its horizons, by gathering intensity, archives, texts, narratives, and objects over time, and through discourses that extend beyond it. Rather than the bounded event suggested by Doane and Debord, the “Haute Mess” scandal remains an unresolved controversy with specificities that trail like loose threads from a seam, providing an avenue to grasp and explore the recent past.

This thesis involves following these threads which open up “a realm of historical inquiry” (Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?” 46) to capture history and the present simultaneously. Conducting an archaeology of the present is therefore about finding what escapes and what are ongoing, continuous, and contingent processes. This framework embeds the appearance of the apparently exceptional event in a citational chain, thereby foregrounding its redeployment of other histories about origins, objects and everydayness. The aforementioned approaches to ‘The Event’ suggest that an event is ostensibly about the real. In these formulations, the real therefore operates as an unquestioned and immanent category of being. However, the scandalous event of “Haute Mess” claims a relationship to the real world through the production of an event predicated on “real” and “fake” origins, objects, and everydayness. In this instance, “real” is not a given category; instead, it refers to a particular iteration and imagining of the world that masquerades as irrevocable fact. Therefore, the identity categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen that come about through the event are treated as real or fake bodies. This gesture has implications for any bodies which are imagined to inhabit these categories, as it suggests that some bodies are real and worthy of defending, while others are fake, and therefore possible to dismiss.

The scandalous aspect of the “Haute Mess” event depended on the binary distinctions of real and fake signalled by interventionist discourses about appropriation and inspiration, as
they attempted to uncover or articulate the “truth” about the “Haute Mess” shoot. John B. Thompson characterises scandal as “the sudden disclosure into the public domain of actions or information previously thought by the parties concerned to be private; a widespread belief that the actions involved an element of transgression or impropriety; [a] condemnation of the actions in the media” (“Shifting Boundaries of Public and Private Life” 50). For Thompson, a media scandal is therefore about the production of truth in order to rearticulate the boundary between public and private. “Haute Mess” was a scandalous event insofar as it occasioned public revelations and condemnation in online media of an action of cultural appropriation by the high profile fashion magazine *Vogue Italia* which was private through occlusion. While a scandal generally shores up the boundaries of the public/private spheres through ostensibly truthful, previously private information, the scandalous event of “Haute Mess” complicates Thompson’s formulation of scandal in three ways. Firstly, the “revelatory” photographs that resembled “Haute Mess” were already public on sites such as *NoWayGirl.com*, thereby drawing attention to instability of the public/private boundary that scandal depends on. Secondly, the media response to the shoot was ambivalent rather than wholly condemnatory, with *Jezebel.com* describing it as “kinda racist” (Sauers; emphasis mine) and *Fashionista.com* characterising it as a “debate” (Mau “*Vogue Italia’s ‘Haute Mess” Editorial: Racist or Not? The Debate Continues’”). Thirdly and finally, this event had to become a scandal, in contrast to Thompson’s assertion that scandal involves abrupt revelation.

For this event to become a scandal, it had to transform into a scandal from an impasse. Lauren Berlant calls an impasse a “space of time lived without narrative genre” (*Cruel Optimism* 199), a process that had “not yet found [its] genre of event” (*Cruel Optimism* 4). In short, it is a space of potential becoming. The notion of the impasse complicates Thompson’s formulation of scandal as “sudden disclosure” (“Shifting Boundaries” 50) by drawing attention to the production of the scandalous event of “Haute Mess” through discursive shifts from discussions about aesthetics, to the subsequent interventions about appropriation and inspiration. For “Haute Mess,” the impasse constituted discussions about the shoot’s aesthetics and a sense of anticipation about its upcoming release. The appearance of discussions about cultural appropriation contested the meaning of “Haute Mess,” and changed the mode of discussion about it from aesthetics to representation. This signalled a shift from the impasse, where little seemed to be happening, to a scandal, where something had apparently happened. Scandal can be understood as a genre that stretches out the present that it describes through attentiveness to what is happening at the time: what Berlant would
describe as a “temporal genre” (Cruel Optimism 5). In this way, by breaking with Thompson’s formulation of scandal through the notion of the impasse, Berlant’s formula of genre allows the unravelling of the very acts – appropriation or inspiration – that constitute the scandal. In this way, the “Haute Mess” scandal appears less a part of modernity’s teleological history – a quality that Debord suggests is characteristic of events (95-96) – and more of a re-articulation of history in the present moment. This re-articulation begins with the “Haute Mess” shoot itself.

**Vogue Italia and “Haute Mess”**

*Vogue Italia* has been a part of Condé Nast’s *Vogue* imprint for fifty years. It has a popular reputation as the most influential and “avant-garde” of the Vogue editions (Rafinei). It has also garnered a reputation for controversial fashion shoots which likely serve to reinforce its reputation for being at the cutting edge, particularly over the last decade (Ma). Of these, two in particular involved explicit discussions about race and racism: an incident where hoop earrings were called “Slave Earrings” (Hartmann), and “A Black Issue” (July 2008), which focused on black models and designers. Although controversial, these shoots are also positioned by *Vogue Italia* as part of their artistic, creative, and sartorial dedication to fashion. Nevertheless, *Vogue Italia* adheres to a fairly straightforward fashion magazine format, which involves a monthly issue covering and setting seasonal trends, focusing on high-end, luxury clothing brands in curated editorial shoots. These make up about one third of the March 2012 edition of the magazine. The remainder of the issue is comprised of a mixture of lifestyle articles, profiles of celebrities or people in the fashion industry, advertisements, and trend collages on clothing, accessories, and cosmetics, with the majority of this content being image-based. In short, *Vogue Italia* treads a line between fulfilling fashion industry demands, and situating itself at the forefront of the industry.

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Figure 1: Vogue Italia March 2012 Cover
Figure 2: "Haute Mess" Title Page
“#OVERTHETOP,” Vogue Italia’s March 2012 issue, featured Joan Smalls, a black Puerto Rican model, in her first Vogue cover. She is also the sole person of colour in the “Haute Mess” editorial shoot. On the cover (fig. 1), the Vogue Italia masthead dominates the upper part of the frame, layered over Smalls’ image, while the title #OVERTHETOP is positioned in the lower third of the cover below Smalls’ face. All text is in a stark white. Through the use of the hash symbol, Vogue Italia deliberately references the microblogging service Twitter, where “tweets” can be “hashtagged” (“#”) by users with any word or phrase they desire, allowing a collation of disparate tweets when searched. Behind the title and shot in close up, Smalls looks directly into the camera, wearing dramatic brow-high sky blue eye shadow dotted with pink smiley faces, green spots, and blue diamantes, her hands adorned with long acrylic nails in tiger print and acid green. The fingers of her right hand are fanned out across the top right hand side of her face, touching her hair and partly obscuring her eye in a gesture that appears measured and self-conscious, an obvious pose rather than a “natural” movement. Smalls wears a cropped weave bejewelled with large colourful imitation gemstones and large and long silver and gold earrings. The portrait’s focus on Smalls’ face foregrounds the makeup styling of the shot, inviting the viewer of the image to make a connection between the makeup, nails, and the experience of being “over the top.”

The design and layout of the “Haute Mess” editorial itself is busy and garish, opening with a bubblegum pink title page with “Haute Mess: Photographed by Steven Meisel” in the center (fig. 2). The title is in a big, bubbly font, with “haute” written in fuchsia, and “mess” in orange. Both words are outlined, surrounded by white, and then outlined again in lime green and dark green in a shadow effect that makes the title ‘pop’ off the page. This title appears on average every two pages throughout the spread, on every opening. The photographs vary in

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4 Any fashion magazine editorial requires an assemblage of professionals. In the case of “Haute Mess,” Vogue Italia credits the involvement of the most regular and prominent contributors. As the photographer, Steven Meisel’s name appears prominently on the title page of the editorial, while other contributors are listed in a small paragraph toward the end of the shoot. Those credited include Lori Goldstein as fashion editor/stylist, makeup artist Pat McGrath, hair stylist Jimmy Paul, manicurist Lisa Logan, and set designer Mary Howard. Logan, an African American woman, is a nail technician for Beyoncé, Katy Perry, and other celebrities, while McGrath, a British woman of colour, has been working in the industry for a long time and regularly with Meisel since her breakthrough in the 1990s. Like McGrath, Goldstein and Paul have also worked in their fields for many years, and have a high profile in the fashion industry. Howard, on the other hand, is an established set designer for advertising and fashion, although set design is a relatively new field of expertise, compared to say, hair or clothing styling. As such, all these people represent the apex of their respective fields, shoring up Vogue’s reputation as a prestigious name through their involvement in the shoot. The unnamed models constitute a test for fashion followers on message boards such as TheFashionSpot.com, with parts of the forum thread on “Haute Mess” devoted to naming the models in the shoot: Joan Smalls, Jessica Stam, Karen Elson, Abbey Lee Kershaw, Lindsey Wixson, Daphne Groeneveld, Guinevere van Seenus, and Coco Rocha, all of whom have a high profile in the industry. All of the cast, except for Smalls, are white.
size and layout. Some take up one or two full pages, while other photographs appear on pages that are split in half, into quarters, or into a combination of both. Collaged borders, some comprised of images of soft-drink labels, others of crisp packets, junk food, chewing gum, or cartoon characters such as Tweetie Bird, frame some photographs (fig. 3). Bright and busy, cartoony fonts and montaged margins modify the pictures by echoing the mishmash of styles throughout the shoot, while foregrounding food and pop culture references in what appears to be an effort to bring high-fashion and “low” culture together.

Modification also extends to changing the content of the images. The editorial makes use of explicit forms of content modification whereby faces are pixelated or blurred out. At other times this gesture of anonymity takes on a more crafted feel, by erasing faces in a manner reminiscent of the scribble of the eraser function in a basic program such as Microsoft Paint. While these forms of modification take on a hypermediated quality, drawing attention to the action and existence of modification, the probable occurrence of routine modification in the form of image photoshopping to remove imperfections remains invisible. The addition of the hashtag, “#OVERTHETOP” on the cover image is a similarly heavy-handed image modification. Although one would expect to see a title on the cover, the style of the title – its use of the hashtag – and the invisibility of likely photoshopping produce a sense of immediacy, even as they draw attention to the print form itself though the disjuncture of a digital symbol and digital production. In this way, the shoot encapsulates – via image modification – a tension between a perfect veneer, and tropes of gritty or playful realism.

This tension between veneer and realism echoes the styling of “Haute Mess,” particularly in terms of the accessories. The accessories in “Haute Mess” broadly fall into two categories: those which are attached to or that adorn bodies, and those which form part of the scene around the models. The two most consistently used accessories are the acrylic nails and the extreme weave hairstyles, as they appear throughout the shoot and on all of the models in different styles (fig. 3 and fig. 4). All of the models in the shoot sport acrylic nails on their hands, and some on their feet. The acrylics vary widely in length, colour and pattern, from shorter nails to extraordinarily long ones, and are often embellished with diamantes and animal print in fluorescent colours. Similarly, the extreme weaves that the models wear vary in size and shape, from pixie cuts and cornrows to long curls and massive beehive styles. The range of the weaves also cuts across the colour spectrum, from natural hair colours, to unnatural bright candy shades, and their arrangements taking a myriad of forms, including
Figure 3: Collaged Borders and Extreme Weaves in "Haute Mess"
Figure 4: Makeup, Weaves and Acrylic Nails in "Haute Mess"
checks, stripes and animal print. Often, the weaves are adorned with sweet labels, faux jewels, woolen cupcakes, zips, and more. Other weaves are sculpted into wallet shapes, Easter egg baskets, Mohawks, stacked towers, or are deliberately “badly” applied, with visible tracks at the hairline.\(^5\) The bold patterns and colours of the nails and weaves are a veneer, but they are also reminders of the hair and nails underneath them.

While the acrylic nails and extreme weaves are the most immediately noticeable aspect of the styling in “Haute Mess,” the makeup worn by the models is similarly intense (fig. 4). The eye makeup forms a focal point for each model’s face, and is uniformly brow high, in an array of colours and in both metallic and matte finishes. Patterns and shapes are sprayed or appliqued onto opaque eye shadow, with brows emphasized through strong geometric lines, sometimes raised above their usual height. Eye makeup in the shoot includes false eyelashes, or glued on diamantes that extend out of the eye socket. Lips are usually less prominent than the eyes, although often outlined and some are styled with a multicoloured metallic foil finish, glitter patterns, or bright opaque gloss. Blush is sometimes strong and sculptural, but frequently overshadowed by faux tattoos painted onto cheekbones: tears, hearts, flowers, crosses, and so forth (fig. 4). In a similar fashion to the weaves and acryclics, the thick and opaque use of makeup functions as a transformative veneer on the models, reminiscent of a Barbie doll’s fused on makeup.

While the makeup in “Haute Mess” often approximates tattoos, the styling extends this kind of bodily modification – which is often permanent, but here is temporary – to teeth. Some of the models wear metal and diamante grills over their teeth.\(^6\) Others grin widely, displaying gold front teeth with text or jewels glued onto the tooth surface. Intense accessorizing is a key part of styling in “Haute Mess,” with all of the models adorned with large amounts of jewelry: stacked bangles and rings, layered necklaces, and long earrings. Gold finishes predominate, with acetate, Lucite, plastic, and diamantes appearing frequently. The main mode of the jewelry appears to be bold pieces, occasionally in novelty, exaggerated shapes such as dried pasta bows or oversized plastic chains. The models wear fingerless gloves and enormous platform sandals and boots, such as Dr. Martens, in bright colours and animal print or sparkly finishes. The outfits in “Haute Mess” are at times hyper-coordinated – for example, with shoes matching the weave or makeup, and dress – while at other times they

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\(^5\) Tracks are the parts of the weave where the nylon hair is attached to a net. This is why weaves are often referred to as “lacefront weaves,” as the hair is “laced” – woven – through the net and glued or sewn into place on the scalp.

\(^6\) Grills are jewelry worn on the teeth.
are a bewildering assemblage of different textures and styles. The majority of the clothing comes from high end designer labels, and there is a plethora of garment styles, textures, surfaces, and materials.

The accessorizing in “Haute Mess” frequently incorporates everyday objects, which are used as props that work to both ground and amplify the “over the top” styling. Some accessories, such as the bags, are common, while others, such as the faux pregnancy belly in the first shot, are one-offs (fig. 5). Some objects occur several times, and are used to signify everydayness. Among them, fake phone hand sets and bedazzled smartphones are often used by the models. Similarly, food appears in many of the photographs, in the form of sweets, crisps, alcohol or soft drink, and fast food. In contrast to soft props such as food, there are props made of synthetic or hard materials such as a trolley, detached weave, and mobility scooter. In “Haute Mess” the models play with these objects. An anonymous person on a mobility scooter becomes a rocking horse, as a model straddles their lap while wedged between the handle bars and seat; other models wheel around trollies filled to overflowing with groceries and toys. Finally, parts of the extreme weaves leave the models’ bodies as pieces of nylon hair are photographed clipped on to coat hangers or photographed on bathroom rails (fig. 4). By employing these props, “Haute Mess” looks are integrated into the environment, but the disjuncture between the diner space and the shopping trollies draw attention to the posed set. Together, these props suggest a liminal space between the environment and the body.

The environment for “Haute Mess” echoes realist tropes evident in the depiction of props and styling. Set in what appears to be a “typical” American diner, the Kelloggs Diner in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, New York City (Moss), “Haute Mess” depicts its models engaging with the space in a variety of both public and wholly domestic ways. While the majority of the shoot takes place at the counter, in the booths, and by the food cabinets, some images show the models in the bathrooms, by changing tables, sinks, and toilets. The diner space is made of wood veneers, beige tiles, beige Formica, mirrored pillars with chrome, and orange, blue, or brown vinyl seats. Lighting comes from a series of low hanging fixtures, and the windows have venetian blinds, while the partitions between the booths are made of thick striped glass. The walls, windows, and shelves in the diner display an array of advertisements for food combos or specials. Although we see relatively little of the bathrooms, they are tiled in white – and occasionally granite – with chrome fixtures and grey Formica stalls. The diner’s surfaces cohere into three major groups: the smooth and synthetic – Formica, vinyl,
Figure 5: Jessica Stam with Faux Pregnancy Belly and Handbag in "Haute Mess"
glossy cardboard – mixed with the hard and organic - wood veneer, glass, granite, ceramic – and the reflective – mirrors and chrome.

By posing, the models bring props and environment into relation with themselves and each other. The models’ poses are captured in a variety of shots, close ups and extreme close ups, full body, and mid-range compositions, and fall broadly into three categories: self-aware poses for another photographer, apparently un-selfconscious gestures, and self-aware poses for the self. In the former category, these poses involve playing it up for the camera, sometimes through jokey gestures such as throwing horns, or through more traditional modeling techniques: arched back, hand on hip, head tilted back, looking at camera. Un-selfconscious poses often involve the models interacting with props or the environment, such as chewing on a weave, checking a phone, buying food, or eating; these shots often appear quite candid. Self-aware poses usually involve the models taking a selfie in a bathroom mirror with a smartphone camera.

The selfie’s amateurism draws attention to a more general lo-fi aesthetic in the shoot. There is a sense of low resolution to the images, as though they have been shot off the cuff with a digital camera on a poor resolution. Light sources are a mixture of harsh camera flashes, fluorescent lighting, seams of sunlight entering through the windows, and low hanging pendant lamps over the booths. This piecemeal approach to lighting makes the shots look candid or rushed. While some shots are brightly lit and sharp, in the majority there is obvious glare bouncing off surfaces and disrupting the lines of objects, creating deep shadows around the models and red eye. The lighting flattens out the images; as some models pose in front of windows with sunlight, the contrast between this and the diner results in the fixtures and model appearing flattened and gloomy. In this way, the lighting produces matte and reflective surfaces, similar to the surfaces found in the diner itself. The aesthetic tensions between professionalism and amateurism, and refined and wild styling echo tensions that emerge in coverage about “Haute Mess” about the “real” Poor Black Woman and “fake” Messy Drag Queen.
“POOR BLACK WOMEN”

TheFashionSpot.com

In the run up to the March 2012 print issue of Vogue Italia, Vogue.it posted a series of promotional teaser GIFs from the “Haute Mess” editorial on the 27th of February 2012, and circulated the cover image. The resulting discussion about “Haute Mess,” prior to the full release of the shoot, fixated on the aesthetics of the photographs and the fact that it was Joan Smalls’ first Vogue cover. Cottonmouth13 commented on TheFashionSpot.com: “Joan Smalls! Now that’s unexpected. Love the cover though. Although, what’s with the hash tag thing?” Another commenter, Style Savvy, also noticed the hashtag, stating “wow, a Vogue cover for Joan finally!...Amazing cover, I love the use of the hashtag...so Twitter-esque,” as did MulletProof, who likewise expressed aesthetic approval of the hashtag: “:-D at the hashtag. Like, ‘yeah, it’s over the top’. Love the celebration of tackiness and the humour in it” (“Vogue Italia March 2012: Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”). With hindsight, this kind of discourse about aesthetics functioned as a way of marking time, an enforced delay before the event of the release of the full shoot. This delay encouraged active speculation about the final form “Haute Mess” would take. Discussing aesthetics therefore constituted what Berlant identifies as an “impasse,” which “marks a delay that demands activity [that] can produce…events” (Cruel Optimism 199). In short, it was a productive space of anticipation.

This anticipatory state continued as the focus of the discussion on TheFashionSpot.com forums turned to Smalls in particular. Some commenters expressed their congratulations and pleasure effusively, such as Rosary who said “OMG OMG Joaaaaaan! I’m dead! Congratulations Joan” (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”). Others commented more obliquely and ambivalently, such as Fernini, who stated that “tranny goes perfect with Joan, she was the option” (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”). Some were adamant that the cover was a disaster. Helmut.newton wrote:

[T]his is awful!...probably one of the worst covers Meisel has ever shot. I understand the irony… but still, this is giving me a headache. The colours, the general aesthetic – it just doesn’t work. The creative direction here is awful! And the model is positively

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7 GIF is an acronym for “Graphics Interchange Format,” a small animated loop of photographs or stills.

8 All quotes in this thesis from online coverage are verbatim. The variance in proper grammar, capitalisation, and so forth reflects the varied styles of writing commenters adopt. Some are formal and consistent, others not.
atrocious. I will never understand how she reached such heights in the industry with a face like that (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”)

Here, there is slippage between an evaluation of the aesthetics of the photograph and an evaluation of Smalls. The specific focus on Smalls appears to come at the expense of other aesthetics, as the attention initially paid to the appearance of the hashtag tapers off sharply, suggested only by “irony.” With only a small amount of material to speculate about and discuss – the GIFs and the cover – the breadth of the discussion became very narrow, spiralling into extended opinions and repetitive comments, becoming increasingly fixated on the minutiae of the shots available.

The comments about Smalls’ first Vogue cover are repetitive, and revolve around a series of back and forth exchanges between commenters on TheFashionSpot.com about whether the aesthetics of the GIF previews, cover shot, and later the full shoot are good, bad, or mediocre. This form of circular, eddying discourse is characteristic of the impasse (Berlant, Cruel Optimism 4), a stage which appears to precede, but actually forms a part of, the scandalous event of “Haute Mess.” Berlant characterises the impasse as “a stretch of time [in which] the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help clarify things” (Cruel Optimism 4). Although the process of discussing Smalls’ cover in the forum may appear repetitive, it also demonstrates the state of inquiry and collection characteristic of the impasse, as commenters express anticipation about the full shoot, attempt to divine information about “Haute Mess” from the image, and collate information about the picture, such as the photographer, stylist, model, and so forth. In short, while discussion appears stuck it is still producing aesthetic parameters – good or bad, ugly or beautiful – in anticipation of the release of the full shoot. Subsequently, the discussion on TheFashionSpot.com became a resource for other reports in online magazines to draw upon.

Berlant suggests that the activity of the impasse is indicative of “processes that have not yet found their genre of event” (Cruel Optimism 4). In this event, the impasse around “Haute Mess” eventually transformed into a scandal. When the print edition of “Haute Mess” was released in its entirety on the 8th of March, 2012, the tenor of the posts on TheFashionSpot.com began to change from opinions about aesthetics to questions of representation. Thus the nature of the event began to shift from a cyclical fashion event to a scandal. One poster commented on TheFashionSpot.com, saying:
so happy that joan got a VI cover, however, maybe i'm being a little too sensitive, but
i do not agree with the connotation of the editorial...it's clearly poking fun at “black,”
“ghetto” culture, and though i see humor in it and appreciate the images, i do take
offence...anyone else? (Rusty28 “Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”)

Some commenters defended “Haute Mess” as art. Jmrmartinoho stated “I think art is above
everything” while also confusedly advising that “I dont think we should take fashion so
serious…” (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”). Others disagreed, TREVOFASHIONISTO saw
it “more poking fun at Hispanics in California… as well as taking it back to the 90s,”
JustABoy saw “connotations of class, but I don’t know where you’re getting race from,”
while Ives927 loved “all the tackiness of Meisel’s ed. It looks hilarious!” (“Joan Smalls by
Steven Meisel”).

In the impasse of the “Vogue Italia March 2012: Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”
forum discussion, specific ways of categorising “Haute Mess” as aesthetically and
representationally good or bad emerge through the repeated use of words with similar themes.
These include descriptors – some of which appear in the comments quoted earlier – such as
“black,” “trailer trash,” “drag,” “ghetto,” “atrocious,” “racist,” “classist,” “tackiness,” and
“90s” (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”). These descriptions enmesh “Haute Mess” in frames
of reference beyond the forum. According to commenters, “Haute Mess” is “clearly poking
fun at ‘black,’ ‘ghetto’ culture,” “more poking fun at Hispanics in California,” “so Twitter-
esque,” or “mocking drag queens” (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”). Although these
descriptions seem primarily aesthetic, focused on achieving a “ghetto” or “90s” look or style,
they also suggest particular inspirations, and therefore potential intentions behind the shoot.
The desired outcome of these descriptions is aesthetic, but they evoke social conditions that
are intimately linked with particular African American, Latino, and working class or welfare-
dependent white style cultures.

Berlant suggests that genre “provides an affective expectation of the experience of
watching something unfold” (Cruel Optimism 6). In the case of “Haute Mess,” however,
something is already unfolding, and the divulgence of affect is what transforms its genre
from being in the holding pattern of the impasse to a scandal. Commenters claim to feel
“disgusted,” “appalled,” and “offended,” finding that the “Haute Mess” fashion shoot fails to
be “respectful,” and instead is “condescending” and “disappointing” (“Joan Smalls by Steven
Meisel”). These words reveal a fusing of description with affect, discursively gesturing
towards the “Haute Mess,” shoot, towards the weaves and references to everyday life (signified by remarks about “ghetto” or “Hispanic” culture), and towards affective states. With the appearance of affect, the genre of the event around “Haute Mess” solidifies into a scandal. As a “conventional genre of event,” the discursive formation of scandal yokes opinion, description, and affect together, “potentially foreclose[ing] the possibility of the event taking shape otherwise” by delineating the discursive boundaries of the event (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 6).

