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SO NOW!: On Normcore

One of my concerns over the last few years is what I see as a certain fear within some domains of left thought – the fear that, because we have repudiated any normative grounds for adjudicating between arrangements of existence, we must be blind to how our actions extinguish (kill) another way of life ... the question must be what arrangements of existence do we want to try to pull into place or remain in place rather than disaggregating good essences from bad essences. In other words, the goal for me is not simply to state what I do not want – or how I am or am not more anti-normative than thou – but what forms of existence do I seek to put my shoulder into making normative in Canguilhem's sense: normativity is the power to establish norms. But aren't I paralyzed by the fact that I have no transcendental grounds or regulatory norms justifying why I shove here rather than there? And when I put my shoulder here rather than there, am I not shoving against not merely a different position but trying to shove outwards into a new arrangement of existence that will, if successful, extinguish what existed before? So am I not extinguishing others without reason? The answer is pretty much yes. And so I must take responsibility for this, this potentiating and extinguishing, without either shunting responsibility onto a transcendental truth or regulation, or onto a denigrated and demonized other. The current emphasis on anti-normativity is, at times, a refusal to accept this responsibility.
– Elizabeth Povinelli, 2014

Perhaps beyond normcore is another normal altogether, an aberration devotedly to be wished.
– Benedict Seymour, 2014

Over It: Post-Critical
The project of critique, at least as represented by critical theory, is in trouble. Indeed, the grandees of an older generation of critics are warning of the dangers of a "post-critical" condition, where presumably power does not only go unchecked but doesn't even have to suffer the indignity of critique.[1] Yet many leading voices in contemporary philosophy and social thought argue that critical theory has brought this crisis upon itself, and they are joining in the critique-of-critique chorus. Whether we look to Bruno

Latour, whose influential critique of the epistemological foundations of critical theory has chimed in with recent attempts to escape its anthropocentric limits; Jacques Rancière, who has advanced an epistemological and political equality in place of the hierarchies of knowledge-power built into the demystification at the heart of critical theory; Alain Badiou, with his forceful return to the universal terms of capital-*P* Philosophy after the wordplay of theory; Reza Negarestani, with his recent attacks on the antihumanism of "kitsch Marxism" in these pages; or Elizabeth Povinelli's push back against the constraints of anti-normativity on the radical Left, the familiar tropes of the critical project have been declared conceptually moribund and politically exhausted, and this by thinkers of the Left.[2] Yet, the idea that critical theory is in crisis may come as a surprise to anyone who has recently passed through a graduate program in the arts or humanities, where it remains dominant. Yet this is perhaps paradoxically part of the problem, critique having lost its sting as it became institutionalized, not only as a methodology but increasingly as a set of knee-jerk reactions and rote exclamations; a generation or two of those speaking truth to power assumed that power themselves, often resisting rather than producing change in their own institutional fiefdoms. Largely cut off from social processes and political impact in its academic enclaves, critical theory poses little threat to the powers that be, who are more or less happy to let it persist, defanged, in these melancholic holdouts where it waits for the generational dialectic to gather momentum.

In the midst of this slow crisis of critical theory, the contours of new models of thinking, new questions, and new concepts can be seen squirming, only partially formed, and they are already shaping the terms of social thought. This is perhaps most evident of course in the new forms of philosophical realism, materialism, and rationalism that have emerged over recent years, and the new attitudes to art, politics, technology, and the environment that have developed in an awkward tandem with them. However, despite all the distracting fanfare that has accompanied the mishmash of discussions about posthumanism, accelerationism, object-oriented ontologies, the Anthropocene, mass extinction, neorationalism, and so on, a more latent and still somewhat obscure transformation has been underway in how the relationship between difference and normativity is understood. This shift both tests some of the key conceptual pillars of critical

Characters from *Friends* and *The Shining* share a doorway in this meme.

Mel Brooks, *Blazing Saddles*, 1974. Film still

theory, and bears directly on some of the more prosaic political concerns that have taken a backseat as abstract metaphysical and epistemological concerns have been dominating the social media spotlight and lapping the conference circuit. Difference has long been the lens through which radical social thought has approached all questions, setting itself the task of exposing the inside/outside exclusions or above/below hierarchies through which social power operates in every instance, and undermining all foundational claims with reference to some deeper contingency, where destabilizing reserves of difference can always be found. By contrast, normativity has often been considered a central aspect of the problems that critical theory ranged itself against. Normativity, seen from this perspective, was seen to provide the legitimating basis for the exclusions and hierarchies by which social power supports itself, and became a byword for authority, domination, and inequality. Yet today the dominance of this anti-normativity is beginning to loosen as various strands of radical social thought, weary of the claims made for difference failing to translate into tangible political gains or prevent the grip of capital tightening on ever more spheres of life, are returning to questions of normativity in the hope of gaining the type of traction on social reality that appears so far beyond the reach of critical theory 1.0.

Here Come the Normies: Youth Mode
It is in the context of this "post-critical" moment and the tentative return to normativity in radical social theory that I want to examine the phenomenon of normcore. What normcore is and is not has been the subject of some debate and the source of some confusion: Is it a fashion trend, a sociocultural concept, or some sort of downtown in-joke that has become a popular talking point for the press?[3] What now goes by the name "normcore" is probably a slippery mix of all three. The concept originated in *Youth Mode: A Report on Freedom*, a 2013 text by K-Hole, a New York–based "trend forecasting group," where it was not specifically understood in relation to fashion.[4] The text was first presented as part of the Serpentine Gallery's "89plus Marathon" in October 2013 and was subsequently published online.[5] After a much-discussed and disputed piece in *New York Magazine*, solely referring to normcore as a specific set of normie styles adopted by fashion-conscious kids, the concept went viral; it was picked up by the fashion and news media at the beginning of 2014, with *Elle*, *Vogue*, the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, *Huffington Post*, *Salon*, and *Dazed & Confused*, amongst others, running

articles on the subject and thereby putting normcore on the mainstream map.

