



**AMERICAN RACIAL
STRATIFICATION AND
ONLINE ECOSYSTEMS:**

a reflection on

**SYSTEMIC
OPPRESSION
& DIGITAL
DREAMS**

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Grounding Personal Reflections

One January morning in 2018, a 13 year-old version of myself logged onto YouTube to check my favorite creator’s channel, ShoeOnHead. Shoe, now sitting at 2.4 million subscribers, toed the line between American culture critique and media analysis that a younger version of me found soothing on some level. In an era of neoliberal feminisms, her videos came across as a negotiation of left-wing discourses with much of the edge associated with the online American right. In this video, she downs shots of alcohol, cringing at a compilation of ‘woke’ clips. One such video features Victoria Powell on the BBC, introducing the concept of digital blackface—which I was primed to find laughable. Shoe argues the video does a disservice to real, physical instances of racism by extending real concerns about racism and appropriation ‘too far.’ To a young white teenager, there is something appealing about indulging in this form of reactionary rejection of ‘cringe’ leftist expressions, failing to examine how race interacts in digital spaces. I was unwilling to recognize how the Internet is directly implicated in the constructions of all American realities, creating new structures which incorporate material associations attached to race, class, and gender.

I had left behind this period of my life until reading Lewis’s (2020) “Alternative Influence” last year, where I recognized several usernames in association with ShoeOnHead’s channel. He explains how YouTube enables the endearment of fringe yet palatable personalities to increasingly radical figures, informing an ecosystem of ‘underdog’ self-perceptions that entrap pliable users and promise belonging. Researching media and politics, it struck me how close I was to being one of these young men. I use this basis of digital feminist discourse to ground an analysis of how online space entrenches old modes of racial stratification while creating new mechanisms that maintain inequality. These same networks that limit the critiques of gendered disparities also reproduce racial inequality in American society.

In line with Michelle Alexander’s (2010) *The New Jim Crow*, I argue the architecture of digital information ecosystems, similar to modern criminal justice predation, deserves attention as a present and future avenue for maintaining the American color line. Further study must be given regarding digital infrastructure’s potential to reinforce and challenge racial stratification. I problematize the conception of a shared, singular Internet as a democratic zone, locating how structural racism

is embedded in its design and thrives on individualization and factionalism. I highlight how users interact, cultivating oppressive and liberatory futures. I examine the Internet's role in social movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), finding promise for localized connectivity despite enduring structural hostilities to Black life. For the ease of discussion, these inhabitants of digital space will henceforth be referred to as 'netizens.'

Digital Ecosystems and Racist Reproductions

It is worth pondering the purpose of the Internet. Is it a network for mass connection, the ordering of data? An interface augmenting our physical realities? Is it an implicit public good? It is a mistake to assume that digital space is separate from legacies of inequity. Rather than my naive perception of an insulated, inconsequential space, the Internet is a capricious environment centered on unequal footing. Supposed anonymity—and therefore equality—does not stymie the interplay between new digital structures and inherited racist norms of deprivation and exploitation. The Internet is a multipurpose platform run on capitalist modes of production and accumulation. Fuchs (2020) presents digital ecosystems as directing the flow

of attention and profit. This lends to the “asymmetric distribution” of power and control over netizen autonomy; users are flung to fragmented and algorithmically sorted communities that monopolize their interests, implicated in the dissemination of misinformation, disinformation and scandal (p. 12). Noble (2016) notes that the perspectives of racialized minorities are often left out of the proverbial drawing room where digital domains are workshopped; the Internet functions as a neoliberal space where Black voices, silenced in the past, may be included in digital ecosystems to appease “global capital’s thirst for expansion.”