*TheFashionSpot.com* represents the first stage of the event, as it progresses from anticipation into actualisation. The discussion on the forum begins with aesthetics, but ends in a deadlock over the nature of representation. The shift from an impasse – an anticipatory state of event-in-becoming – to aesthetics, and then to representation, signals the transformation of the genre of this event from one part of the fashion industry’s seasonal cycle, to scandal. As the genre of event transforms, it sublimates the ambivalence in the event under the rubric of scandal. In doing so, it delimits the scandalous event of “Haute Mess.” From this, the multiplicity of commentary became sorted into a series of binaries: commenters either see the appropriation, and therefore, the racism and classism in the editorial, or they do not; or, they do, but they do not care. *TheFashionSpot.com* shows the emergence of categories within the scandal, categories that calcify as “Haute Mess” begins to appear as a story in online magazines.

**Online Magazines**

While *TheFashionSpot.com* began covering #OVERTHETOP in late February 2012, increasing coverage on blogs and online magazines coincided with the full editorial release and promotional video editorial on *Vogue.it* on the 7th of March. The *Vogue.it* post, titled “Over the Top: Photos by Steven Meisel” contains a gallery of images and a “Backstage Video,” which features the models at work. The written text is minimal, giving the names of the styling team, a release date for Italy, and a small blurb describing, among other aspects of the styling, the make-up. The African American women’s lifestyle site, *VibeVixen.com*, was

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9 The blurb reads: “Craziness! Starting from the colours. Admirably expressed through eccentric and visionary make-up. With psychedelic eyelids, adorned in the lavender nuance of Pure Colour Eyeshadow, iridescent violet, and decorated with contrasting drawings created with Double Wear Lip Pencil, pink, and Eye Pencil, forest. Lips, instead, are natural with Pure Colour Sensuous Rouge, nude, a bright and moisturizing lipstick. All Estée Lauder. Printed brocade jacket with jewelled button and top entirely embroidered with beads and crystals: Dolce & Gabbana. Earrings Erickson Beamon. Hair Jimmy Paul for Bumble and Bumble. Maquillage Pat McGrath. Manicure Lisa Logan for Minx Nail Artists by Next. Fashion Editor Lori Goldstein. This month’s issue of
among the first of the online magazines to report on “Haute Mess,” posting articles about the shoot on the same day as “Over The Top: Photos by Steven Meisel” appeared on Vogue.it (Monaco). VibeVixen.com pointed to the “colourful clothes, crazy up-do’s and weaves, extravagant nails and…gold teeth,” the “restaurants and bathrooms” that made up the set, and the “pregnant” model and models with “infants,” and suggested that “many are raising an eyebrow at the photos because the women seem to be projecting some stereotypes” (Monaco). The article then goes on to say that “the hair styles of the models can be seen at almost every black hair show…it is clear that the theme of this shoot was ‘ghetto’” (Monaco). VibeVixen.com both reiterates and explicates the points about racist and stereotyped representation from TheFashionSpot.com forum by mentioning specific events such as hair shows, and by suggesting connections between the location, styling, and props. However, the tone of VibeVixen.com’s article is distinctly ambivalent, as it oscillates between saying that “Haute Mess” “seems to be projecting…stereotypes” and stating that “it is clear that the theme of this shoot was ‘ghetto’.” This ambivalent tone also appeared in other coverage of the shoot.

Other articles covering “Haute Mess” took a tentative and ambivalent approach to discussing the shoot. The Feminist website, Jezebel.com (Sauers), African American culture websites GlobalGrind.com (Walker) and ConcreteLoop.com (Norell), news and culture websites TheHuffingtonPost.com (Wilson) and TheFrisky.com (Krause), and fashion website Fashionista.com (Mau) also published articles about “Haute Mess,” that focused on the question of representation. These websites often framed their reports as questions, or, as with VibeVixen.com, shifted between firm claims and hesitant remarks. Jezebel.com suggested that “Haute Mess” “seems kinda racist” and quoted directly from TheFashionSpot.com (Sauers), while Fashionista.com noted that the editorial was “accused of being ‘in poor taste’” (Mau “‘Vogue Italia’s ‘Haute Mess’ Finally Drops, Is Accused of Being In ‘Poor Taste’’”). GlobalGrind.com, TheHuffingtonPost.com, and TheFrisky.com all asked variations of the question: “is ‘Haute Mess’ racist?” (Krause, Walker, Wilson). ConcreteLoop.com also asked whether the shoot was “offensive or not” (Norell). GlobalGrind.com, TheHuffingtonPost.com, and Fashionista.com all quoted from VibeVixen.com’s report on the editorial, which criticised “Haute Mess” for “projecting…stereotypes” and suggested that although “racist” might be a harsh word to describe the editorial, “it was definitely done in poor taste and judgement”
(Monaco). Ultimately, coverage of “Haute Mess” often turned responsibility for moral judgement over to its readers as a question, while strongly implying that “Haute Mess” was a racist text. Jezebel.com (Sauers), GlobalGrind.com (Walker), ConcreteLoop.com (Norell), TheHuffingtonPost.com (Wilson), TheFrisky.com (Krause), and Fashionista.com (Mau) all provided images of “Haute Mess” and photographs of very nearly identical weaves collected from sites such as African American woman’s fitness blog YumYucky.com and “funny” submission website NoWayGirl.com. Therefore, “Haute Mess” appeared already framed by headlines asking questions about representation, and alongside images that resembled it. What emerged from the online magazines eliciting responses to the scandal was a hybrid dialogue that encompassed both the coverage of the event and direct responses from commenters to the “Haute Mess” editorial.

Subsequently, smaller blog sites posted about “Haute Mess,” often linking to one of the more established online sites as a source. For example, BlackGirlLongHair.com focused on Vogue Italia’s history of problematic representation of black women, and white fetishizing of black women’s bodies and style, providing some comparative images at the end of the post that show the models from “Haute Mess” next to photographs – some from NoWayGirl.com – of black women wearing very similar weaves (Knight). MyAfricaIsShowingg.blogspot.com [sic] reported that “some people think this is in poor taste and makes a mockery of certain sections of the Black/African American community” before expressing a more ambivalent position: “I never associated them [the models] with any particular race…I thought the styling borrowed a bit from alternative fashions,” and posting comparative images taken from BlackGirlLongHair.com (“18th March 2012 Vogue Italia’s Haute Mess”). Thus, these smaller blogs showed a similarly ambivalent attitude toward “Haute Mess” that the online magazines sites did. Therefore, what was framed by online coverage as a clear cut issue of cultural appropriation and bad representation was instead constantly being negotiated.

The discursive template for discussing “Haute Mess” began as a question of good or bad aesthetics, and transformed into a question of good or bad representation. This transformation occurred when several commenters on TheFashionSpot.com linked to other commenters to photographs with weaves that resembled those in “Haute Mess.” Commenters on TheFashionSpot.com unearthed a series of images that bore a striking resemblance to the weaves in “Haute Mess.” The curator of Rubyshimmer.tumblr.com, who had also posted on TheFashionSpot.com under the name Rubyshimmer, linked to a post on their Tumblr showing
Figure 6: Comparative Images on Rubyshimmer.Tumblr.com
pictures of the “Haute Mess” weaves side by side with pictures of similar weaves being worn by black women (fig. 6). Underneath the comparative gallery of photographs, Rubyshimmer wrote “[a]nyone who says they don’t see why this is racist can kiss my black ass.”

Commenters on Dhani Mau’s article on Fashionista.com weighed in with their views about the appropriation that ranged from dismissal – “I don’t think that it’s racist” (Kamila Powell commenting on Mau “Debate Continues”) – to approval: “I think its HOT!” (Carlton Jordan ibid). Others accused Vogue Italia of creative bankruptcy, suggesting that “the idea was unoriginal and uninspired” (Karen Stephens ibid). Jezebel.com linked to YumYucky.com, a health and fitness blog, which contained a post that collated a series of photographs of anonymous African American women wearing weaves that were essentially identical to the ones in “Haute Mess.” At Jezebel.com, some commenters expressed their disgust with Vogue Italia’s perceived act of cultural appropriation: “It’s one thing to be ‘mesmerized’ by black or Latino people but it’s a whole other thing to play dress up and mock them. Vogue Italia is no stranger to racial controversy” (Queenstar commenting on Sauers). Although responses from the commenters on the articles varied, the articles themselves framed the relationship between “Haute Mess” and the images found online as an act of cultural appropriation.

The images of black street style that circulated as one part of the discussions about racism and classism were used primarily as evidence of Vogue Italia’s racist cultural appropriation. By using the black street style photographs as evidence, the weaves depicted in them accumulated attendant meaning in relation to the styling of “Haute Mess,” while evoking the weaves’ relationship to the history of “black hair.” The white models in “Haute Mess” wore weaves that signified black hair, and therefore histories of black hair. This disjuncture between the white bodies in “Haute Mess” and their weaves was cast as stereotyping, but crucially, in concert with an array of other objects. Writing about the execution of the shoot, commentator Just_10 states that it “[reads] like ‘upper middle class white stereotype of how Poor Black Women present themselves in public’” concluding: “the babies and references to single motherhood, and the malt liquor? LOL” (quoted in Mau “Debate Continues”). The specific references Just_10 makes to this trifecta of liquor, babies, and fast food suggests that these tropes, taken in conjunction with the weaves, come to signify “poor black [American] women.” Photographic evidence of weaves that resemble

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10 This Tumblr post was linked to in Dhani Mau’s Fashionista.com article on “Haute Mess” (“Debate Continues”).
those in “Haute Mess” is therefore only one part of the array of elements needed to signify the ‘Poor Black Woman.’

In this way, the imagined body of the “Poor Black Woman” unfurls from the coverage, articles, and commenters engaged in the discussion about “Haute Mess.” This form of commentary and coverage on and of “Haute Mess” indicates a particular preoccupation with racialised excess in the guise of liquor, fast food, and babies, that in combination with the extreme weaves and acrylics come to predominantly signify “poor black [American] women.” These objects signify the “Poor Black Woman” ambivalently, as they do not belong to any one body, or exist at a single origin, or reside statically in the everyday. Food, drink, children, hair and nails are objects that are either inserted into bodily space, or extrude from it: neither fixed nor ending, completely attached or wholly discrete, they capture the tension between the body and being in the world. Therefore, in the case of “Haute Mess,” the spectre of “people of excess,” those bodies marked as “too much and too little for ordinary social membership” (Berlant, Cruel Optimism 113), emerges through affectively charged objects. These objects, namely, the extreme weaves and acrylics, fast food, babies, and liquor, act as racialised markers of poverty, despite Vogue Italia’s whitewashing.

“MESSY DRAG QUEENS”

TheCut.com

Soon after Fashionista.com and Jezebel.com began reporting on “Haute Mess,” Vogue Italia’s editor Franca Sozzani gave an interview to online magazine TheCut.com about the editorial. Sozzani discussed the concept behind the shoot, stating that “[w]e wanted to make something quite extravagant… to push people to be creative and extravagant” expressing her desire to create a shoot that would demonstrate variety, because “most of fashion all looks alike” (quoted in Moss). When asked if she was aware of the online criticism of the shoot, Sozzani responded:

I think it’s good that everyone sees what they wanted to see… I don’t care as much what people think, because I think that every time that you try to change something, people [say something else]… I think that the most encouraging way is to make a discussion and not to be completely, bored, you know? (quoted in Moss; addition in original).
Sozzani’s comment frames “Haute Mess” as a welcome departure from the banality of everyday life. The desire to avoid boredom suggests the necessity of the event itself, as in this case the genre of scandal provides an “affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold” (Berlant, Cruel Optimism 6). However, rather than take on a specific affect, Sozzani’s comment suggests a more general malaise with everyday rhythms, and an investment in the notion of event-as-rupture.

Sozzani’s investment in an event, was not, however, necessarily an investment in a scandal. Rather, Sozzani’s interview demonstrates an effort to discount the figure of the Poor Black Woman in her relation to “Haute Mess.” When the interviewer asked Sozzani about the accusations of racism in “Haute Mess,” Sozzani responded, “[a] racist image, I really do not understand” (quoted in Moss). Sozzani’s comment both avows the event – “[a] racist image” – and disavows it: “I do not understand.” In her words, the shoot was simply “creative,” and little else. Still, the interviewer pressed Sozzani about classism in “Haute Mess,” stating that they had “also seen the word classist being used, and comments about the opening model being pregnant” (Moss; emphasis in original), to which Sozzani responded:

There are so many sick people in around the world that you cannot – I don’t care about them. I care about normal people. They want to read and see the normal way as we did (quoted in Moss).

Here, Sozzani suggests that there is a correct or normal way to read the editorial, evoking the ordinary, everyday people that appropriately recognise certain texts as “creative and extravagant” (Sozzani quoted in Moss). Claiming that there was a “normal” way of approaching “Haute Mess” implied that there was an abnormal way of reading it too. Yet, Sozzani’s version of normal is ambivalent. It is unclear if the normal people she cares about are the ones that inspired the editorial, if they are the normal consumer of Vogue Italia, or if they are entirely everyday – so normal as to be unaware of Vogue Italia. However, in the context of the scandalous event, invoking the “normal” reads as an implicit gesture to the apparently abnormal discourse about cultural appropriation. Ostensibly, the abnormal includes those who are interested in the politics and representation of class, race, and gender in “Haute Mess.” It also includes those who accuse Vogue Italia of uncreatively appropriating.

The figure of the Messy Drag Queen relates ambivalently to the normal people which Sozzani invoked. Moss asked Sozzani about a blog post on “Haute Mess” on Vogue.it, which claimed that the inspiration behind the shoot is “Messy Drag Queens,” and characterised
them as everyday in a “diner or supermarket” (Gherardesca). Sozzani responded “it’s one of [the inspirations], yes, of course. Today there is not one world. Today, there is a different point of view for everything” (quoted in Moss). The plurality of views that Sozzani evoked momentarily acknowledged the competing narratives in this event. Yet, Sozzani stated that she did not have any knowledge of the source images from YumYucky.com, NoWayGirl.com, and other sites (Moss). Instead, the recognition of multiple ways of seeing “Haute Mess” became an exercise in locating “Haute Mess” in relation to a stable referent: a diner. Sozzani claimed that “Haute Mess” was shot in Kelloggs Diner “because I like it” (quoted in Moss). The interview concluded with Sozzani saying that #OVERTHTOP was “not a controversial issue at all” (ibid) suggesting that her desire for new ways of styling is not the same as a desire for controversy.

**Vogue.it**

Sozzani’s interview was a somewhat disjointed addendum to a more in depth response posted on Vogue.it’s blog titled “Simply Outrageous: An Analysis on a Ever Green Phenomenon.” The article references Judith Butler and Judith Halberstam in support of its central claim that “Haute Mess” “might take its inspiration from messy, dishevelled, counter-intuitive cross-dressers” (Gherardesca). This claim, hedged with a telling “might,” prefaces a discussion that explains to readers what a “Messy Drag Queen” is:

“Messy” does not simply mean having untidy clothes though: a messy drag queen does not pass as sufficiently feminine… when the queens define themselves – as well as their clothes – as “messy,” it is a queer assertion (Gherardesca).

The article continues by asking: “what if you choose not to play one of the [gender] roles that has been decreed by society?” but rather “a role that’s neither ‘masculine’ nor ‘feminine’?” by instead favouring that “messy, individualistic, gender bending look” (Gherardesca). This line of reasoning – that not being styled as recognizably masculine or feminine necessarily equates to a “mess” – postulates messiness as a tactic for dealing with gender binaries primarily through style. The remark about defining oneself also frames the drag queen as a figure with agency, and equates that agency with power, thereby rendering Vogue Italia’s appropriation as homage. Furthermore, positing messiness as a tactic also reframes the scandalous event of “Haute Mess” as messy and ambivalent in itself: that this “might” be one way of locating and making sense of the production of the event.
Figure 7: Vogue.it's Blog Post "Simply Outrageous"

Figure 8: Close-Up of "Simply Outrageous" Gallery with Thumbnail Images
Figure 9: "Simply Outrageous" Gallery with a Still from *Paris Is Burning* (1991)

Figure 10: Extreme Close-Up of "Simply Outrageous" Gallery Thumbnails
In this way, a vaguely delineated “messiness” is recast as a particular origin. This move is foregrounded by the position of the Vogue.it curated photo album about Messy Drag Queen style at the top of the article (fig. 7). The Vogue.it gallery included images of RuPaul (fig. 7), photographs from Paris is Burning (1991) (fig. 9), The Cockettes, and others (fig. 8 and fig. 10) in a move of appropriation that echoes the posts citing the “origins” of the weaves featured in the shoot on sites such as YumYucky.com. However, the origin of the Messy Drag Queen does not seem to have the stable referent that the provision of photographs would suggest. “Simply Outrageous” continues:

... Queer imagery ... is not confined to homosexuals... there have been several heterosexual women over the years that have decided to express their own individuality by dressing in an outrageous – but not conventionally feminine or masculine – way. Usually these women, proud of their unconventional appearance, have brought their performances to everyday life, regardless of their sexual orientation. Perhaps it’s no accident that Meisel’s “girls” are in a diner and a supermarket, and not on stage (ibid).

As Vogue.it’s post references other cultural texts – films, art, celebrities – it also locates its inspiration in imagined spectacular, yet everyday bodies. However, the bodies that Vogue.it imagines efface the historical and political particularities of drag.

This official narrative about “Haute Mess” drew upon historical representations of queer people by providing a gallery apparently containing exemplars of Messy Drag Queen Style. In doing so, it appropriated a wide variety of photographs of queer people – some, such as RuPaul, decidedly glamorous – recasting them alongside celebrities, art, 1970s fashions to monolithically signify as Messy Drag Queen style. Vogue Italia’s imagining of this style is a narrow one. For although the photograph album contains images of people of colour, such as Marsha P. Johnson, the overwhelmingly white cast in “Haute Mess” implies that Vogue Italia’s imagining of messy drag is a specifically white one. While the album shows different bodily performances, the writing implies that Messy Drag Queen style should be most celebrated when adopted by “heterosexual women...who express their own individuality” (Gherardesca). Furthermore, the gallery offers textual referents of real people, and the article points towards “real” life by mentioning everyday spaces– the supermarket, the diner – depicted in the editorial shoot. By evoking everydayness through places where people eat or buy food, the Messy Drag Queen is grounded by traces of domesticity and the affective
aspects of food. However, this figure also exceeds the everyday by making a “performance” of everyday life, by being “unconventional” in the banal space of the diner. In this way, the Messy Drag Queen is framed as everyday and spectacular, queer, yet heterosexual, messy, yet glamorous. By apparently favouring “that gender-bending look,” the Messy Drag Queen makes stylistic sense out of a liminal space by appropriating queer bodies.

**Event, Genre, and Scandal**

Generally, a scandal is a moment of apparently truthful revelation. John B. Thompson’s work on political scandal suggests that a “mediated scandal… [involves] the disclosure through the media of some action or activity that was previously hidden from view, that involved the transgression of certain values and norms and that, on being disclosed, elicit… public expressions of disapproval and outrage” (“New Visibility” 42). Following Thompson, scandal is a negotiation of public/private spheres that dictate what is reasonably visible and when. Yet the impasse on TheFashionSpot.com before the transformation of “Haute Mess” into a scandal complicates this formulation, drawing attention to the production and mobilisation of the categories of “Poor Black Woman” and “Messy Drag Queen.” These categories, that stem from the interventionist discourses of appropriation and inspiration, complicate the distinction of public and private that marks scandal. The Poor Black Woman emerges from TheFashionSpot.com forum, and through the online magazine coverage that repeats and amplifies the debate about cultural appropriation that started there. By contrast, the Messy Drag Queen comes out of Sozzani’s assertion that “Haute Mess” is about creativity and extravagance, and out of Vogue.it’s “Simply Outrageous,” which explicitly claims that Messy Drag Queen style inspired the shoot. For both, the material that proves the existence of these figures is already public, on NoWayGirl.com and in official media archives. Furthermore, expressions about the editorial on TheFashionSpot.com and in online magazine coverage are not uniformly of “disapproval and outrage,” rather they are feelings or attitudes about cultural appropriation or inspiration. In this way, the scandalous event of “Haute Mess” is a contingent, historically embedded, and ongoing process: it is not without history.

“Haute Mess” appears to be an open and shut textual event that can be categorised, responded to, and solved. Yet the appearance of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen indicate the production of knowledge that extends beyond it. In her discussion of Foucault’s concept of eventilization, Berlant states that it refers to a “need to move analytically beyond the moment when a happening moves into common sense, or a process
congeals into an object-event that conceals its immanence, its potentially enigmatic or unfinished activity” (*Cruel Optimism* 64). Foucault describes this method as destroying “the abstract unity of change and event” (*Archaeology* 195). “Haute Mess” is ostensibly a congealed event, as it performs familiar interventionist discourses of cultural appropriation or inspiration, and as it happened in the recent past. Yet neither of these discourses reach a conclusion about “Haute Mess.” They do not definitively mark the editorial as racist or classist, but it does not expunge these possibilities either. In this sense, we cannot know what “Haute Mess” apparently is. What I do examine, however, are the issues that the categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen raise in relation to origins, objects, and everydayness and the role they play in the production of knowledge about bodies through the two figures.
As the previous chapter demonstrates, the identity categories of Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen emerged as “Haute Mess” transformed into a scandalous event. Throughout the coverage, photographs of anonymous black women wearing weaves that matched the ones in “Haute Mess” were reproduced time and time again in online magazines such as Jezebel.com as evidence of Vogue Italia’s appropriation. Often, magazines linked to the source of the photograph (usually YumYucky.com or NoWayGirl.com) and, in doing so, framed the Poor Black Woman as the origin of the styles depicted in “Haute Mess,” while simultaneously producing an origin for her. Vogue.it’s blog post, “Simply Outrageous,” also used other photographs to construct an “origin” for the Messy Drag Queen and present this figure as an origin. Accordingly, I argue that the emergence of the categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen rely on each category asserting a verifiable origin, which is produced via informal or institutional archives of photographs. By producing knowledge about each figure’s respective origin through these archives, the interventionist discourses in this event treat these archives as having a stake in the real. However, the formation of these archives also reveals their instability, thus drawing attention to the disjuncture between the notion of an origin and the real. In this way, the efforts throughout this event to bring together the idea of an origin and the real demonstrate how both are always already in question for the figures of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen.

The rhetorical investment in the origin of “Haute Mess” that extra-textual references point to suggests that, in this instance, the production of genre and event demands an identifiable genesis. The ostensible origins of “Haute Mess” are discursively produced through informal and institutional archives. The informal archives are produced in relation to the Poor Black Woman, as they were cobbled together ad hoc throughout the event. On the other hand, the institutional archive structures the Messy Drag Queen and Vogue Italia’s official narrative of inspiration. Generally, the archive “explain[s] something aesthetic” (Berlant, Cruel Optimism 67): in this instance, messy drag style, or the repetition of weaves. But the archives in this event also seek to explain two categories presumed to be about real people: the Poor Black Woman and the Messy Drag Queen. Therefore, the search for the origin of “Haute Mess” in this event also creates its origin, by conflating the representation of bodies in photographs with bodily practices. In the case of the apparently inspirational images
presented on *Vogue.it*, this happens through historical photographs that are presented as emblematic of the Messy Drag Queen’s style practices. In the so-called original photographs found on *YumYucky.com* and *NoWayGirl.com*, on the other hand, this occurs through the evocations of racialised patterns of consumption that suggest the Poor Black Woman. In this way, things that bodies are depicted doing become ways of marking textual origins as real or fake, and producing knowledge about marginalised bodies through the categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen.

In order to trace the production of origins for these figures, I focus, in this chapter, on the series of archives which are provided as putative origins for the *Vogue Italia* shoot. I begin with a discussion of the construction of the Messy Drag Queen in *Vogue.it*’s “Simply Outrageous” blog post, which produces a photograph album gallery as archival evidence of this figure’s style. By yoking the category of the Messy Drag Queen to *Vogue.it*’s iteration of the varied histories, cultures, and practices associated with drag, *Vogue.it* produces a sense of a stable past from which the Messy Drag Queen apparently originates. In this way, *Vogue.it* uses the gallery to rhetorically position the Messy Drag Queen as the inheritor of an apparently particular tradition of drag style. Therefore, with reference to Foucault and Butler, I suggest that the blog post reifies the specificity conveyed through the varied array of photographs to broadly signify “tradition.” I then turn to this event’s other, less formal archive: the use of comparative images in the online magazine coverage. Websites such as Jezebel.com provided images from “Haute Mess” next to images of the weaves found online that strongly resembled those in *Vogue Italia*. This action indicates that the relationship between the images was already there, and furthermore, that this link is immutable. However, using Foucault’s characterisation of the archive, I demonstrate how the practice of comparing images attempts to fix the link between the photographs from “Haute Mess” and those of anonymous black women that circulate online. Therefore, I argue that comparing is an action that attempts to naturalise the apparently original status of the images found online.