In trying to grasp the nature of normcore, these publications have variously described it as: a style based on "the desire to fit in rather than stand out"[6]; "embracing sameness deliberately as a new way of being cool"; "fashion for those who realize they're one in seven billion"[7]; "one facet of a growing anti-fashion sentiment"[8]; "a trend amongst the privileged towards anti-fashion clothes of the kind available at Wal-Mart"[9]; and in one particularly off-the-mark, but perhaps telling, account, "a knowing piss-take on the heterosexual male's desperate desire to be sartorially unremarkable."[10] Despite the flurry of attention normcore received, some were left none the wiser, with *Vanity Fair* – arriving a little late to the party – still asking at the end of March, "Is Normcore Really a Thing?" However, by this point the question of whether normcore was "real" or not was of little importance, as the media reports took on the force of a self-fulfilling prophecy and the fashion press did its best to capture a variety of existing tendencies under this label. The concept of normcore that emerged from this media frenzy was of a fashion trend based around the idea that dressing normal was the latest form of cool, with frequent reference being made to Jerry Seinfeld, Steve Jobs, the inconspicuous chi of '90s Gap campaigns, and the unremarkable sartorial styles of "middle-aged, middle-American tourists" (at least as they appear in the imagination of fashion journalists).[11]

However, it is not the idea of normcore as it appears in the fashion press that interests me, but rather the concept as originally presented in K-Hole's *Youth Mode*. This is not because I assume K-Hole to be the architect of a "true" normcore trend that has been overlooked or sullied by the media and the fashion industry. If anything, rather than creating a trend, *Youth Mode* was in part responding to certain stylistic predispositions already present in a loose, largely downtown scene (even if those inclinations always appeared to be more about sportswear than Jerry Seinfeld, more Nike-socks-in-heels than mom-jeans-for-men).[12] Rather, it is because in *Youth Mode*, K-Hole attempts to analyze the changing relationships between individuals and community, difference and normality (or "sameness"), and map the way in which pop-culture strategies, including but not limited to fashion, have developed in line with these changes. In *Youth Mode*, normcore is not a term used to describe an existing or imagined trend, but a strategy of embracing sameness in order to address the demands of difference and the stresses it produces for the "youth of today."[13] It is in light of this that K-

Hole's articulation of normcore has some bearing on the "post-critical" moment and the nascent return to norms, reflecting a broader shift away from difference towards normativity, albeit in the sphere of pop culture as opposed to critical theory. The questions it tries to address certainly appear to have purchase on wider concerns, something arguably demonstrated by the particularly acute way in which it has captured the imagination of many.

Nonetheless, what Benedict Seymour wrote of the trend in *Mute* might also apply to *Youth Mode*: "Normcore just is so now, so absolutely the state of things … Normcore is what the age demanded."[14] Perhaps that which gives the text its fascinating allure – its sheer sense of zeitgeisty nowness – also betrays it limits: a blinding complicity with the times, the text's very of-the-momentness making it more of a *symptom* of the age rather than an effective analysis of its character and ills. It is also clear that *Youth Mode* is not a work of critical theory or political thought, and K-Hole admits that they are "a little naive about politics in general," as their friend Christopher Glazek noted in a post on the group's Facebook page.[15] However, they do make some claim to produce works of social thought; Dena Yago, one member of the group, recently noted that their practice is "along the lines of sociological or anthropological thinking."[16] It is largely in this vein that I consider their work.

Although the majority of articles on normcore begin by attributing the concept to K-Hole – some even referring to *Youth Mode* as the "original Normcore manifesto"[17] – they then go on to misrepresent what they mean by the term. Indeed, as K-Hole and their defenders have been quick to point out, many articles confuse their concept of normcore with "Acting Basic," another idea that appears in *Youth Mode*.[18] This has unfortunately meant that the concept of normcore most frequently attributed to K-Hole is not the one they themselves proposed, but rather Acting Basic, a concept to which they critically contrasted their idea of normcore.[19] In order to understand K-Hole's conception of normcore it is thus important to first grasp what they mean by Acting Basic, so that the two terms can be distinguished, clearing up any potential confusion with the more common use of the term. The difference is of some consequence within K-Hole's thought, as the two terms imply distinct responses to the changing relationship between differentiation and normativity, individuality and community. By contextualizing these terms in relation to the broader argument of *Youth Mode*, I hope to clarify their meaning and give a critical account of their implications for how the relationship between difference and

normativity might be conceived today.

The Narcissism of Same Differences: Mass Indie

At the core of *Youth Mode* is a genealogy of post-oppositional pop-cultural formations that begins with a loaded reference to Kurt Cobain's suicide. It is in the wake of this event, they argue, that the current pop-cultural era emerges, which they refer to as "Mass Indie." "We live," they state, "in Mass Indie times."

> It's like someone yelled "Fire!" in a crowded movie theater the day Kurt Cobain died and everyone tried to find a different exit. Mass Indie is what happens 45 minutes later. Tired of fighting to squeeze out of the doors, everyone decides to stay in the theater. Panic subsides into ambivalence … Mass Indie ditched the Alternative preoccupation with evading sameness and focused instead on celebrating difference instead.[20]

Cobain's death not only neatly dates the period they have in mind but seems to provide a symbolic finale to the Alternative movement, itself the last stand of the varied pop partisans who had an antagonistic attitude to mainstream culture, before what used to be called "recuperation" reached saturation point.[21] Even the notion of "selling out" finally lost currency with the rise of Nirvana to awkward MTV stardom – screams of discontent traded in for a whimper of self-loathing. In fact, looking back, the brief dominance of MTV in the 1990s might be seen as a sort of pop rendition of the then (and still now) triumphant "no alternative" economics of neoliberalism, all outsides being subsumed into the "flat world" logic of market globalization, whether they were geopolitical, economic, or pop cultural. K-Hole has little more to say about this Alternative past, and in fact, as so-called millennials, they have had little or no lived experience of a time when major pop-culture movements did not simply exist *within* an increasingly fragmented mainstream, however ambivalently, but actively defined themselves *against* dominant culture values as embodied in a recognizable mainstream. They have grown up in, as many more have grown used to, Mass Indie times.

The most useful definition of Mass Indie appears on a chart at the end of *Youth Mode*, where its key terms are explained in relation to the poles of "sameness" and "difference," crisscrossed with those of "celebration" and "evasion." Each of the four possible combinations represents an axis with a distinct character. Whilst Alternative is defined by the

Steve Jobs poses in front of an apple poster in this cropped image.

evasion of sameness, or what K-Hole refers to as the "axes of rebellion," Mass Indie is characterized by the celebration of difference, the "axes of tolerance." In its celebration of difference, Mass Indie is the pop-cultural form of a new sense of pluralism, a new form of difference marked by tolerance rather than antagonism. In Mass Indie times, difference is a matter of addition rather than opposition. K-Hole suggests that with the emergence of such a cultural space, all sorts of new combinations became possible: "Mass Indie has an additive conception of how culture works. Identities aren't mutually exclusive. They're always ripe for new combinations … Mass Indie culture mixes weirdness with normalness until it levels out."