Noble expands in *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018) how exclusions inherited from physical racist superstructures reiterate white supremacist perspectives online. She demonstrates how entities like Google experience ‘cracks’ such as Michelle Obama’s association with gorillas in images searches, or Google Maps displaying the White House when “‘N*gger House’” is typed in the search bar (pp. 4-6). This elucidates Eberhardt’s (2019) conception of implicit bias, in how the unconscious associations we make between character and appearance inform our perceptions of the world and the institutions we make—including the Internet. Machine learning and search engines aggregate

racist tropes and associations from their creators, riddling the digital landscape. This influences netizen behavior, remaining imbricated in white supremacist economic orderings. The connotations are troubling when paired with the notion that the World Wide Web is at its default a democratic exercise. Franks (2021) explains these enterprises, legally, are private citizens. They have authority within their domains “to counter, ignore, or exclude speech as they see fit.” Rather than social media like Twitter or Instagram fulfilling the utopian function of a ‘digital town square,’ these environments incentivize netizens to act in undemocratic yet lucrative ways. The disinhibiting factor of anonymity, the rapid rate at which messages can be disseminated, and the temporally unmoored nature of online discourse engender riskier, radical, uncivil speech (p. 432). Capitalist logics shape who is valued and included in the digital citizenry.

Taylor (2019) elaborates upon the Internet’s exclusionary tendencies. When digital spaces are designed as unwelcome, fostering behavior that profits off the suffering of Black netizens, it privileges the online demos as a presumed-white locale (p. 81). She complicates this matter by highlighting ignorance to how these spaces are maintained. Unawareness of the mach-

inations of algorithmic content, its delivery, and how personal data is accumulated obfuscates the ways Blackness is constructed as undesirable and hostile—to the point of plausible deniability one is being discriminated against at all (p. 121). Users engage in curated spaces with the impression they were made ‘for them’ when truly acting as sites of extractive ordering. Online terrain claims the mantle of ‘colorblindness’ (Kilgore, 2015, p. 285). Terms of service and community guidelines give the false impression discrimination is solely incident-based. Hiding behind neutrality, the Internet diverts accusations of racism onto anonymized individuals, disguising structural deference to white supremacist logics. Race is digitally left behind, with whiteness filling in the vacuum, unless someone inserts it into discussion.

This paradox sees race in America as both defining and void online, where disparities and insecurities inherited from the material world are left at best truncated, and at worst unacknowledged. In her book *Reckoning*, Woodly (2022) mobilizes theories of racial capitalism to describe how race is instituted as a form of economic ordering exploiting Black bodies and labor, specifically in the shadow of Michael Brown’s murder (pp. 29-30). Through lessened wages, predatory police tick-

eting, asset forfeiture, and extraction through the justice predation system, perceptions of Black inferiority are structurally legitimized (Soss & Page, 2025). Hannah-Jones (2019) compounds upon this, mentioning how the sabotaging of Reconstruction after the Civil War—the failure to deliver the reparative promise of ‘40 acres and a mule’—resulted in a “centuries-long economic head start” for white Americans (p. 457). The digital dispossession seen through marginalizing conversations about race is therefore inevitably a continuation of historical material systems of deprivation that facilitate racial discrimination. As I had done as a child, the Internet entices netizens to engage with structural issues on superficial levels. Digital space relegates enduring racism to a footnote; one should not bother considering one’s own place in larger structures.

Netizen Behavior and Culpability

It is evident that netizens are habituated by the interlocking structures of digital and racial capitalism to act in manners retrenching racist foundations. I argue that the fragmentary and individuated nature of digital ecosystems, delivering highly customized content, accentuates W.E.B. Du Bois’s observation of ‘Life Worlds’ and ‘Black Double Conscious-

ness’. Olson (2004) uses Du Bois to demonstrate how American citizenship is predicated upon the constructed category of whiteness, the polar opposite of Blackness (p. 17). Black double consciousness highlights the friction between Blackness and Americanness—the need to understand the white social order in a manner white citizens do not, or cannot, care to see Black life (p. 22). As America maintains a large hegemony over online space through ownership of its physical infrastructure in data centers and fashions close ties to architects like Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Mark Zuckerberg, one can privilege this racialized view of space as ‘exported’ to a shared digital environment, regardless of nationality. Online communities align through shared interests and experience, creating identitarian Life Worlds that operate in an overall environment of whiteness. While this has opportunities to produce meaningful organization and community connections for marginalized groups, it signifies how insulation from diverging perspectives is weaponized to reassert white supremacy.

