

## Digital Media, 419, and the Politics of the Global Network

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**Abstract:** In his article "Digital Media, 419, and the Politics of the Global Network" Paul Benzon analyzes advance fee fraud, a scam in which con artists communicate with potential victims via email, promising them a monetary reward in return for financial assistance in extracting an allegedly astronomical (yet ultimately nonexistent) fortune from within a geographical zone often characterized as highly violent and unstable. Advance fee fraud is often referred to simply as 419, in accordance with the section of Nigerian penal code that addresses fraud. Benzon reads advance fee fraud as a practice of epistolary narrative that self-consciously allegorizes central processes of global financial circulation, trading in digitized narrative information rather than in digitized capital. In this sense, he suggests, it functions as a highly abstract financial instrument within the network of the global economy, dealing in a paradoxically literal fashion with imaginary money and thus using narrative form to probe and problematize the question of how and where money might move as data. Tracing the geopolitical and geoeconomic dimensions of advance fee fraud's narrative and formal structure, Benzon argues that its random interpellations, arbitrary twists, and exaggerated claims deploy literary narrative in a manner that both relies upon and mirrors the material instability of global digital mediation itself.

**Paul BENZON**

### **Digital Media, 419, and the Politics of the Global Network**

Where does the global meet the digital? The easy, immediate answer might simply be that the two meet everywhere. Indeed, if globalization as a process is by definition everywhere, and if digital information is at least potentially ubiquitous by virtue of its fluid transmissibility, then the discourse of totality that frequently surrounds both domains would seem to dictate that they are equally, interchangeably, and indistinguishably universal and universalizing. Lev Manovich exemplifies this utopian idealism regarding the cultural stakes of digital mediation as follows: "in new media lingo, to 'transcode' something is to translate it into another format. The computerization of culture gradually accomplishes similar transcoding in relation to all cultural categories and concepts. That is, cultural categories and concepts are substituted, on the level of meaning and/or language, by new ones which derive from the computer's ontology, epistemology, pragmatics. New media thus acts as a forerunner of this more general process of cultural re-conceptualization" (12). Manovich's postulates suggest that digitality performs the process it describes, translating the (allegedly) unimpeded fluidity of digital coding into a seemingly equally unimpeded cultural fluidity. Within such a perspective, the computer is at once the symbol, the means, and the agent of cultural change: the malleable ontology of the operating system seemingly has the capability (whether direct or indirect) to reshape the contours and possibilities of lived cultural experience in its own image. Indeed, when seen on a global scale, the "re-conceptualization" Manovich describes is as much the product of a highly rhetorical and ideologically entrenched culture of computerization as it is of the "computerization of culture" he refers to. In its emphasis on the mutual totality of the digital and the global, the equation Manovich makes syllogistically smoothes over the instabilities and irregularities within and between them. The convergence of these two domains is indeed far-reaching; globalization and digitization are deeply intertwined, co-constitutive phenomena. Neither element can be fully thought without the other. To reckon with globalization without accounting for the digital transmissions that underlie and sponsor it, or to reckon conversely with the digital without accounting for its global capacity for circulation and transmission, is to understand these phenomena in less than their full scope. However, as Caren Kaplan notes, "the rhetoric of cyberspace and information technologies relies heavily on a hyperbole of unlimited power through disembodied mobility ... references to boundless space, unfettered mobility, and speedy transfers abound. In this heady environment, new technologies promise ever-increasing powers of transformation and transport" (34). Kaplan's critique suggests that, contrary to the rhetoric she outlines, the relation between the global and the digital is one of unevenness and dissonance, of stoppage and parataxis, rather than of smooth cohesion and symbiosis. As such, a critical approach towards the global and the digital that takes full account of their interdependence must attend to the complex ways in which they overlay, suppress, and reveal one another, relating in configurations that exceed a simple convergence of absolute (and absolutely positivistic) values.