In this culture of tolerance and difference, the space for individuation seemed boundless. Yet, as K-Hole points out, the paradox of this pluralism lay in the fact that the more difference there was, the harder it became for individuals to stand out. Being different no longer had to find an outlet in rebellion but could be welcomed into the mainstream. Being "special," however – being different in a different way – remained a challenge. Hence, even as difference became ubiquitous, individuality remained exceptional (you no longer needed to be white to have white people's problems, although it still probably helped): "But just because Mass Indie is pro-diversity, doesn't mean that it's post-scarcity. There's a limited amount of difference in the world, and the mainstreaming of its pursuit has only made difference all the scarcer."[22]

The Mass Indie celebration of difference increased the competition for individuality, and as Peak Difference impended, the market for social capital grew ever fiercer.[23] As a result, the mining of difference became ever more intense and specific, making it harder to spot a real difference, to maintain durable devotions, to consolidate your own shtick or give a shit about others'. Hence, for K-Hole, the path to individuality lay across a terrain of differentiation fraught with dangers: "seeming like a clone" – "the details that distinguish you are so small that nobody can tell you're actually different"; "isolation" – "you're so special nobody knows what you're talking about"; "maxing out" – "the markers of individuality are so plentiful and regenerate so quickly that it's impossible to keep up."

In a sense, Mass Indie had seen the relationship (so crucial to critical theory) between exclusionary norms and liberatory difference switch roles. Difference itself had become the norm, and what was excluded was precisely the normal: "The rule is Think Different, being seen as normal is the scariest thing. (It means being returned to your boring suburban

roots, being turned back into a pumpkin, exposed as unexceptional.)" In the logic of *Youth Mode*, differentiation, once the individual's escape route from normality, had itself become a prison. Mass Indie, a regime of compulsive differentiation – to echo a phrase from Benjamin H. D. Buchloh – had turned a machine of individual liberation into a technology of normalization, spawning a sort of inverted cultural conservatism. This rule of difference – where difference demands conformity rather than promising freedom – is what the ageless youth of Mass Indie are confronted with. It's a Mass Indie problem. But K-Hole suggests that the tide is perhaps turning as this jaded generation, drained by the relentless rigors of differentiation, seeks to return to the same, to get back to normal. As Emily Segal recently said in an interview with *Vogue UK*: "there's an exhaustion with trying to seem different. People are genuinely tired by the fact that to achieve status you need to be different from everyone else around you."[24] And thus the cargo shorts.

Meh Universalism: Acting Basic

K-Hole notes that more recently a new strategy has begun to emerge to address these Mass Indie problems. They call this strategy "Acting Basic."[25] The very demand for differentiation that defines Mass Indie, the fear of being seen to be normal, "paradoxically makes normalcy ripe for Mass Indie überelites to adopt as their own, confirming their status by showing how disposable the trappings of uniqueness are. The most different thing to do is to reject being different altogether." Hence, Acting Basic represents a strange dialectic inversion where being normal becomes the new way to be different: "When the fringes get more and more crowded, Mass Indie turns toward the middle. Having mastered difference, the truly cool attempt to master sameness."

It is of course immediately obvious that Acting Basic does not in fact exit the logic of differentiation that defines Mass Indie, but rather represents a paradoxical new twist within it. As K-Hole notes, "Acting Basic is not the solution to Mass Indie problems because it's still based on difference." Playing normal to be different is not a strategy that breaks with the demand for differentiation, but instead remains defined by it. "Sameness is not mastered, only approached," but approached from within the Mass Indie gold rush of differentiation – just one more look to set the individual apart.

Acting Basic – staking out one's difference by dressing normal – is recognizable as what is identified as normcore in most press articles, yet K-Hole's members themselves are critical of the idea. For them it is merely "an aestheticized

version of the mainstream," inadequate for addressing Mass Indie problems, i.e., the demand for differentiation. "At the end of the day," they note, "superficial simplicity is just the denial of complexity, not its resolution." Further, the very superficiality of the sameness that Acting Basic gestures towards makes it immediately obvious to everyone: "Act Basic too long and you become extra conspicuous … The casual uniform begins to attract police attention."[26] Although, of course, it would seem that the very point of dressing normal to be different is to be noticed rather than to actually sink into the obscurity of broad daylight. Acting Basic is surely not so much the desire to be normal but to be *conspicuously normal*, to have transformed what is artless into an art form for the discerning eye of those who can appreciate the effort in your nonchalance. At any rate, in K-Hole's terms, Acting Basic is bound to fail as a solution to compulsive differentiation, as it rests on a fundamentally flawed relation to sameness: "going back to basics doesn't work when the scripts that determine the basics are out of whack."

Before moving on to examine what K-Hole actually means by normcore, it's worth dwelling on some problematic implications of the concept of Acting Basic given that it is what most think of as normcore. First of all, as Thomas Frank and

Benedict Seymour, two of normcore's more vociferous critics, have noted, normcore is in many ways incredibly condescending to those sections of the population (Middle American, tourist, etc.) whose "back to basics," fuss-free lack of sophistication is appropriated as a marker of social capital for a fashionable "set" (regardless of how many have discovered that sportswear is indeed comfortable for every occasion, or who consider themselves to be engaging in nobles acts of sartorial solidarity with the "average American"). As Thomas Frank notes, it's hard, "given the economic circumstances surrounding the normcore trend [i.e., Acting Basic] – the One Percent, the Financial Crisis, the withering of the middle class, and all that," not to see it as the latest iteration of the long tradition of "slumming," whereby the privileged adopt the modes and mores of the lower orders to enhance their own image, or in the delusional belief that deep social differences can be papered over in, or authenticity found through, a superficial mimesis.[27] Seen in this light, Acting Basic gives expression to an inane form of class tourism in its appropriation of Middle American tourist style.