This is why Lewis’s (2020) *Alternative Influence Network* remains so poignant. By framing any Black expression in digital space as threatening, these influencers reap the economic benefits of a presumed-white Internet while claim-

ing imperilment, given license to act in opposition to Blackness uncritically. Noble (2014) and Coates (2017) identify Black cultural commodification in the aftermath of Trayvon Martin’s murder through the digital phenomenon of media trends where children bought Skittles and mimed being shot—to the extreme of purchasing Halloween costumes bearing Martin’s visage. Powered by news framing of Martin as liable for his own death, for looking like a ‘thug,’ pantomiming criminality becomes a form of social currency entrenching assumptions of an innate Black pathology (Coates, 2017, p. 5). Signaling belonging through dehumanizing Martin displays how white netizens choose to perform the “wages of whiteness” for the digital masses (Olson, 2004, p. 13). In taking Martin ‘on and off,’ white netizens affirm they exist above him and outside his world. The Internet, in such a case, serves as a stage that makes a spectacle of Black marginalization, eschewing calls for compassionate reflection.

Digital spectacle rears its head at any premise of Black advancement as well. Haslett (2018) sees this in how the reputation of Martin Luther King’s civil disobedience is diluted to non-violence “with the power of a fetish,” used to tone-police BLM protestors (p. 6). Riots are framed as unjust, petulant, and

unproductive. Hooker’s (2017) analysis suggests that spectacle is a tactic of grievance politics; through dissemination online, coverage of protest and Black suffering bows to white discomfort and turns Black rage into fodder for accusations of criminality. BLM, challenging the digital frame that advancement must derive from “respectability,” reveals how the spectacles of the Internet provide an avenue to confirm the white political mastery that the War on Drugs and justice predation system previously maintained (pp. 490-91). I wonder to myself how much of my early Internet consumption consisted of reactionary, self-congratulatory content that affirmed my place as a rightful member of (white) digital society. The arbiters of the Internet have simply found a new way to ask white Americans to perform dominance.

Material Consequences

Racially colored media has disproportionate impacts on the lived experiences of Black Americans. Lyon (2017) warns how digital ecosystems habituate netizens to cultures of surveillance and sousveillance, where not only do we expect to be seen by the government and the companies they partner with, but to see and be seen by one another. Exploiting the human desire for connec-

tion, digital infrastructure encourages us to share data regarding our lives and self-censor (p. 831). This generates an unspoken cultural code of what can be discussed, where, and in what manner, unbound to digital space. Strategies of invasive spying recall past government experiments, such as COINTELPRO, who infiltrated the Black Panther Party to sow division and discord (Throughline, “The Real Black Panthers,” 2023). Digital securitization offers increased vantage for the government to destroy civic trust, quashing alternative futures before they can form.

Aside from enforcing white supremacist modes of dehumanization, lampshading, and shaming Black netizens, these environments increase state-corporate reach into the personal: One will be exploited through observation. This demonstrates further leakages of the carceral state into quotidian life noted by Soss & Page (2025), mirroring how those suspected of breaking the law become the playthings of public-private partnerships (p. 98). Be it awaiting trial or living under community supervision, race-class subjugated (RCS) Americans are sites where economic elites test their ability to surveil, portending future “e-carceration” where the prison is not a physical constraint on the state’s ability to control Black bodies (Remnick, 2020, p. 8). The Internet is yet an-

other tendril of the state’s biopolitical impulses. Further, Asare (2025) writes in *Forbes* that, before the federal suspension of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), AI-generated content flooded TikTok, showing Black mothers struggling to take care of their children, demanding American tax dollars to assist them. This is reminiscent of the Reagan and Bush administrations’ framing of Black mothers as “welfare queens,” subsisting lazily off government aid, to justify state retreat from such programs (Kilgore, 2015, pp. 286-88). The uncritical reproduction of Black bodies vindicates BBC News’s (2017) concerns about digital blackface. It remains difficult to draw lines between digital blackface as a form of expression, the pursuit of entertainment, or the explicit intention of spreading race-based stereotyped hatred. Existing within an environment of presupposed racial hierarchies, it can be enacted by a range of digital personalities towards multifaceted ends. It is foolish to think, simply because this content is fabricated, that it does not impact how one of America’s most vulnerable populations is perceived. Compounded by the fact that AI data centers have been disproportionately located in RCS communities like Mansfield, Georgia, affecting the quality of air, water, and physical wellbeing, it is clear that digitized struc-

tures beget racism that buttresses physical inequity (Bush, 2025). The Internet manufactures how the world is seen. It entrenches racist associations and emboldens racialized reactions in manners that, on the surface, can be difficult to predict and perceive.