Articles comparing “Haute Mess” to other online images often link to, or cite, the sources for the online images. Jezebel.com, for example, linked to a blog post called “Gallery of Ghetto Fabulous, Edible Hair-dos” on *YumYucky.com*, a fitness and food blog. The weaves depicted use food or food wrappers as a part of their construction, which relates to *YumYucky.com*’s focus on food. The curated and discrete nature of the “Edible Hair-dos” blog post allows it to function as an easily attributable origin for Haute Mess. Furthermore, “Edible Hair-dos” frames the putative origins of “Haute Mess” in relation to consumption.
Accordingly, in the next section of the chapter and with reference to the work of de Certeau, I show how “Edible Hair-dos” positions the bodies depicted in the post as consuming badly, and how this apparently errant consumption is coded as authentic through the logic of the event. Finally, I address the other website that is sometimes linked to as the origin of for the weaves in “Haute Mess” in the online coverage: NoWayGirl.com. In a similar way to YumYucky.com, the logic of NoWayGirl.com evokes “failed” kinds of consumption through its punitive attitude toward bodily modifications depicted in the photographs on it. However, through the lens of the event, the tension between “natural” and “modified” consumption depicted in the photographs produces a hierarchy between “Haute Mess” and the photographs on NoWayGirl.com. Paradoxically, in relation to “Haute Mess” the apparently inauthentic forms of bodily modification depicted on NoWayGirl.com are reoriented as the authentic origin of the Poor Black Woman. Despite this, the way that NoWayGirl.com functions as an informal archive is far less precise than the former methods of comparison or links to curated blog posts. As a result, I argue that NoWayGirl.com is an origin undermined by its own logic. By foregrounding failure, NoWayGirl.com highlights the untenable process of producing a single origin for the Poor Black Woman. My analysis of this website uses Berlant’s discussion of the archive in order to reveal how this ostensibly obvious and stable origin for the category of the Poor Black Woman is actually contingent and negotiated. As such, the figures of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen provide a way of negotiating and producing the relationship between NoWayGirl.com and Vogue Italia. Tethered to both texts but originating in neither, cited in both texts but inhabiting neither, these categories instead exist in a state of suspension, and without origin.

Vogue.it “Simply Outrageous”: Origin and History

The Messy Drag Queen is Vogue Italia’s official narrative of origin for “Haute Mess.” From “Simply Outrageous: An Analysis on an Ever Green Phenomenon,” the blog post on Vogue.it, Vogue Italia claims that “Haute Mess” “might take its inspiration from messy drags: untidy, dishevelled, counter-intuitive cross-dressers” (Gherardesca). To illustrate the post, Vogue.it provided a gallery of photographs that apparently exemplified Messy Drag Queen style. The album is of apparently inspirational images that the viewer can click through, beginning with a still from Blue in the Face (1995) featuring RuPaul holding a microphone and poised to lead a crowd through a series of dance steps (fig. 7). The gallery contains twenty-one images, which are roughly split between archival documentary shots and film stills. Among the film stills, there are shots from The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert (1994) (fig. 7
Several Nan Goldin photographs feature, showing intimate rituals of drag queens putting on makeup and clothing. Warhol superstars Candy Darling and Jackie Curtis appear, as well as musicians The Cockettes with Pristine Condition, activist Marsha P. Johnson, the punk model Jordan, artist Urs Lüthi, and actors Elodie and Jean-Pierre Kalfon. Other photographs are identified by location rather than by individuals or photographers, such as shots of patrons at the club Studio 57, dated to the late 1970s and early 1980s, and an image of the book *Casa Susanna*¹¹ and one portrait from it.

Collectively, the “Simply Outrageous” gallery enacts what Foucault terms a “positivity of discourse” in which there is an attempt to define the field that “Haute Mess” operates in (*Archaeology* 143). In “Simply Outrageous,” the Messy Drag Queen signifies in ambivalent, incoherent, and contradictory ways. By providing a photographic gallery that spans the 1950s to the 1990s, *Vogue.it* implies that the Messy Drag Queen is an historical figure, and that “Haute Mess” falls within the particular aesthetic tradition of drag. Yet the gallery represents a varied – rather than specifically messy – tradition of drag. The comments on *TheFashionSpot.com*, like “Simply Outrageous,” use drag to signify monolithically. *YourMonster* states that “I thought it was mocking drag queens at first,” while *ForChicSake* says that “[A]bbey [Lee Kershaw] … she looks [like]… a drag queen” (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”). However, some draw attention to the variance in the gallery, thus undermining its ability to signify generally. As *Racialicious.com* points out, the gallery starts with an image of RuPaul, who is emphatically not messy:

The way *Vogue* phrases “messy drags,” however, makes me cringe a bit. I do see the eye makeup on a lot of the shots as clearly a Divine influence… [h]owever, RuPaul is also listed as an inspiration, but she’s one of the most pristine drag queens working today, firmly categorized as a glamour queen (Lamour)

Similarly, there is a conflation of the performance of drag with the gender performance of transgender people through the use of images of Candy Darling and Marsha P. Johnson. Furthermore, the gallery includes images that are quite readily associated with a certain period of fashion, such as Jordan and punk style (fig. 8), or Jean-Pierre Kalfon and 1970s glam style. As such, the gallery at once depicts some of the varied traditions of drag and

¹¹ *Casa Susanna* was a resort in Hunter, New York, that functioned as a safe space for men in the 1950s and 60s to gather and cross dress.
conflates them with other eras, cultures, and bodily practices, subsuming them all under the rubric of style. “Simply Outrageous” and *Vogue Italia* are therefore “caught up in the very things that they connect,” insofar as they betray an investment *that* they connect (Foucault, *Archaeology* 144). As such, the visual archive *Vogue.it* supplies functions unevenly, even as *Vogue* employs the archive as evidence by positioning it as the inspiration behind “Haute Mess.”

The identity category of the Messy Drag Queen in “Simply Outrageous” is a way of unifying different styles by claiming everyday bodily performances as inspirational. *Vogue.it* positions the Messy Drag Queen as a figure that inherits a tradition which is inflected with a gritty aesthetic, a kind of everydayness that the written text in the post invokes as “performances [in] everyday life” (Gherardesca). Through the evocation of the ongoing nature of everyday life, *Vogue.it* ameliorates the rift between historical images and the present through the imagined bodily performance of the Messy Drag Queen. Because of this, the disjuncture between the present iteration of the Messy Drag Queen and those figures depicted in the grainy snapshots, slightly washed out stills, and documentary style photographs is smoothed over through the construction of an “everyday” iteration of drag, which is so absolutely everyday that potentially anyone – as the gallery suggests – could take part in it. By positioning the Messy Drag Queen in this way, *Vogue.it* appears to draw on a history, pay homage to that history, and contribute to its persistence. Yet implicitly appealing to tradition conflates the production of a textual origin with “original” creative practices and bodies, and draws parallels between the “authentically” original and the everyday. The concerted effort to frame “Haute Mess” in this manner on the part of *Vogue Italia* suggests that the notion of history is unstable for the Messy Drag Queen. Historical narrative is implied, but deployed incoherently, and it is this incoherence that threatens to undermine the category of the Messy Drag Queen’s relationship to a tradition, and therefore, to an *origin*. Hence, the use of Messy Drag Queen *style* attempts to stop the gaps that history opens by evoking and privileging ephemeral bodily performance.

“Simply Outrageous” identifies the photographs in its gallery generally, as “queer imagery of that period” (Gherardesca), privileging the visual in accounts of Messy Drag Queen style. “Examples [such as] John Waters’s Dreamlanders, The Cockettes, and Andy Warhol’s superstars” are listed as self-evident occurrences of “gender bending style” (ibid). *Vogue.it*’s formulation of the Messy Drag Queen is distinctly ambivalent. By claiming that the Messy Drag Queen is the real origin of “Haute Mess,” *Vogue.it* positions the Messy Drag
Queen as a “performance that works, that effects realness” (Butler 88). In this case, *Vogue.it*’s foregrounding of the performative aspects of the Messy Drag Queen imbues its claim of an origin with a sense of realness. However, realness is itself a “standard used to judge any given performance” (Butler 88) and, as such, draws attention to the performance and imitative structure of drag generally, even as it reifies it as real. *Vogue.it*’s performance is then read in much the same way as an apparently failed performance is. A commenter on the post states that they find the Messy Drag Queen narrative “inappropriate” and entreats *Vogue Italia* to “just admit they took their inspiration in nowaygirl.com and general ghetto fabulousness” (grinbeetch on Gherardesca). Thus, the Messy Drag Queen appears to be read as fake, and particularly so given *Vogue.it*’s possibly unwitting citation of Jack Halberstam and Butler. In this way, reading *Vogue.it*’s Messy Drag Queen echoes Butler’s claim that “when what appears and how it is ‘read’ diverge, the artifice of performance can be read as artifice” (88). *Vogue.it*’s iteration of the Messy Drag Queen is read as a fake origin, but the failure of this origin draws attention to the construction of origin in the Poor Black Woman for this event.

**Online Coverage: Origin and Comparison**

The genesis of the Poor Black Woman in the Haute Mess scandal began, like the Messy Drag Queen, with photographs. However, these photographs resembled “Haute Mess” in a very specific way through the depiction of extreme weaves. Online magazines such as *Fashionista.com* (fig. 12) and *Jezebel.com* (fig. 11) reproduced images from “Haute Mess” alongside the images found online that resembled them. By comparing images, the online magazines suggested that there was a fixed link between the two sets of images. In this act of comparison, they asserted that “Haute Mess” had a static and fixed history by demonstrating that the weaves were elsewhere at other times. The interventionist narrative of appropriation therefore makes a truth claim about “Haute Mess” that takes temporal form: the weaves were there before “Haute Mess,” so “Haute Mess” comes after the weaves. This narrative posits the Poor Black Woman as the definitive origin of “Haute Mess” because the images that resemble “Haute Mess” existed before it. This resembles the temporal logic of the “Simply Outrageous” gallery, but through the specificity of the extreme weaves. Drawn into relation with “Haute Mess,” the photographs of anonymous women wearing weaves which appeared on sites like *YumYucky.com* and *NoWayGirl.com* become newly meaningful in this event as the apparent origin of the Poor Black Woman.
In fact, should there be any doubt about the specific inspiration for the styling, nail design, and—most notably—the hair styles on display in "Maine Mess"...

Figure 11: Jezebel.com’s Comparative Archive of the Skittles Weave
Figure 12: Fashionista.com's Comparative Archive of the Skittles Weave
Comparative images that show “Haute Mess” alongside its anonymous counterparts treat the resemblance between the weaves as obvious, even while inviting comparison. The practice of comparing “Haute Mess” to other images reaches back to the discussion in TheFashionSpot.com forum. On 7th March 2012, user GivenchyHomme posted a link to a post on YumYucky.com, with the comment “take a look. This is how some women actually dress” (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”). On the same day, LabelWhore4 posted a response to Ives927 which contained a link to the Fashin.LiveJournal.com community demonstrating the link between “Haute Mess” and images of African-American women (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”).\textsuperscript{12}\_incognito also posted the same link, accompanied with the comment: “the styling is lifted almost literally from those of stereotypically ‘ghetto’ black women” (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”). As discussed in Chapter One, rubyshimmer also posted a link to their Tumblr which highlighted comparative images of “Haute Mess” (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”), and Jezebel.com included a link to the gallery of extreme weaves on YumYucky.com in their story, along with comparative photos (fig. 11) (Sauers). An array of other blogs included comparative galleries with their posts about “Haute Mess,” but did not attribute the images to any particular source: for example, MyAfricaIsShowingg.Blogspot.com [sic], and BlackGirlLongHair.com. Other articles attributed photographs more generally: MadameNoire.com and Racialicious.com suggested that there was a “correlation between [‘Haute Mess’] and …the ‘Ghetto Fabulous’ panache we see on sites like Hot Ghetto Mess” and that “maybe inspiration came from another source [such as] Fail Blog’s Poorly Dressed” (Ball, Lamour). Through these acts, comparison became a way of directly asserting the relationship between two texts – “Haute Mess” and the images that resembled it – and therefore asserting the Poor Black Woman as the shoot’s origin.

While some articles attributed the source images for “Haute Mess” to general styles or types (e.g. “ghetto” or “drag”), several prominent online magazines linked to, or name checked YumYucky.com or NoWayGirl.com. Notably, Jezebel.com attributed the source of the “Haute Mess” style to YumYucky.com, while Fashionista.com (fig. 12) observed that:

many of the looks appear to depict American cultural stereotypes and resembled images from American sites like Nowaygirl.com, which post anonymous photographs of people in places like Wal Mart and McDonald’s with the intent of poking fun at them (Mau “Franca Sozzani Defends Haute Mess Editorial”)

\textsuperscript{12} At the time, the page showed images depicting black women wearing weaves similar to those in “Haute Mess.” At the time of writing, the page has been removed by LiveJournal.com.
This comment suggests that what is “really” being represented in the repetition of the weaves are “American cultural stereotypes” (ibid), and although this comment does not explicitly mention race, it invokes categories – “cultural stereotypes” – and, in doing so, gestures to the figure of the Poor Black Woman. Finally, in Franca Sozzani’s interview with TheCut.com, the Vogue Italia editor was asked directly if she had seen the “photos from a gallery of ‘Ghetto-Fabulous, Edible Hair-dos,’ which looked a lot like the hairstyles from ‘Haute Mess’” (Moss). The interviewer elaborates: “they were pictures of real women, taken a few years ago, with Skittles packages in their hair or basket-weave hairdos. They were probably the source photos, but they were also pretty close to the final styles” (Moss). Here, Sozzani’s generalised account of the styling for “Haute Mess” as “creative and extravagant” is at odds with the specificity of the interviewer’s questions, which cite the weaves in particular (Moss).

Sozzani’s lack of acknowledgement of the photographs that resemble “Haute Mess,” coupled with Vogue Italia’s failed attribution of an adequate source, focused the online commentary concerning “Haute Mess” around the interventionist discourse of cultural appropriation. This simultaneously conjured up a space in which Vogue Italia’s official narrative could intervene. As discussed in the previous chapter, Vogue.it appeared to respond to accusations of cultural appropriation by claiming that the inspiration behind “Haute Mess” was Messy Drag Queens. This appeared as a response only in the context of the online coverage, while Sozzani’s professed ignorance of other images allowed Vogue.it to focus its claim on “Haute Mess” and its “true” inspiration. Through the emphasis on proper attribution in both Vogue Italia’s official discourse of inspiration and the online coverage’s discourse of cultural appropriation, any ambiguity regarding the origin of “Haute Mess” was sublimated in the act of locating an origin for “Haute Mess.” Thus, the difficulty of finding an exact origin in the figure of Poor Black Woman was glossed over through the apparently glaringly obvious lack of attribution on Vogue Italia’s part. On the other hand, Vogue.it’s proposed origin in the Messy Drag Queen seemed to collapse under the pressure of other more obvious origins. Finally, the coverage shows that proper attribution to a given source, while apparently desirable, is inconsistent, even for those articles that did attribute.

Foucault claims that the archive is a “system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events” (Archaeology 144 – 145). In this case, it is the mobilisation of informal archives which appear as “unique events” by seemingly disrupting Vogue Italia’s institutional archive. On TheCut.com, the informal archives around the category of the Poor Black Woman upset Vogue Italia’s official narrative. Here, the informal archive is suddenly
invoked in the interview with Sozzani through the interviewer’s statement about the resemblance of “Haute Mess” to images such as those found on NoWayGirl.com or YumYucky.com, the “pictures of real women… with Skittles packages in their hair or basket weave hairdos… pretty close to the final styles” (Moss). Sozzani’s denial appears, in the context of the event, to reflect anxiety about the invocation of an informal archive and what it means: namely, “real” women. As such, Sozzani’s hurried and uncertain response – “I don’t know, I don’t know what to answer. No” (quoted in Moss) – discloses an apparent faith in the power of the institutional archive to convince, and reveals a discomfort with its inability, in this instance, to do so. Furthermore, in the context of this event, Sozzani’s response also disavows the reality that the informal archive apparently signifies, and simultaneously affirms it. Yet, to function as disruption, the informal archives rely on the sense of order and power that the institutional archive promises. Thus, though they appear at odds in this event, the categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen are mutually dependent via their reliance on archives.

YumYucky.com: Origin and Consumption

YumYucky.com’s “Gallery of Ghetto-Fabulous, Edible Hair-dos” was posted on the 8th March 2011, and was later cited multiple times by different sources in relation to “Haute Mess.” The post consisted of a series of five captioned photographs, all depicting black people wearing weaves. Significantly, three of these weaves resemble those worn by models in “Haute Mess”: an Easter egg basket weave, a Skittles weave, and a weave made of money. Similar to the initial discussion about aesthetics in “Haute Mess” on TheFashionSpot.com forum, commenters’ opinions about the images ranged from “garbage… kinda nasty” and “they look like a hot mess” to “so awesome” (“Edible Hair-dos”). A year later, in March 2012, the post listed thirteen links from other blogs discussing “Haute Mess,” in addition to links from websites Jezebel.com, Fashionista.com, and TheCut.com. The post’s format – tidily curated, with the majority of images matching “Haute Mess” – turned it into easy evidence for Jezebel.com and other online magazines to link to. The curated form of “Edible Hair-dos” (fig. 13 and fig. 14) constitutes an informal archive of extreme weaves, easily aligned with “Haute Mess” in this scandalous event.

On YumYucky.com, “Edible Hair-dos” appeared as part of a broader, if at times irreverent, discourse of “taking care of oneself” through food and exercise. Although the images in “Edible Hair-dos” might be read as creative, beautiful, or ugly, the captions draw
Figure 13: "Gallery of Ghetto Fabulous, Edible Hair-dos" on YumYucky.com Depicting the Easter Egg Weave
Figure 14: YumYucky.com's "Edible Hair-dos" continued, the Skittles Weave
attention to the food component of each weave. The money weave is deemed “edible, because it’s grocery money,” while the author of the post expresses a preference for “regular Skittles over the pastel variety” in the caption for the Skittles weave (fig. 14), before inviting readers looking at the Easter Egg basket weave to “Rock ‘dat style for East-aah!” (fig. 13) (“Edible Hair-dos”). Although the captions are clearly intended to be humorous, they collapse the practice of eating into that of bodily modification, framing the images as an errant bodily practice. The bodies depicted in the photographs are deemed to be errant because they wear, rather than eat, the food attached to or evoked by the weaves. While these images clearly show effort in adornment, this effort is ostensibly misdirected: wrong food, wrong practice.

The models depicted in the images on YumYucky.com exemplify the category of the Poor Black Woman through the intersection of origin and consumption. Initially, they are framed as the “origins” of “Haute Mess” through links from online coverage, specifically Jezebel.com (Sauers). Subsequently, because YumYucky.com frames the images as failed consumption, the models appear to reveal their status as poor and black; a status conferred on them by virtue of being deemed the origin. By linking to YumYucky.com as one of the primary sources of evidence, Jezebel.com – and other websites – foreground norms around consumption that produce the category of the Poor Black Woman. The misperformance of consumption – consuming food by putting in weaves – constitutes a racialised form of failure in the context of hegemonic white western modes of consumption. Through linking to YumYucky.com, the event draws these apparently errant forms of consumption into contact with Vogue Italia, a text that structures the “proper” consumption of fashion, which is coded white, European, and wealthy. Because consuming fashion is a classed activity requiring capital, the crafted appearance of the weaves in “Edible Hair-dos” present a paradox in terms of attributing class to those bodies wearing the weaves. Hand-made commodities are often associated with luxury consumption; hence, the weaves in “Haute Mess” suggest a particular kind of unique fashion commodity on par with a Hermès Birkin handbag. Conversely, the hand-made weaves in “Edible Hair-dos” suggest a kind of “making do” (de Certeau 29) with limited resources, such as tinsel and Skittles wrappers. Furthermore, the relationship of these images to Vogue Italia highlights a disjuncture in the means of production, as the crafted appearance of the weaves evokes the hand, while the commodities that Vogue Italia promotes in “Haute Mess” – though often expensive and often limited edition – suggest mass production through their links to large fashion conglomerates. The “poor” of the Poor Black Woman is therefore articulated at the intersection of making and consuming that the weaves
signify. Furthermore, the yoking together of “authentic” origins and “making do” is also racialised, as it evokes a form of primitivism through the ostensible lack of technologies of mass production – which are often coded white – and the evocation of otherness, specifically blackness, via incorrectly performed consumption.

In this way, the weaves in “Edible Hair-dos” are positioned as misplaced forms of extravagance. Because they show an incorrect form, of consumption, such as Skittles on the head or Easter Eggs worn at the wrong time of year, they appear to be excessive. Because this excess is classed and racialised, it has already constituted their failure. Food, and the incorrect consumption of it, too much, and too visibly, is how the bodies in YumYucky.com are marked as in excess, and as racialised excess. As such, a normative bodily mode suggests a public management of consumption through the expenditure of energy, calories, and so forth: through activity, rather than adornment or styling. In the case of “Edible Hair-dos” then, consuming involves the right kind of labour expended on the correct object. For the people depicted in “Edible Hair-dos,” “incorrect” performance can be recouped as an origin for “Haute Mess” by being rendered “authentic” through the equation of making with a form of luddite primitivism, in a move that erases the labour and tools required to construct the weaves. The apparent excessiveness of the images and bodies in “Edible Hair-dos” indicates that the images already appear original as they contravene the norms of properly consuming bodies typical to Vogue Italia. In this way, deviation from and contravention of bodily norms of consumption and labour shore up expectations around origins, and bodies: that an origin is so exceptional as to be quite obvious. By not labouring to consume correctly, the errant and excessive body is put to use and made to be productive in other ways: as spectacle, and as source.

**NoWayGirl.com: Origin and Failure**

While YumYucky.com’s “Edible Hair-dos” is given as a source on Jezebel.com and on TheCut.com, some commenters on Sozzani’s interview asserted that “Haute Mess” “was a complete lift of http://nowaygirl.com/” (Woodcider commenting on Moss). Another prominent fashion website, Fashionista.com, suggested that “websites like Nowaygirl.com” were the origin for the photographs in “Haute Mess” (Mau “Debate Continues”). In this paradoxical statement, Fashionista.com specifies an origin – NoWayGirl.com – and undermines that specificity; “websites like.” However, the nature of NoWayGirl.com, what NoWayGirl.com is “like,” can tell us about why Fashionista.com’s gesture takes the form that
it does. *NoWayGirl.com* collates photographs through user submissions. The site is updated several times a day, with one image per post. Visitors to the site can navigate by clicking back through older posts, or by using terms such as “Barbie” to sift through tagged posts. *NoWayGirl.com*’s main focus is to post images that are, or that in some way speak to, being “ghetto.” Being “Ghetto” refers to a long list of practices, such as “flashing money you don’t have instead of making your money last” and “yelling at your boo [romantic partner] in the middle of the street” ([UrbanDictionary.com “Ghetto”](http://www.urbandictionary.com)). This description gestures to the racialised dimension of the website. In other words, *NoWayGirl.com* focuses on explicitly racialised and often classed “fail” photographs to do with African American identities, usually oriented around seemingly bad bodily performance and practices that contravene norms. *Vogue Italia* and *NoWayGirl.com* therefore both trade in bodily spectacle but at different ends of the continuum, with *Vogue Italia* typically representing the “perfect” body, and *NoWayGirl.com* the “worst.”

To fail on *NoWayGirl.com* generally involves some form of bodily impropriety which implies that the subject of the photograph is doing femininity wrong. This failure can involve any number of practices, but is often the result of poorly constructed, applied, or extreme weaves, too much or badly applied makeup that is deemed to be unnatural, long acrylic nails, and the decision to wear clothes that are “inappropriate” for the bodies wearing them. “Fail” photographs on *NoWayGirl.com* are usually accompanied by a snarky caption that directs the reader’s attention toward the “bad” aspect of the photograph. Because these images are collected for the site from user submissions they are often informal and poorly, or “badly,” composed. Some appear to have been taken surreptitiously on smart phones, while others are posed amateur self-portraits or snapshots. Perhaps due to the submission process and the high rate of image turn over, there are often repeats of images under different post titles, making it difficult to locate an “original” post.

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13 The list in full:

1) Yelling at your boo in the middle of the street
2) Using the walkie-talkie feature on your cell to discuss personal drama in order to save minutes
3) Dressing for work like you are going to the club
4) Wearing house slippers outside the house
5) Taking pride in being broke
6) Flashing money you don’t have instead of making your money last.
7) Having a new ride with large chrome rims but don’t have a job.
8) Wearing your same clothes 5 days in a row but keeping them clean and pressed.
9) Running from the cops for no reason just to see if they can catch you......