This uneven interdependence of globalization and digitization exemplifies the need for what Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee describe as a shift in critical attention from a focus on performativity to a focus on circulation as "a cultural process with its own forms of abstraction, evaluation, and constraint, which are created by the interactions between specific types of circulating forms and the interpretive communities built around them" ("Cultures" 192). Contemporary information's capacity for global circulation — its ability to constellate and engage multiple new communities of interpretation, as well as of production and reception — is perhaps the most crucial and dramatic result of its digitization. As such, the turn towards circulation that LiPuma and Lee argue for makes possible a new set of questions regarding the global stakes of digital information: how, for example, does the circulation of this information both produce and short-circuit the communicability of meaning and power across global space and time? What paths and patterns does this circulation of information follow, and under what conditions does it fall apart or malfunction? In what ways is it open to being masked, rerouted, and distorted, and to what ends? More broadly and perhaps also more problematically, what role does digitization play in producing a global economy in which information is simultaneously freely mobile, infinitely reproducible, and ultimately often disposable? Such questions make clear that although the

global and the digital must be thought together, they cannot be thought as synonymous or as evenly distributed.

On the contrary, their relationship crystallizes a newly complex and irregular geopolitical dynamic. LiPuma and Lee delineate this tension in their discussion of the technologized global expansion of the market: "though the new communication technologies, exemplified by satellite-linked internet cafés in small cities in Africa and South Asia, create an equality of access to information at the level of the subject, the socio-structures and cultures of circulation also, and at the same time, engender an objective dependence that inhabits the very conditions of connectivity itself, so that individuals' acts of subjective freedom are always self-annulling at another and higher level. The conditions of connectivity ... are also the conditions of encompassment and domination by circulatory capital and the infrastructure of the metropole generally" (*Financial Derivatives* 46-47). LiPuma's and Lee's analysis points to a sort of curve shift in the geopolitics of digital mediation, a partial, gradual transformation of globalization's central problematic from one of uneven access to technological connectivity to one of uneven agency within that connectivity produced at least in part by the extension of that connectivity. Within such a transformation, digital technology becomes both increasingly central to the practices and processes of globalization and increasingly global in and of itself. Yet these two changes take shape in tension with one another, as irreducibly skew vectors of technocultural transformation. The relations between the global and the digital are disjunctive and uneven rather than seamlessly compatible, and they in turn produce relations between "subjective freedom" and "encompassment and domination" that are similarly uneven. Thus perhaps it makes the best sense to seek critical purchase on the meeting between the global and the digital not in terms of any pervasive convergence but rather in terms of a minute, tangential intersection at the extremities of each domain. Within what kinds of cultural practices and forms, we might ask, is globalization most integrally and fundamentally digital, most granularly incarnated as information? And conversely, what practices and forms stage the digital in the most dramatically global fashion, illuminating most visibly its promiscuous and wide-spread capacity for circulation?

In this article, I offer a theory of 419 as one such possible limit form of global media relations, as a crucial point of intersection between the outermost extremities of the global and the digital that in turn reflects back upon the larger parts of both of those domains (see, e.g., *419 Advance Fee Fraud*; "419 Advance Fee Fraud Maps"). 419 is the digital phenomenon known more technically as advance fee fraud and more commonly — if also somewhat limitedly and prejudicially — in terms such as "the Nigerian email scam." Within this con game, scam artists communicate with marks via email, promising them a monetary payout in return for assistance (financial and otherwise) in liberating and securing an allegedly astronomical (yet ultimately nonexistent) fortune from within a zone often characterized as highly violent and destabilized. The numerical term 419 refers to the section of Nigerian penal code that addresses fraud. I use the term 419 to refer to this phenomenon for several reasons, including linguistic convenience and a desire to theorize the phenomenon as a global form rather than as explicitly tied by language to any specific nation or region. I also use the term 419 as a way of gesturing to the numerical abstraction and digital discreteness underlying the cultural nexus of this phenomenon. As an arbitrary integer, 419 produces a surface echo of the code that provides the raw material underside of advance fee fraud, as well as of all other digital communications. Thus it stands in stark contrast to the "disembodied," immaterial "unlimited power" that Kaplan critiques as often being associated with digital media.

