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# “We Play by House Rules” UNO, Social Media, and the Power of the Petty

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The author discusses the impact of Black Twitter, a section of Twitter dominated by members of the African diaspora, on marginalized communities when it offers alternatives to the rules and expectations of mainstream social media, especially in relation to such online games as UNO. She touts the value of what she calls the “petty” for Black players turned unofficial designers and their creative and important resistance to—and even a defiance of—such official rules. **Key words:** Black Twitter; pettiness and creativity; UNO

## Introduction

**S**Ocial media has served as the major alternative to mainstream media for marginalized communities. One of the major examples of this has been dubbed “Black Twitter”—a section of Twitter dominated by members of the African diaspora. Black Twitter has made itself known through the shared use on the site of memes, language, and experiences from Black users. One of these shared cultural experiences is the importance of house rules in the game of UNO. In May 2019, the official UNO Twitter account posted that stacking, a popular house rule in UNO, is not permitted in the official rules of the game. In an act of defiance and pettiness, Black Twitter users completely ignored the official post about the rules of stacking. I explore the prominence and power of something I describe as “petty” on social media and its importance to Black defiance and resistance, especially the reaction to the official rules of UNO and how the ability to modify and challenge them puts it at a unique intersection of Black pettiness and creativity.

## It Was a Random Day in May

On May 4, 2019, the official Twitter account for the UNO game (@realUNO-game) wrote: “If someone puts down a +4 card, you must draw 4 and your turn is skipped. You can’t put down a +2 to make the next person draw 6. We know you’ve tried it. #UNO.” The tweet is accompanied by an image that reads (in all caps): “YOU CANNOT STACK DRAW 2 & DRAW 4 CARDS.” As of this writing, the tweet has accumulated over eighty thousand likes, ninety thousand retweets, and nearly six thousand replies. The backlash was immediate. Some asked for clarification about whether this stacking rule applied only to Draw 2 and Draw 4 or whether stacking a Draw 2 on a Draw 2 or a Draw 4 on a Draw 4 was allowed. UNO clarified that the official rules of the game did not allow stacking of any kind. Many Twitter users quickly pointed out that the official UNO mobile app and the game published by Ubisoft allowed stacking. UNO replied to these tweets with: “These rules are for the physical UNO card games. The mobile version of the classic game features custom rules, including the most common house rules, for a new way to play.” Indeed, the official rules of UNO do not include anything to indicate that stacking these cards was permissible.

Many users disagreed with the UNO Twitter account’s rule clarification, because stacking is simply one of the more popular house rules of the game. Kyle Smith, whose reply earned over eighty-five hundred likes, one thousand retweets, and forty-five replies, read: “My deck, my rules . . . someone’s eating this +24.” Covering the event, writer and podcaster Ashleigh Lakieva Atwell wrote the *Blavity* article “Uno Tried to Prohibit a Game Move We’ve All Done and Twitter Went Mattel, Please,” which cited several key tweets (Atwell 2019). Sports reporter Nubyjas Wilburn’s tweet specifically pointed out that Black Twitter was telling UNO it was wrong to clarify the rules of its game. Black Twitter can be defined as a group of Black users of Twitter whose members occasionally interact by sharing their culture and experiences. Even though the title of Atwell’s article read in part “Twitter Went Mattel, Please,” it consists mostly of replies and retweets from Black users of the site. And a new page soon appeared called Black Uno (@realblackUNO), with the bio “The Real Black Uno,” though the account only had two tweets and had not been updated since May 6, 2019. In a response to UNO’s tweet, those on the account wrote: “This is a completely valid move and the only sure way to assert your dominance at the table. See Also: House Rules.”

These petty exchanges between UNO and Black Twitter illustrate that the

popularity of stacking—a house rule made popular in the Black community—supersedes the official rules of the game. By “petty,” I mean the three senses of the word suggested in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, which provides three definitions: having secondary rank or importance; having little or no importance or significance; and marked by or reflective of narrow interests and sympathies. All three of these definitions rely on petty being considered an adjective. None of these describe particularly accurately the action of being petty. They are better suited for describing a situation (i.e., “petty exchange”), but not the actions involved in that situation. In February 2017, Urban Dictionary user omfggdiana defined petty this way: “When you make a fucking big deal over small shit.”