Perhaps more important from the perspective of the relationship between individuality and community, difference and

Channel4 news interviews President Alexander Lukashenko in this segment on the dictatorship in Belarus, titled *Undercover in Europe's last dictatorship*, 2014. See http://www.channel4.com/news/undercover-in-europes-last-dictatorship-belarus

sameness, which lies at the heart of *Youth Mode*, is the fact that Acting Basic assumes there to be a identifiable "normal" that can be plundered like a dress-up box – a normal of course defined by the Middle American nobody/anybody. Hence, subtending the supposedly stultifying "difference as norm" that characterizes Mass Indie is the bedrock of an even more basic normal, a normal that is not different from itself but everywhere the same – a persistent mainstream that runs deeper than the claustrophobic pop-culture cornucopia of Mass Indie, with its insistence on individual differentiation. In the end, Acting Basic, like the long passé Alternative movement, assumes there to be an actually existing normal from which one wants to differentiate oneself, even if now it inspires only indifference rather than a spirit of rebellion. It is the new sociocultural strata of differentiation that Acting Basic seeks to evade most of all, rather than the underlying normal, which is just accepted. In fact, Acting Basic seems to operate on the principle that it is possible to ironically return to one's "embarrassing suburban roots" – that sprawling empire of normal – in order to differentiate oneself from all the other Mass Indie paths to differentiation. In order to be truly "special" one has to go back to "normal" – and this of course relies on there being, somewhere, a normal to go back to.

New Jersey Governor Chris Christie and his wife visit the Western Wall in Jerusalem, Israel. Photo: Governor's Office/Tim Larsen.

Unspecial: Normcore

K-Hole contrasts Acting Basic to Normcore, which appears to be a more intriguing concept even as it is slippery and ambiguous.[28] It's hard to shake the impression that it's difficult to grasp simply because it lacks clear definition, but K-Hole welcomes this ambiguity, covering their tracks by claiming that Normcore "capitalizes on the possibility of misinterpretation as an opportunity for connection." This conceptual opacity lies in part with the fact that with the shift from Acting Basic to Normcore, K-Hole departs the domain of analysis and diagnosis for the world of speculation and prognosis, moving from an examination of contemporary sociocultural conditions (Mass Indie) and existing responses (Acting Basic) to the trickier task of pitching new cultural strategies to face them. At the crux of this change of perspective between Acting Basic and Normcore is a different understanding of the relationship between difference and sameness, and indeed a different conception of normal. As noted above, K-Hole considers Acting Basic to have "approached" but "not mastered" sameness, Normcore presumably being successful where Acting Basic fails. Yet, what conception of sameness, what normal, does Normcore suppose?

To be "truly Normcore," K-Hole claims, "you need to understand that there's no such thing as normal." Hence, unlike Acting Basic, Normcore does not assume there to be an identifiable normal that can be aestheticized. However, if there is no such thing as normal, what does "sameness" mean and how might it be mastered? Here lies the core of Normcore: a paradoxically normless sameness. Sameness, for K-Hole, is not defined in relation to a dominant mainstream, an identifiable normal, but is a plural, "situational" category. Being Normcore means adapting to the specific norms of each context one encounters, rather than assuming that one sameness fits all, or that all roads lead to Normal. Hence, K-Hole claims, "Normcore understands the process of differentiation from a non-linear perspective." Rather, it assumes an adaptable attitude that "cops to the situation at hand." As one of the group's members said when clarifying the concept in an interview with the Huffington Post, "At K-Hole we think it's all about being situationally appropriate."[29] It means accepting others for who they are and going with the flow, getting into it: "You might not understand the rules of football, but you can still get a thrill from the roar of the crowd at the World Cup."

Being "truly Normcore" requires one to cultivate a chameleon-like capacity to adapt to any situation and empathize with anyone, just as Woody Allen's Zelig takes on the character of those he encounters.[30]

In K-Hole's articulation of the concept, Normcore is thus "about adaptability, not exclusivity," and marks a shift from "a coolness that relies on difference to a post-authenticity coolness that opts into sameness."[31] K-Hole insists that this change of attitude opens up the

possibility for connection, for forms of belonging that escape the trap of isolation laid by Mass Indie's demand for differentiation. Mass Indie (and hence Acting Basic) creates

> cliques of people in the know, while Normcore knows the real feat is harnessing the potential for connection to spring up ... Normcore seeks the freedom that comes with non-exclusivity. It finds liberation in being nothing special, and realizes that adaptability leads to belonging.

Hence, for K-Hole, in emphasizing sameness over difference, Normcore values connection over individuation and marks a break with the entire logic of Mass Indie and its demand for differentiation. "Normcore," they write, "doesn't want the freedom to become someone. Normcore wants the freedom to be with anyone." It is grounded in an ethos of *being with* as opposed to *being special*. This, they suggest, is a more effective response to Mass Indie than merely appropriating normality as the last frontier of differentiation, given that contemporary sociocultural conditions make a coherent, and supposed "authentic," individuality harder and harder to maintain at a higher and higher cost:

> It used to be possible to be special – to sustain unique differences through time ... But the Internet and globalization fucked this up for everyone [...] Individuality was once the path to personal freedom – a way to lead life on your own terms. But the terms keep getting more and more specific, making us more and more isolated.

In contrast to the isolating differentiation of Mass Indie and the pseudo-sameness of Acting Basic, in Normcore "one does not pretend to be above the indignity of belonging."

However, K-Hole insists that jettisoning outmoded models of individual "authenticity" and embracing the opportunities for belonging opened up by sameness doesn't mean that the self is eclipsed by the norm. As Emily Segal, one of K-Hole's founders, noted in interview with *New York Magazine*: "It's not about being simple or forfeiting individuality to become a bland, uniform mass [but about seeing sameness] as an opportunity for connection, instead of evidence that your identity has dissolved."[32] For K-Hole, one does not lose connection to oneself in sameness, but instead finds belonging with others. Indeed, at the very heart of K-Hole's conception of Normcore is the idea that the relationship between self and others has undergone a fundamental transformation, of

which Acting Basic is a symptom, but to which Normcore offers a solution: "Once upon a time people were born into communities and had to find their individuality. Today people are born individuals and have to find their communities."