Digital Black Futurity

In Jamil Smith’s (2020) interview with Philip Goff on the prevalence of police in American society, they discuss the American ‘yearning for safety.’ Yet, Owens et al. (2025) demonstrates how police discipline disproportionately targets RCS communities, suffering from heightened violent crime statistics as police investment increases (pp. 203-04). If the American policing systems’ pursuit of order persecutes Black Americans, it must be acknowledged they do not truly seek universal safety.

Digital infrastructure must be viewed similarly; though it provides netizens with a surplus of information and community networks, this cannot distract from directives of biopolitical organization. Relating to Fred Moten’s conception of the undercommons at the university, perhaps it is possible to “steal what one can,” in the pursuit of equality (Kelley, 2016, p. 8). Woodly (2022) highlights the politics of care as a central tenet of Radical Black Femi-

nist Pragmatism (RBFP), where affording dignity to the “individual-in-context” produces actions that challenge the social mores of society (p. 84). Navigating digital landscapes through pragmatic, compassionate creeds reveals structural inequities and develops alternate ways of being. In recognizing “shared ends and a shared life” (p. 99), the Internet exhibits latent potential to connect people to material resources, organizing for mutual aid, and social change. It cannot be ignored that the advent of BLM owes much of its success to digital infrastructure. Woodly (2022) emphasizes the movement’s reliance on the spread of firsthand accounts through social media, the wealth of reporting on protestors and Black Americans, and the consequent exposure of more people to the ideas of RBFP (pp. 171-75). Aside from narrative empowerment, these social movements create linkages between causes that interpret their struggles as interconnected.

This “public intimacy” demonstrates that, given time, resources, and attention, the citizenry can be convinced to act ‘as-if’ Black life matters, even for a small moment (pp. 177-79). This is something to cherish, and can act as a proof-of-concept for the future. The crux of BLM hinges upon the necessity of recognizing that, as individuals, we cannot experience freedom until we

all do (Kaba, 2021). The Internet simply draws this into sharper perspective, where increased connectivity has not necessarily translated into sustained respect. I assert that online space should pivot to the local, serving as a conduit for mutual aid. Described by Kaba & Ritchie (2022) as “cooperation...rooted in understanding that our survival is tied to that of others,” communal digital connections empower people to recognize their neighbors and pursue relations uncaptured by the state’s purview (p. 252). This may take the form of community forums, communication channels, and public programs like Project NIA—reducing youth incarceration rates through a combination of community-based reconciliation, education, and occupational opportunity (p. 241-44).

Alcantara & Dick (2017) similarly examine the use of e-currencies by the Lakota to generate new forms of digital ownership. Localized seeds of connection can germinate to bolster collective action outside seasons of active protest, arming disadvantaged communities with ways to cope and enact social change. Digital access, training, and justice must be included when discussing investments needed for racial equality. This is not to argue that the mainstream Internet—rife with white supremacist structures—can simply be

supplanted; rather, diversified internets can center care and autonomy—community sovereignty assured through digital architecture. Woodly (2022) emphasizes RBFP’s ability to experiment, adapt, and dream. The use of the Internet should be no different. Imagining digitized Black futures is paramount in delegitimizing the online world’s racist superstructures.

Conclusion

Digital ecosystems can be conceptualized as tools, rehabilitating the racist policies pioneered by Jim Crow, the War on Drugs, and modern justice predation. New algorithmic forms of organization and surveillance compound material deprivation that maintains the American color line in invisible manners—and therefore remains difficult to challenge. As long as we continue to envision the World Wide Web as an aspirationally democratic space, it becomes imperative to abide by the praxis of RBFP online. We must move away from top-down conceptions of the digital citizenry and imagine stronger modes of relation. Digital continuity with past arbiters of structuralized racism can be revealed and questioned, but it requires us to throw away the cultural crutches of paranoia, cynicism, and doubt. In seeking technological parity

within our local communities, we can begin to craft internets capable of deconstruction and transformation.

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