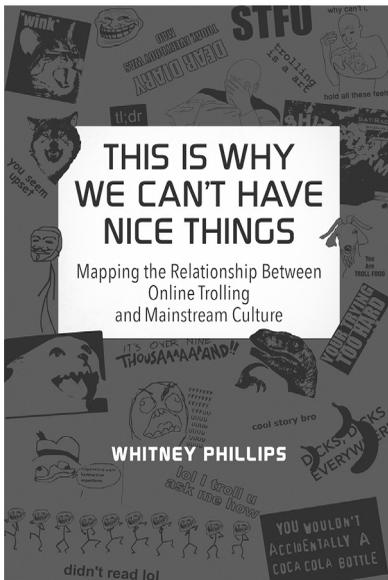# Daniel Lark

Book Review: Whitney Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship* between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture

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As archaeologists have noted, one of the richest and most fertile places to look to understand human culture is in the trash. This is where Whitney Phillips begins her book, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture.* Phillips digs into the detritus of internet trolls, tracking their memes as they move from anonymous image boards to mainstream media outlets to your mother's Facebook page. While trolling has come to be a verb that suggests any type of negative or offensive online behavior, she provides an ethnographic investigation of self-identified internet trolls as a specific subculture emerging in the early 2000s that, over the course of a decade, crystallized into discrete behaviors and attitudes that eventually proliferated across the internet landscape. Phillips argues that

while trolls are figured as the central reason why the internet can't be a kinder and more forgiving place, trolling behavior is reflective of and embedded in dominant, mainstream institutions and cultural attitudes. While often outrageous and downright awful, trolls, like the mythological trickster figure, show us that the difference between trolling and mainstream culture is a difference in degree, not in kind.

Nice Things is divided into three sections: The first section describes Phillips's methodology and terms, detailing the history of online trolling and its coalescence into a particular subculture. Phillips describes this history through the word "lulz," a central term in trolling culture which suggests laughter at the expense of others. Lulz serves to solidify social bonds among trolls, shoring up distinctions between in-group and out-group. Cruel jokes and laughter at others' distress is exactly what brings trolls together in a community of shared values and actions. In addition, lulz work to create a "mask of trolling," an emotional and social buffer between trolls and their victims, obscuring the conditions that created a particularly troll-worthy story and insulating them from any negative psychological effects.[1]

In the second section, Phillips follows the golden years of trolling, during which trolling behaviors began to be recognized, reported on, and encouraged by mainstream culture. In fact, Phillips argues, there is a clear relationship between the often racist and sexist humor of trolls and sensationalist mainstream media. Through ethnographic interviews with trolls and an analysis of the birther movement, a set of conspiracy theories which questioned Barack Obama's status as a natural-born U.S. citizen popularized by Fox News, Phillips notes that trolling behavior emerges from the cultural logics of contemporary capitalism such

as the celebration of the user by the tech industry, the transformation of events into neutral content, and emotional disassociation from these events. Further, Phillips argues that trolling behavior has precedent within Western culture's privileging of cool rationality, colonial expansion and chauvinism, and sexual violence. In short, despite the fact that trolling behaviors are lambasted as out of the norm, they are in direct alignment with the interests of tech titans, platform owners, and the Western tradition.

In the third and final section, Phillips turns to what she calls trolling's transitional period, noting how the memes trolls created and spread have now proliferated throughout mainstream culture. She describes how the definition of trolling has broadened to include a new range of attitudes and behaviors. Phillips is concerned about categorizing all types of harassment under one umbrella term, arguing that "trolling has a way of snapping its audience to attention, either by activating emotional investment or by forwarding a claim so outrageous that one cannot help but engage in dialogue."[2] As such, she questions the dictum "don't feed the trolls" and suggests that, when used carefully, trolling can be used for positive and even feminist aims. It is important to note, however, that Phillips urges extreme caution with this strategy, warning against the adoption of inherently asymmetric, humiliating, and non-consensual practices.

This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things, while presenting a carefully plotted chronology of the history and practices of online trolling, contains a few avenues that could be explored in further depth. First, while Phillips notes that trolls overwhelmingly perform a sense of white, heterosexual masculinity and engage in numerous sexist, racist, and homophobic behaviors, she is resistant to ascribing these qualities to her interlocutors themselves. Insisting that we can't know the hearts and minds of either Fox News pundits or her informants, Phillips posits a definition of racism that requires either conscious or empirical affirmation, reinforcing a rather unhelpful notion that racism is a state of mind and not a pervasive social formation. Second, despite the abundance of homophobic terms like "butthurt" and "fag" in trolling discourse, the consideration and connection between homophobia and homosocial troll behaviors is limited.

Third, while Phillips draws fascinating connections between particular media events, such as Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008), and trolling, a deeper analysis of why these particular media artifacts were so resonant with trolls might shed more light on these attitudes and behaviors. What about this particular film spoke to trolls? The fact that many of the most cherished troll memes are drawn from a range of popular culture begs further analysis.

The strengths of Phillips' work are nevertheless worthy of praise. Phillips provides one of the first comprehensive examinations of internet trolls, contributing to a growing body of research on internet culture that is desperately needed. Her identification of trolling behavior in broader culture reminds us that the line between the outlandish and the acceptable is not natural, but the result of particular social, political, and economic changes. One could extend Phillips' thinking to events like GamerGate, the 2016 United States general election, and current presidential administration, where trolls, Donald Trump, and corporate media each try their best to out-troll each other with increasingly sensationalist tweets and reporting. Trolls are not and cannot be the only reason we can't have nice things and to cast blame on only them is to ignore problems that are deeply rooted in our culture and social institutions. It seems we've given trolls an all-you-can-eat buffet and we don't know when they will be sated.

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Notes

1 Whitney Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 2015), 33.
2 Ibid. 159.