Normcore is the name K-Hole gives to this individual labor of finding communities. Hence, although Normcore is a product of individualizing conditions, it sees in them not the confirmation of inevitable alienation but an opportunity to forge new connections, nurture new feelings of belonging, and find new communities. Of course, the idea that there is no longer a single, monolithic sociocultural mainstream that gives expression to a dominant set of cultural norms, but rather multiple sets of situationally specific normals, reflects to some degree the increasingly complex social realities that have accompanied globalization in all its permutations. Needless to say, however, dealing with the relationship between difference and sameness, individuality and community, belonging and isolation in complex societies is a lot more difficult than simply enjoying sports when you don't know the rules. And thus the problems.

A Different Normal?: Yes Please

As interesting, and in some ways attractive, as the analysis advanced in *Youth Mode* is, a number of fundamental problems immediately present themselves. Perhaps the most striking limitation is that whilst *Youth Mode* presents a concise, PowerPoint-ready breakdown of various pop-cultural formations – Alternative, Mass Indie, Acting Basic, and Normcore – it approaches pop culture as if it were an autonomous sphere, immune to broader social, economic, and political dynamics. Yes, globalization and the emergence of the internet are mentioned in the opening lines, and the recent financial crisis is hinted at via references to Boomerang kids and exasperated Subway employees with PhDs, but the key categories are largely discussed as if they existed in a social vacuum. A sociologically shallow account of pop culture might not in itself be much of a problem, given the context in which the text appeared, and K-Hole of course does not present *Youth Mode* as an academic study with all the bells and whistles of rigor, let alone as a work of political theory. But they do set out to engage major sociological questions about the changing relationship between difference and sameness, individuality and community. In light of the concerns they take on, and indeed their own characterization of their practice as quasi-sociological or anthropological, their failure to engage with social forces, even superficially, or to even show an awareness that they exist, is a

disappointment. It takes much of the steam out of their often-alluring provocations.

One of the most significant consequences is that the image of society that emerges from *Youth Mode* is almost totally emptied of power; the only hint that social power exists at all appears indirectly when mention is made of competition to accrue social status. Needless to say, an account of sociocultural differentiation – and indeed its changing relationship to individuality and sameness – that does not engage with the existence of social power and the way in which it structures the conditions in and through which such differentiation takes shape, will have little purchase on its object. *Youth Mode* is particularly notable in its absence of any discussion of differences that take antagonistic form. Granted, K-Hole focuses on pop-cultural formations that have emerged in the wake of Alternative – and hence major oppositional pop-culture movements – but of course the effects of social antagonism upon the domain of pop culture are by no means limited to the sepia-tinted dead horse of punk. They continue to structure pop culture fundamentally, albeit in new ways. K-Hole presents an account of society from which all antagonism seems to have been ironed out, where all differences are

peaceful, bar the minor frictions involved in the competition for social status or the boundaries of cliques – and even these can be soothed by empathy, Normcore's primary affect. Only by excluding social power and antagonistic difference from their account of the social field is it possible for K-Hole to assume that individuals can float freely from situation to situation, adapting to the norms of each, without encountering the rifts, fences, and stratifications that play such a fundamentally structuring role in our societies.

The limitations of this account of the social field of course impact K-Hole's analysis of the contemporary problems with differentiation and the solutions they present to them. The Mass Indie problems that are central to *Youth Mode* – that differentiation has become compulsory at the same time as its capacity to generate individuality/social status has declined, leaving people exhausted and isolated – are themselves symptoms of wider social processes, but no engagement is made with the wider context, so they appear to be the result of purely internal pop-culture dynamics. Yet, even if Mass Indie problems are second-tier problems, this doesn't mean they are without sociocultural interest, or indeed that they are not real problems. The

Gisele Bündchen shouts out to other models on the runway at a staged protest for the Chanel SS15 Collection. Signs read for instance "Tweed is better than tweet," and "Be your own stylist" as well as "History is her story." Photo: DailyMail

argument that differentiation has become complicit with the status quo, with forces of domination, is of course not new (despite the persistence of the idea in so much Left theory that institutional power and difference are necessary enemies). Many analyses that focus on the changing forms of subjectification that have accompanied the spread of neoliberal economies – notably in relation to the increasingly important role played by precarious forms of affective and cognitive labor – have made precisely this point in one way or another. Whether we look to Deleuze on control societies, Federici on social reproduction, Boltanski and Chiapello on artistic labor and the entrepreneurial subjectivities, or Berardi and Fischer on cognitive labor and mental health, there is a common thread: an engagement with the ways in which capital operates through the production of subjectivities and thrives on extracting surplus value from the generation of social difference and individualization, not to mention the important ideological role played by self-actualization over and against collective identifications.[33] However, insofar as they fail to contextualize Mass Indie in relation to broader socioeconomic or political forces, K-Hole misses an opportunity to examine the demand for differentiation in the domain of pop culture in relation to wider patterns of neoliberal subjectification, something that may have provided greater traction on the phenomenon and allowed for more persuasive responses to emerge. Indeed, by defining Normcore in relation to adaptability and empathy – both admirable traits in and of themselves – K-Hole risks framing their solution to chronic differentiation in terms that replicate rather than challenge the ideological Trojan horses of neoliberal subjectification. It is, after all, the same ideological framework that insists on an adaptive labor force and the economic importance of affects such as empathy, that channels subjectification into the isolating vectors of differentiation. Hence, even if Normcore were to provide some respite from Mass Indie strain, tweaking the meat grinder of subjectification for comfort, it would remain subject to much the same set of social forces that knead contemporary lumpenbourgeoisie.