Although both Merriam-Webster and omfggdiana view petty as something minor—Merriam-Webster with its little or no importance or significance and omfggdiana with its small shit—the definition used by omfggdiana better reflects, I think, what it means to be petty. It is the action of making “a fucking big deal over small shit” and provides the social meaning of the word (Ro 2019). Even when we use it as an adjective to describe someone as “petty,” we are describing them as someone who makes “a fucking big deal over small shit.” Together, the Urban Dictionary and Merriam-Webster definitions combine and create the full context of the word as I use it here: UNO’s tweet was petty—as in, it had little or no importance or significance—and the reaction of Black Twitter was also petty—they were making a big deal over small shit.

Deploying this petty clash between UNO and Black Twitter over house rules, I explore the prominence and power of the petty in Black Twitter and its importance to Black defiance and resistance. I situate my reading in the historical foundations of UNO and in its social media savvy alongside the rise of Black Twitter as a Black digital community play space. Black Twitter’s reaction to official rules of UNO and its own ability to modify and challenge the official rules put the card game at a unique intersection of Black pettiness and creativity.

### **Foundations and Social Media Rise**

I find it hard to ignore the irony of UNO calling out players for their house rules, given that UNO itself constitutes the house rules of another card game—Crazy Eights. UNO’s creator Merle Robbins, a barber from a small town in Ohio, fell one night into an argument with his son about the rules of Crazy Eights. Like the game Robbins would eventually create, Crazy Eights had different versions

that were mostly confined to specific geographical locations. Following the argument with his son, Robbins wrote the commands for each card in the game on the back of the card with a marker (McGlynn 2016). Later, according to David McGlynn, Robbins bought a deck of blank cards on which he wrote commands. He later sold this “game”—called UNO—to Bob Tezak, and in 1992 Tezak sold UNO to toy giant Mattel, where the card game has been produced ever since (McGlynn 2016). The story of UNO’s creation shows the power of pettiness. Robbins’s tendency to make “a fucking big deal over small shit” encouraged his entrepreneurial spirit and helped him turn an argument with his son about the rules of Crazy Eights into his card game franchise.

UNO has become popular in the social media age as a meme, a term that predates the creation of the Internet by about seven years and was first introduced by Richard Dawkins in 1976 to serve as the counterpart to genes. As Gretchen McCulloch writes, just as “a gene (such as for brown eyes) spreads through sexual selection and physical fitness, a meme (such as the idea that the earth orbits the sun) spreads through social selection and ideological fitness” (2019). For Dawkins, memes explained how ideas and beliefs evolve socially. In 1990 technologist Mike Godwin had come up with Godwin’s Law, a term used to describe a “gratuitous Nazi reference” (McCulloch 2019). Speaking with *Wired* magazine a few years later, Godwin remarked on the way the idea of “Godwin’s Law” had spread and used “meme” to describe it. At that point, McCulloch claims a meme was used in a strictly Internet context (McCulloch 2019).

All this had changed by the time the UPROXX article “How Uno Became 2017’s Favorite, Highly Meme-able Card Game” appeared. In it Mattel’s editorial director Steve Bramucci cites four reasons for UNO’s rise on social media. For one, “it’s everywhere.” UNO is available on a variety of platforms that targets different demographics. UNO is available as a mobile app where it’s been downloaded more than fifty million times. In addition, millions of users on Facebook have played the game on Messenger (NetEase Games 2018). UNO has also been ported to PCs and consoles during the past ten years by multiple publishers. Through this, UNO has made itself available to every major video game player and consumer. The Entertainment Software Association reports that 61 percent of U.S. gamers play with a smartphone, 52 percent with a gaming console, and 49 percent with a personal computer. In addition, 71 percent of gamers play casual games, a genre into which UNO fits. And with the average age of U.S. gamers falling between thirty-five and forty-four, these are people highly likely to have already played the physical version of the game at some point in their

lives (Entertainment Software Association 2020). UNO's ability to adapt to the new ways of play and make itself accessible has allowed it to maintain its hold on older players and also to acquire new ones.