This list could be pages long...

ghetto is also know as hood rich” ([UrbanDictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com)).
The attribution of origin which adheres to the “Edible Hair-dos” on YumYucky.com also marks NoWayGirl.com as a source for “Haute Mess.” However, as NoWayGirl.com’s images are more diffusely collated the links to the website are characterised by a lack of specificity. In coverage, the link made between “Edible Hair-do’s” and “Haute Mess” is specific; by contrast, the link between NoWayGirl.com and “Haute Mess” is more general, a gesture in the direction of the website in its entirety. YumYucky.com has one post with several images in it, while NoWayGirl.com has many posts, each with just one image. As a result, linking to a specific origin on NoWayGirl.com is exponentially more difficult for online coverage than linking to “Edible Hair-dos” is. However, Fashionista.com’s general attribution of origin to NoWayGirl.com heralds a breakdown in the specificity implied in the identification of an origin. By hedging their claim in the plural – “websites like” – they not only generally indicate the whole of the NoWayGirl.com website, but also other, unnamed websites. In short, Fashionista.com displays a generalising tendency that appears to specifically identify an origin. In this way, the informal archives that are attached to the category of the Poor Black Woman show their more diffuse nature. Through Fashionista.com’s attribution, NoWayGirl.com is rendered as a textual origin, when it is rather comprised of a series of images that require excavation from the site. Furthermore, Fashionista.com’s comment implies it is one site among many, and that if one did not have NoWayGirl.com, one might never find the “origin” of “Haute Mess,” as the same pictures that resemble the shoot appear in multiple, and possibly unquantifiable, locations online. General though they may be, these gestures attempt to locate images of the weaves, and thereby draw attention to the weaves as central to the process of attributing origin. As such, there is slippage between “origins” and the weaves, and the ways that the weaves are framed by their “origin.”

Posts on NoWayGirl.com present a similar logic to “Edible Hair-dos,” by focusing on consumption generally and often food specifically, likely due to the fact that the weaves depicted often explicitly evoke food. However, where the tone of “Edible Hair-dos” feels irreverent, NoWayGirl.com’s is punitive, as it engages in a process of shaming that rearticulates normative laws concerning bodily practices and excess. Again, excess is attached to bodies but articulated through consumption. “Good” and “bad” consumption are in this instance organised around the paradigm of “real” and “fake.” Here, the identification and use of NoWayGirl.com as an origin for the weaves and styling in “Haute Mess” draws attention to bodily modifications as being in excess of the natural, rather than in pursuit of the
Figure 15: NoWayGirl.com "The Hairstyles to Expect This Easter - LMAO"
Figure 16: Lindsey Wixson in "Haute Mess" Wearing the Easter Egg Weave
natural. It is this failure to be natural, to make the labour of the weaves disappear, that marks them as déclassé. The foregrounding of bodily construction through modification on NoWayGirl.com echoes and necessarily inflects the production of origin itself.

The bodily modification which is a feature of the images on NoWayGirl.com and YumYucky.com finds an analogue in the ways in which the Skittles weave and the Easter Egg Basket weave styles are in turn modified before appearing in Haute Mess. This occurs with particular frequency in images featuring food, such as the Easter Egg weave and the Skittles weave. Food is a common theme for the weaves featured in “Haute Mess” and NoWayGirl.com. “The Hairstyles to expect this Easter – LMAO” (fig. 15) is one such post on NoWayGirl.com, and consists of a picture taken in a fast-food restaurant of the back of a woman’s head as she waits at the counter. The poor quality of the image and apparent lack of awareness on the part of the model suggests that the photograph was taken surreptitiously. In the centre, and taking up most of the shot, is a fluorescent green and pink weave woven into the shape of a basket that extends out from the back of the head. The front of the weave is striped with pink, green and black, while the basket contains a spray of sparkly pink weave, on which bright green, pink, and yellow plastic eggs rest. “Haute Mess” contains a similar image, with the weave sitting on the side of the model’s head, on an ash blond base wig, though the eggs are pastel, rather than fluoro (fig. 16). The softer colours of the “Haute Mess” weave suggest modification in the form of toning down the source weave by bleaching out the intensity in favour of something closer to, yet still decidedly not, natural.

The Skittles weave, like the Easter Egg weave, appears on NoWayGirl.com in “This Should Be Everybody’s Motivation to #beatbeingbasic” (fig. 17), and in comparison images on Jezebel.com and Fashionista.com. This same picture of the Skittles weave also appears in “Edible Hair-dos.” In “#beatbeingbasic,” the photograph, which is taken outside, shows the model facing away from the camera in partial profile, wearing white sunglasses with matching white patterned hoop earrings. Another woman faces the camera in the background, partially visible. The photographer has cut the shot off at the chin, so that the weave dominates the frame. The weave itself is fluorescent green on top with a choppy longer section of green weave on the crown, and bright pink on the lower section. The Skittles logo is pasted twice on an angle around the weave, with images of the skittles attached to the words. The “Haute Mess” weave is very similar, though in a slightly curled, rather than choppy style, and the colours, as in their version of the Easter Egg weave, seem muted (fig. 18). The model in “Haute Mess” also stands in profile, though much more of her face is
Figure 17: NoWayGirl.com "This Should Be Everybody's Motivation to #beatbeingbasic"
Figure 18: The Skittles Weave in "Haute Mess"
visible, and she is the only person in the frame. The more formal portrait shot in “Haute Mess” diffuses the potential impact of the weave by moving out from it rather than having it fill the frame as it does it NoWayGirl.com. Modification therefore takes place both at the level of the object and the composition of the photograph.

“Haute Mess” also draws on a series of other objects and practices that appear on NoWayGirl.com. While acrylic fingernails do not draw the same attention in online coverage as the weaves, modified acrylics toenails do. “Ladies Do You Get Your Toes Done Like This?”(NoWayGirl.com) consists of an image of feet in a pair of gold open toed, high heeled mules replete with long bubblegum-pink acrylic toenail extensions that contrast sharply with the navy carpet background (fig. 19). Slightly blurred through the use of flash, the toenails seem to almost touch the carpet as they extend out over the end of the shoe, half the length of the wearer’s foot again. The photograph is digitally watermarked with NoWayGirl.com’s URL in the bottom left corner, and the caption “GhetToes” appears both on and underneath the photograph (“Ladies Do You Get Your Toes Done Like This?”). The photograph from “Haute Mess” (fig. 20) strongly resembles “GhetToes” in terms of composition and objects. It is taken from above, with a strong flash, and only captures the model’s feet. She stands on a tile floor, wearing blue sparkly high heeled sandals, with long toenails printed with United States dollars. Long toenails suggest an excessive modification, as they are resolutely impractical prosthetic objects. What the long toenails draw attention to is the ostensible uselessness of modification generally. In this instance, the useless nature of the modification reads as an assault upon, and explicit rejection of, being “natural,” in that one not only modifies, but one modifies for the sake of modifying. Furthermore, uselessness evokes unwarranted decadence, as the toenails not only fail to be natural, but also evince an apparently purposeless expenditure in terms of labour and capital, therefore signifying a “bad” form of consumption. This form of modification is apparently so bizarre – one commenter says, “WTF,” and another asks “Y” (Renee Dopson and Intensity Lawz commenting on ibid.) – as to be at once unquestionably fake, and totally authentic, and therefore original because of that bizarreness.

The general attribution of an origin for the “Haute Mess” weaves to NoWayGirl.com from Fashionista.com draws attention to the production of plural origins. This plurality of origins in the informal archive associated with the Poor Black Woman is brought on by an archiving impulse that equates the recognition of referents with narrative authority. Berlant describes this impulse as seeing “every referent as a hyperlink to an untold history that can
Figure 19: NoWayGirl.com "Ladies Do You Get Your Toes Done Like This?"
Figure 20: Long Acrylic Toenails in "Haute Mess"
justify, if the archive is thick enough, a ‘reading’ that [does] not stray too far from [a] version of this historical record” (Cruel Optimism 67). In this event, this is expressed through the intensive production of an informal archive to provide evidence of Vogue Italia’s cultural appropriation, which suggests that the more origins found, the stronger the claim becomes. Of course, this process simultaneously destabilises the very thing that it seeks to achieve: origin.

For example, the apparent specificity of NoWayGirl.com as an origin dissolves on closer inspection. The Skittles weave, for example, appears several times on NoWayGirl.com, twice in 2011, and once in 2013 (“Skittles Hairstyle,” “Got That Thousand Dollar Hair Do,” “This Should Be Everybody’s Motivation to #beatbeingbasic”). As such, there is no single originating image for the weaves, even on NoWayGirl.com. Furthermore, the site’s format means that posts appear and disappear relatively quickly, as it is continually updated. Because of this, it could fail to make sense in the context of the “Haute Mess” scandal depending on what appears on its homepage when someone clicks through from a link from the Fashionista.com coverage of “Haute Mess.” It lacks the stability of the static and singular presence that an origin requires.

The gesture from the coverage of “Haute Mess” to “original” photographs requires the will to excavate, or the willingness to take the article’s link for what the gesture symbolizes: that it is there. Berlant claims that “the gesture is… only a potential event, the initiation of something present that could accrue density” (Cruel Optimism 199). That NoWayGirl.com (and YumYucky.com) are produced as ostensibly evident origins by the gesture of linking – that is sometimes specific, as for YumYucky.com, and sometimes general, as for NoWayGirl.com – suggests that the appearance of origins is the accrual of density that the gesture transforms into. Berlant suggests that the “potential event” of the gesture is a radically open space. However, in the scandalous event of “Haute Mess,” the gesture of linking attempts to foreclose NoWayGirl.com’s status and role in the event, even as it establishes it as a part of this event.

NoWayGirl.com’s post obliquely titled “She Got That New 2012 Hairstyle” suggests that rather than “holding the present open” (Berlant, Cruel Optimism 199), the gesture begets the gesture. As Fashionista.com claims NoWayGirl.com as the origin for “Haute Mess,” NoWayGirl.com answers that interpellation by gesturing back to the “Haute Mess” scandal and the website’s place in it. A Twix weave that appears in “Haute Mess” could possibly be inspired by some found on NoWayGirl.com. However, the Twix weave in “Haute Mess”
Figure 21: Coco Rocha Wearing the Twix Weave in "Haute Mess"
Figure 22: NoWayGirl.com "A Weave Wouldn't Be Complete Without A Twix Candy Wrapper"
Figure 23: *NoWayGirl.com* "She Got That New 2012 Hairstyle" Showing a Modified Version of the Photograph from "Haute Mess"
appears so radically transformed as to bear little resemblance to its possible origin, unlike, say, the Skittles weave. In the “Haute Mess” shot, Coco Rocha sips a large fast food soda with a straw, seated at a booth beside a window, with light streaming in through the blinds (fig. 21). She wears a cropped style of weave constructed completely of metallic Twix candy bar wrappers; the chaotic reflective scribble of torn gold, red, and white is punctuated with interiors of silver and small green spots of caloric information. A possible intensification of the Twix weave in “A Weave Wouldn’t be Complete Without A Twix Candy Wrapper” (fig. 22) the “Haute Mess” style trades in hair for foil, precision for reflection and surface.

In “2012 Hairstyle,” the curators of NoWayGirl.com posted a cropped photograph of the “Haute Mess” Twix candy wrapper weave image, with Coco Rocha’s eyes pixelated out and the caption “Wow! Talented though” (fig. 23). In this instance, NoWayGirl.com appears to assert and confirm itself as the “origin” of the weaves and inspiration for “Haute Mess” by taking an image from the editorial and presenting it as its own. The doctored and (re)-appropriated photograph was watermarked with the NoWayGirl.com logo in the bottom right hand corner, and merged so seamlessly into the general aesthetic and purpose of the photographs on the website that most commenters on the post treated it as a typical NoWayGirl.com photograph. Through this gesture, the existence of the event around “Haute Mess” and the “origins” of the shoot are sublimated by the logic of the site, becoming simply a new post on NoWayGirl.com.

In what appeared to be a response to the “Haute Mess” scandal, NoWayGirl.com’s “2012 Hairstyle” demonstrated a gestural specificity. However, the specificity of this gesture was lost on many commenters, as many failed to recognise the image as being from “Haute Mess.” In strong disagreement with the “wow” caption, the post garnered responses such as “what’s the name… garbage?” (Barbara Dee Davis quoted from “She Got That New 2012 Hairstyle”) and “that’s not even cute at all” (Sybil Coleman quoted from “2012 Hairstyle”), with only one commenter mentioning that the image was from a fashion magazine. As a “potential event” (Berlant Cruel Optimism 199) this gesture back to “Haute Mess” by NoWayGirl.com is uneven, rather than a shocking moment of recognition. Reclaiming errant aesthetics and images is a potentially radical gesture. However, the gesture’s failure to link back truncates the potential in the gesture and disperses it. That the gesture misses allows it to be easily recouped into the referential process – the constant deferral and back and forth – between “Haute Mess” and its multiple “origins.”
Origins

The scandalous event of “Haute Mess” relied on the existence of ostensibly original images and the ability to locate these images online. The categories of the Messy Drag Queen and Poor Black Woman inflect, and are inflected by, their origin and are afforded status as “(in)authentic” origins for “Haute Mess” accordingly. The Messy Drag Queen is positioned as the inspiration behind the “Haute Mess” spread in official *Vogue Italia* narratives that stem from Franca Sozzani’s interview about the shoot, and the blog post “Simply Outrageous” on *Vogue.it* which provides an institutional archive. However, *Vogue Italia*’s version of the Messy Drag Queen comes apart under scrutiny. Rather than being a stylistically or aesthetically coherent figure, the Messy Drag Queen’s narrative – part of a tradition of style – becomes incoherent. Paradoxically, *Vogue Italia*’s attribution of origin to the Messy Drag Queen draws attention to the fact that drag always gestures to an absence of verifiable origins.

The origins of the identity category of the Poor Black Woman appear to be more convincing in the scandalous event, yet in actuality they are more contested. Online magazine coverage from *Fashionista.com, Jezebel.com*, and others provides readers with comparative images of the weaves that resemble “Haute Mess” in order to shore up the interventionist discourse of cultural appropriation. They also link to *YumYucky.com*, in a specific gesture that implies that the website is the original location of the weaves. *YumYucky.com* constitutes a readily available informal archive. By linking to *YumYucky.com*’s “Edible Hair-dos,” the online coverage performs a specific gesture, bringing “Haute Mess” into contact with *YumYucky.com*. However, when *Fashionista.com* suggests that *NoWayGirl.com* is the origin of “Haute Mess,” the production of origin becomes increasingly unstable, as it becomes clear that the same photographs of weaves that resemble “Haute Mess” appear in multiple places on the internet, and more than once on *NoWayGirl.com*. Finally, *NoWayGirl.com*’s re-appropriation of “Haute Mess” fails, drawing attention to the failure coded into the heart of the gesture towards origin.

The search for origin in this instance requires the production of informal and institutional archives to shore up discourses of appropriation or inspiration. The production of archives occurs through general or specific gestures towards other texts to bring them into relation: this occurs, for example, between “Haute Mess” and *YumYucky.com*. The informal archives – or origins – attached to “Haute Mess” mobilise a series of discourses in the moment of the scandal. While the media coverage identifies the apparent genesis of “Haute
“Mess” in the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen, the process of finding an originating image demonstrates a further preoccupation with class, race, and gender in the event. Both categories signify ambivalently: the Messy Drag Queen is rendered stylistically authentic but performatively inauthentic, while the Poor Black Woman signifies bodily authenticity through errant practices of consumption and making. For the Messy Drag Queen, these discourses pertain to history, and the instability and performance that drag more generally evokes. The performance that “Simply Outrageous” invokes is, for the Messy Drag Queen, a performance of gender that, following Butler, reveals all gender as performance and thereby attributions of origins as impossible (85). The Poor Black Woman, on the other hand, heralds a negotiation of race and class in relation to practices of making and consumption, which produces a sense of authenticity that elides the instability of origin. While the Poor Black Woman and the Messy Drag Queen appear original, these categories collapse into the production of origin: they are “real” because they can be attributed to an origin, but conversely, because they have an origin, they are “real.” This preoccupation with the “real” origins of “Haute Mess” in this event functions to produce knowledge about the apparently inherent attributes of the marginalised bodies imagined to inhabit the categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen. Yet, the instability of the production of origins gestures to the contingent process of producing knowledge about these categories. In attempting to negotiate a link with the real by appealing to depictions of “original” bodies that wore the weaves first, this event attempts to fix the unstable nature of bodily practices that undermine it.

Origins are bound up in the identity categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen. Yet, the “origins” of the scandal are also inflected by the objects that ostensibly demonstrate them: most particularly, the weaves. The weaves draw attention to a series of affective elements that inflect the production of the identity categories. Furthermore, they point towards other discourses mobilised throughout the event that also articulate the production of “real” and “fake” in relation to the bodily phantasms imagined to take up the identity categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen. The realness of origins is not simply textual, but relies on a “feeling” of realness or authenticity. The next chapter explores how this affect arises.
CHAPTER THREE: “HAUTE MESS” AND AFFECTIVE OBJECTS

Where the previous chapter dealt with the production of an origin for “Haute Mess,” Chapter Three explores affect in relation to objects depicted in the shoot. This chapter is concerned with how certain objects – in particular, the weaves and food – operate affectively to undergird the identity categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen. That affective operation provides the scandalous event of “Haute Mess” with a sense of authenticity. Chapter Two’s analysis of the production of archives and their transformation into origins drew attention to “the affectivity gathered up in the [archive’s] evidence” (Berlant, Cruel Optimism 67). This chapter examines the “evidence,” which consists of the objects depicted in “Haute Mess,” the informal archives of pictures that resemble “Haute Mess” attributed to sites such as NoWayGirl.com and YumYucky.com, and the contents of Vogue.it’s institutional archive, the gallery that accompanied “Simply Outrageous.” A wide array of objects in “Haute Mess” and its counterparts were mentioned in the popular discourse surrounding the event, including grills, jewellery, clothes, makeup, “babies,” and so forth. This chapter focuses on the two most prominent and culturally resonant of these objects: weaves and food. It also explores the use of the “Simply Outrageous” photograph album as the object that defines and evokes the Messy Drag Queen. With these objects in mind, in this chapter I argue that the weaves, food, and photographs depicted in this event function as affective objects that shore up the scandal by making the categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen feel “real” and “fake,” respectively. However, the discursive histories mobilised via this scandal aligns these objects with the categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen. In doing so, these affective objects are revealed as discursively produced, a status which undermines the seemingly direct attachment to the real that is promised by their evocation of bodily sensations.

The weaves, food, and photographs are objects which evoke forms of embodiment that the interventionist discourses at work in this scandal seek to defend against cultural appropriation, or laud as inspirational. As discussed in Chapter One, these interventionist discourses brought about the transformation of “Haute Mess” into a scandalous event. Berlant defines genre – of which scandal is one form – as an affective technology, claiming that:

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The purpose of genre is … to engender in an aesthetic field of historical signification a punctum that appears singularly ahistorical – affect – but which is, because of the detail it cuts across and unites, a relay through which the historical can be sensed before it is redacted (Cruel Optimism 66).

With affect characterised as a technology for channelling history, the weaves and food in the “Haute Mess” scandal draw attention to the ways in which materials and objects are simultaneously understood as sensual, and sensed as historical. Sara Ahmed suggests that affect is shaped by “contact with objects” rather than “being caused by objects” (6). Coming into contact with an object mobilises “histories that come before” that moment (Ahmed 6). In this way, the weaves which formed points of contact in this scandal draw attention to particular racialised histories of hair, while fast food articulates the knotty history of the relationship between class, labour, and bodies in late capitalism. I suggest that objects that are treated as aesthetic or straightforwardly representational in this event are in fact underpinned by an affective dimension, and that Vogue.it’s “Simply Outrageous” photo album operates by an inverse logic, in that it appears to be affective, but instead becomes primarily aesthetic. Affective objects then, must be able to convincingly convey their relationship to bodies and the sensual world.

However, the affective dimension of objects also implies or begets the potential for a transformation of their relations. In Affective Mapping, Jonathan Flatley characterises affect as “relational and transformative,” an event where “one is affected by people or things” (12; emphasis in original). While Flatley’s definition captures the importance of being-in-relation to affect, Ahmed suggests that affect is “not simply ‘in’ the subject or object” (6), rather, it comes about via the often uneven processes through which subjects and objects come into contact with one another. Photographs, fast food, and alcohol are objects that foreground the process of coming in contact, they come into bodily orbits and leave again, drawing attention to the coordinates of the body. By evoking this process, the weaves, food and photographs in this scandal promise attachment, a way of grasping the figures of the Poor Black Woman and the Messy Drag Queen through objects that are related to these categories. Berlant suggests that “all attachments are optimistic” and that they occur in relation to an “object of desire” that is a synecdoche for a “cluster of promises” (Cruel Optimism 23). The identity categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen become ways of positioning the affective objects of the weaves and fast food as desirable or undesirable. The Messy Drag Queen and Poor Black Woman seem to become, through a process of sedimentation involving objects
and origins, a cluster of promises about realness. However, the objects in “Haute Mess” proffer ambivalence, rather than optimism, as the status of discrete and objects signal proximity and attachment, but lack the recourse to the “real” Poor Black Woman or Messy Drag Queen that they allude to. What happens eventually is a divestment of aesthetic and affective responsibility for what is apparently real on to everydayness.

The first part of this chapter is devoted to an analysis of the weaves in the scandalous event of “Haute Mess.” This involves an exploration of their affective properties as they relate to the categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen. With reference to Nigel Thrift’s discussion of affective properties of hair as a glamorous material, I examine how the weaves depicted in “Haute Mess” function as prosthetic objects. Weaves function as prosthesis because they come in close contact with the body for extended periods of time, but never enter it completely or separate from it discretely for the duration of its contact. In this way, they intensify and draw attention to the body. In line with Kobena Mercer’s work on “black hair,” I discuss how this oscillation occurs through the discursive paradigms which contrast “natural” and “cultivated” hair. In this respect, I argue that the weaves operate as racialised and glamorous material objects via their relationship to the Messy Drag Queen and Poor Black Woman. I then turn to the relationship of food to the weaves, and the use of food more generally in “Haute Mess.” Like the weaves, food also produces and reproduces racialised discourses alongside notions of “real” and “fake” through a binary that maps onto the binary which organises hair: “natural” and “processed.” Via the work of Berlant, de Certeau, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol, I draw attention to food’s relationship to race and class through the notions of waste and time. Finally, the chapter turns to the use of photographs in Vogue Italia’s blog post “Simply Outrageous,” which appear to produce an affective rendering of the Messy Drag Queen. Employing Roland Barthes’ work on photography, I show how the photographs in “Simply Outrageous” are framed as uniquely affecting historical objects that provide evidence of the Messy Drag Queen but, as a result of their tethering to notions of style and tradition, fail to generate the attachments that the weaves and food do. Through their discursive positioning, the affective objects in this event apparently give access to what the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen’s respective embodiments feel like. However, this affectivity is discursively produced through the mobilisation of racialised and classed histories of these objects. These affective objects therefore, cannot provide the access to the “real” that they promise.
WEAVES

Weaves in Relation

As affective objects, weaves draw attention to the borders of the body, and therefore to the felt and sensual affective experience of being in the world. As discussed in Chapter One, online discussions on Jezebel.com, Fashionista.com, TheFashionSpot.com, and others about the weaves in “Haute Mess” positioned them as a significant contributor to the shoot’s “#OVERTHETOP” aesthetic, and central to the narrative of cultural appropriation. As Chapter Two demonstrated, they became contested objects that signified the Poor Black Woman in the narrative of cultural appropriation and the Messy Drag Queen in Vogue Italia’s attempted reorientation of the scandal via their institutional narrative of inspiration. Because weaves resemble hair, the depictions of the weaves draw attention to a part of the body that can be easily modified. Furthermore, as Mercer points out, hair is an inherently political material (106-108), and as such, draws attention to the racialised dimension of the weave as an affective object. In the discussion about “Haute Mess” on websites including Fashionista.com and Jezebel.com, descriptions and discourse consistently link weaves and fast food to one another, framing them as central to the styling and general feel of the shoot. However, because food surrounds the models in “Haute Mess” and appears on the weaves, the distinction between food as a discrete object and weaves as prosthetic objects starts to break down. In this section, I suggest that the breakdown between their differences occurs through the emphasis on the transformations that they enact, or could potentially enact, on bodies.

The weaves were initially discussed as part of the overall styling of “Haute Mess” on TheFashionSpot.com prior to the release of the full editorial and the transformation of the event into a scandal. The Twix weave is the first singled out, with commenter JesseDillon stating that “[Jessica] Stam is the only one that didn’t make it look trashy,” thus implying that weaves, by default, are the preserve of “white trash” women (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”). By contrast, commenter Clocked thinks that “joan [Smalls] is working that hair like nobody’s business…awesome” (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”), which suggests that weaves are a more “natural” fit for black women. Commenter agee is, on the other hand, the first to connect the weaves to both racialised tropes and drag:
Of the gifs on vogue.it, Daphne’s [Groeneveld] is my fave… the Little Dutch Girl has left the building and she looks like a Boricua from the Bronx whose cousin’s step-brother RayRay recruited her to do his hair show… Abbey Lee’s [Kershaw] wig line and draggishness has piqued my interest (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”).

The next time the weaves are explicitly mentioned, the focus of the discussion on TheFashionSpot.com’s thread shifts to issues of representation as outlined in Chapter One. Now the weaves are used as evidence of Vogue Italia’s cultural appropriation of “‘ghetto’ culture” (valliaddict “Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”), rather than being dubious or ingenious styling. Valliaddict thinks that “they [Vogue Italia] should be ashamed of themselves,” while GivenchyHomme says that “it’s an insensitive parody of African American women” (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”). Thankyouhon remarks “it’s like he [Steven Meisel] googled the most outlandish pics of black hair styles…threw in stereotypes about malt liquor, weaves and single mothers and called it a day” (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”). Rubyshimmer critiques the apparent lack of creativity and sensitivity, stating that “Meisel could’ve shown the beauty, the unique artistry in some of these hair pieces. Instead, he just literally copies and pastes on the models, and thinks its enough” (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”). The displeasure that these commenters express marks the weaves as the preserve of the category of the Poor Black Woman.