The image of the social chameleon finding both individual liberty and group belonging in drifting between situations is surely an appealing one, but it betrays a conception of difference from which power has been purged. This Normcore nomadism seems to assume that an individual will be welcomed into every situation if they are willing to be adaptable and empathetic. However, social differences and group identifications are hardly the product of individual self-fashioning alone but are shaped by the power dynamics between groups. No individual is likely to find belonging in every situation regardless of how adaptable and empathetic they are. Whilst a lot of this might come down to the individual's character, much might likewise depend on race, gender, sexuality, and other such factors around which power congeals. Normcore seems to assume that such factors will have no bearing on the ability of individuals to immerse themselves in a multiplicity of different normals. K-Hole's conception of Normcore assumes the valuable insight that there are different versions of sameness, but it doesn't address the fact that not all differences are the same. This is a point perhaps less pressing for those who less frequently find themselves on the wrong side of the subjective tracks in the view of others. Normcore smuggles in the backdoor an implicit idea of what is normal (white, middle class) even as it shuts the front door on the mainstream.[34]

These limitations and blind spots are hardly surprising given that *Youth Mode*'s account of contemporary society remains focused on the individual. Community is virtually ignored despite its changing relationship to individuality supposedly being a key. Although K-Hole claims that today, individuals must find their communities – and K-Hole associates Normcore with this process – no details of the forms of community that might be found or produced through this individual search are offered. The only collective subjects that seem to be considered worthy of mention are exclusionary Mass Indie cliques. The last line of *Youth Mode* perhaps sheds some light on this almost exclusive emphasis on the individual: "Normcore is a path to a more peaceful life." Normcore thus seems to be conceived above all as a self-help strategy for ensuring individual peace of mind. Hence, Normcore is best understood as a coping mechanism to help individuals deal with the stresses of differentiation, rather than a means to address the wider social conditions that demand it. In such an individualist account of social relations, there is not much need to address the contents of social norms. This perhaps explains the lack of discussion of this topic. Yes, adaptability, empathy, and a lack of concern for authenticity may all be virtues, but they hardly constitute a set of norms in and of themselves, no matter how useful they may be in facilitating a sense of belonging. In neither challenging existing norms nor positing others, K-Hole seems happy to accept existing social norms, or to assume that they don't exist. This contributes little to addressing the very real problems that shape the present, including neoliberal subjectification in all its forms. Nor

can it do much to guarantee a peaceful life.

By ignoring questions of power and framing the social field in individualist term, K-Hole ends up sharing considerable conceptual space with mainstream conservative opinion. This is no doubt an accidental neoconservatism. Perhaps in a rush to flush out the calcified critical theory they were exposed to in art school, K-Hole opted into mainstream conservative provocations: *too much difference is the problem, individual responsibility is the solution*. Or perhaps it's fairer to say that *Youth Mode* settles on something closer to the sort of inclusive liberalism envisaged by Richard Rorty, where everyone gets along because they've swapped out authenticity for ironic detachment. There is of course something to be said for ironic detachment as a strategy for individuals navigating complex societies, where one might pass through various different situations in the course of a day or even a few blocks. But this likewise assumes that the social field is a neutral public meeting place equally open to all rather than an unstable terrain rent with power. The world envisaged in Normcore, where sameness is celebrated, is ultimately a realm of consensus, where difficult difference is pushed to the side even if sameness is plural.

"Perhaps," as Benedict Seymour suggests, "beyond normcore is another normal altogether."[35] Perhaps, too, other conceptions of normativity with a fuller grasp of social reality are emerging in these "post-critical" times. Elizabeth Povinelli's recent work, and the quote with which this essay began, offer one important instance worth noting by way of contrast.[36] Povinelli forcefully rearticulates the need to go beyond critiquing existing norms – *the way things are* – and make commitments to alternative norms – *the way things ought to be* – if social thought is to have traction on social reality. She rightly notes that this is something much critical theory has shrunk from, preferring instead the security afforded by anti-normativity. Yet, to refuse to engage with questions of normativity is either to fail to engage the realities of social power, or to vacate the terrain of political efficacy in favor of intellectual purity. In too often happily settling for the latter, critical theory has been complicit in ceding ever more ground to the forces of reaction. Intervening in social power complexes affords few clean hands and no pure outside: one must always start in the shit, in the middle of a social field cut through with power and antagonism from which difficult difference cannot be wished away. Making a commitment to one set of norms against another – whether defending existing "arrangements of existence" or trying to pull new arrangements into being – involves engaging in struggle and, as

Povinelli's language makes clear, exercising one's force: "I shove here rather than there … I put my shoulder here rather than there."[37] Hence, for Povinelli, engaging in struggle means taking responsibility for the fact that, if successful, the arrangement of existence we seek to make normative may well "extinguish what existed before." Indeed, for her, the anti-normativity that defines so much radical social thought can be – if perhaps not always – a "refusal to accept this responsibility."[38]

Povinelli's articulation of normativity offers no exit from this conflicted terrain of struggle, but this is precisely its appeal. In contrast to the flat, neutral, depoliticized social world of Normcore, Povinelli's conception of normativity confronts social power and the realities of antagonism. In Povinelli's analysis, social norms are bound to struggles between groups who have made active commitments to contending conceptions of how things ought to be. And no matter how provisional, temporary, strategic, or conflicted those commitments might be, they must be defended or forced. If radical social thought is to help shape social realities, it needs to engage once again with questions of normativity. It mustn't be satisfied with simply wagging fingers at what's wrong with the world, but must also generate visions of how it might be otherwise. Following Povinelli into the shit would be a good start. You can wear sneakers if you like.

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1
Hal Foster, "Post-Critical," *October* 139 (Winter 2012).

2
Whilst once the critique of critical theory was the preserve of methodological and social conservatives, its most persuasive proponents today are located firmly on the Left. The Right, in the United States as in Europe, has instead now discovered the virtues of diversity, subjective relativism, skepticism of truth claims – all key aspects of what was once known as "theory" – throwing themselves with gusto into disputing climate science and playing the role of embattled white male minorities facing unfair discrimination due to all the immigrants, women, queers, and black presidents taking their jobs and tax dollars. For a pungent example, one need only look at the flurry of commentary sparked recently by the brave Princeton boy who, growing sick of being asked to "check his privilege" as a white male, penned a letter to *The Princeton Tory* that was picked up by the*New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Time*, and other major bastions of the "liberal media" to say their dirty work for them.

3
Alex Williams made this useful distinction in an article that appeared in, of all places, the *New York Times*. See his "Normcore: Fashion Movement or Massive In-Joke?," *New York Times*, April 2,2014 http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/03/fashion/normcore-fashion-movement-or-massive-in-joke.html

4
Available at http://khole.net/issues/youth-mode/ . K-Hole was founded by Greg Fong, Sean Monahan, Emily Segal, Chris Sherron, and Dena Yago.

5
The "89plus Marathon," curated by the loquacious ever-presence of Hans Ulrich Obrist, brought together "emerging practitioners born in or after 1989" with the usual eclectic jumble of old hands to discuss important questions facing the present and future in an "optimistic and generative tone."