Part of this adaptability comes from the company's social media savvy, making it a quality of UNO's popularity (Bramucci 2017). M Rafiq states that building a rapport with followers, making them feel special, engaging with audiences, and improving communication are all key to effective customer management on social media. UNO posts pseudohands on its Facebook page, for example, and asks viewers how they would play the game with that hand. Despite having fewer Facebook followers than Monopoly, UNO's engagements on the site exceed it (Bramucci 2017).

Even prior to the May 4 tweet, UNO engaged consumers who had questions about how to play the game properly. The tweet was not the first announcement in which UNO stated cards cannot be stacked. In fact, two days before the famous tweet, Twitter user @i\_amthomasjr asked UNO if stacking Draw 2s was allowed. UNO replied: "You cannot stack cards. If you play a draw 2 the next player will need to draw 2 and skip their turn." Most of the engagements with this tweet occurred after the May 4 tweet. UNO often replies to several consumers to clarify the rules of the game and explain that their digital games allow for the use of popular house rules.

UNO uses another social media trick—mixing paid social media ads with organic engagement. Consider its advertisement campaign starring former NFL player Charles Tillman. A photo shows Tillman and his children engaged in a game of UNO. Most of the children are looking at their cards. The youngest child stares directly at the camera, and Tillman takes this as an opportunity to sneak a glance at the child's hand. Most of the interactions in the advertisement involve Tillman's peeking at his youngest child's card in a teasing manner, telling Tillman to stop cheating. The ad with Tillman affirmed UNO as a game played by family and one that encouraged shady tactics.

Bramucci notes UNO's house rules offer "open-source gaming, analog style" as another reason for its social-media popularity (2017). Included in the official UNO deck are four blank cards that allow players to write whatever they want, similar to the way Robbins did when playing Crazy Eights. Bramucci's link to an UNO Instagram post shows an image of a player in the middle of a game holding four cards. One of the cards is a blank, filled in by a player that reads: "Everyone must discard all their wild cards except the holder of this card". The caption of the post says: "Game changer. Say goodbye to those Wild Cards.

And possibly your friends. (photo: @midnightwonders)” The Atlanta Hawks basketball team plays the game using action cards from multiple decks (Cacciola 2016). Former Hawks forward Kent Bazemore describes their version of UNO as “no-holds-barred” and the “WWE [World Wrestling Entertainment] of UNO” (Cacciola 2016).

The tangible nature of house rules gives players of the game the sense of some ownership over the game, specifically involving its rules. For Bridget Whelan, modding (making modifications to game play) is “the act of changing the base content of a game . . . the action that players take to make game experiences better” (2020). For Instagram user @midnightwonders, there may be some thrill in a customized card that upsets your friends when you play it. For the Atlanta Hawks, the abundance of action cards makes the game even more dependent on luck and creates more frustration for friends. Most importantly, it creates more opportunities for players to be petty.

In a way, pettiness serves as an additional modification to the game. There is no house rule—I presume—that calls for players to be as petty as possible. However, the house rules that players have created encourage attempts to make other players miserable just to be petty. Bazemore refers to the Atlanta Hawks’s modifications of UNO as akin to the WWE. This is notable because WWE and other sports entertainment companies are performative simulations of combat that focus on dramatic in-match storytelling as opposed to actual in-ring competition. The goal of being petty in UNO, similar to the goal of professional wrestling, is to invoke a strong emotional response from the target audience—whether players or fans. Similar to the no-holds-barred style of wrestling matches in which the performers can do whatever they want to each other to win, house rules in UNO allow players to do whatever they want—and to be as petty as possible—to achieve victory.