The implications of such a contrast for the politics of global mediation become clear when 419 is considered as an integer and a phenomenon in comparison with the search engine Google. The use of the number 419 as a name for advance fee fraud is an arbitrary function of where the laws pertaining to it reside within the Nigerian penal code. The name Google, on the other hand — a misspelling of googol, a number equal to  $10^{100}$  — is a highly calculated (if ultimately also somewhat arbitrary in its misspelling) reflection of a particular technological and political project. In *The Google Story*, David A. Vise and Mark Malseed relate the origin of the search engine's numerical name: "'How about Googleplex?' I [employee Sean Anderson] said, 'You are trying to come up with a company that searches and indexes and allows people to organize vast amounts of data. Googleplex [a number equal to  $10^{909090}$ ] is a huge number' ... He [Google co-founder Larry Page] liked it shorter. I typed in G-

o-o-g-l-e and misspelled it on my workstation ... It had a wild Internet ring to it" (39). Peter Jakobsson and Fredrik Stiernstedt understand the organizational project that Anderson notes to be a profoundly political force, "turning people and objects *into* information or putting them in a position where they can be handled and organized *as* information. The way this is accomplished is indeed decentralized, but only with the effect of increasing Google's gravitational pull" (114). As a numerical extremity, the name Google itself signifies for and embodies this constitution of power: connoting boundless information almost beyond the capacity for human comprehension, it represents the internet as a "wild," open frontier offering seemingly limitless access and freedom to its users. Yet, as Jakobsson and Stiernstedt argue, Google's project of informatization ultimately functions not in the service of such a decentralized, utopian mobility, but rather in an attempt to produce a network of biopolitical control at the microscopic level of the digital: "what remains" in the post-space age moment of digital culture, they suggest, "is to map and systematize ... already conquered space, as well as the digital space, and not least the interiors of human minds and bodies" (132). 419 cannot fully subvert or resist such a systematization, nor do its practitioners explicitly seek to do so. Yet the marking of a global technological flow with such a literally odd, prime number — both in spite of and because of the arbitrariness of this numerical designation — might be seen as a counter narrative to the digital politics that Jakobsson and Stiernstedt attribute to Google (or, as it were, to  $10^{100}$ ). Indeed, the number 419 serves to register that the axes underlying the dominant narrative of digital mediation as a wholly unfettered field of "techno-ecstasies" (Hayles 6) are ultimately profoundly askew, constantly reverberating under the pressure of the global circulation of information, capital, and power.

Moreover, the unevenness of such a designation underscores the ways in which the digitization underlying advance fee fraud is closely bound up with the irreducible tension between its seemingly national character (as a solely or primarily Nigerian form) and its ultimately global condition. Roland Greene advocates a conception of comparative literature that "concerns itself with the exchanges out of which literatures are made: the economies of knowledge, social relations, power, and especially art that make literatures possible. Not literature but literatures; not works but networks" (214). For Greene, colonial and postcolonial studies serve as "a limit-case that shows how inseparable works and networks are, how often works must be reinvigorated within networks even as the networks themselves are reinvented again and again" (222). 419 might be seen as a similarly extreme instance of the inseparability between works and networks in the moment of global mediation. As a limit-case of both the global and the digital, 419 makes visible the critical stakes of a global system of communication that is at once both profoundly material and profoundly mediated in its digital nature. In doing so, this form points to a conception of comparative cultural studies as most possible and most urgent at the far reaches of the network, the outer limits of both the global and the digital. Within the material and discursive domain of 419, the fantastical capital hyperbole of unread spam throws into relief multiple uneven terrains of knowledge, authorial awareness, political stability, and access to capital and communications technology across global space and time. Thus in focusing on 419 I aim to constellate a conception of media and cultural studies that, by virtue of and necessity of taking up the global circulation of information as a central concern, might accurately trace the materialities and mediations of contemporary global culture.