As discussed in Chapters One and Two, the weaves were often used in online media coverage from magazines such as Jezebel.com as evidence of Vogue Italia’s cultural appropriation and racism. This coverage typically draws attention to the weaves’ apparent outlandishness by situating them in relation to other outré objects. On Jezebel.com, the weaves are part of an array of objects that evidence “racist stereotypes” (Sauers). The article shows a shot of the “Haute Mess” Skittles weave (fig. 12), with an image of an anonymous black woman wearing almost exactly the same weave beneath, with the caption: “look familiar? This is an image from a gallery…. ‘Ghetto-Fabulous Edible Hairdos’ that’s been making the rounds since 2011. They didn’t even change it from Skittles to M&M’s” (Sauers). HuffingtonPost.com says that “Haute Mess” the “story, shot by Steven Meisel, is definitely eye-catching with a team of top models… decked out in over-the-top ensembles, crazy weaves, extra long fingernails (and toenails), and other ‘ghetto fabulous’ additions” (Wilson). ConcreteLoop.com describes the weaves as “excessive hair,” alongside other excessive objects such as “excessive makeup, excessive nail art, excessive earrings” (Norell), while Fashionista.com describes the shoot as “models wearing over-the-top, flashy clothes with
Figure 24: Abbey Lee Kershaw in “Haute Mess”
crazy colourful weaves, heavily painted on makeup and impractically long nails” (Mau “Sozzani Defends”). MadameNoire.com describes the styling in a similar way: “top models, who are mostly white, playing up images of neck and facial tattoos, gold teeth, and wigs made of money and candy-coloured towering hairstyles” (Ball). By invoking the models’ whiteness, MadamNoire.com implies that there is a disjuncture between the forms of adornment and the bodies wearing them that renders the shoot bizarre. Drawing attention to Vogue Italia’s whitewashing, BlackGirlLongHair.com describes “Haute Mess” as featuring “white women stylized with colorful hair, colorful long acrylic fingernails, hairstyles that were decked out with weave galore, hair buns with the Oreo slogan spray painted in it” (Knight). As before, some of these comments render the weaves (and other objects) the property of the Poor Black Woman, but they do so through the relationships of objects. Thus, what feels like a direct and natural connection between the weave and the body is complicated by the fact that for the weave to signify the Poor Black Woman it needs to be in relation to other objects.

Some of the coverage of the shoot foregrounds the reliance that stereotypes – and therefore the categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen – have on the arrangements of objects in it. For example, “Haute Mess” style is dissected in detail at Racialicious.com through specific references to particular objects, such as the clothing, jewellery, and acrylic toenails. The weaves “bring to mind Lil’ Kim’s heyday,” and are sometimes depicted as “unattended weaves in doorways” in chorus with “multiple images of toenail press-ons” (Lamour). The article continues, discussing Abbey Lee Kershaw’s “TUNA” image (fig. 24):

What I notice here is gold accessories appear frequently throughout the shoot. But is merely showing an abundance of gold racist? Of course not, but pairing it with chola14 brows, the oft recreated and symbolic teardrop tattoo, the fringe jacket, the exposed weave tracks, and her expression make it hard for some not to see it that way (Lamour).

In this way, the weaves accumulate significance through their relationships to other objects depicted in “Haute Mess.” As the coverage demonstrates, other objects are often required to

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14 “Chola” is a colloquialism that refers to women of Latina heritage, often with working class connotations. Sometimes “chola” refers to a style culture. Popular definitions on UrbanDictionary.com, variously define “chola” as “The girls my brother gets pregnant,” “hardcore latina gangbangers,” or “[Latina women who] usually have thin, arched, angry looking tattooed-on or penciled-on eyebrows, brown or dark red lip liner,
evidence the outlandishness of the weaves specifically, and the styling generally. Yet this process is elided through racialised and classed assumptions about what objects belong to particular bodies. These assumptions allow the weaves to appear as naturally in the purview of some bodies, but not of others.

**Weaves and Materials**

Weaves are objects that can be made to mimic “natural” hair. *ConcreteLoop.com*’s references to “excessive” weaves, on the other hand, suggest that they contravene the “natural,” and thereby establish the act of looking natural as desirable. Weaves are categorised by the evocation of different forms of materiality, and they transform the bodies they are attached to accordingly. Nigel Thrift suggests that “colorful materials” play a role in the production of glamour in late capitalism (300). For him, these materials “exist on the boundary of being alive and inert,” and include, among other objects, “clothes, jewelry, hair” (Thrift 305). Although the extreme weaves are most likely made of “inert” material – nylon – their mimicry of hair renders them “alive.” Thrift describes the material qualities of hair: it grows, and can be cut, styled, dyed, or otherwise woven into weaves or hidden by wigs; it falls out, it greys, and so on (305). Similarly, Graham Harman draws attention to the role of objects in mapping the body as an *individual* body. Harman claims: “what we at least think we see in the…person is a certain total geography of objects, one that the [person] acknowledges and inhabits to the exclusion of others” (cited in Thrift 305). In this instance, weaves mark the body as individual through their uniqueness, through the assertion in online coverage that they are inhabited by certain bodies and *not* others. Yet, the weaves can only appear as unique in the coverage about this event by being part of an array of objects. Therefore, weaves draw attention to the mapping of the body through a “geography of objects.” Descriptions of “Haute Mess” online, for example, regularly describe the styling through an arrangement of two or more of these objects. Returning again to *Racialicious.com*, the article describes “Haute Mess” through precisely this array of objects: “neck and facial tattoos, gold teeth, and wigs made of money…my eyes will never unsee the toenail situation” (Lamour). However, rather than the Poor Black Woman emerging because of the stark *individuality* of the styling – one who “inhabits” objects and materials “to the exclusion of others” (Harman, cited in Thrift 305) – this figure instead emerges in part through resemblance.
Figure 25: NoWayGirl.com "TrailerPark Lacefront Mess"
The act of comparing pictures of the Skittles and Easter Egg weaves on Fashionista.com and Jezebel.com foregrounds a paradox whereby the use of comparative images seeks to demonstrate the uniqueness of the weaves depicted in images from sites such as NoWayGirl.com through their resemblance to those in “Haute Mess.” The Skittles weave which appears in “Haute Mess,” and is frequently cited as evidence of the shoot’s cultural appropriation, at once resembles and differs from the comparative image offered by Fashionista.com (fig. 12). As discussed in Chapter Two, both Skittles weaves strongly resemble each other, but also differ slightly in their respective cuts and colours. However, through repetition, the apparent high-fashion uniqueness of seeing a white model wearing a weave in Vogue Italia is divested of its auratic status through the appearance of very similar hair on an anonymous black body. This suggests that white bodies tend not to wear weaves, and that when they do, it is either a creative statement – like “Haute Mess” was supposed to be – or a classed practice that indicates liminal whiteness, as in “TrailerPark Lacefront Mess” (fig. 25) (NoWayGirl.com). Conversely, this logic implies that weaves are unique to black bodies, and that black bodies naturally wear weaves, even though the ostensibly natural fit does not render them any classier. There is a tension here between the “authenticity” of the online, anonymous version of the Skittles weave and its counterpart in “Haute Mess.” Although the “Haute Mess” Skittles weave is rendered as a “fake” object in light of the “true” weave, for the true weave to maintain its status as the authentic object it needs to remain in proximity to the “Haute Mess” weave. Furthermore, because the weave clearly evokes hair and its occupation on the “borderline of the body” (Thrift 305) the weave simultaneously bestows bodies with, or removes, their “authentic” status. Without “Haute Mess,” the “original” weave lacks its status as origin, and instead functions primarily as an image to ridicule on websites such as FailBlog.com’s poorly dressed, on NoWayGirl.com, and others.15

The promise of individuality proffered by the Skittles weave, and by other weaves in “Haute Mess” that have online analogues, is contravened by comparative photographs appearing in TheFashionSpot.com and elsewhere. The “geography of objects” (Harman, cited in Thrift 305) is present, but rather than outline individuality they draw attention to the lack of it. What the weaves foreground is the artifice that glamorous materials and objects rely on. The “fake” status of the objects such as the weaves certainly evokes a connection to drag as a

15 The “Haute Mess” scandal also shows how ridiculing something is a contingent act, dependent on the locations of the weaves. For example: the weaves are an object for ridicule on sites like NoWayGirl.com, but that the weaves apparently are ridiculed in Vogue Italia is itself an object for ridicule, through comments lambasting the magazine for being “lazy” and “uncreative.”
performance. Yet, in relation to other objects in “Haute Mess,” the weaves are positioned by online media coverage as forms of artifice that signify the “real”: the Poor Black Woman. However, the weaves, can only pass as real by being attached to the category of the Poor Black Woman. In this instance, the weaves are “the artifice [that] works,” and “realness appears to be achieved” (Butler 88). Artifice then ends up signifying realness, and realness is conflated with individuality (the notion of the singular origin discussed in Chapter Two). In this way, the figure of the Poor Black Woman draws attention to individuality repeated.

Weaves and History

The hair and weaves in “Haute Mess” are affective material objects steeped in history. While Thrift’s discussion of glamour draws attention to hair as an alluring material, Kobena Mercer discusses hair as an affective and racialised material. Mercer states that “black people’s hair has been historically devalued as the most visible stigmata of blackness, second only to skin” (101; emphasis in original). Accordingly, “good” hair is mainly straight, good hair is white European hair, while “bad” hair is “woolly” or “tough,” bad hair is black hair (Mercer 101). Furthermore, as hair is “powerfully charged with symbolic currency” it plays a role in dictating class (Mercer 102). In political discourse about Black hairstyles, there is a tendency to valorise “natural” hair over “cultivated” – often straightened – hair (a tendency that reoccurs with food later in this chapter) (Mercer 106-108). These articulate two distinct popular positions about black hair: that black hair should aspire to be “manageable” like white hair, or that black hair should aspire to be what it “is.” Mercer reaffirms the political dimension of style and hair as a material, stating that “all black hairstyles are political in that they each articulate responses to the panoply of historical forces which have invested this element of the ethnic signifier with both social and symbolic meaning and significance” (104; emphasis in original). In this event, the weaves in “Haute Mess” function as black hair through the discourse which links them explicitly to the figure of the Poor Black Woman.

Rather than being natural or cultivated, the weaves in “Haute Mess” are decidedly synthetic. In their materials and crafting, they are the apotheosis of styled. The discursive negotiation of Lindsey Wixson modelling the Easter Egg weave (fig. 16) demonstrates how “styled” can still signify as either natural or fake. As comparative images indicate, the concept and the execution of the weaves appearing in “Haute Mess” are extraordinarily similar to those on NoWayGirl.com and other sites, yet they also differ quite strongly in terms of colours and arrangement (fig. 11 and fig. 12). However, these differences are subsumed
under a logic that is similar to that of “natural” and “cultivated” hair hierarchies (Mercer 106-108). The hierarchy of modified “fake” hair repeats, through the logic of origin, discourses about apparently natural hair. In this instance, natural becomes synonymous with original. Hence, the anonymous woman wearing the Easter Egg basket weave becomes more original – more *natural* – than the staged “Haute Mess” weave, thus establishing a hierarchy among the weaves. The styling of the extreme weaves deflects attention from the fact that all hair is cultivated, even as it invites attention to this fact through the amplifying and intensifying of a given hair style. Furthermore, at the intersection of “origin” and hair, the weaves come to symbolise a supposedly natural expression of a distinctively black culture.

Hairstyles are “stylistically cultivated and politically constructed in a particular historical moment” (Mercer 108; emphasis in original). The photograph in “Haute Mess” seems to revel in how out of place the weaves apparently appear to be. When the Easter Egg weave *does* appear in a fast food restaurant, in the shot from NoWayGirl.com (fig. 15), it is “out of place” in everyday life. In a similar way to *Vogue Italia* marking seasonal trends with spreads such as “Haute Mess,” the Easter Egg weave evokes the festive season of Easter. In “Haute Mess” it appears out of place because of its place in the diner, *and* because of the absence of any other seasonal cues that suggest Easter. As such, it is “stylistically cultivated” (Mercer 108) to appear out of place. Likewise, there is an absence of festive signifiers in the image found on NoWayGirl.com. Seeing seasonal adornments out of place suggests that something has “failed,” therefore, an inappropriate weave suggests that *somebody* has failed. It suggests a lack of cultural knowledge, a certain gauche sense of style, or even laziness – like the family who does not take down their Christmas tree until March the following year – that denotes a lack of class. Removed from any contextual traces of Easter, the weave is divorced from its “particular historical moment” which simultaneously allows it to be rendered in another historical moment as a poor taste object, and thereby as a racialised signifier for the working or welfare-dependent class. Furthermore, this “trashy” kind of weave evokes a kind of glamour gone wrong, where too much is visible in terms of effort, quality, or amount of “glamorous materials” (Thrift 300). In short, perfection tips over into imperfection, which then reveals one’s gauche taste and lack of class. Curiously, however, the use of fake eggs in the Easter Egg weave draws attention to the glamour afforded to a distinctly banal object, and the use of food in relation to weaves in “Haute Mess.”
FOOD

In “Haute Mess,” food becomes a way of discursively completing the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen. Like the weaves, food also signifies the intersection of race and class. Although food is positioned as a part of the figures of the Messy Drag Queen and Poor Black Woman, it is in itself partial. In “Haute Mess,” food becomes an incomplete object that purports to disclose the truth about race, gender, and class via consumption. Much of the food in the shoot is fast food, candy and junk food, or alcohol. Foodstuffs appear in borders around the images, in the background, and in the model’s weaves. Relegated to the margins, food nonetheless frames the images. Often encountered as a partial object, food appears through a wrapper appliqued to a weave, a single cheese curl in a model’s hand, a partly obscured can of Colt 45, and so on. Invariably, the remnants of food, such as a wrapper, evoke partiality as waste. The form that food takes – fast food, junk food – suggests a kind of lack, being “fake” and therefore bad food. The ongoing discursive alignment of food with the categories of Poor Black Woman or Messy Drag Queen throughout the scandalous event of “Haute Mess” instead evokes the noumenal, and inherently partial, qualities of food.

Food often touches the models in “Haute Mess” and, if it does not, the models are positioned in relation to it. The comments from rubyshimmer on TheFashionSpot.com (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”) and Racialicious.com (Lamour) explicitly mention images or words to do with food in the backgrounds of the photographs, such as “deep fried.” While this is a very specific instance, it draws attention to the general presence of food throughout “Haute Mess.” As backdrop, food forms walls, piles, stacks, as in Abbey Lee Kershaw’s “TUNA” shot (fig. 24), or in Guinevere van Seenus’ cheese curl shot (fig. 26). The sheer amount of fast or pre-packaged foods becomes clear shorthand for excess and class: evoking images of those who apparently do consume too much, too often, and too quickly, or, those who consume incorrectly, eating food that apparently lacks the wholesome, and therefore “whole” qualities of ostensibly natural food.

Because the food in “Haute Mess” evokes the partial – fake food in contrast to whole – it also suggests a sense of lack. Lack plays a part in desire, as Lauren Berlant suggests in her dissection of the phrase “the object of desire” (Cruel Optimism 23). For Berlant, the object becomes a synecdoche for a “cluster of promises” that explain attachment and proximity to the object (Cruel Optimism 23). In this formulation, the object is useful: it
Figure 26: Guinevere Van Seenus in "Haute Mess"
becomes something that is employed to attain a particular end and sustain one’s self. While the “cluster of promises” – in this event, the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen that promise recourse to “real” bodies – are necessarily potential and therefore seem partial, the powerful tug exuded by food objects to maintain attachment, proximity, and one’s “endurance” (Cruel Optimism 23) in them suggests that part of the promise is a sense of completeness. Berlant suggests that these “attachments do not all feel optimistic…but being drawn to return to the scene where the object hovers in its potentialities is the operation of optimism as an affective form” (Cruel Optimism 24; emphasis in original). In this respect, the categories of the Messy Drag Queen and Poor Black Woman need not necessarily be rendered positively, as the lack that food evokes is reoriented towards producing a sense of completeness about these figures. As Berlant suggests, it is the return, the perpetuity, the sense of something tipped on the edge of being complete that gives away the optimistic investment in the object. What then, of the desire to fix objects because they make no promises, because they are so aggressively incomplete?

**Food and Waste**

Food objects in “Haute Mess” appear as partial, and often in the form of waste. The “Haute Mess” Twix wrapper weave is a weave made completely of waste objects that transform the model into an unrecognizable body. On TheFashionSpot.com, commenter JesseDillon fails to recognise the model wearing the Twix weave, mentioning “whoever it is with twix wrappers in their hair” (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”). In this instance, the Twix weave obscures Coco Rocha’s face, though it does not cover it. The way the Twix wrappers swamp Rocha’s identity suggests that there is something excessively transformative about candy. The visual transformation wrought on Rocha means she becomes “lost” under the metallic sheen of the foil, she too becomes partial, lacking the supermodel status that recognizing her face confers. Identifying models in editorials seems to be a pleasurable practice, but the failure to recognise a model’s face because of Twix wrappers in an industry where a recognizable face is central to a model’s work suggests something overpowering about food. The Twix wrappers in the weave are improperly disposed, and instead litter “Haute Mess” and waste away at Rocha’s identity.

At this point, the discussion about Twix is predominately aesthetic. As the general tone of the thread shifts toward representation, the tenor around food objects changes. “Don’t
even get me started on the Ihop\textsuperscript{16} weave shot” states valliaddict, singling out another of the food based brand weaves (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”). Others, such as Ives927, express mild incredulity: “never knew candy wrappers in the hair was a real thing” (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”). These comments draw attention to food out of place, potentially, food wasted. Waste has its inverse in excess. \textit{Racialicious.com} says “I feel an intentional theme of overconsumption, perhaps by a perceived notion of the American poor [we see] Mountain Dew, Ruffles, Lemonheads, and Doublemint gum (all American companies)” (Lamour). These foodstuffs, described as “junk food” (Lamour) make up the collaged borders of some of the photographs in “Haute Mess.” “Junk food” is contained in straight lines, yet it also spills over from or enters in to the photographs. The borders, fecund with imagery, burst with even more images with even more in them. Food clutters “Haute Mess”: in one shot, Guinevere van Seenus poses in front of shelves of flavoured popcorn, with a blown up image of a streusel muffin behind her (fig. 26). She wears a pink and purple fabric cupcake weave. In one hand, she is holding a bag of Cheese Curls; with the other she pops the bright orange tubes of corn into her mouth. One of the Cheese Curls protrudes from between her lips, which are slightly parted.\textsuperscript{17} The plethora of food definitely suggests “overconsumption,” and therefore, bad bodily practice. Furthermore, the nature of the food – processed, packaged, fast, sugary – is positioned as fake, something that the woollen cupcake weave draws attention to. Given this, a fluorescent Cheese Curl is already discursively coded as “fake” and therefore “bad” food. As such, the evocation of overconsumption elides the fact that there is never a correct way to consume a Cheese Curl, because eating it denotes a failure in good bodily practice, and therefore a lack of bodily and moral control.

\textbf{Food and Time}

Food surrounds the models in “Haute Mess.” \textit{Racialicious.com} singles out an image of Joan Smalls posing “in a diner with the words ‘deep fried’ on the window behind her, in clothes that likely cost more than the diner’s rent” (fig. 27) (Lamour). Smalls stands in the middle of the shot, talking on a bedazzled smartphone. She wears a cropped bright green, black, and red ombre weave, with green and silver eye shadow, and silver earrings, rings, and chains to match. The windows to the left of Smalls have posters for sandwiches on them, and a sign advertising apples with McDonald's Happy Meals. To the right, there is a sign that reads

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} International House Of Pancakes: a USA based fast-food restaurant chain that specialises in breakfast food.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Two other images explore encroachment in or out of the mouth: Coco Rocha sipping a soda with the straw held between her teeth (in “Haute Mess”) and Abbey Lee Kershaw’s GIF in which she licks her finger.
\end{itemize}
Figure 27: Joan Smalls in "Haute Mess"
“DEEP FRIED CORN on the COB” in red, yellow, and green lettering, with a cartoon picture of a corn cob. Beside Smalls, underneath this window but in the foreground, is a table with a tray filled with empty fast food packets. Red with yellow and white striped lining, they are most likely McDonald’s wrappings. These wrappings from a prominent fast food corporation foreground the links in “Haute Mess” between consumption, bodies, and capitalism.

The phrase “fast food” evokes the dual paradigms of capitalist acceleration and consumption. Berlant enumerates how food and class are intertwined:

Urban development; longer working days; an increase in temporary and part-time labor with increasingly more workers…juggling work and family in a way that relegates exercise to a leisure time people barely have; the refocusing of the food industry as the immediate gratifier for energy for service-sector workers of the working classes and the professional managerial classes, both of which increasingly eat fast food at lunch, live off vending machines, multitask while eating, work during lunch and the coffee break [and] the expansion of fast-food availability and of snack culture generally (Cruel Optimism 110).

In this reckoning, a surfeit of fast food and a lack of time marks working class food culture in the United States, which results in a surfeit of bodily corpulence and a deficit of health necessary to be a properly productive worker. Leaving aside the question of the intersection of leisure as work that so often marks labour in fashion industries and style cultures, positioning the models – who, by working as models, mimic domestic labour such as shopping or changing babies, and thereby do work which is gendered and often signifies as non-work – in “Haute Mess” in relation to fast food foregrounds the mutually dependent structures of work and consumption.

Labour and consumption are also classed and racialised practices. Racialicious.com implies that the disjuncture between Smalls’ attire and the kind of food the diner serves is “wrong,” and that there is an uncomfortable intersection of wealth and leisure signified by the clothes, and poverty or working class indicated by fried fast food. Despite suggesting that certain patterns of food consumption can evince class, Berlant argues that “weight excess [is] coded as black” (Cruel Optimism 113). However, Berlant’s formulation that bodily excess equals blackness fails to account for how the body becomes racialised and excessive. Instead, it posits deviant bodies as emblematic of late capitalism, eliding the fact that normative bodies are perhaps more so, as they evoke efficiency and “truly” productive labour. The
anxiety about fried fast food in “Haute Mess” suggests that excess and blackness is rather coded into the food object, which is discursively constructed as inherently potentially transformative. As such, food commodities and bodies are vectors for anxiety about capitalism, rather than evidence of it.

Alcohol, like fast food, also articulates classed and racialised anxieties about bodies. The attitude toward alcohol in the online magazine coverage and on TheFashionSpot.com was similar to the attitude toward food, though it was not afforded the same centrality as junk food. Alcohol is mentioned as part of an array of objects: “stereotypes about malt liquor, weaves and single mothers,” “babies, malt liquor” (thankyouhon, loladonna “Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”). Although food appears constantly throughout the scenes in “Haute Mess,” by contrast, alcohol appears only in two quarter page images. In LJ Knight’s discussion of “Haute Mess” at BlackGirlLongHair.com, Knight sarcastically claims that her “favourite photograph was the Colt 45 can that one model was holding…that made the bigot cake a tad bit sweeter for me” (“Vogue’s Haute Mess Editorial: A Not-So-Subtle Swipe at Black Women”). As part of an array of objects, Colt 45 is a commodity that functions as colloquial shorthand for poverty, authenticity and blackness. For example, UrbanDictionary.com’s definitions include: “A cheap malt liquor/beer popular in the ghetto,” “the closest your white ass will ever get to the ghetto,” and “a shitty cheap malt liquor beverage normally purchased by black people” (“Colt 45”). The two photographs in “Haute Mess” featuring the use of alcohol as a prop are modelled by Daphne Groeneveld and Lindsey Wixson (fig. 28). Both models wear matching blue, blonde, and brunette striped cropped weaves with the Oreo logo on them, and lean on a bar in the diner, making gestures to the camera with one hand while clasp ing a large can of Colt 45 in the other. Their louche poses and hand gestures – which recall gang signs18 – converge with the Colt 45, framing a racialised object with racialised gestures, wedding the bodily performance to the object and vice versa. In this manner, the particular bodily performance of mimicking gang signs appears to require the Colt 45 to shore it up, yet the Colt 45 also requires the bodily gestures to read in the way it does. However, in this instance, criticism in online coverage is directed entirely at the can of Colt 45, taking the models’ bodily performance for granted. However, because of the discursive construction of Colt 45 as a racialised form of alcohol, the white model drinking from a can

18 Gang signs are bodily gestures of affiliation (often using the hands) popularly associated with African American and Latino gangs in the United States. Some of these gestures have become a part of popular culture. UrbanDictionary.com describes the practice as “a sign one makes with their hands in representation of what set or hood they are from,” and tags the definition with “bloods, crips, hood rats, locs, g’s.”
Figure 28: Daphne Groeneveld and Lindsey Wixson in "Haute Mess"
evokes both blackness and liminal whiteness. As such, the white model’s body comes to signify chaotically through its contact with Colt 45, as “ghetto” and “trailer trash.”