Bramucci notes that the petty nature of the game has contributed to its popularity as a meme (2017). UNO maintains this popularity through engagement with users about the strategies they use to play the game. However, UNO cannot start a meme—it can only provide the Internet with the tools to create one and, maybe, acknowledge its existence. For UNO, the tools for doing this are the cards available in the deck. One of the most popular UNO memes shows an image of a blank UNO card on which is written “[do this unpleasant activity] or draw 25.” This is accompanied by an image of a player holding many cards—at least 25, we presume. The unpleasant activity varies based the sector of the Internet in which one actively participates. For an Internet user who has been

diagnosed with depression, the UNO meme may seem like something saying, “Clean your room or draw 25.” This example depends on understanding that those suffering from depression, like me, sometimes struggle to complete tasks like cleaning the room. McCulloch writes that memes have a “playful language” that “provides a clear route to participation.” Understanding how memes work, the example also assumes that those suffering from depression would see it as a playful “call it out,” but they would generally understand that the maker of the meme also suffers from depression.

The nature of memes requires they be created and shared by everyday users of the Internet. A major corporation like Mattel cannot try to insert itself into this culture without risking that it looks out of place. For example, consider Hillary Clinton’s infamous “Pokemon Go to the polls” statement in which she tried to capitalize on the popularity of Niantic’s new AR mobile game *Pokemon GO*. Instead of sparking the interest of young on-line voters, she became the meme of an older-generation candidate who was out of touch with the Internet generation.

### **Black Twitter and Play**

André Brock (2012) describes Black Twitter as “Twitter’s mediation on Black discourse” and as a “user-generated source of culturally relevant online content, combining social network elements and broadcast principles to share information” (530). Sarah Florini (2014) notes the importance of treating Black Twitter not as a monolith, but rather as “millions of Black users on Twitter networking, connecting, and engaging with others who have similar concerns, experiences, tastes, and cultural practices” (225). Brock attributes the popularity of Twitter for Black users to its inherent ease of access through cell phones and its minimalist aesthetic.

Both Brock and Florini point out that Black users on Twitter engage with each other through “rhetorical games” that Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes as “signifyin(g).” Signifyin(g) takes on multiple forms in the Black community. The origins of signifyin(g) can be found in West African myths and folktales. Maria Tatar writes, “West African myths, more powerfully than the lore of other regions in Africa, repeatedly foreground contradiction, paradox, and indeterminacy, to the point of telling stories that at times seem to turn on philosophical principles as much as on figures with real-life struggles and conflicts” (lxxvii). African-American folktales, Tatar writes, are seen as “deceptively simple” in comparison

to their West African counterparts (lxxvii). However, the “deceptively simple” nature of African-American folktales are “simply deceptive.” African-American folktales are wrapped in the same storytelling traditions as West African folktales, but they hide behind a simple façade so they do not tip off any slave masters to the true nature of these stories. Signifyin’ has fostered solidarity in African American communities, and their performative elements “have historically served important roles in the creation and preservation of Black communities” (Florini 2014, 226).

Signifyin(g) makes Black Twitter a site of play. John Sharp and Colleen Macklin (2016) note six elements to play: actions, goals, rules, objects, play space, and players. They also note that crafting these six elements together to create a play experience constitutes the role of a game designer. Macklin and Sharp say that players, “are the most important part of any game, as they are the operator that makes the game go” (9).

In the case of Black Twitter, the players are also the game designers. Jack Dorsey, CEO and cofounder of Twitter, and his team provided objects and actions, but they did not provide the rules for how to interact with the objects and actions. And they certainly did not provide a goal. Even as the play space can be considered Twitter.com or its mobile app, Black Twitter is a loosely configured subsection of the app that consists of its millions of Black users. The formation of Black Twitter as a play space is based on—but completely independent of—the creation of Twitter itself. Sharp and Thomas (2019) define potential play spaces as existing “only through the players’ imaginative cooperation” (8). Black Twitter was created this way. Black people on the site agreed to use Twitter to share cultural experiences with each other, and it became a space of play. The action: make tweets. The objects: a computer, phone, or tablet. The play space: Twitter.com or the Twitter app. The players: Black users on Twitter.