My choice of 419 as a test case for these concerns is a deliberate attempt at disciplinary provocation. In arguing for the significance of the form to both comparative cultural studies and (comparative) media studies, I aim to show how close consideration of the relations among forces such as residuality, criminality, crisis, deception, and speculation might prove instructive with regard to the broader global politics of mediation: I trace the outer limits of the 419 form by addressing a few conventional potential oppositions or qualifications to it: rather than being grounds for disregard, these oppositions, whether justified or not, make clear precisely why 419 is an emblematic process within global digital culture. The first and perhaps most extreme of these qualifications stems from the question of visibility — the simple dismissal that no computer user actually reads spam of this or any other kind. At the outset, it bears noting the ways in which this deferred visibility of spam in general and 419 in particular plays a crucially deconstructive role within the material and communicative relays of the digital network. If our Internet service providers and our email clients send vast quantities of mail straight to our spam folder, unopened and unread, what does that mail tell us? Where does it reside

within the circuits of global telecommunications? How does it weigh — materially, statistically, textually — within those circuits? Given that unsolicited and undesired messages account for roughly 85% of all incoming email (see, e.g., *MAAWG*), communications such as 419 seem both conceptually overwhelming and practically invisible, at once the governing rule of digital circulation and the conspicuously unseen exception. Richard Dienst, writing about Derrida's *La Carte postale* in relation to the communicative problematics of television, claims that "in spite of its economic and existential immensity, the televisual system is structured on tenuous textual networks held together by an unfounded guarantee that messages always reach their destination. Perhaps, Derrida suggests, a little uncertainty in the right places is all it takes to disturb this network. Or, just as likely, a little uncertainty in the right places keeps the whole thing together" (xii). As a limit form of global telecommunications, 419 is a sort of digital successor to the uncertainty of the televisual message. Purportedly direct and personal yet ultimately arbitrary and anonymous, it literalizes the epistolary dynamics of the Derridean postcard against which Dienst reads the televisual system, deriving discursive and geopolitical leverage from the ways in which its visibility is dramatically compromised by the web.

The second qualification circulating around 419 is the question of credibility, the all-too-easy dismissal that no educated, informed member of Western public culture would be so gullible as to believe these preposterous, extreme narratives. This objection is, of course, factually unfounded. While it would be virtually impossible to pinpoint the value of the 419 market, one estimate puts the take for 2007 alone at \$4.3 billion, with the G7 nations of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany reporting the highest numbers of incident complaints worldwide (*419 Advance Fee Fraud* 24-25). Numbers such as these suggest that the practice of 419 is neither an urban legend nor a deception to which only those in less developed, less technologically connected regions are susceptible. More importantly, however, to dismiss 419 on the grounds of a lack of credibility or of the supposed gullibility of its victims is to attempt a kind of casual dodge of the form's significance, sidestepping the affective and political holds that narrative exerts on us often precisely because of its falsified urgency rather than in spite of it. Such a dismissal — a refusal to subscribe to the 419 narrative in even hypothetical terms — constitutes a strategic attempt to write oneself into an opposing narrative of first-world skepticism and superiority. Yet while entrance into the 419 narrative as a mark certainly depends upon a dramatic suspension of disbelief, that suspension is sponsored and supported by the promise of equally dramatic material compensation. To fall prey to 419, then, is not to be a sucker any more than it is to be a reader or an investor in the conventional sense of those terms — to be subject, in other words, to the conventions, contracts, promises, and distortions of narrative and of the global market.