Alcohol is a volatile object when considered along the vectors of quality and quantity that discursively structure practices of consumption. In his discussion of wine in Volume Two of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Pierre Mayol captures the unpredictability of alcohol. For Mayol:

the pleasure of drinking well always tends toward the boundary of drinking too much...[it] intrinsically contains the possibility of drift, of a setback; it can be the origin of a journey from which one does not return; the abuse of drinking logically leads to sickness, destruction, death (Mayol in de Certeau et.al 88).

However, while Mayol understands alcohol as having the potential to instigate a downward spiral in the consumer, the references to Colt 45 in “Haute Mess” suggest that the “fall” has already happened. One can presumably “drink well” with other kinds of alcohol, such as wine and expensive liquors. However, in “Haute Mess,” Colt 45 forms part of a tableau that ostensibly represents a marginalised existence. Because it evokes marginalisation, both in and of itself, and as part of an array of objects, one can only ever overindulge in it.

Colt 45 therefore appears to be an object that cushions the ongoing blows of disadvantage and marginalisation, while simultaneously being the apparent reason for that marginalisation. This formulation suggests that alcohol is at once a tonic for the ailments of life in late capitalism, and their cause. However, the consumption of “too much” alcohol also signifies the gradual attrition of the body. In this respect, it is symbolic of what Berlant terms “slow death,” which is understood as the “physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence” (*Cruel Optimism* 96). In “Haute Mess,” alcohol therefore magnetises both hyper and hypo expressions of excess: the potential to spin out of control, or to be gradually and imperceptibly in decline, to “wear out.” Hovering between these two positions, alcohol suggests entropy though the atrophy of bodies, evoking the potential for those bodies to become chaotic as they decline. In this way, the remarks about the alcohol in “Haute Mess” suggest a state of anxiety about the Colt 45 as an object and what it potentially signifies. Yet although alcohol signifies in the multiple, Colt 45 steadfastly attests to the body that is always already marked as too far gone to be in decline.
The act of consuming food and alcohol is an activity that always comes with moral inflections that disclose the status of the body taking part in the consumption. Without diminishing Berlant’s discussion of the link between capitalist temporality and fast food as a toxic object, it is worth noting that the “fast” in fast food generally points to the apparently processed and unnatural state of the food, much like referring to malt liquor by a brand name, such as Colt 45, denotes its status as a mass produced commodity. This gesture presupposes that “natural” food is good food, whatever natural food might be. In opposition to this binary, Luce Giard draws attention to the status of all food as already processed, stating that “no more so than any other elements of material life, food is not presented to humans in a natural state… it is already a cultured foodstuff” (de Certeau et al 167; emphasis in original).

“Natural” food is thus a discursive effect that is also classed, and often racialised. Therefore, fast food is, and is not, an obviously “bad” form of food that elides the processed and modified state of all food. Furthermore, the focus on fast food, junk food, and alcohol as seemingly bad objects obscures the potential for all food – even so-called natural food – to damage bodies and realign their spatial coordinates. Giard points out “the history of medicine itemizes an entire list of illnesses caused by deficiency or resulting from the poor quality of absorbed foods” with specific references to ergotic poisoning, scurvy, and pellagra (de Certeau et al 165).

Similarly, and as outlined earlier, Berlant’s exploration of the “so-called obesity epidemic” recasts the contact between food and bodies by focusing on work, time, consumption, and capitalism (Cruel Optimism 99). Both these paradigms suggest that there is always more or less that food can do, but what it might do more or less of is never certain. Therefore, although the food object comes into contact with, surrounds, or traverses the body, it still retains something of a noumenal and un-quantifiable quality. The food object’s surface is opaque plastic or reflective foil, but despite this, these surface qualities are not indicative of suppositions about what is “not-said” in discourse (Foucault, Archaeology 28). Rather, the inevitably partial aesthetics of opacity and reflection evoke fast food’s status as a partial object that contributes to the emergence and mapping of the body of the Poor Black Woman in “Haute Mess.” As such, fast food seems to reflect back “truths” about consuming bodies, even as it becomes a busy surface for the “Haute Mess” models to swallow or be swallowed up by.
In the initial discussion of “Haute Mess” on TheFashionSpot.com, some contributors suggested that drag was an aesthetic touchstone. ForChicSake suggested that “abbey [Lee Kershaw]... looks [like a] beyond horrendous... drag queen,” while agee stated that “Abbey Lee’s wig line and draggishness has piqued my interest,” and Fernini suggested that “Tranny goes perfect with Joan” (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”). The “why” of these statements – for example, why does “tranny” go well with Joan? – is unanswered beyond general expressions of aesthetic appreciation or dislike. Furthermore, drag appears divorced from any specific objects, bar the one mention of a “wig line.” By contrast, “Simply Outrageous” used its photo album to produce the figure of the Messy Drag Queen as a style icon. By invoking style, the identity category of the Messy Drag Queen is simultaneously positioned as in relation to the notion of tradition, and yet beyond history or aesthetics as a “truly” influential individual. Vogue.it therefore positions the Messy Drag Queen as a “punctum that appears singularly ahistorical” (Berlant, Cruel Optimism 66) and, paradoxically, as a current style icon with a history. But by claiming to represent her with a photo album Vogue.it’s articulation of the Messy Drag Queen becomes incoherent, as the types of images that are used to represent this figure are broad, from fine art to documentary images to film stills, often depicting glamour queens. The photo album, like the weaves and food, functions as an aesthetic object. However, while the weaves and food in “Haute Mess” are supposed to function purely aesthetically and end up functioning affectively, the “Simply Outrageous” album tries to function affectively as a punctum and falls short.

The punctum – the affective dimension – ostensibly resides in each photograph. The logic of the photo album means foregrounding history, the “that-has-been” (Barthes 77). In “Simply Outrageous,” this is an ongoing history, which presently takes the form of “Haute Mess.” Although the photo album is not arranged chronologically, the photographs still evoke an aspirational telos. By linking the photographs in the photo album to the then current “Haute Mess” editorial, they promise a narrative of transformation for anyone who adopts Messy Drag Queen style, specifically, those “heterosexual women...that have decided to express their own individuality by dressing in an outrageous – but not conventionally feminine or masculine – way” (Gherardesca). The impetus to transform by presenting the historical photographic object as “inspiration” reads as an attempt to recast the Messy Drag
Queen as an affective figure. However, the way that Vogue.it frame the photographs, in relation to everyday performances, unspecified “heterosexual women,” and style, suggests that their iteration of the punctum lies somewhere outside the images that they provide, in a place that they do not specify, and that, therefore, readers and viewers might fail to see.

The Messy Drag Queen is positioned as the embodiment of a depoliticised “style” that centres on individual expression. Although the album itself contains images that attest to the history of drag as a marginalised gay culture that is predominantly black and Latino, these varied histories of representation are subordinated in the service of style. If, as “Simply Outrageous” suggests, “Meisel’s ‘girls’” in “Haute Mess” are the final photographs in the photo album, then Vogue Italia’s Messy Drag Queen is a white, heterosexual woman, with the income to buy designer labels, and wear them outrageously, while being called, at worst, unconventional. Unconventionality in “Haute Mess” is aligned with “gender bending style” (Gherardesca) in “Simply Outrageous.” The writing refers to the photo album through specific examples, such as “John Waters’s Dreamlanders, The Cockettes, and Andy Warhol’s superstars” (Gherardesca), suggesting that those who look will be able to tell that there is a coherent style at work. Even though Vogue.it reorients drag in line with neo-liberal privileging of the individual, the use of “unconventional” retains traces of the politics inherent in style. While the notion of the “unconventional” erases the politics of drag as a marginalised culture and bodily practice, it simultaneously evokes that marginalisation that is coded into drag as a practice. For Vogue Italia, the Messy Drag Queen matters because she is “not conventional,” and can therefore be seen as stylish. The marginal, “not conventional” bodily performance of drag is precisely what is so desirable about it, therefore, what is appropriated, and finally, what unifies the photographs into an album. The photo album therefore surfaces as the primary object that explains and articulates the Messy Drag Queen.

Still, the “Simply Outrageous” album is a whole composed of parts, individual photographs, captions, a row of thumbnail images, back and forth arrows, and so on (figs. 7, 8, 9 and 10). The composed and arranged object of the photo album is tethered to the Messy Drag Queen, but the evocation of individual photographs implores the viewer to observe the uniqueness, the affective punctum, of the Messy Drag Queen in each image of, for example, “The Cockettes, and Andy Warhol’s superstars” (Gherardesca). The punctum, according to Barthes, is that “detail” and “partial object” in the photograph that grasps its beholder (43). In the case of “Simply Outrageous,” however, individual photographs from the album, rather than details from the photograph, are invoked as the punctum. A decidedly random detail
the punctum is also specific because it “pricks,” touches, and “arouses” (Barthes 43). The libidinal tone used to describe the punctum’s actions evokes bodily sensations and events. The little event of the punctum – when the object of the photograph does something to or for the viewer – indicates proximity and attachment that, following Berlant, characterises “objects of desire” (Cruel Optimism 23). But the punctum is a decidedly individual experience, an errant and unpredictable feature of a photograph. Barthes says of the punctum: “certain details may ‘prick’ me. If they do not, it is doubtless because the photographer has put them there intentionally” (47). Therefore, as much as Vogue.it’s evocations of a punctum outside the album fail, Vogue.it’s investment in directing attention towards certain details in the photograph album also fails to render the photographs as uniquely affective objects, and the Messy Drag Queen as an affective figure.

Instead, the photo album for “Simply Outrageous” remains in the order of what Barthes termed the “Studium” (26 – 27; emphasis in original). The studium is a “general interest” that is in “the order of liking,” a mode of engagement with a photograph that is temporary and passing, as the object glances off the beholder (26 – 27; emphasis in original). In the case of the “Simply Outrageous” photo album, recognising the historical context or people in the photographs constitutes the studium. Although there is an attempt to use “tradition” to shore up the Messy Drag Queen as an affecting and, therefore, truly convincing figure, the studium of the photo albums and photographs permits a general sense of engagement without necessitating a deep affective investment. It is therefore possible to read Vogue.it’s history of Messy Drag Queen style critically, rather than affectively.

Vogue.it locates the styling of “Haute Mess” in relation to Jack Halberstam and Judith Butler’s scholarly work on gender (Gherardesca). Ironically, both of these theorists have written on the politicisation of drag and its unstable structure, a point that undermines Vogue.it’s use of their names to shore up a stable style history for the Messy Drag Queen. The juxtaposition of glamour queens, queer icons and activists, fine art, 1970s clothes, and anonymous party goers is ostensibly contextualized by the references to Butler and Halberstam. Through employing scholarly language in the service of style, “Simply Outrageous” subsumes a wide variety of bodies, practices, groups, and histories under the figure of the Messy Drag Queen. It is this generality that renders the photo album in the order of the studium, for it becomes more about the collating of photographs into an album as evidence that signifies, as discussed in Chapter Two, as “tradition.” The Poor Black Woman,
on the other hand, emerges from specific objects in the photographs, rather than, as the Messy Drag Queen does, the photographs themselves.

However, this process of framing and delimiting the photographs (or indeed any object) is uneven, as “discourses are composed of signs, but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things. It is the more that renders them irreducible to language…and to speech” (Foucault, *Archaeology* 54; emphasis in original). “Simply Outrageous” frames the Messy Drag Queen style photo album by sublimating, while paradoxically drawing attention to, each photograph’s historic specificity and marginalised narratives about that history. Yet the “more” to which Foucault refers suggests that there is something about *Vogue Italia’s* rhetorical project that will inevitably fail to contain whatever it produces, and fail it does:

I didn’t find the editorial racist in the first place but this justification is inappropriate. Just admit they took their inspiration in nowaygirl.com and general ghetto fabulousness. I saw the photos [“Haute Mess”] not as a mockery but as an homage to the guts of this ladies. Also we could argue of the relevance of the bourgeois fashion and aesthetic standards as the “scale” by which we recognize beauty and style. But I just felt the general Lori Goldstein “fashion is not dead serious” vibe in this pictures. Fashion is about recycling the streets and creating lively new shapes. Just admit to it. This whole speech about dragqueens and john waters and nan goldin is out of point and pretentious (grinbeetch on Gherardesca)

Evidently, for commenter grinbeetch (and others elsewhere) *Vogue Italia’s* Messy Drag Queen falls short, and misses the mark entirely, because she cannot explain away other stylistic features. However, the commenter’s reference to *NoWayGirl.com* evokes the affective objects. The way that the weaves obliquely re-emerge here recalls their discursive production as excessive objects in online discourse, as it appears as though they cannot be contained. Given away by other objects – namely, the weaves – the Messy Drag Queen, and by extension, the photo album, miss “the point” and become “inappropriate” and “pretentious” (grinbeetch on Gherardesca). In “Simply Outrageous” the “more” takes the form of photographs, but crucially, photographs *not in the album.*

grinbeetch’s comment makes a connection between “Haute Mess” and *NoWayGirl.com* and disavows any possibility of a link between the “Simply Outrageous” photo album and “Haute Mess.” That grinbeetch “felt the…vibe,” and specifically, the
stylist’s vibe, of “Haute Mess” suggests that there is something about the array and arrangement of objects in “Haute Mess” that is lacking in Vogue Italia’s Messy Drag Queen. Even when contained neatly in a blog post or presented in a photo album, the apparently inspirational and traditional figure of Vogue Italia’s Messy Drag Queen does not tie “Haute Mess” down to something “real” in the way that NoWayGirl.com does. The investment in the photo album suggests there is a bifurcation of desire: on the one hand, there is Vogue Italia’s desire to reorient “Haute Mess” around the Messy Drag Queen, on the other, there is a sense that something is left wanting, that the apparent answers that “Simply Outrageous” gives in images and text are only a part of a continuing event. Ultimately, by employing the figure of the Messy Drag Queen Vogue Italia only attracts more ire by attempting to divorce “Haute Mess” from something “more real.”

Errant Objects

Weaves and food in Haute Mess are affective objects that mobilise discourses rendering the identity categories of the Messy Drag Queen and Poor Black Woman as “fake” and “real.” Photographs, on the other hand, are positioned by Vogue.it as affective objects, yet they end up signifying ambivalently. Unlike the weaves and food, their relationship to bodies appears less direct, and more straightforwardly representational and aesthetic. Affect is deployed in the service of the scandalous event in order to render the ostensible stakes: the “real” Poor Black Woman, and the “fake” Messy Drag Queen. However, the deployment of affect to shore up this event also undoes it, as the way that all the objects signify is partial and unstable, like the shreds of Twix wrappers on Coco Rocha’s weave. The comparative images in the online coverage gesture to the unstable nature of the objects without origin, because the weaves and food appear in more than one place. Because the weaves and food are without origins, they can be malleably positioned as “real” or “fake,” and their affective charge can channel history. However, their malleability means that they cannot statically signify a history wholly unique to the scandalous event of “Haute Mess.”

The scandalous event of “Haute Mess” is an intersection that foregrounds the affective dimension of the objects in “Haute Mess,” and attempts to fix them in place. In the first instance, this involves arriving at the objects and coming in to the knowledge that there is an impetus to feel something about them. This can be as straightforward as encountering the spread in an article on Jezebel.com, where the comparative photosets and description of the shoot as “kinda racist” (Sauers) in the title invites the viewer to consider the objects and
give their opinion. This impetus can, of course, fall short: one may not feel anything much at all, or feelings may change over time. As the comment on “Simply Outrageous” makes clear, affective gestures can fail entirely, or be rerouted. The way that affect can miss the mark suggests that the production of feeling – rather than a particular feeling – is the event, and that it relies on convincing proximity to other objects. The affective objects in “Haute Mess” are not, therefore, events that precede a given progression to affects, they instead signal affect as an event.

The unstable origins and affective status of the objects in “Haute Mess” means that they signify affectively because they are in proximity to other objects. Food makes sense in relation to the weaves, the weaves make sense in relation to other weaves, and the “Simply Outrageous” photographs fails to generate feeling in relation to one another and “Haute Mess.” Yet there is what Berlant terms an “endurance in the object” (Cruel Optimism 23; emphasis in original) that is affectively sustained by proximity to it. The objects, in the instance of the scandalous event of “Haute Mess,” are rather the categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen, that promise something real (or fake). In an inversion of Berlant’s formula, these material objects of the weaves, food, and photographs signify proximity to the Messy Drag Queen and Poor Black Woman prior to signifying affectively. As such, the status of the weaves, food, and photographs as objects is contingent and obscured, foregrounding their noumenal qualities. As evental blindspots, the responsibilities that the objects seem to hold as signifiers of “real” and “fake” are deflected onto the everyday.

While what the objects in “Haute Mess” do is not totally knowable, popular discourse in the scandalous event demonstrates the often inconsistent and piecemeal effort to contain the discursive properties of the images themselves. Foucault suggests that “discourses are composed of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things” (Archaeology 54). In the event of “Haute Mess,” interventionist discourses directly ascribes importance to photographs, food, alcohol, and weaves. In this wedding of “words and things” (Foucault, Archaeology 54) the objects end up doing more or less than what is required of them in the event. The more or the less that they do is often to do with their proximity to the categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen. As such, following the gestures to objects in the “Haute Mess” scandalous event reveals how designating objects designates and delineates bodies.
The weaves and food in “Haute Mess” are the only objects that appear in other photographs with any degree of resemblance or similarity. As such, they play an important role in solidifying or undermining the identity categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen. Similarly, the photographs in “Simply Outrageous” attempt to present the “Haute Mess” Messy Drag Queen as a figure with a clear stake in the real through the use of affect, which is ultimately an ambivalent gesture. In this chapter, the focus has been on objects that come into direct contact with the body in some way. However, these objects also escape the body too. Weaves drying on door handles, selfies, diners, supermarkets, babies, trollies, prams, mobility scooters, and weaves that seem to have inspired the weaves in “Haute Mess” but do not clearly “match” them, revel in how the apparently solid connections objects have to the body are anything but. As objects move into the environment, their shifting gestures to the instability of meaning attributed to them, and by extension, the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen. Their instability also gestures to the divestment of meaning on to tropes of the everyday.
CHAPTER FOUR: “HAUTE MESS AND EVERYDAY LIFE

The “Haute Mess” scandal is an event that is anchored in the everyday by virtue of the everyday spaces which it depicts and the everyday practices which it refers to. Both in the “Haute Mess” editorial, and on websites such as NoWayGirl.com, the depiction of bathrooms and diners, and the use of the selfie offer the possibility of encountering manifestations of the everyday – the real – in textual form. Like the origins offered for the Vogue images, as discussed in Chapter Two, and the objects seen in those images, as discussed in Chapter Three, these textual references to everyday spaces and practices constitute a way of making truth claims about the identity categories of the Poor Black Woman and the Messy Drag Queen. However, the promise of finding the reality which is located in the selfie and everyday spaces also offers the potential for recognising these tropes as forced and directed, and altogether fake. Rather than taking these textual manifestations of everydayness as given, this chapter argues that what appears to be self-evidently real instead operates as an aesthetic surface that produces the Messy Drag Queen as a “fake” figure, lacking the depth of the Poor Black Woman, who is coded as “real.” Yet, because both of these figures rely on the everyday to function as a textual surface like a backdrop, neither are real in the way that this event claims they are. In this chapter, I demonstrate how the selfie’s deployment and the representation of diner and bathroom spaces in this event reorient the “real” as what is unremarkable – and therefore, uneventful – in a process that conflates authenticity with the banal.

This process involves undoing this event’s conflation of the notion of reality with the everyday, which produces a sense of depth rendered in surface. Through the production of a hierarchy between the depth of the Poor Black Woman, and the surface of the Messy Drag Queen in the “Haute Mess” scandal, the seemingly neutral category of “real” life is revealed as a produced category of knowledge in and of itself. In this way, what appears to be everyday and real in the “Haute Mess” scandal is rather a particular construction of everydayness as an aesthetic surface. Attention to “surfaces of their emergence,” Foucault suggests, is essential to tracing the appearance of objects of knowledge (Archaeology 45; emphasis in original). Therefore, I suggest that in order to grasp how the categories of the Poor Black
Woman and the Messy Drag Queen function, paying attention to their backdrops in this event is crucial. For Foucault, “surfaces of emergence,” – which might, for example, take the form of the family, or similar institution – are “normative” and therefore “susceptible to deviation [and] all have a margin of tolerance and a threshold beyond which exclusion is demanded” (Archaeology 45). In an inversion of Foucault’s method, this chapter attends to the (dis)appearance of the everyday in “Haute Mess” as a process of mapping the emergence of surfaces so as to unravel the production of the relationship to “real” life that the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen have. Thus, as these categories emerge from surfaces, surfaces do so from categories, and the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen come to operate as cartographic rubrics that sort selfies and spaces into varying degrees of realness.

The chapter begins with a discussion of selfies in “Haute Mess” using Michel de Certeau’s notion of “spatial practice” (91). As a spatial practice, selfies draw attention to the spaces themselves through bodily interaction with them. Paradoxically, this tendency highlights the status of bathrooms as sites of bodily policing, while simultaneously employing ironic elements that divert attention from the politics which are inherent in the production of space. Through this, the selfie is rendered as a practice that is in “bad taste.” As the bathroom is the primarily site for selfies in “Haute Mess,” the next section examines discourses associated with the bathroom. Drawing on the work of Frantz Fanon and Jack Halberstam, I explore the bathroom as a zone that evinces the dissolution of the public and private through the policing of race, class, and gender. With reference to Halberstam’s discussion of the “bathroom problem” (20), where the bathroom is reoriented as a decidedly public space, and Fanon’s phenomenological account of how black bodies inhabiting public space are treated as public property (91), I suggest that the bodily performances adopted by the models’ in the bathroom in “Haute Mess” reveal the status of the bathroom in “Haute Mess” as a thoroughly public space through amplified performances of privacy.

In the third section of this chapter, I turn to the diner space represented in “Haute Mess.” The diner is where the production of self-evidently “real” spaces begins to breakdown. Because the models in “Haute Mess” misperform in the diner by behaving as though it is a supermarket, the representation fails to make sense. The diner, therefore, becomes a set, which functions as an overtly “fake” space for racialised, classed and gendered bodily performance. The diner as apparently failed

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space stands in contrast to the final section of the chapter, which focuses on the seemingly obviously real spaces depicted in the images on NoWayGirl.com which contain the weaves that resemble those in “Haute Mess.” Without these spaces – domestic living rooms, waiting areas in shops, fast food restaurants – it might not be so crucial to the event that the diner in “Haute Mess” appears fake. As it was, the spaces depicted on NoWayGirl.com came to appear real through the binary of public/private space. In the domestic spaces, the presence of a camera implies an invasion of a private space, because in this instance the photograph was made public. While in the public spaces, the apparent unawareness on the part of the subjects that they were being photographed suggests another invasion in the presumed anonymity of public life. Yet, the overt pose adopted by someone in their home, and the surveillance implied by a covertly taken photograph evinces the breakdown of the very binary that makes the images seem real. What selfies and spaces do, then, is graze the real in such a way that draws attention to the general production of surfaces that occurs throughout the event. By evoking everyday life, and citing discourses associated with particular spaces and practices, they become a – sometimes convincing and sometimes not – scene for the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen.

SELFIES

Selfies and Practice

A selfie is a self-portrait taken with a Smartphone’s digital camera, and often disseminated through online social networks. Current popular discussion about selfies tends to categorise them in differing ways, for example, as being deliberately “gross” to engage in a critique of normative expectations around photographs (Hills), or as worthy of preservation for posterity (Garber). These discussions are inclined to focus on selfie aesthetics in order to elevate the form, glossing over the labour of self-production which is often characterised as narcissism.¹⁹ The selfies in “Haute Mess” are unusual, in that they embody the “candid” and lo-fi aesthetics that characterise the

¹⁹ For example, see media coverage about Kim Kardashian’s selfies. The newspaper The Daily Mail recently ran an article on one of her selfies titled “You’ve got to be kidding? Kim Kardashian compares herself to icon Elizabeth Taylor in most indulgent selfie yet.”
Smartphone selfie, and yet appear in a professional photo shoot, where their composition was most likely directed in some way. There are four curated selfies that intersperse the other images in “Haute Mess,” and all of the selfies depict models posing and preening in the diner’s bathroom. Through the logic of self-production that the form demands, the selfie draws attention to the here and now of that preening as a form of labour. The temporality of the selfie is always “now,” what Manuel Castells refers to as “timeless time” (12): a picture that has just been posted on Twitter or Facebook, or sent via Snapchat. The selfie is also always “here,” which foregrounds the role space plays in the labour evinced by the form. Therefore, I suggest that the “Haute Mess” selfies foreground the production of the self in a space, drawing attention to the role the bathroom holds in regulating and policing bodily performance. The way in which the bathroom does this through discourses of race, gender, and class, anchors the categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen accordingly. In short, the “Haute Mess” selfies evince de Certeau’s formulation of spatial practice as a motor in the production of knowledge in this event.

In his discussion of spatial practices, Michel de Certeau contrasts place with space, suggesting that while place has connotations of stability, space:

…is composed of intersections and mobile elements…actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it…that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities…space is like the word when it is spoken…when it is caught in the ambiguity of an actualization (117).