## Rules

The first rule of Black Twitter is that, to enter the informal play space, one must be Black and respect Black life. Six days after the 2014 murder of Michael Brown by Darren Wilson, the Ferguson, Missouri, police department released video showing Brown robbing a local convenience store. Many who had advocated for Brown changed their opinion, claiming that he was no longer a compelling victim because “he lacked the proper public image to garner, or perhaps even

merit, national sympathy” (Hill 2018, 293). However, Black Twitter as a whole resisted the politics of respectability and still argued that Michael Brown’s life mattered and that petty larceny (or according to police officer Wilson, jaywalking) did not warrant a death sentence. Black people in the space who did not respect this rule were rejected from the space.

Another Black Twitter rule is to respect the voices in the space, especially if they are not actually a part of the play space. Players are quick to call out such actions. In 2010 Farhad Manjoo published an article titled “How Black People Use Twitter,” in which he affirmed the curiosity of non-Black people about how Black people use Twitter (Manjoo 2010). Manjoo’s curiosity came from the hashtag, #WordsThatLeadToTrouble. Manjoo’s article reveals the uncomfortable relationship between non-Black people and Black people. Manjoo published the article under the guise that he, a non-Black man, would be able to explain how Black people use Twitter. Instead, Manjoo’s article offered more questions than answers:

What explains the rise of tags like #wordsthatleadtotrouble? Are black people participating in these types of conversations more often than nonblacks? Are other identifiable groups starting similar kinds of hashtags, but it’s only those initiated by African-Americans that are hitting the trending topics list? If that’s true, what is it about the way black people use Twitter that makes their conversations so popular? Then there’s the apparent segregation in these tags. While you begin to see some nonblack faces after a trending topic hits Twitter’s home page, the early participants in these tags are almost all black. Does this suggest a break between blacks and nonblacks on Twitter—that real-life segregation is being mirrored online? (n.p.)

But these questions show that he is not remotely qualified to provide an answer. In fact, when Baratunde Thurston—a Black man—presented a theory that Black Twitter constitutes a new iteration of the Black vernacular tradition of playing the dozens, Manjoo dismissed the theory because it was “compelling, but not airtight” (n.p.). Manjoo seemed not to understand that he was asking questions about human behavior, so it appears nearly impossible to find an airtight answer to why Black people trend more than non-Black people.

Kimberly C. Ellis (2010), affectionately called Dr. Goddess, published a response to the article, problematizing the conclusions that Manjoo attempts to draw. The response can be summed up with a tweet that Ellis quotes in the first paragraph: “BLACK PEOPLE ARE NOT A MONOLITH” (n.p.). Although Ellis does not provide an explanation of how Black people use Twitter, she does

say that Twitter is used as a space for community building and allows Black people to express culture. Manjoo was provided with the opportunity to listen to a Black voice explain how communication among Black people on Twitter, and he chose to ignore it. Unsurprisingly, the players within the space called him out for his lack of respect.

### *Hashtags*

With players, objects, actions, and a play space, the designers and players of Black Twitter turn it into a play experience with one goal: to educate, entertain, and build community among the players. This goal proved particularly important during the summer of 2014, when protests against police violence in the Black community occurred across the country. Players used one object of their play—hashtags—to educate others in the space about what was going on and what they could do to help. Raven Maragh-Lloyd (2020) notes that hashtags make it easier to find and join discussions. She also notes that hashtags are how Black users on Twitter look for each other and then engage in conversation in real time. The hashtags #MichaelBrown, #HandsUpDontShoot, and #Ferguson trended on Twitter.

Residents and others in Ferguson took photos and videos to keep Twitter updated on the protests occurring after Michael Brown’s death. These videos also showed additional instances of police brutality, reaffirming that Brown’s death was a systemic issue of police brutality against Black bodies and not a one-off incident. Marc Lamont Hill (2018)—who was in Ferguson, Missouri, during the protests—states that Black Twitter “disseminated information about the shooting that went unreported by traditional media outlets, issued calls for new evidence, demanded the release of Darren Wilson’s still-withheld name to the public, organized protest actions against the Ferguson police department, and engaged in broader dialogues about anti-Black state violence” (287). These actions, Hill concludes, helped turn this local instance of police brutality into an international cause.