Finally, perhaps the next most immediate potential objection to the centrality or validity of 419 comes on the grounds of its criminality and deceptive nature. However, criminality is of course precisely the point of the scam, and to dismiss or disregard the dynamics of the form on account of this (or, for that matter, on account of the invisibility or unbelievability I outline above) would be to overlook its primary project. However, as central as criminality is to the practice of 419, it is not an end goal of the form in and of itself. Indeed, while 419's predication on deception might make it tempting to dismiss, it might also make it tempting to claim it as a direct form of attack on multinational capitalism, and thus perhaps also to champion it along these lines. Yet such an affirmative reading of 419 privileges the work of the 419er as a primarily political intervention, an analysis that comes at the expense of understanding the form simply as a mode of knowledge work that is no more or less politicized than any other. I consider 419 within the politics of knowledge work in greater depth in the third section of this essay below; for the moment, I want to mark in passing the ways in which the dramatic deceptions inherent to the form manifest the pressures it places on the global network as a means of communication. 419 exists at the borders and limits of global telecommunications, exploiting and distorting the ethical presumptions of the market that lie at the center of — indeed everywhere within — the global network. Through this distortion, it allows subjects within developing and nonwestern regions to attain technological and economic leverage in direct disregard of the legal, moral, and narrative contracts that are central to the neoliberal market discourse of the technologized west, and thus to make money through narrative work within a system that consistently writes them out of its own larger narrative of financial circulation.

419's narrative's epistolary exchange begins when the potential mark, or, in the slang of 419, the "mugu," receives an unsolicited email addressing him/her directly, if not necessarily by name, and promising a large sum of easy money in return for a comparably small loan to assist in clearing and moving the larger sum. The costs involved with this transportation vary in amount and type, but might include fees for storage, travel, bank services, and taxes as well as money for bribing customs, falsifying documents and credit histories, ensuring safe passage, and so on — in short, the operating costs of doing legitimate and illegitimate business within the global economy. While the larger morphology of the narrative is complex and constantly changing, a few recurring elements are significant for a reading of the form as a linchpin of global capital mediation. 419 communications often use the urgency of personal and geopolitical crisis as a point of departure: while some accounts of the form trace its broad contours as far back as sixteenth-century Europe, its current global incarnation first rose to prominence in the 1980s alongside corruption in the Nigerian oil industry (see Zuckoff <[http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/05/15/060515fa\\_fact](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/05/15/060515fa_fact)>). Many iterations of the scam purportedly come from the relatives and heirs of deposed political figures (or those figures themselves), seemingly democratically minded victims of dictatorial coups. As actual objects of telecommunication, these narratives originate most infamously from Nigeria, but also from elsewhere in Africa, the Middle East, and Russia, and could indeed emanate from anywhere: the Dutch firm Ultrascan Advanced Global Investigations claims to have traced 419ers to cities in 69 countries ("419 AFF on the World Map"). Moreover, given the disembodied, digital nature of the form, the actual geographic origin of any given scam matters far less than the ways in which it deploys its alleged origin in narrative and ideological terms. This technologically mediated displacement draws western marks into a fantasy narrative that often hinges on both the fetishized opulence of the Orient and the contemporary imagery of the developing world. One characteristic example uses the infamy of the diamond trade in Sierra Leone as a point of narrative departure:

My name is Miss Stella Sicqau, a native of Freetown in Sierra Leone. Following the outbreak of war some years back for tussle over who will rule Sierra Leone and control the rich diamond deposit in my country, lives and properties were destroyed. Many homes were displaced and citizens became refugees in other neighboring countries states and countries of Africa. My family and I were not different from others ... Apparently speaking, my dad Mr. Zac Sicqau was a chief miner controlling one of the large mining zones in Sierra Leone prior to the outbreak of war. He was under Tejan Kabba, the then President. But the rebels led by Foday Sankoh sensing his importance to the administration first arrested him; some months later, they executed him in order to have full control of the mining zone. (Sicqau)

The broken English visible in this and similar texts of the genre poses a problem of reading at the levels of the textual and the geopolitical. While this language could be an incidental consequence of the author's writing in a language that is not her primary language, it could also be a deliberate, strategic attempt to seem unschooled (and thus perhaps more trustworthy or vulnerable) for the purpose of deception. Reading the text through either of these lenses consequently necessitates the assumption of a particular political position on the part of the recipient. At a more specific level, one notable effect of the linguistic and semantic "errors" here is the way in which they index the geopolitical strife that serves as the narrative's context and catalyst: for example, the strange intentionality behind lives and property being lost "for tussle" seemingly as an end in itself, or the material, domestic upheaval literalized in the phrase "many homes were displaced," or, perhaps most provocatively, the uncanny, circular repetition of refugees fleeing to "other neighboring countries states and countries," almost as if the violent production and dismantling of the African nation-state were enacted, multiplied, and laminated within the language of the fugitive missive itself.