6
Aimee Farrell, "Meet Norma Normcore," *Vogue UK*, March 21, 2014 http://www.vogue.co.uk/news/2014/03/21/normcore-fashion-vogue---definition . A sentiment echoed by Lauren Cochrane of the *Guardian*, who declared that "blending in is the new standing out." See Cochrane's "Normcore: The Next Big Fashion Movement?,"*Guardian*, Feb. 27, 2014 http://www.theguardian.com/fashion/fashion-blog/2014/feb/27/normcore-the-next-big-fashion-movement

7
Fiona Duncan, "Normcore: Fashion for Those Who Realize They're One in 7 Billion," *New York Magazine*, February 26, 2014 file:///C:/Users/Briad/AppData/Local/Microsoft/Windows/Temporary%20Internet%20Files/Content.IE5/K5O9DAK6/nymag.com/thecut/2014/02/normcore-fashion-trend.html

8
Jeremy Lewis, the founder and editor of *Garmento* and freelance stylist and fashion writer, quoted in Duncan.

9
Thomas Frank, "Hipsters, They're Like Us! 'Normcore,' Sarah Palin, and the GOP's Big Red State Lie," *Salon*, April 27, 2014 http://www.salon.com/2014/04/27/hipsters_they%E2%80%99re_just_like_us_normcore_sarah_palin_and_the_gops_big_red_state_lie/

10
Simon Doonan, "Beware of Normcore: The Bogus-Sounding New Fashion Trend is All Too Real," *Slate*, April 7, 2014 http://www.slate.com/articles/life/doonan/2014/04/normcore_the_new_fashion_trend_and_its_perils.html . Doonan, who holds the amazing title of "Creative Ambassador of Barney's New York," has "been moving in fashion circles for decades," as the *Los Angeles Times* reminds readers in its own article on normcore (May 18, 2014). http://www.latimes.com/style/la-ig-normcore-20140518-story.html

11
Duncan, "Normcore: Fashion for Those Who Realize They're One in 7 Billion." More recently, Gap has run a campaign called "Dress Normal," with expensive adverts directed by David Fincher, attempting to capitalize on the normcore trend to revitalize their brand.

12
Nor is it because I assume fashion to be inherently stupid, frivolous, or unworthy of serious attention, common misapprehensions about a domain that is not only a fine instrument for reflecting broader social, economic, and cultural changes, but one that can occasionally put in a turn as a realm of aesthetic invention, creative experimentation, and social comment that far outshines the visual arts. Indeed, the response to normcore from the fashion press has not been without interest, especially given that a trend for "dressing normal" has the potential to undermine the industry's imperatives, if, say, too many people got swept up in the trend and realized that they preferred to "dress normal" and stopped buying in to the idea that new markers of difference are needed on a "seasonal" basis. A financial and aesthetic shudder has been perceptible.

Some tried to knock things on the head before they got out of hand, with *Elle* leading the industry backlash with a piece entitled "Why the 'Normcore' Phenomenon is a Fraud." Others attempted to accelerate the trend and move on to something else entirely. Just two weeks after normcore "broke" in *New York Magazine*, *Vogue* asked, "What Comes After Normcore?," referring to the still nascent trend as a "useful palate cleanser," and identifying an "exit strategy: keep the sneakers and your ability to walk, wearing them with anything – even couture dresses!" Those craftier set out to instantly gentrify normcore, recuperating it for the top end of the market. As Adam Tschorn wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*, "a pair of off-brand heather grey sweatpants from Big 5 Sporting Goods won't cut it. The key is to wear a super-luxe high-end designer version … that only *looks like* you're slumming it," and indeed Chanel has had two seasons of couture sneakers (although you can't blame Karl Lagerfeld for wanting some comfy shoes at his age). Thomas Frank and Benedict Seymour both picked up on the fashion-eats-itself potential of normcore, the former seeing in it the possibility of a "cultural-commercial Armageddon … a complete collapse of the imperium of cool," and the latter, a more melancholic "end of dressing up." However, they both discuss the fashion industry as if it were the preserve of "the One Percent," led by a cabal of elite tastemakers – Frank: the "aristocracy of the tasteful"; Seymour: the "oligarcho-aristo-creative" class – whilst the rest of us presumably walk around in the nude except for our now faded blue collars. This vastly underestimates the scale and diversity of the industry, and fails to acknowledge the way in which social media has allowed trend formation to slip out of well-policed channels, even if the great brand leviathans are now learning how to make an amplification chamber of it, slipping in collections (resort) and seasons (pre-fall) to fit the social-media-enhanced pace of the fashion cycle.

13
K-Hole insists that youth is no longer to be strictly identified with the young, given that biological, economic, and cultural clocks having long fallen out of sync. Youth is thus "ageless." In fact, the first section of *Youth Mode*, which most clearly satirized the language of brand analysis and marketing reports, is entitled "The Death of Age." "Youth," they declare, "is a mode. It's an attitude." Being in "Youth Mode" is "about being youthfully present at any given age. Youth isn't a process, aging is. In Youth Mode you are infinite." Yet, this infinite, ageless youth seems to be the lifelong companion of an indebted, jobless future: "when Boomerang kids return to their parents' Empty Nests and retirement fades into the horizon, the bond between social expectations and age begins to dissolve."

14
Benedict Seymour, "Notes on Normcore," *Mute*, May 29, 2014 http://www.metamute.org/editorial/fifth-column/note s-normcore

15
Of Glazek's comments the group said, he "nails it."

16
See "Curating the Internet," moderated by Karen Archey (*Kaleidescope*, Summer 2014). Of K-Hole's practice, Yago wrote, "our platform looks to consumer trends, and attempts to identify the larger motivating forces behind why and how decisions are being made. This is why we focused on anxiety and individuality on our past two posts."

17
Frank, "Hipsters, They're Like Us!"

18
Members of K-Hole have tried to address this confusion in interviews with HuffPost Live and *Dazed & Confused,* and as reported in a number of other articles, the Los Angeles-based writer and friend Christopher Glazek noted on K-Hole's Facebook page that Fiona Duncan's initial piece in *New York Magazine* had conflated the two concepts and hence misrepresented what K-Hole had meant by normcore – something for which Duncan apologized, complaining that she had been forced to edit her article a number of times to make it more about fashion (which in itself hardly explains why the ideas had been confused).