Of all the benefits provided by the Black Twitter play experience, the hashtag is probably the most prominent. It became an invaluable mechanic that Brock (2012) says helped “discover” Black Twitter. According to Brock, the hashtag “serves triple duty as ‘signifier,’ ‘sign,’ and, ‘signified,’ marking as it does the concept to be signified, the cultural context within which the tweet should be understood, and the ‘call’ awaiting a response” (537). Hashtags provide the means and parameters to engage in signifying, the primary action performed

in the Black Twitter play space. Signifying is a form of pettiness, and, as I have noted, it can have a performative element to it. Through followers, the hashtag, and trending topics, the signifiers are provided the tools and audience to perform their signification. The hashtag is the primary means by which more players come into the space for the play experience, because Black Twitter's players and designers do not actively promote joining the play space. However, they expect that those who do enter the space to follow the rules of engagement.

Even when using hashtags to discuss serious issues, Black Twitter has also deployed them to bring attention to issues in playful ways. J. Talmadge Wright (2018) describes play as occurring both "in our often nonserious but sometimes serious expressions of engagement with the world around us" (5). #APHeadlines is an example of using play to discuss a serious issue. On August 7, 2014, Theodore Wafer—a white man—had been convicted of second-degree murder and manslaughter of Renisha McBride, a nineteen-year-old Black woman. Following the conviction, the Associated Press tweeted: "Suburban Detroit homeowner convicted of second-degree murder for killing woman who showed up drunk on porch" (Abbey-Lambertz 2014, n.p.). Black Twitter responded immediately with the hashtag #APHeadlines. Huffington Post senior editor Phillip Lewis (2014) contributed the following tweet: "#APHeadlines millions of Africans complain after free cruise to the Americas; slave traders find them 'ungrateful.'" Lewis's tweet is accompanied by an image that shows the cramped quarters of a slave ship. Another user tweeted: "#APHeadlines Philanthropic millionaire innocently requests immigration paperwork of Taliban affiliated President." This tweet was in reference to President Donald Trump's call for then-President Barack Obama's birth certificate. Black Twitter challenged the notion that McBride's drunkenness justified her murder and forced the Associated Press to delete the tweet and write a new one: "Jury convicts Michigan man in killing of unarmed woman on his porch (rewords language from previous tweet)."

The power of Black Twitter is its ability to use play as a form of protest, such as to hold mainstream news media accountable on their reporting on Black death. Lee (2017) describes the #APHeadlines as an example of "textual poaching" and the use of "facetious comedy and jokes" that "Twitter users were able to create a space that allowed them to voice their anger about the lack of consideration and concern black bodies receive by mainstream news press and coverage, even after someone's demise" (2). Black Twitter created ridiculous and nonserious news headlines to showcase the dubious and offensive nature of the Associated Press's serious news headline. In this moment, Black Twitter played

a rhetorical game by twisting the words of the dominant white media and used it against them. Hashtags like #HandsUpDontShoot and #APHeadlines can be viewed as a more serious type of play—one in which the goal goes beyond having fun toward bringing awareness to serious issues in the Black community and helping achieve the goal of entertaining, educating, and building community.

The #APHeadlines hashtag also involves the potential third definition of petty (making a big deal over the implication that something is viewed with little or no significance) and shows the shortcomings of the Merriam-Webster dictionary and Urban Dictionary definitions of petty. We do a disservice to the life of Renisha McBride when we refer to a news headline implying that she to blame for her death as “having little to no importance or significance” or “small shit.”

The reaction of Black Twitter can still be described as “petty,” however, because it still made of it a “fucking big deal.” But that “fucking big deal” came because the life of Renisha McBride was viewed as “having little to no importance or significance.” But who exactly held this view? Certainly not the people petty enough to create a hashtag to mock the Associated Press headline. For Black Twitter, that something was Renisha McBride’s life. In this instance, the act of being petty becomes a power play because it forces others to view an issue with greater significance than they previously intended to. If not for the hashtag, the Associated Press would have run the headline and thought nothing of it. But Black Twitter forced AP’s hand and made it think about the significance of its words.