Later in this email, Ms Sicqau claims to be writing from the relative safety of Accra, Ghana, seeking to gain access to her father's bequest to her and her brother. She estimates the value of this bequest at \$18.5 million and offers the mugu an undetermined cut of this money — "the sharing of the fund is negotiable," she promises — in return for standing as a benefactor for the two children (other variations of the scam often revolve around posing as a next of kin). In taking the bait in a situation such as this, the mugu becomes part of an ongoing dialogue with the 419er, faced with negotiating an endless series of legal, technical, and financial deferrals aimed at extracting as much money as possible from him or her. Entering into this narrative, he or she must wager a strange mix of financial sta-

bility and neoliberal, pseudo-humanitarian greed against the promise of the astronomical, yet perpetually unseen wealth of a foreign nation. Structured around negotiations over this (promised) transaction, 419 constitutes a sort of shared or interlocking narrative of global development, speculation, and return, in which an agent from a less developed nation asks a western mark to support him or her in order to produce stability and thus financial return. The playing out of this narrative over global time and space is at once both dramatically distortive and paradigmatically representative of the ways in which capital and power (in narrative as well as material forms) circulate through global data networks.

Indeed, this dialogic, multi-authorial narrative at the level of the individual exchange provides the infrastructure for 419's broader status as a metanarrative allegory of global circulation. Instead of circulating capital, the system of 419 circulates a narrative about the circulation of capital, which is itself intended in turn to catalyze the circulation of capital. Within this system, the mugu invests in the narrative in psychic as well as economic terms, responding to cries for help and negotiating the inevitable detours, deferrals, and requests that follow, and thus engaging in a form of generative intellectual labor that is as collaborative in its relation to the 419er as it is potentially contested. The 419er conversely invests narrative itself in search of a monetary return, and in doing so writes him- or herself as a strangely abstracted microcosm of the oversimplified promises of development economics: if only the money he or she represents can be retained and transmitted safely into western hands, global capital and the development it makes possible will remain fluid and upwardly oriented. The 2005 Nigerian pop song "I Go Chop Your Dollar" by the popular singer and comedic actor Nkem Owoh illustrates the stakes of this abstraction: "National Airport na me get am / National Stadium na me build am / President na my sister brother / You be the mugu, I be the master... / The refinery na me get am / The contract, na you I go give am" (Owoh <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ktz7vc70hZ8>>). Speaking from the subject position of a 419er alternately enticing and mocking the mugu, Owoh positions himself as a central agent in the infrastructural development of an unnamed African nation, promising credible, stable business with an outside investor: I got the National Airport, I built the National Stadium, I got the refinery, I'll give you the contract. Yet over and above the literal strategy of these deceptions, the boasts and promises Owoh lists are deeply synecdochal in their abstraction of Africa's place in the global economy, almost to the point of allegory or mythology: how could one individual possibly claim control over so many massive material and symbolic resources? What would such a claim even mean? The extreme projections of Owoh's performance bring into relief the ways in which the 419er him/herself claims the iconography of development as much as its actual (alleged) material. Self-consciously deploying this iconography, the 419er attempts to move capital value through writing. Given the deeply symbolic currency of this exchange at all levels, the con of 419 becomes visible as nothing more and nothing less than a deception designed to bring a microscopic yet global economic shift through a narrative of economic shift. In this sense, the 419er's own intervention underlying this gambit is ultimately a far more drastic speculation than the one offered to the mugu: leveraging time, narrative, and bandwidth against monetary compensation, the 419er's practice simultaneously relies upon and inverts the market promise of risk-free return.