19
It is not only in the fashion press that normcore and Acting Basic have been erroneously conflated. The two most substantial critical reflections on the phenomena, Thomas Frank's article in *Salon* and a subsequent piece in *Mute* by Benedict Seymour, both repeat this mistake, despite otherwise interesting interpretations.

20
The cinema setting also seems to evoke the mass shootings that have also been a fixture of American youth culture since the 1990s, although here too it seems that panic has subsided into ambivalence.

21
Or what Benedict Seymour refers to as the "final dregs of the punk negativity/self-fabrication process."

22
A logic that might actually work better for K-Hole's argument would be that because there was *so much* difference, its value was reduced, making it harder to achieve the type of individualism that traded on *unique* difference, or the type of difference that makes one really special.

23
K-Hole notes that in Mass Indie times, "mastering difference is a way of neutralizing threats and accruing social status within a peer group"; the master of Mass Indie was not the look-at-me mall punk with the last of the mohawks (although they were cool too), but the quiet comps connoisseur who told you about Awesome Tapes from Africa.

24
Farrell, "Meet Norma Normcore."

25
With Acting Basic, K-Hole of course reference the idea of being "basic," most frequently heard in relation to being a "basic bitch," an idea that emerged first in hip-hop (more specifically a 2009 release by Lil Duval) but has gone on to achieve more mainstream popularity, and somewhat shifted meaning, as a meme. Hence, "basic" might be considered alongside other terms like "twerk" and "shade" that mainstream culture has likewise appropriated from African American subcultures, hip-hop and drag respectively, in recent years. There is of course an interesting discussion to be had about the fact that hip-hop, or a certain hip-hop, has in fact long been one of the dominant aspects of mainstream pop culture. At any rate, as Glazek noted, for K-Hole, being normcore means being "unbothered by the politics of appropriation" (see Glazek above).

26
One of the most potentially interesting lenses through which to understand Acting Basic, or indeed the normcore trend in fashion, is that of the broader desire for anonymity – however perversely attention-seeking it might be – in a period of ever-more invasive and pervasive surveillance, not only from the state and other institutional powers (the NSA; CCTV cameras; police drones; Google street view; marketing algorithms that track online behavior, consumption patterns, etc.) but also from ourselves, our own constantly updated and geolocated social media feeds and well-curated spreads of publicly accessible selfies. Of course, wearing Birkenstocks is probably likely to attract less attention than a plastic *V for Vendetta* mask, but whilst it's relatively clear who anarchist protestors might want to conceal their identities/seek attention from, it remains to be seen what type of anonymity Acting Basic might be seeking. A number of authors have likewise referred to camouflage, understanding normcore (or rather Acting Basic) as the "latest urban camouflage" (Duncan) or even a form of "wealth camouflage" (Seymour), although of course whilst camouflage may always be used to conceal, the reasons for wanting to be concealed are many.

27
This point was not lost on all the fashion press. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Lizzie Garret Mettler, author of the 2012 book *Tomboy Style*, noted that "it's a bit condescending to wear normal clothing as a joke, like it's a costume, but maybe that's the next natural iteration of the hipster." See Adam Tschorn, "Normcore is (or is it?) a fashion trend (or non-trend or anti-trend)," *Los Angeles Times*, May 18, 2014 http://www.latimes.com/style/la-ig-normcore-2014051 8-story.html

28
In what follows I will capitalize "Normcore" to indicate that it is K-Hole's conception of the term rather than the wider understanding, which will remain as "normcore."

29
"The 'Normcore' Fashion Trend," interview with Sean Monahan, HuffPost Live, March 6, 2014 http://live.huffingtonp ost.com/r/archive/segment/53 18afacfe344420bc0009fb

30
I owe thanks to Suhail Malick for the comparison to Zelig.

31
Adaptability and empathy are key virtues for such an outlook, and these terms recur throughout *Youth Mode* in a variety of forms, like branded keywords.

32
Duncan, "Normcore: Fashion for Those Who Realize They're One in 7 Billion."

33
In fact, even older models of social thought, such as Freud's "narcissism of small differences," may offer some insight on the bubble economy differentiation that characterizes Mass Indie. Indeed, even Thorstein Veblen had long ago noted that "David Riesman and Vance Packard … have shown that even the vast American middle class, which is as free from want and even more uniform than the circles described by Proust, is also divided into abstract compartments. It produces more and more taboos and excommunications among absolutely similar but opposed units. Insignificant distinctions appear immense and produce incalculable effects. The individual existence is still dominated by the Other but this Other is no longer a class oppressor as in Marxist

alienation; he is the neighbor on the other side of the fence, the school friends, the professional rival. The Other is more and more fascinating the nearer he is to the Self." Quoted in Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994). Thanks to Eva Kenny for this point.

34
This doesn't even factor in the other side: the fact that there may be very many individuals, even adaptable and empathetic specimens, that do not wish to find belonging or embrace sameness in every situation, whether because they just like to keep to themselves or because some situations are built around social norms that they cannot empathize with or don't want to adapt to. You don't have to be a hater to not chill with racists. Not everyone is always happy to chant for the other team.

35
Seymour, "Notes on Normcore."

36
Another powerful instance of the contemporary return to normativity is to be found in the work of the philosophers Ray Brassier and Reza Negarestani. Brassier and Negarestani are both engaged in an attempt to develop a rationalist project of universal emancipation based around a concept of collectively generated and revisable norms that govern behavior along the lines of commitments to rational experimentation, testing en route the very limits of the human as such. As fascinating and persuasive as their abstract accounts of rational normativity are I need to do further work to grasp their implications for the processes of political subjectification, and vice versa, before I can discuss their political value with confidence.

37
Needless to say, force here should not be solely or even principally understood as physical force, even if this language evokes it. Rather, this terminology is used to highlight the fact that society is not a neutral sphere, and acting in it means engaging with a play of other forces, some of which will offer resistance, whether symbolic, physical, ideological, legal, and so on.

38
Povinelli talks of "extinguishing others," indeed "without reason," and even notes that extinguishing forms of existence can be equated with killing forms of existence. I would rather not affirm the language of extinguishing other social groups, given the history of this idea. I nonetheless take Povinelli's point that unless we accept the power in our actions and take responsibility for putting our shoulder into what we think ought to be over and above other forms of existence –

without any transcendental or ultimate regulative ground – we will be petrified in discourse, paralyzed in disdain for those who dare do (an all too recognizable malaise today).