In this sense, space is transformative, functioning as an ongoing process of becoming, whereas place is orderly, a series of “elements taken into consideration are beside one another, each situated in its own ‘proper’ and distinct location, a location it defines” (de Certeau 117; emphasis in original). Generally speaking, the selfie foregrounds the taking and making of a photograph by its subject. Selfies are an actualisation – “a word when it is spoken” (de Certeau 117) – that despite their ephemeral modes of dissemination could potentially be archived. The selfie brings together self-production and spatial practice in a knowing way. In one “Haute Mess” selfie, a model poses in a blurry mid-shot in front of a mirror, looking down toward the phone’s screen (fig. 29)
Figure 29: Karen Elson Mid Shot Selfie in “Haute Mess”
which shows an awareness of where the mirror is in space and what she is doing in relation to it. This also captures a tension between space as actualised, in this case, the model taking a photograph, and place as an orderly location, the model in the bathroom.

By suggesting that “space is a practiced place” (117; emphasis in original), de Certeau evokes a sense of use that results in an accretion of meaning over time. Subsequently, this use can come to “determin[e] through operations” specific “spaces” via “the actions of historical subjects” (118; emphasis in original). Hence, space can accumulate a history. Although the selfie, with its emphasis on the here and now, actualises space as de Certeau’s walkers from The Practice of Everyday Life actualise the possibilities in the terrain of the city through their activity (91-110), its potential archiving and reproduction (re)produces a history of the form, and of spaces associated with it. In this way, selfies write “stories” (de Certeau 118) that draw attention to the ways in which the public bathroom is produced as a racialised, gendered, and classed space that houses historical subjects. However, the selfies in “Haute Mess” are positioned as without “stories” of their own, while the interventionist discourses employed on TheFashionSpot.com positions them as simply “ironic.”

**Selfies and Irony**

The selfies in “Haute Mess” are obliquely referenced on TheFashionSpot.com as part of the shoot’s “over the top” and borderline “bad taste” aesthetics. Comments claiming that “Haute Mess” is “about the ‘facebook’ stupid girls that we see doing stupid things” (jmrmartinho “Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”) evoke selfies through their reference to narcissism and social networks. On the same thread, Fiercification’s complaint that “I’m kind of sick of Meisel’s ‘ironic’ editorials, especially since they look like they were shot with a £25 digital camera more so than before” (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”) gestures to the use of selfies in “Haute Mess” by yoking together ironic knowingness and lo-fi aesthetics in their remarks about the shoot’s photographic style. By using the word “ironic,” Fiercification’s comment implies that irony can be amplified through a particular kind of practice: “shot with a [cheap] digital camera.” In this way, the “Haute Mess” selfies’ content and practices come together through this ironic cheapness, marking them out as a knowingly “bad taste”
Figure 30: Selfie with A Sanitary Bin (Top Left) and A Selfie in the Mirror (Bottom Right) from "Haute Mess"
permutation of the form. Irony, according to Fredric Jameson, is “the very locus of the notion of self-consciousness and the reflexive” (Postmodernism 259), a “residual modernist value” that has become a hallmark of postmodernity (Postmodernism 427). However, postmodern texts like the selfie often engage in a “practice of blank irony” (Jameson, Postmodernism 17) a form of apolitical irony which uses it for its own sake, a kind of “empty” rhetorical gesture of knowingness about knowingness. But by describing the selfie as an ironic, ephemeral, blankly self-aware, and often “bad” genre, the complexities of selfies as spatial practices are elided by positioning them as inherently narcissistic (a “stupid thing” done by “stupid girls”), rather thinking about them as tactics of self-production or necessary labour.

In the discussion on TheFashionSpot.com about “Haute Mess,” the selfies’ connotations of knowingness are read by commenters through the models’ performances, or attributed to Meisel’s (unknowable) intentions behind the photographs. Through the privileging of the self as the locus of irony in the selfies – the singular model as “Facebook girls” or Meisel as the auteur – the apparent ironic mode of the selfies is also located in the real through its attribution to “real” people out there. As such, the ironic “Haute Mess” selfies seem linked to a “realer” real than their context in the shoot, where someone knows the intention ostensibly at work in them. Knowingness, as Steven Shaviro’s discussion of irony suggests (“Detention”), presumes that there is something that the viewer should or could know about selfies, and “Haute Mess” more generally, that they cannot access. However, the evocation of potential truth behind the selfies is as much a construction as their artifice is.

Positioning the “Haute Mess” selfies as ironic evinces an awareness of the selfie as a potentially cheap or tasteless form. The selfie is popularly positioned as narcissistic, and therefore as a bad genre. This is exacerbated by the intersection of the socially devalued and often gendered forms of labour the “Haute Mess” selfies display, such as bodily preening or models posing, and the site of production in which they take place, the bathroom. In the burgeoning vernacular of the selfie, the bathroom is popularly understood as an inappropriate space to take a photograph in. Kate Losse, a pop culture and technology writer, describes bad selfies as “amateurish, flash-blinded…often taken in front of a bathroom mirror…shot with cell
phones…cheap-looking, evoking the MySpace era…a sign of bad taste”\(^{20}\) (“The Return of the Selfie”). In “Haute Mess,” one model takes a picture of herself on a sharp downward angle, capturing a sanitary pad bin in the corner of a bathroom stall (fig. 30). While capturing a toilet in a bathroom selfie is often accidental, here it appears deliberate, as though the model (or Meisel) chose the awkward angle to capture both face and bin, a quite literal visual nod to trashy aesthetics. Another model, wearing a towering rainbow beehive weave, prims and shows off her bag and bedazzled Smartphone in the bathroom mirror (fig. 30), while in yet another, the same model appears in extreme close up, a wide grin showing off a gold front tooth and Louis Vuitton monogramed eye shadow (fig. 31). The interlocking “LV” monograms are backwards, indicating that although the mirror’s edges are not visible, it is still there. Through the barely visible edges of the baby changing tables and chrome hand dryers in the backgrounds of the “Haute Mess” selfies, the images continually reference the bathroom, and therefore, continually evoke “bad” selfies.

There is a sense of everyday pageantry to the model’s over the shoulder pose with bag and rainbow beehive that suggests a performance (fig. 30). As Butler writes in relation to the category of “realness” in drag, “when what appears and how it is ‘read’ diverge, the artifice of the performance can be read as artifice; the ideal splits off from its appropriation” (88). The selfies are explicit performances that can be read as such, but they are also earnest gestures toward the ordinary; selfies taken in bathrooms are something that ordinary, everyday people are imagined to “do.” As such, the performances in the “Haute Mess” selfies are as ambivalent as Butler’s reading of drag. They draw attention to the “real” of the ordinary and everyday, even as they render that everydayness artificial. As such, through the everyday pageantry displayed in the “Haute Mess” selfies, the selfies paradoxically demonstrate how performance and everyday life are compatible, even as they suggest a rift between the two. What seems real about the “Haute Mess” selfies is therefore always going through a process of amelioration and dissolution.

\(^{20}\) The “return” of the selfie that the title of Losse’s article gestures to is about the apparent renewed acceptability of the selfie. Losse links this to the invention of front facing cameras on Smartphones, which allow for a perfect shot. Twitter hashtags such as #GPOY, which is an acronym for “Gratuitous Picture Of Yourself,” suggest the ubiquity of the trend and an irony laden awareness of that ubiquity.
Figure 31: An Extreme Close-Up Selfie in "Haute Mess"
Realness is also temporally dependent. In the “Haute Mess” selfies, a sense of realness is dependent on that of nowness or immediacy, and vice versa. As “the ability to compel belief, to produce the naturalized effect,” Butler suggests that realness is the result of embodiment, reiteration, and impersonation of a “standard which regulates the performance, but which no performance fully approximates” (88). What the “now” of the selfies in “Haute Mess” signify is not the present per se, but rather the sense that for this selfie to be happening now it must have happened before. Being recognised as an “ironic” image indicates that it adheres, as an object and a performance, to a norm. As such, the “Haute Mess” selfies draw attention to all iterations and reiterations of the selfie, and it is from this, rather than its temporal currency, that it stakes a place as everyday.

SPACES

**Bathrooms**

The public bathroom is an everyday space that masquerades as a zone of privacy. Its unspoken rules suggest that the diner bathroom depicted in “Haute Mess” can be understood as what Marc Augé terms a “non-place,” a zone which is typical of late capitalism (94). Non-places are “spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have with these spaces” (Augé 94). The purpose of the diner bathroom is the professed function of it, its “certain end,” a place for going to the bathroom. Yet the bathroom is also more than this. Augé continues: “non-places mediate a whole mass of relations, with the self and with others, which are only indirectly connected with their purposes” (94). Therefore, the way in which the bathroom promises privacy but publically regulates bodies exemplifies the disconnect between the purpose or use of a space and its operations that is typical of a non-place.

The selfies in “Haute Mess” draw attention to how the bathroom functions as a public space of surveillance that mediates “a whole mass of relations” (Augé 94). The selfie suggests that the bathroom is a place of leisure where one poses for a photograph, a place of transit where one takes a photograph while passing though, and a place of commerce where the “Haute Mess” models engage in the labour of self-
production. But this labour and play is mediated by the bathroom, it is classed, racialised and gendered in relation to this space. Although the diner bathroom may not appear to be what Augé terms a space of “supermodernity” (94), it appears reified and more concrete through the selfie as a spatial practice. The “bad” “Haute Mess” bathroom selfies draw attention the labour of self-production in an ostensibly private space that should never display labour, thereby rendering the division between public and private space increasingly ambivalent and ambiguous.

The “Haute Mess” bathroom selfies subsequently evoke a lack of class through each model’s obvious modeling. The “Haute Mess” selfies depict improper labour in a bathroom space, with the models captured posing, rather than cleaning or grooming. Furthermore, the bathroom is a space that generally functions to make labour – especially that which is coded feminine – disappear. One emerges from the bathroom fully made up, the toilet is simply clean not cleaned, or one goes to “powder one’s nose.” The bathroom is an ellipse in space that facilitates and hides the labour of bodily transformation and maintenance. As such, the fact that the “Haute Mess” selfies occur in the bathroom suggests an uncultured behaviour on the part of the posing models. Yet the déclassé selfies in “Haute Mess” also appear so by virtue of their cultured context within Vogue Italia, where they are juxtaposed against professional images. However, this apparently straightforward binary of amateur/professional is complicated by other professional images in the shoot which sometimes have an amateur quality, for example, some photographs have had the “red eye” deliberately left in (fig. 32). This indicates that the photographs were poorly lit, not usually a characteristic of professional images, and the fact that they remain there suggests careful direction in the photoshopping to leave them in. The way that the other images pick up on the selfies’ amateur aesthetics suggests a conflation of everyday amateurism with authenticity. However, the selfies’ amateurism also conflates a lack of class, or lack of cultured taste and expression, with everydayness because they are “bad” bathroom selfies. In this way, the bathroom becomes an apparently lower class space.

The intersection of labour and askew glamour in the selfies in “Haute Mess” highlights the paradox of public and private that marks the women’s bathroom. Judith Halberstam suggests that:
Figure 32: Red Eye and Amateurism in "Haute Mess"
The bathroom is a domestic space beyond the home that comes to represent the domestic order, or a parody of it, out in the world. The women’s bathroom accordingly becomes a sanctuary of enhanced femininity, a “little girl’s room” to which one retreats to powder one’s nose or fix one’s hair (24).

The women’s bathroom is therefore a public space with gendered expectations that mark the private, which makes it a primary site for the public policing of gender. The way in which Vogue Italia frames Messy Drag Queen resonates with Halberstam’s discussion. Messy implies that Vogue Italia’s drag queen, in their words, “does not pass as sufficiently feminine” (Gherardesca). She is, therefore, “not-woman” (Halberstam 21). However, the models in the diner bathrooms in the “Haute Mess” shoot are simultaneously framed as “not conventionally feminine or masculine” (Gherardesca) and therefore, “not-man” (Halberstam 21). Furthermore, the models in “Haute Mess” engage ambivalently with the gendered expectations of domesticity in the diner bathroom. Sometimes they appear unladylike, taking photographs of sanitary bins, while at other times they pose in the mirror, or dry their weaves under the hand dryers, in an unruly approximation of publicly acceptable grooming that evokes norms around the propriety of doing domestic tasks in public space (figures 28, 29 and 30). Because this behavior is coded domestic and improper, it reveals the public status of the bathroom. Furthermore, the misperformance of acceptable bathroom tasks equate to a misperformance of gender. Even acceptable tasks are amplified until they appear grotesque, such as the extreme close-up selfie where the model appears to check her teeth for lipstick (fig. 31). Together, this ambivalence and the very nearly proper performance of improper tasks in the shoot collapse into the liminal zone of not-woman/not-man, which destabilises the “sanctuary” (Halberstam 24) status of the women’s bathroom.

The discomfort with the photograph of Joan Smalls standing over a urinal evinces the tenuous split between private and public space (fig. 23). The bathroom promises privacy by invoking domesticity. Michel de Certeau and Luce Giard suggest that the status of domestic space is a “private territory [that] must be protected from indiscreet glances” (de Certeau et.al 145). Smalls’ assertive pose and direct stare at the camera betray a sense of bodily self-awareness that reads as a public performance. She straddles the urinal, which draws attention to the gendered status of the urinal as something which men use. As an object that men use, there is a conflation of the body
Figure 33: Joan Smalls in the Bathroom in "Haute Mess"
over the urinal with the practices that the urinal is involved in, as the comments such as “that shot of Joan in the bathroom is appalling” (valliaddict “Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”) suggest. That is, the urinal is used by men, therefore the woman is used by men. Yet what this conflation – urinal/woman – fails to account for is the attendant history of how black bodies have been, and are, always already treated as public property.

The public bathroom in the United States is a space imbued with a history of racial segregation (Abel 435-6). Bathrooms not only delineate space as public or private, but also segregate bodies. The history of segregation of African Americans from whites pathologized public bathrooms as a space of potential contagion that would, if unmanaged, result in a moral or bodily atrophy. Hence, the public bathroom is a space shot through with gendered and racialised taboos. For Racialious.com, the image of Smalls and the urinal is particularly problematic. They state: “maybe Meisel was trying to show that beauty exists in all cultures of fashion...I was beginning to think the Internet rumblings could be an overreaction...at least, until I got to the above image [of Smalls and the urinal]” (Lamour). Smalls’ assertive pose draws attention to the racialised public status of the diner bathroom. The “appalling” (valliaddict “Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”) spectacle of Smalls in the bathroom evokes Frantz Fanon’s account of black bodies as spectacle for the white gaze: “Look! A Negro!” (91). By treating Smalls as a spectacle, her body comes to take up the bathroom space. This recalls Fanon’s phenomenological account of the process by which the black body is realigned in public space:

The body schema, attacked in several places, collapsed, giving way to an epidermal racial schema…it was a question of becoming aware of my body, no longer in the third person but in triple…I existed in triple: I was taking up room (92).

For Fanon, the process of becoming a spectacle entails a rearrangement of the coordinates of the body. He states: “my body was returned to me spread-eagled, disjointed, redone” (Fanon 93). Although Smalls’ akimbo pose over the urinal echoes Fanon’s assertion, her intense expression renders the scene more ambivalent. She appears to gaze directly back the viewer, her angular pose assertive and almost combative. As the selfies do, Smalls’ paradoxically disarranged pose draws attention
to the overarching function of the bathroom as a space that attempts to organise bodies.

Diner

“Haute Mess” was shot in at the Kelloggs Diner in Brooklyn, New York City (Moss), with models posing at the counter, in and around the booths, and in the bathrooms. As figures 28 and 34 show, the diner is a melange of surfaces and colours, dotted with pot plants, with windows and walls adorned with pictures advertising food specials. Combining practicality and industrial glamour, the diner’s bright chrome trims and faux-marble edges on the tables exist alongside more obviously functional beige tile floors and red brown, navy and sky blue vinyl bench seats. The whole space is lit with a mixture of fluorescent strip lighting and low-hanging lampshades. The diner space appears especially visually busy, yet curiously flat and robbed of perspective, perhaps due to the tight framing of the models, lighting, and seemingly low resolution shots. The upper images in figure 28 show how the diner windows and glass partitions are partially obscured with blinds or food advertisements throughout “Haute Mess,” which lends the space an enclosed feel.

The spaces in “Haute Mess” received some coverage during the scandal, but drew far less commentary than the array of objects, such as the weaves, food, makeup, and nails did. When the sets were discussed, the comments referring to them tended to be ambivalent, if not entirely negative. VibeVixen.com stated that “oddly enough restaurants and bathrooms were chosen as the background of the shoot” (Monaco), while Racialicious.com highlighted a sense of cognitive dissonance in “Haute Mess” between the space and the “clothes that likely cost more than the diner’s rent” (Lamour). Fashionista.com described the models as “parading through a grocery store and diner” and suggested (without mention of the weaves) that the images resembled “images from American sites like Nowaygirl.com, which posts anonymous photographs of people in places like Wal Mart and McDonald’s” (Mau “Sozzani Defends”). On TheFashionSpot.com, discussions about the sets were similarly sparse. One commenter, rubyshimmer, mentions the “baby changing station in the fast food restaurant” (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”). Tigerrouge described the styling of “Haute Mess” as “dressing people up in a cavalcade of tackiness and having them stand around in a diner” (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”). TREVOFASHIONISTO
Figure 34: Model Pushing a Trolley in "Haute Mess"
stated that they were “not understanding shopping in a diner,” later suggesting that “if Meisel did a story that wasn’t shot in a diner made to look like a supermarket and actually took it to the area where this happens…even an actual grocery store after hours, I would have been more…accepting” (“Joan Smalls by Steven Meisel”).

Several different themes about the space in “Haute Mess” emerge from these comments. For one, the diner fails to make sense in the context of the everyday, because if the clothes cost more than the diners’ rent, as Racialicious.com claims, then the diner is a distinctly lower class space that jars with the expensive designer clothing. Furthermore, the choice of the word “oddly” from VibeVixen.com’s discussion of the bathrooms and diner suggests that the diner has a bearing on the rhetorical figure of the Poor Black Woman. It is implicit then, that the Vogue Italia staff would choose this space to evoke poverty, the working class, or African American culture. But the diner space also says something about the bodies that inhabit it. Descriptions of the models as a “cavalcade” or “parading” through the space suggest that the way the models inhabit the diner space is inappropriate and excessive. They are apparently too showy or too much of a spectacle for their environment. While one ostensibly comes to a diner to eat, the models, for the most part, do not. Instead, they parade and play. Yet banal performances are also considered at odds with the space. For example, an image of a model pushing a trolley filled with things through a diner is less believable than the idea that someone would be spectacularly styled to go to a diner, particularly given the candid shots from NoWayGirl.com. Finally, the diner space fails to make sense in and of itself, as it sometimes appears to be a supermarket, while at other times it is a diner. Because of the improper ways that the models’ inhabit it, it lacks a sense of the real that a “real” and clearly delineated supermarket or diner – perhaps as depicted in PeopleOfWalMart.com or NoWayGirl.com – ostensibly has.

Using the diner as a supermarket also draws attention to the set itself as an incoherent space. Styling the diner as a supermarket primarily involves adding things to the shoot, such as a shopping trolley or mobility scooter with a full basket, as in figure 34 where the model pushes a full trolley past the camera, behind a rope with the diner booths in the background. The transformation of diner into supermarket occurs through how the models apparently inappropriately inhabit the diner. Because of the models’ performance of “incorrect” banal tasks for the diner, the performance
Figure 35: Karen Elson in "Haute Mess"
that signifies the supermarket fails to wholly line up with the diner. Though supermarkets and diners share similarities in terms of their fittings – surfaces are hard and easily cleaned, lighting is fluorescent, walls feature advertisements, and so forth – they demand that bodies inhabit them in different ways. The diner has places for sitting and gathering with other people, while the supermarket channels people through it. They also require people to consume in them in different ways, much like the weaves and food evoke varied modes of consumption in Chapter Three. Therefore, the performance of shopping in a diner foregrounds the way the diner is used not as a diner, but as a set. With connotations of theatricality, the diner-as-set reads as a space for performance, rather than a “real” diner, and as such, inflects the figures of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen as “real” and performative respectively. The figure of the Poor Black Woman belongs to the “real” diner space in a qualified way. That is, she does reside in a diner eating fast-food or perhaps serving it, but because she apparently does “in real life” she should not in the “Haute Mess” diner set. The figure of the Messy Drag Queen, on the other hand, belongs to the diner-as-set because as she signifies performance, she inhabits the diner as an everyday stage for a performance of the exceptional. *Vogue.it’s* “Simply Outrageous” claims that proponents of Messy Drag Queen style bring “their performances to everyday life” so “perhaps it’s no accident that Meisel’s ‘girls’ are in a diner and a supermarket, and not on stage” (Gherardesca). This suggests that the Messy Drag Queen is the apparent cornerstone of the editorial shoot. By framing the shoot in this way, the Messy Drag Queen becomes a way of rhetorically navigating the disjunctures between the space and the way the models inhabit it by recasting it as performance. Hence, the models should not use the space properly, because that does not constitute a “performance” in the everyday.

In this way, the Messy Drag Queen renders the everyday space of the diner banal, and draws attention to its everydayness. The apparently exceptional performance evokes a myriad of ways that people inhabit the everyday, which are potentially spectacular, boring, repetitious, and so forth. In figure 16 the pixelated people and “baby” with Lindsey Wixson evoke a family unit, as does the stroller in Karen Elson’s image (fig. 35). Here, the “babies” position the nuclear family as an institution of the everyday. Yet, the nonchalance of Wixson’s demeanour and countenance lifts her above the banal concerns of mothering. As such, her insouciance
contrasts with the banal space of the diner, which evokes the more practical preoccupations of everyday life. However, Wixson’s distracted manner is reliant on the diner as an ostensibly grounded and practical space, and vice versa. The synthesis of banal everydayness with performances that seem to hover above it or at its edges effects a flattening of the binary relationship between banality and performance. Melding banality into performance demolishes the distinction between bodily performance and everyday space into a surface, in contrast with the apparent “depth” of the Poor Black Woman.

**Private, Public**

The photographs on NoWayGirl.com that resemble the images in “Haute Mess” depict everyday public spaces like the diner but, unlike “Haute Mess,” domestic space as well. Although there are a relatively small number of remarks about the diner space in “Haute Mess,” there is, by contrast, a complete lack of discussion of the spaces which feature in the photographs of anonymous black women on NoWayGirl.com, YumYucky.com, and other websites. The “more real” spaces in the “original” photographs are taken as a given, to the point where they fail to register in commentary as significant. Backgrounds in the photographs from NoWayGirl.com vary greatly, from fast food outlets, bathrooms, sitting rooms, bedrooms, and cars, to hair show booths, outside at fairs or festivals in public spaces, store interiors that look like a mechanics’ shop, or Costco or Wal-Mart. While the “Haute Mess” diner-as-set is a specific space that comes to signify generally yet unevenly, that is, as a stand in for the “all American” diner and supermarket, by contrast, the backgrounds in the NoWayGirl.com photographs are places that could conceivably be anywhere, but are specifically somewhere, even if it is impossible to know where exactly. Pictures featured on NoWayGirl.com often focus tightly on the person wearing the weave, such as figure 36. This relegates the backgrounds to the edges of the photographs, with only small parts of the photograph acting as clues to what kind of space the subject is in: the edge of a television in the top right hand corner of a photograph, a pallet of tyres off to the side, an illuminated menu hovering at the top edge of the frame, a rumpled bedspread, and so on. The relegation of the background to the edges mirrors the absence of discussion of the everyday in the event, in that it is treated as though it has been sublimated into the spectacle. Instead, the images reorient
Figure 36: NoWayGirl.com "I'd Like To Send A Big Shout Out To Your Lacefront Holla!"
domesticity in a public way, acting as a window into the private through the public website of NoWayGirl.com.

The photographs on NoWayGirl.com function as a public exposure of domestic space. Rather than evoking the strictly voyeuristic feel of an intrusion into private space, the image of the young woman in “I’d Like To Send A Big Shoutout to Your Lacefront, Holla!” suggests a more ambivalent paradox of intrusion and display (fig. 36). Similarly, the logic of intrusion and display maps onto two primary modes of recording in photographs on NoWayGirl.com: one overt, the other covert. Overt recording refers to a photograph that appears to have been taken with the consent of the person in it. For example, in the case of figure 36, a woman looks directly into the camera in a close up portrait format shot. From the television just visible in the top right hand corner and what appears to be a coffee table with things on it below, the photograph appears to depict a domestic interior. It is someone’s home, somewhere. Typically, these overt, sometimes clearly posed photographs depict domestic spaces in the background, although there are, of course, exceptions. For example one image (“Cupcakes In Atlanta”) depicts an African American woman with a cupcake hair weave standing at a hair show booth. The hair show, being a trade show, is also a semi-private space, and one that encourages a sense of celebration and showmanship. Outré weaves are therefore a part of inhabiting this space. Furthermore, the hair show draws attention to the paradoxical production of public space, which in late capitalism is often privately owned. The domestic interior, however, reads as intimate, which differs from privately owned public spaces.