### *Black Twitter and UNO*

The UNO Twitter account violated the rules of the Black Twitter play space unintentionally, unlike Farhad Manjoo and even those who no longer viewed Michael Brown as respectable. UNO did not come into the space or attempt to make an undue observation about the space. But UNO and its house rules are popular in the Black community, and, therefore, invalidating their legitimacy appears to those in the community to be inviting themselves—and inserting their opinion—into a space where they do not belong. Doing so, they violated the first rule of Black Twitter: to enter the informal play space, one must be Black. Wright (2018) writes “When the life forces of individuals are embodied in what they do, when they have control and ownership of that process, the pleasure that comes from this integration with nature gives them the energy to treat discipline as a mere step, one among many, to create a greater and pleasing form of play” (14).

*LEVEL* (2020), a publication by Medium for Black and Brown men, pub-

lished a list that ranked the must-know Black card games, UNO ranked second, right below Spades. The creation of house rules gives players a sense of ownership in the game, based in part on Kyle Smith's "my deck, my rules" declaration in response to the rule clarification. The *LEVEL* editors point out the importance of making sure players square away the house rules once they start because ownership of the deck means ownership over the rules of the game. This is a tedious, but accepted practice among Black players of UNO. The players—not the makers—of the game determine the rules of the game. Similar to Black Twitter itself, the actions, objects, and play space are provided by those outside the Black community. But these outsiders cannot dictate the rules for how Black Twitter operates precisely because they are both in the space where the Black voice dominates and therefore determines the rules. On the other hand, UNO and Black Twitter engage in mutual pettiness and rule breaking. *LEVEL* calls knowing how to play UNO "subjective" because "apparently none of us know how to play the damn game." This can be fixed by simply reading the rules provided with every deck, but the article implies that this is an uncommon practice.

The various tweets to which UNO replied before and after May 4 imply that an awareness exists on its part of how the house rules and official rules sometimes get conflated by players, especially when digital versions of the game encourage such conflation. The same way Black people could just read the rules from UNO, UNO could have ignored that a lot of its player base (regardless of race) does not really know the official rules of the game. A lack of knowledge about the game did not stop fifty million people from playing it on Facebook, and that number is probably greater given the multitude of platforms on which the game is available. Everyone made a "fucking big deal" over their rules of play being broken. Scott G. Eberle (2015) points out that "rule making also includes rule breaking" and the "subversion and mischief often become part of the experience and parcel of the fun." (216). UNO's tweet went viral, and the many websites catering to Black culture added traffic by posting the tweet and the reactions to it. Black Twitter was also able to take over a space in which Black players could talk about their own house rules for the game.

### **Power Playing Petty**

Anne H. Charity Hudley describes being petty as a form of Black resistance, akin to throwing shade. Hudley adds that pettiness "comes from a long history

of Black verbal arts and culture in which things have a double meaning.” These “Black verbal arts” have varied based on time and the Black subculture. For young heterosexual Black men and boys, this can take the form of roasting. YouTube channel All Def notes, “Roasting is a friendly game played by comedians in a CONTROLLED SETTING. . . . Roasting others who don’t welcome it is BULLYING!” (Drill 2017, n.p.). All Def points out the importance of willing participants because roasting involves clever insults, and a willingness to participate is what separates fun from bullying. This willingness to participate makes roasting a form of play and allows Black people a temporary respite from the material conditions of anti-Blackness. For women and queer folks, this resembles Hudley’s example of throwing shade. Seth E. Davis (2018) describes shade as “a subversive insult or the suggestion of an insult” (26). Throwing shade is reminiscent of the stories in African American folktales in which a clever tongue can get one out of a precarious situation. Queer scholar E Patrick Johnson states, “The threat of being beaten or mutilated was always there if you were to look at a slave master directly in his eye, or if you were to sass, so African-Americans developed these covert ways of communication, which, over time, have morphed into the traditional ways that they interact with one another” (quoted in Holmes 2015, 14). African Americans, as Johnson points out, do not have the ability to make such a direct power play. They overcome this with subtle insults that require a context to understand who has been insulted and how.