419ers thus perform the "destructive creation" that Alan Liu sees as the "most extreme verge" of "new media aesthetics." For Liu, destructive creation — or, as he refers to it more frequently, destructive creativity — is "the critical inverse of the mainstream ideology of creative destruction" by which global capital perpetuates and extends itself (324-25). Liu traces the roots of destructive creativity to the auto-iconoclasm of the twentieth-century avant-garde and finds its logical extreme in digital practices centered on "a destructivity that attacks knowledge work through technologies and techniques internal to such work ... introjecting destructivity within informationalism" (331). The financial reversals, exchanges, and deferrals of the 419 narrative embody many of the structural elements of Liu's model in their use of the technologized protocols of the global market against the market. Yet the system as a whole resists the recourse that Liu makes to a broader ideological intentionality. Whereas the exemplars of destructive creativity he discusses are digital artists and activists passionately committed to a radical left politics, the immediate end goal of 419 (whatever its larger effects may be) is the production or retention of livelihood within the global digital economy. Of course, at one level, this goal might be seen as the purest possible incarnation of the engaged knowledge work that Liu calls for in

his critical study. Stripped of political abstraction or generalization, the 419 narrative mobilizes destructive creativity in a manner that is focused and conscious in order to enact localized, practical change. Yet prior to that pursuit of change — as narrative development, as monetary exchange, as momentary change in the balance of geopolitical power — 419 exists as simply another financial instrument available in the marketplace, a series of relations and agreements (however disproportionate in their distribution of power) designed to circulate capital within the network of the global economy. In the extremities of its narrative structure, its ability to redistribute wealth, and its circulatory capacity, it provides an exception that proves the rule of capital in the moment of global media.

Understood in this manner as a narrative, economic, and technological play within and upon the system of global capital, 419 closely resembles the status of the financial derivative as understood by LiPuma and Lee. Derivatives are financial contracts based on the value of underlying assets or indices, including but not limited to the values of national currencies themselves. Because derivatives provide a great deal of financial leverage, they allow investors to shift and pressure the value of such currencies by speculating upon them. LiPuma and Lee theorize derivatives as central to the circulatory economy's "double movement in which new forms of financial progress and freedom, as defined by the West, are inseparable from the rise of a new form of domination and disenfranchisement, generally and most visibly visited on others" (*Financial Derivatives* 25). They frame circulation as "the cutting edge of capitalism," describing "the transmission of voice, image, data, and money, globally, accurately, and instantaneously," as "the primary mission, the business plan" of an increasing number of corporations (9). Within this "business plan," derivatives constitute a "metalevel" of finance, "relations about the relations of capital" (30). Like derivatives, 419 and the monetary relations that circulate within its system are "socially imaginary objects" that serve as instruments of "abstract symbolic violence" (26), albeit often with dramatically different targets. Thus in spite of being largely ideologically opposed, both 419 and financial derivatives constitute predictive, prescriptive imaginations at the levels of narrative, capital, and informatics. Although 419 often derives both a narrative energy and an oppositional leverage from being imaginatively embedded in the violence of "ordinary" global reality — the tropes of development and collapse I have traced above — it ultimately deals in a paradoxically literal fashion with imaginary money, with the promise of how and where money might move as data. At the core of both the financial derivative and the 419 gambit, then, is the tendency towards virtuality, towards abstraction in which the materialities of lived experience under global capital become little more than the narrative context and the technical catalyst for the speculative circulation of digitized value.