While the domestic photographs indicate an awareness that a photo is being taken, the covert photograph, on the other hand, seems to have been taken without the permission or awareness of the subject. Covert photographs are often taken in public, or privately owned public space such as a store or fast food restaurant. Typically, the photograph’s subject faces away from the camera seemingly unaware that their photograph is being taken, such as in figure 15 from “The Hairstyles to Expect This Easter – LMAO.” In figure 15, the Easter egg basket weave is attached to the back of the woman’s head and takes up the bulk of the shot and only an ear, part of her neck, and the slight jut of her right cheekbone is visible. She is standing in what appears to be a fast-food restaurant, beside the counter, with backlit menus above. Like the
person wearing the weave, the other people in the shot (who are most likely employees) are only partially in the photograph.

This weave in the fast food restaurant represents a disjuncture between expectations of being in public, and how being in public works in actuality. The weave in NoWayGirl.com’s “Hairstyles This Easter” draws attention to the intersection of spatial histories that structure expectations, and spatial practices that contravene or complicate those histories. In “Hairstyles This Easter,” the woman wearing the weave appears to be in public in the wrong way, as she contravenes dominant notions of what proper public attire should be. Yet, the woman is in public in the Easter Egg weave, which, on NoWayGirl.com, marks her out for ridicule. The woman in “Hairstyles This Easter” is thereby framed as responsible for her own iteration of publicness. This iteration of being in public depicted in “Hairstyles This Easter” evokes Berlant’s “intimate public,” which is “a space of mediation in which the personal is refracted through the general” (The Female Complaint viii). In “Hairstyles This Easter,” the “personal” that the Easter Egg weave evokes is refracted through the more generally public space of the fast food restaurant, and so, becomes caught up in the histories associated with that space. Although a body might apparently belong in an unproblematic way in a fast food restaurant, as with the person in “Hairstyles This Easter,” the way in which it belongs is delineated by a racialised history of that space related to the spatial practices associated with the fast food restaurant, particularly serving and making fried food. Yet the Easter Egg weave suggests a different understanding of the fast food restaurant as a public space, as a space which has room to accommodate a personal way of being in public.

The person in “Hairstyles This Easter” is “overdetermined from the outside” (Fanon 95) insofar as they have the history of the space impressed upon them. Spatial histories of the fast food restaurant cast her into a “bad” shape that is fit for ridicule on NoWayGirl.com. Yet, NoWayGirl.com archives this photograph, and frames it in relation to dominant norms about being in public. This act foregrounds the disjuncture between hegemonic modes of publicness and the publicly intimate zones of making, domesticity, and “relevant commodity culture” (Berlant, The Female Complaint viii) that the weave symbolises. By insisting on other ways of being proper in public, the Easter Egg weave in the fast food restaurant offers possibilities for public spaces to become sites of resistance via negotiated understandings of what is commonly
understood as the public. However, tropes of intimacy, such as the extreme weave, come to simply signify “bad” on NoWayGirl.com and what is ostensibly “real” in the scandalous event of “Haute Mess.” Yet the covert cataloguing and public archiving of “Hairstyles This Easter” and the other photographs found NoWayGirl.com suggests an ongoing production of a racialised everydayness that hinges on the places or practices of consumer capitalism.

The reorientation of domesticity as public in NoWayGirl.com and “Haute Mess” reifies the everyday as a more general sense of commodified “realness” that captures both a sense of familiarity and otherness, exemplified by the fast food restaurant and its analogue, the diner. The diner is familiar insofar as it holds a privileged place in the popular imaginary of the United States. From Edward Hopper’s painting Nighthawks to the “Double R Diner” in Twin Peaks, the diner is at once egalitarian, potentially social, and alienating. A diner can take on more culturally specific and racialised forms, for example, the Italian deli frequented by Tony Soprano in The Sopranos, or the KFC visited by a group of middle class African American college students in Spike Lee’s School Daze. But the idea of the diner, the image of the diner is untethered from these specificities. It is neither lived nor uniform. Paradoxically, as a representational space that attests to a representation of space, it can, in turn, be employed as visual shorthand for a “real” space. Yet, because the diner exists primarily symbolically, it never uniformly signifies the real. Instead, the malleable nature of the diner can be moulded through its deployment to signify in culturally or historically specific ways, as it is in this event in relation to the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen. Therefore, for “Haute Mess,” the diner is cast as an inauthentic space. It is a specific place (Kelloggs Diner in Brooklyn, New York) that ends up signifying generally as a supermarket or diner conceivably anywhere. “Haute Mess” also conflates the diner with the fast food restaurant, as the diner appears to sell fast food (at least for the purposes of the shoot), with McDonald’s takeaway bags littering tables throughout the editorial. By contrast, the spaces in the photographs on NoWayGirl.com slip by as unremarkably real, a series of unspecific places that amalgamate to broadly signify the specificity that a sense of everydayness

21 The British Novelist J.G. Ballard once described Hopper’s painting thus: “Hopper brings his eye to bear on the alienation of the twentieth-century city… [the people in his paintings] expose everything, but reveal nothing. In a late-night bar, in the Nighthawks of 1942, a couple sit like characters on a theatre stage, but no drama is communicated to the audience” (68).
demands. What the production of this distinction obscures is the mediated and impenetrable relationships that both sets of texts have to the real.

Despite the impossibility of knowing the real through either NoWayGirl.com or “Haute Mess,” the production of “realness” via the diner nevertheless offers the potential for a renegotiation of what it might do or mean. In Valences of the Dialectic, Fredric Jameson proposes a “new institutional candidate for the function of Utopian allegory…the phenomenon called Wal-Mart” (420) that represents a “new reality” (421). For Jameson, Wal-Mart is utterly dialectical in that it is “the ultimate in democracy as well as in efficiency” (Valences 421) as such, it is a great leveller: a shop for all, and a ruthless capitalist corporation all at once. Wal-Mart, like the diner, holds a similar place as both an “any space” in the cultural imaginary of the United States. Jameson’s provocation to consider the political potential in Wal-Mart calls more generally for a reconsideration of the political potential in the paradox of privately owned public space of the diner, the supermarket, the mall, and the bathroom. Yet Wal-Mart, as the website PeopleOfWalMart.com suggests, is in fact a highly classed space. As such, Wal-Mart evokes the welfare dependent or those in poverty, while the idea of the diner promises an egalitarian space.

Jameson’s use of the term “new reality” suggests that something is tangible and material, but also, crucially, describes a stage of late capitalism where utopia, if it is to retain radical potential, must be articulated as a part of rather than apart from the structures of capital. Jameson’s gesture to the “new” recalls Berlant’s formulation of the “new ordinary” as that which is always being affectively encountered (Cruel Optimism 263). However, Berlant’s use of “new” articulates the diffusion of the political into “something else that is always being encountered and invented” (Cruel Optimism 263). The diner in “Haute Mess” presents a convergence of the timeless present in an idea bound up with a sense of history. However, it becomes a set, and therefore fake, by the models contravening spatial histories through spatial practice: the diner is not so egalitarian that one may shop in it. The fast food restaurant, on the other hand, is encountered through the images on NoWayGirl.com, and seems to promise “something else,” something that potentially feels “real” in contrast. Yet what the diner and the fast food restaurant do share is that they both function at the level of affect. Because they function affectively as well as materially, they need not necessarily be materially situated to be politically negotiated. To politicise these
spaces, then, requires not simply the material intervention implicit in Jameson’s discussion, but also an intervention in feeling about space, or spatial affect.

**Surface Textures**

Selfies, sets, and environments in “Haute Mess” and on NoWayGirl.com draw attention to the everydayness in all the photographs. This in turn foregrounds the production of everydayness as an unremarkable occurrence, and hence everydayness is treated as self-evidently real. However, reality in this instance is every bit as produced as the everyday. As much as the “Haute Mess” event produces origins and objects, it also produces a scene in which these two things can be located in and against. As such, the production of the everyday is the production of surface. Every gesture to the “true” origin, or the “real” weave, to “fake” food or an “inauthentic” body, is anchored by the assumption of an unmediated and accessible real. Therefore, the production and maintenance of the categories of “real” and “fake” that delineate the event are the event itself. The photographs on NoWayGirl.com are assumed to be original because they invoke an apparently more authentic everyday. The everyday is ostensibly where authentic bodies and objects are located, but the everyday itself is produced and unstable. Sometimes it is a set, and other times domestic space. Therefore, bodies, objects, and the “real” of the everyday collectively reinforce the necessity of all three, while relating ambivalently to each other.

Locating origins and bodies in relation to the everyday involves attentiveness to the affective, historical resonances of the depicted spaces and spatial practices. The selfie, as a spatial practice, draws attention to the bathroom as a newly re-oriented public space in late capitalism that nevertheless invokes the historical production of the bathroom as a way of segregating and managing people and populations. The historical dimension of the “bad” bathroom selfie draws attention to the fraught production of public and private space in “Haute Mess” and NoWayGirl.com that reveals the racialised, classed, and gendered lines along which notions of the public and private coalesce and transgress, and subsequently contribute to the production of the rhetorical figures of the Messy Drag Queen and Poor Black Woman. Furthermore, the generality of the spaces in “Haute Mess” and apparent specificity of those in NoWayGirl.com and elsewhere also resonate with and delineate bodies, and likewise evoke the boundary between real and false. The specific is that of the “more”
everyday space: the domestic interior, or the covert glance toward a person in public. The general, on the other hand, is the “Haute Mess” set, which is a particular space that becomes other spaces or non-places. While space inflects bodies and origins, it is also inflected by them. The way the diner and fast food restaurant is articulated in “Haute Mess” and on the photographs from NoWayGirl.com shows the disjuncture between different understandings of “the public,” the dissolution of separate zones of privacy through intimate practices, and the unstable delineation between what private and public mean in late capitalism.

This event necessitates its own backdrop, which becomes an emerging surface that allows the apparent depth of the Poor Black Woman to appear contrasted with the relatively surface or shallow figure of the Messy Drag Queen. As before, the paradoxically ambivalent binary of real and fake that structures the event is present and inflects the production of the everyday in “Haute Mess” and the other photographs of anonymous black women. The production of the everyday then, as that which is “real” but impossible to know in all its permutations, calls into question the “depth” of the rhetorical figures and draws attention to the fact that the event only ever grazes the “real,” despite taking place in that which it posits as real: the everyday. The tensions that the selfies and sets of the “Haute Mess” event encapsulate are therefore surface tensions, of a surface that is textured with “realness” and “depth.”
“Haute Mess” is an event without resolution, and a scandal marked by a deep ambivalence. What appears obvious and fixed – the textual origins, the repetition of extreme weaves, the representation of everyday life – becomes more uncertain as the event is unravelled. The ambivalence about these categories draws attention to loose threads in the making of this event that reveal the nature of its production, as well as its rearticulation of discourses that animate history. In their rearticulation, discourses of race, class, and gender produce the identity categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen, and reify them as categories belonging to the real world. Through these rhetorical figures, this event suggests that some bodies are more authentic than others through the interventionist discourses of cultural appropriation and inspiration. In this way, it produces a hierarchy, with the Poor Black Woman as the more authentic figure, and the Messy Drag Queen as an aesthetic style that is at best inauthentic. In other words, the scandalous event of “Haute Mess” partitions identifications off from one another, rendering some political and others aesthetic. However, these categories can only offer a limited version of “reality.” Therefore, although the attempts in this event to forge a link between these identity categories and “reality” could be politically and tactically useful, they also hold the potential to become damaging and essentialist by ascribing fixed attributes to the bodies which are imagined to inhabit them, while punishing deviation from the norm. Still, the ways in which this event produces the categories of the Messy Drag Queen and Poor Black Woman offers access to the discourses they draw upon, and a re-evaluation of the potential for intervention in their imagining. In short, by examining the production of these categories, these categories reveal their usefulness.

By undoing this event, I have suggested that the identity categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen produced through the scandalous event of “Haute Mess” rely on the attribution of textual origins for “Haute Mess” in discussion surrounding the text, the presence of the weaves and food as affective objects in the Haute Mess images, and the depiction of tropes of everyday life as representations of reality in the shoot. These identity categories emerge from the coverage around “Haute Mess” as two different narratives about the origins of the styling in the shoot. In Chapter One, I traced the emergence of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen in respect to four areas of coverage that represent
stages in what I termed the becoming-event: *TheFashionSpot.com*, online magazines such as *Jezebel.com*, Franca Sozzani’s interview with *TheCut.com*, and *Vogue.it*’s blog post “Simply Outrageous” about the shoot. Beginning with the discussion on *TheFashionSpot.com*, I suggested that it constituted an impasse before popular discourse transformed from a discussion about the aesthetics of “Haute Mess” to a scandal about the nature of representation and cultural appropriation. Picking up on the discussion on *TheFashionSpot.com*, I examined how online coverage from *Jezebel.com*, *Fashionista.com*, and other websites entrenched a dominant discourse of cultural appropriation. Specifically, that discourse was that “Haute Mess” was appropriating style from Poor Black Women. Subsequently, this chapter turned toward narratives about “Haute Mess” articulated by *Vogue Italia*. Though not explicitly so on *Vogue Italia*’s part, I suggested that Franca Sozzani’s interview functioned as an attempt to divert attention from the images on *NoWayGirl.com* and elsewhere that matched the weaves in “Haute Mess.” Finally, this chapter demonstrated how the “Simply Outrageous” blog post on *Vogue.it* proposed a different, though no less appropriative, “inspirational” style narrative for “Haute Mess” in the form of the Messy Drag Queen. While this post left the scandal unacknowledged, the work it does within the context of the event to reorient the narrative about “Haute Mess” around the figure of the Messy Drag Queen framed it and Sozzani’s interview as an implicit response to charges of cultural appropriation.

Chapter Two demonstrated that the categories of the Messy Drag Queen and Poor Black Woman are predicated on identifiable textual origins for “Haute Mess,” and hinge on the repetition of images of several extreme weaves which had previously appeared on websites such as *NoWayGirl.com*. In this chapter, I discussed the production of textual origins for “Haute Mess” through the formation of informal and institutional archives. I begin by arguing that *Vogue.it*’s “Simply Outrageous” blog post produced the figure of the Messy Drag Queen as a style narrative, locating this figure as the telos of the historical continuum of drag. In doing so, I suggest that *Vogue Italia*’s iteration of the Messy Drag Queen became both aspirational and traditional, but not convincingly authentic, due to the incoherent narrative provided by *Vogue.it*. In contrast, the Poor Black Woman appears to have a definitive origin due to the presence of photographs that depicting anonymous black women wearing extreme weaves that strongly resemble those in “Haute Mess.” Here, I examined how origin appears to have a bodily specificity that the Messy Drag Queen apparently lacked. Beginning with comparison images in online coverage, I suggested that *Jezebel.com*,

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Fashionista.com and other websites often provided comparison images with their articles in order to establish a link between two otherwise disparate sets of photographs. Often, I found that these articles would also link to the “origins” of those photographs, particularly YumYucky.com and NoWayGirl.com. While YumYucky.com had a discrete blog post, called “Edible Hair-dos,” that functioned as a pre-prepared archive, I argued that NoWayGirl.com’s more diffuse archival arrangement draws attention to the issues inherent in producing, locating and attributing a stable origin. As such, although being able to attribute an origin to “Haute Mess” and for the Messy Drag Queen and Poor Black Woman was crucial to the popular discourse of the scandal, this chapter revealed “origin” as a fraught project, highlighting the instability at the heart of the categories of the Messy Drag Queen and Poor Black Woman and drawing attention to the uneven process of producing identities that appear coherent.

As affective objects, the weaves help these two identity categories appear coherent by shoring them up affectively so that they “feel” real. The weaves appear authentic based on their relationship to discursively produced “real” textual origins such as NoWayGirl.com, as well as on the mutual relationship that the “Haute Mess” origins and affective objects have to everydayness. In Chapter Three, I suggested that the extreme weaves emerged as affective anchors for unstable origins. In doing so, I highlighted how both weaves and food draw attention to bodies: weaves because they mimic hair, and food because it is essential for bodies to function. Moreover, the extreme weaves and food are depicted by “Haute Mess” as coming into contact with bodies, and in doing so become affective objects. By examining depiction of this contact, I demonstrated how weaves and food mobilise and channel particular racialised, classed, and gendered histories about marginalised bodies, animating them in the present as elements of the two identity categories. On the other hand, I found that the photographs used as evidence of the Messy Drag Queen attempt to function affectively, but fail to do so. In the discourses of appropriation and inspiration, the bodies of the Messy Drag Queen and Poor Black Woman seem to align in a straightforward way with the affective objects. However, by tracing the discursive production of hair, food, and photographs as affective objects, I revealed how these objects shored up the scandal by making the categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen feel “real” and “fake” respectively. Furthermore, because these objects are discursively produced as affective, they undermine the apparently direct link to the “real” that they promise via evocations of bodily sensations and transformations. Instead, the discursively produced affective dimension of these objects
draws attention to how they extend textually and temporally beyond the ostensible origins of this event. In particular, weaves and food bridge the gap between the “abstract unity” (Foucault, *Archaeology* 195) of the categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen and “the real” though textures of feeling. They draw attention to the liminal spaces of bodies imagined to inhabit the categories of Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen. These liminal spaces are zones that delimit bodily relationships to spaces; for example, we see the mismatch between body and space in how the models in “Haute Mess” are wildly styled in juxtaposition with the everyday space of the diner. In doing so, I suggest that the affective objects of weaves and food therefore divest their ostensible responsibility for representing reality onto the everyday spaces and practices that appear in “Haute Mess” and in photographs found on *NoWayGirl.com*.

Together, the selfies and the bathroom, diner, and domestic spaces in “Haute Mess” and the pictures on *NoWayGirl.com* ostensibly anchor the event in everyday life by reorienting notions of realism. Depictions of everyday life in “Haute Mess” and *NoWayGirl.com* are treated as self-evidently real in the interventionist discourses present in the coverage of this event. In Chapter Four, I suggested that the selfies and spaces depicted in “Haute Mess” and *NoWayGirl.com* signify everydayness. Generally, the selfies and spaces depicted in this event act as an anchor for what comes before, and signify the presence of something so evidently real that it need not be remarked on. However, I argued that selfies draw attention to the production of space, as they frame it in a particular way, representing a confluence of the body with a particular time and place. Through this, selfies draw attention to the role of the bathroom in producing the “over the top” aesthetic for “Haute Mess,” and indicate how the aesthetically bad but ostensibly neutral space of the bathroom polices race, class, and gender. The diner is another space in “Haute Mess” used to represent everyday life. By examining this space, I demonstrated how the models’ misuse of the diner as a supermarket in “Haute Mess” rendered it an unconvincing representation of everydayness. Ultimately, this misuse caused the diner in “Haute Mess” to fall short of realism, instead becoming a diner-as-set. In comparison to “Haute Mess,” the images on *NoWayGirl.com* appear self-evidently “real” in the context of this event. Unlike “Haute Mess,” the photographs depict both public and domestic spaces. On *NoWayGirl.com*, I argued that the spaces evince a reorientation of the public and private, with public space revealed as a zone with room for privacy, characterised as intimacy, and conversely, the private zone of the domestic as a space potentially in public. In this way, the manner in which “real” space is
taken as a given on NoWayGirl.com reveals potential for rethinking the production of everyday life.

In these four chapters I have claimed that the production of this event was also the production of origins, objects, and everydayness which in turn worked cumulatively to produce and shore up the identity categories of the Messy Drag Queen and Poor Black Woman as fake and real, respectively. Through the use of origins, objects, and everydayness, these identity categories appear to come into direct contact with the real world, thus framing the “Haute Mess” scandal as an event about real life. The Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen are discursively tethered to “real” life through histories about origins, objects, and everydayness. Therefore, imagining bodies in these categories is to imagine “real” bodies. However, by discursively producing a hierarchy between these categories, the “Haute Mess” scandal deems some marginalised identities worthy of defence, and others not. This event treated cultural products, particularly the weaves, as indicative of identities, but as static and essentialist articulations of those identities, thus reproducing them in that way. However, the mobilisation of history and the discursive production of this event happened unevenly, as the response to the “Haute Mess” scandal, even in the articles from the online magazines themselves, was at times decidedly ambivalent.

In this way, the “Haute Mess” scandal left open a moment where one could ask “what is happening?” Though not a radical rupture, this event nonetheless provided a space of potential where “something that will perhaps matter” (Berlant Cruel Optimism 5; emphasis in original) unfolded and, through this thesis, unfolds. However, the way in which the “Haute Mess” scandal popularly privileges “realness” and authenticity suggests that there is a tendency in scandals of this nature (and in discourses of cultural appropriation more generally) to privilege intervention in the “real world.” This in turn leads to a conflation of reality with materiality, which then reifies reality as something ontologically concrete, tangible, and tactile. Given this, it is unsurprising that the “Haute Mess” scandal would seek to claim fidelity to something real through the identity categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen. By staking a claim in reality, the stakes of the scandal seem readily apparent. However, by appealing to reality through the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen, these figures are instead revealed as categories for the production of knowledge about marginalised bodies. What appears to be real about these categories is therefore a particular version or imagining of the real.
Tracing the production of the “real” through the figures of the Poor Black Woman and the Messy Drag Queen requires a discursive mapping of the scandalous event of “Haute Mess.” Through this act of mapping this event, this thesis emphasises the marked ambivalence of its production. Ambivalence, as Butler’s formulation suggests, articulates “annihilating norms” and rearticulates them as “mimed, reworked, resignified” (84). As a mode of becoming, ambivalence points to the potentialities of a “situation” (Berlant, Cruel Optimism 5) not yet cauterised. The issues about origins, objects, and everyday life that “Haute Mess” draws attention to are elements of the categories of the Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen that emerge through the event, while simultaneously being limited by it. Knowing how this event came to be an event is merely a part of what this event might potentially do, or offer, in terms of rethinking bodies in everyday life. In this sense, the process of mapping reanimates the “enigmatic activity” of the event (Berlant, Cruel Optimism 64).

While materiality is doubtless an important site for intervention, it need not be the sole site. Each chapter of this thesis takes as its case study an aspect of the “Haute Mess” scandal that offers the potential for intervention. The Poor Black Woman and Messy Drag Queen operate as categories that draw attention to what apparently constituted them. Exploring the content and delineations of these two categories highlights the gaps in their production, and demonstrates how essentialist claims about these categories are produced in such a way as to snag and catch on their potential negotiation. Similarly, affective objects like weaves and food open avenues for interrogating why certain objects might arouse feeling, why that feeling takes some forms and not others, and what that feeling indicates about embodiment and objects. Likewise, the status of spaces as evidently “real” in the “Haute Mess” scandal elides the production of realness as a category that produces and adheres to certain norms as it organises materiality. As such, undoing the production of real spaces in this event involved exploring the use of a category as a normative undercurrent. That is, a category that does not immediately present itself as such.

In this event, the fidelity of official and popular interventionist discourses to the category of the real produces bodies, objects, or texts deemed inauthentic or fake and simultaneously dismisses them on this basis. But this attachment to depth denies the politics of surfaces. Because the “Haute Mess” scandal produces a particular version of realness, the forms realness takes – depth, authenticity, and everyday life – stand in relation to the discursive production of the Messy Drag Queen and Poor Black Woman, these categories’
origins, and the affectivity of the weaves and food. The “Haute Mess” scandal is an event that introduces discursive and cultural texture to the text of “Haute Mess” the fashion shoot. Weaving meaning out of an array of texts, the production of this event about and involving “Haute Mess” relies on a binary of real/fake, depth/surface to make meaning. But in reifying these binaries, the “Haute Mess” scandal inadvertently reveals their unstable status. Instead, by divorcing surface from depth, we might turn our attention again to only surfaces, not as real or fake things inert in categories, but as worldly textures. By grasping these textures we renew them, so that the surfaces – the harsh glint of the chrome fixtures in the “Haute Mess” diner, the grainy appearance of a television screen in photographs from NoWayGirl.com, and the graduations of neon fibre in the extreme weaves – might appear as lively elements woven together, surfaces that capture the potential and the material.

By reorienting critique toward surface and texture, it becomes possible to “block the becoming-object of the event” (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 64) and find traction and leverage in places that appear to have none. This potentially offers avenues of intervention that refuse to fix what matters about an event into static categories. Potential intervention might, therefore, happen at the level of potential itself by working to extend the space where texts and discourses of events are not yet fully articulated. By thinking about the politics of surface, one might avoid the pitfalls of hierarchy, by considering the expressive potential of texture, one might undermine binaries. Furthermore, by accepting both as legitimate political tactics it becomes possible to intervene in, and think about, media events and representations as objects that matter because of their potential, and not simply because of their actualised forms. The event need not be “real,” it is already in the world. A becoming, the event is potentially ongoing, with surfaces that reach beyond the horizons imposed on it. Those imposed horizons are the place to begin.


“A Weave Wouldn’t Be Complete Without a Twix Candy Wrapper.”


Ball, Charing. “Vogue Italia’s Haute Mess and the High Theft of Black Culture.”


Hopper, Edward. Nighthawks. 1942. Oil on Canvas. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL


Norell. “Fashion: Offensive or Not? Joan Smalls, First Black Model to Cover ‘Vogue


“Vogue Italia March: Haute Mess, Steven Meisel’s Animated Web GIF Preview.”