Hudley also notes that, for Black people, “It’s a state of being. You’re not being petty, you *are* petty” (quoted in Drill 2017, n.p.). Christina Drill (2017) compares Beyoncé petty memes and Joe Biden petty memes to show the difference between Black pettiness and white pettiness. Pettyoncé memes evolved out of Beyoncé’s performance of her new song “Formation” at the 2013 Super Bowl half-time show. The video for “Formation” pays homage to Beyoncé’s Southern roots with a Southern gothic aesthetic as well as to the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Additionally, the video shows her lying on top of a police car in New Orleans as it sinks into the flooding water. Beyoncé and her performers came out in Black Panther Party-inspired regalia, despite the National Football League (NFL) discouraging political statements during halftime shows.

Here we see Beyoncé playing with the language of the NFL to her own benefit. The NFL discourages political statements, but the organization does not ban them. Therefore, technically, Beyoncé did nothing wrong by wearing attire inspired by a Black political organization. Still, she was accused of shoving an aggressive agenda down the audience’s throats and of performing cop-killer

entertainment. The Miami Fraternal Order of the Police called for a ban of her performances (Drill 2017). Knowing full well the uproar she had caused, Beyoncé posted a picture of herself in a sweat suit on a porch with her legs slightly folded under her and her hands clasped in her lap.

The memes were dubbed “Pettyonce.” The ambiguous nature of the photo can also be seen as Beyoncé throwing shade. Here we see pettiness used as a power play because of the implication that something has little or no importance. For Beyoncé, that something was Black life. White society downplays the impact of police violence against Black bodies by labeling such violence the actions of a “few bad apples” as opposed to systemic racism. Therefore, Beyoncé made a “fucking big deal” out of it by performing “Formation” in Panther-inspired retaliation to challenge the dominant idea that Black life has little or no significance or importance. The accompanying Pettyonce memes were Black Twitter’s way of showing support for her defiance of the NFL and white conservatives.

Black pettiness comes from enduring generations of trauma but also of having the ability to use that trauma and its associated word play against white supremacy. Comparatively, Joe Biden memes display people attaching value to the idea that Joe Biden is petty. During his time as U.S. vice president, Biden had an affectionate “uncle” persona to which people on the Internet became attached. Similar to the uncles that parents dislike but kids love because of their seemingly irresponsible nature, affection for Joe Biden memes grew. These types of uncles, often white men, are able to maintain their privilege and to suffer few or no consequences for their immaturity. Internet users took President Biden’s more expressive reactions—compared to the more stoic nature of President Obama—and memed it for fun. Joe Biden himself is not actually petty; his memes and the users who make them are. Is President Biden himself capable of pettiness? Absolutely, but it is not the same pettiness embodied by Black people.

Pettiness is the foundation on which Black verbal arts are built, because embodying pettiness means to regain control in situations where it has been lost. Throwing shade, engaging in double speak, roast sessions, and memes are all examples of how Black people embody pettiness. With #APHeadlines, the hashtag could have been full of anger against the Associated Press for its Renisha McBride headline. Instead, Black Twitter mocked the news source using the “simply deceptive” rhetoric found in African American folktales. UNO’s Twitter account attempted to take away the house rule clarification important to Black people who play UNO. In response, Black people pretty much told UNO to mind its business and used the tweet as an opportunity to share their

house rules. Through imaginative cooperation, Black Twitter users embodied pettiness by universally agreeing to ignore an entire corporation and using the tweet as a space to discuss Black business. Thus, they regained the control that Mattel attempted to take away.

There are rhetorical games that only those who are part of Black culture can understand and play. Despite being in a public space for all to see, Black Twitter is not a space in which all can engage. Non-Black players cannot invite themselves to participate; any attempt to encroach on the space by outsiders gets harshly rebuffed. They must be invited in and follow the guest rules or be kicked out. Not allowing outsiders into the space may seem “petty” because of the public nature of Twitter, but those are the house rules of Black Twitter. It is a space where people who have had their culture ripped away from them share what pieces of it they have been able to retain.

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