What do the narrative layerings, confusions, virtualizations, and extremities of 419 mean, then, for a theory of global mediation? To put this question more radically, we might frame it from the opposite direction: what might it mean to theorize comparative cultural and media studies in the image of 419 — as a convergence of narrative, economic, and technological extremities? In considering this question, I turn to a category of images that sometimes circulate as part of the material of the 419 narrative. These images are part of a subset of 419 that the U.S. Department of State terms the "Gorgeous People in Trouble" (15-16). Within this scam, the mugu seemingly receives a solicitation from an attractive individual — sometimes allegedly a native of the country from which the email allegedly originates, sometimes allegedly a US-American, sometimes someone allegedly of mixed origin — who has had an emergency or tragedy in a developing country and needs financial assistance for hospital bills, extended time abroad, and other unexpected expenses. As the exchange develops, so does the promise of a romantic relationship once the two parties in question are ultimately united. Thus this narrative promises the mugu not only money in many cases but often also marriage and (often in no uncertain terms) sexual gratification and compensation; it becomes a distorted mirror of transnational investment and speculation, but also of the problematics of immigration and sex trafficking. In their blankly seductive appeal, these images serve as unapologetic placeholders not only for the "real" individuals who send them and are depicted in them, but also for a much larger nexus of cultural, economic, and sexual dynamics.

Indeed, images such as these echo and exaggerate the already incredible contours of the 419 narrative in a fashion that marks the centrality of global digital media to the phenomenon as a whole. They derive perhaps their greatest incredibility in that they are examples of stock photography of the

kind used in low-level marketing and promotion, both online and in other media. While it is one thing to fall prey to the tones of affective crisis and promises of easy money that characterize the 419 narrative, it is of an entirely different order to believe that these strangely generic, blank, and empty images are actually of real people in trouble in the developing world, or indeed that they are even credible images of anyone, anywhere. Given the ready availability online of images that, while certainly not unmediated, might more visibly bear the connotations of the amateur, the candid, or the real, 419ers' choice of such generic, detached imagery as a tool of seduction and deception suggests a complexly hedged and over-determined relationship to digital media. The use of these stock images not only leverages a certain credulity or suspension of disbelief on the part of the mug, but also hinges on the way in which that credulity is couched in and predicated upon the stochastic probabilities, emptinesses, and imbalances of networked communication itself. These images gain credibility because of their origin in the dispersed, anonymous archive of the web, rather than in spite of it — their very arbitrariness lends them a paradoxical specificity. If the leverage of 419's narrative gambit stems from the mug's excitement at being seemingly individually reached out to from within a context of political and economic instability, carefully chosen as savior and accomplice in a strangely pleasurable sort of interpellation, the leverage of these images compounds that appeal by inverting it. These images hold out the promise of opening a channel of communication across global digital time and space with someone who could quite visibly be anyone at all or no one at all. They, and the narrative exchanges in which they are deployed, exemplify what N. Katherine Hayles describes as the "flickering signifiers, characterized by their tendency toward unexpected metamorphoses, attenuation, and dispersions," that constitute digital information (30). Indeed, the random interpellations, arbitrary twists, and anonymous images of the 419 narrative both rely upon and mirror the material instability of digital mediation itself.

419's contingent status at the level of circulation and transmission echoes these opposing, indeterminate uncertainties at the level of signification. If the amount of 419 and other spam circulating drastically dwarfs legitimate email, yet only a tiny fraction of 419 messages receive interested responses, the leverage 419 exerts strikes at the sliver of intersection between these two opposing statistical extremities, throwing into relief the dramatically fluctuating disproportionalities that characterize global digital culture. Like the anonymous images that anchor them and make them seductive, 419 exchanges constitute a leveraged play on and against the overwhelming noise of global digital communications, as well as on capital as a part of that noise. Their isolation and rarity form an asymptotic curve that accumulates value because of the counterbalancing overload of spam, somehow paradoxically gaining leverage not only in their narrative uniqueness but also moreover in their potential for remaining unread and unseen. In the ways in which its invisibility, extremity, indeterminacy, distribution, and abstraction function to index the instabilities of the global digital economy, 419 points toward a critique of this economy that accounts for those factors as central, constitutive characteristics rather than as aberrations: indeed, just as those factors define the narrative and circulatory operations of the 419 narrative, they define the larger system within which it operates. Throwing the flows of capital and communications into disarray and into relief, 419 makes visible a practice of global media study productively focused on the tensions and convergences between the material and the digital, the performative and the circulatory, the predestined and the arbitrary, and the linear and the networked.

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