TITLE: AFFECTIVE DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND SOCIAL MEDIA:
METHODOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS IN THE CROSS-PLATFORM STUDY OF
EMOTION AND RACE ON TWITTER, GAB, AND FACEBOOK

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Extended Abstract:
In the context of the so-called "post-truth" crisis, emotions have resoundingly replaced facts in our fast-moving, affectively-driven internet-based culture (McIntyre 2018). Scholars are challenged to develop innovative methods for studying emotion and affect within studies of popular culture, social media, and political communications (Boler and Davis 2020). What is an effective interdisciplinary approach to the study of affect useful for studying communications in our rapidly-evolving media ecosystems? While the "affective turn" makes sense in the humanities, disciplines studying elections and populist sentiments traditionally draw upon quantitative and qualitative methods that tend to reduce and measure emotions as simply negative and positive (Boler and Davis 2018). Further, political communications scholarship on "affective polarization" tend to define "in-groups" and "out-groups" solely in terms of partisan differences, missing much of the complexity of social identities and race relations that catalyze ideological and affective polarization (Iyengar et al 2019).

To bring greater complexity into understandings of affective polarization and how emotion drives debate within social media, this three-year, funded research project draws from cutting-edge scholarship on the politics of emotion and affect theory to inform an innovative grounded theoretical study of emotional expression in social media. Relevant to this talk, the team investigated how emotion was mobilized and discussed within social media regarding salient election issues including voter fraud, Antifa, and Black Lives Matter in the context of the highly polarized U.S. election and the pro-Trump ecosystems. The overarching RQ framing the project was:

- *How are emotions expressed in relation to narratives of racial and national belonging, in the context of election-related social media?*

Methodology
This mixed-methods, three-year research project, funded by the Canadian Social Science and Humanities Research Council) explores how emotions are expressed in relation to narratives of racial and national belonging within election-related social media. Engaging grounded theory (Charmaz 2006), the cross-platform study explores Twitter, Facebook, and Gab in the context of the 2019 Canadian and 2020 U.S. elections. Over the past two years, the PI and a seven-person team have developed an innovative approach of *affective discourse analysis* through an intensive, collaborative and iterative process of weekly meetings from September through June. A four-month digital ethnography was conducted in the lead up to and aftermath of each federal election, tracked developing stories and debates within social media conversations across the political spectrum, documented through extensive field notes and findings discussed weekly. Following an extensive, four-month digital ethnography,

Following each digital ethnography, we selected 2-4 threads from each platform for a total of 12 threads. We coded a sample of 2500 posts for a total of 5000 over two years, reflecting the far right, conservatives, liberals, and left, from Twitter, Reddit, and Facebook in the Canadian context and in the U.S. context, from Twitter, Facebook and Gab. Threads were selected according to the following criteria: initiated by an influencer; reflecting cross-partisan dialogue; explicit address of race; and more than 300 comments/responses. We focused on analysis and coding of the comments to these original posts in order to understand the affective and cross-partisan dynamics of polarization and conflict. We coded the top 300 posts from each thread; in cases where there were fewer than 300 comments, we coded all comments (one interesting finding is that posts from the left are less frequent overall, and by far have fewer comments and responses).

Contributing an innovative approach to the analysis of affect and emotion within social media, our *affective discourse analysi*s was developed through an intensive iterative process over two years, drawing from discourse, rhetorical, narrative, and content analysis. We engaged grounded theory to develop and refine a codebook and coding families suitable for the complex task of coding emotional expression, including: rhetorical and linguistic features; topics to which emotions were directed; and beliefs about in-groups and out-groups.

Literature and Theoretical Framework
To frame our understanding of how emotions become linked to narratives of racial and national identity, we draw on the pioneering work of sociologist Arlie Hochschild. Hochschild's ethnographic study of Tea Party voters in the U.S. South argued that people form political decisions based on how received information corresponds to a "deep story" (2016). A deep story is an affective narrative or myth (such as the American Dream): "a *feels-as-if* story—it's the story feelings tell, in the language of symbols" (Hochschild, 2018: 135). The concept of "deep stories" provides a framework for analyzing polarization and how narratives about race and national identities are linked with strong emotions. We will also engage Hochschild's pathbreaking, widely-recognized concept of "feeling rules" (1987), prescribed emotional behaviors and norms determined by factors such as gender, race, age, socio-economic status, and occupation. By tracking "what emotions do" (Ahmed 2004) in the context of "feeling

rules" and "affective economies" we are able to examine how and why emotions circulate and stick in relation to narratives of racial and national identity. In Year 2, our research in the U.S. election context has allowed us to see that deep stories can be understood more precisely in terms of the predominant discourses and narratives of victimhood, discourses of ressentiment (especially in relation to identity politics), and melodrama as a form of collective political storytelling [please see AOIR talks by Hoda Gharib, Amanda Trigiani, and Míchílín Ní Threasaigh]

In one of the few essays engaging a critical theory of emotion in relation to social media practices and race, Duncan (2017) discusses increased media attention to right-wing actors in the U.S.. She argues that liberal media outlets have portrayed a veritable increase in the emotion of "hate" itself since the election of Trump; however, Duncan shows the problematic conflation of "hate speech" with "speech we might hate." She reveals the need for researchers not only to identify, but to *interpret,* emotional expression. From such critical studies of emotion, we see how quantitative measures such as counting instances of hate-related words, cannot by themselves account for the socio-political context of the *function* of emotion in public discourse. Our work thus provide a significant contribution to a nascent field of studies (Buchholtz 2019, Ganesh 2020) that specifically engage an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that includes affect theory such as that of Ahmed (2004/2014) or politics of emotion such as that by Hochschild (1987, 2016), alongside qualitative research of social media.

The talk shares some of the challenges faced in developing this novel approach we term "affective discourse analysis", addressing the following issues:

- cross-platform data access and challenges posed by ensuring symmetry of coding across platforms
- limitations of academic access to "big data"
- challenges and limitations of qualitative research data software Atlas.ti
- the challenge of identifying and interpreting emotional expressions embedded within social media text
- developing a coding system with credible intercoder agreement, particularly given the intrinsically subjective nature of coding emotion

Contributing to a nascent field of mixed-methods studies related to affect within social media, this talk invites discussion of the importance of interdisciplinary study of affect and emotion in social media, and how qualitative research can augment quantitative methods of sentiment analysis (Bouvier and Rosenbaum 2020). This research urges scholars to move beyond overly reductive understandings of emotion in terms of "positive" vs. "negative" affects within quantitative approaches, and provides direction for developing more nuanced distinctions critical to understanding the *political function of emotion*, and best practices for the study of *affect in social media*.

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