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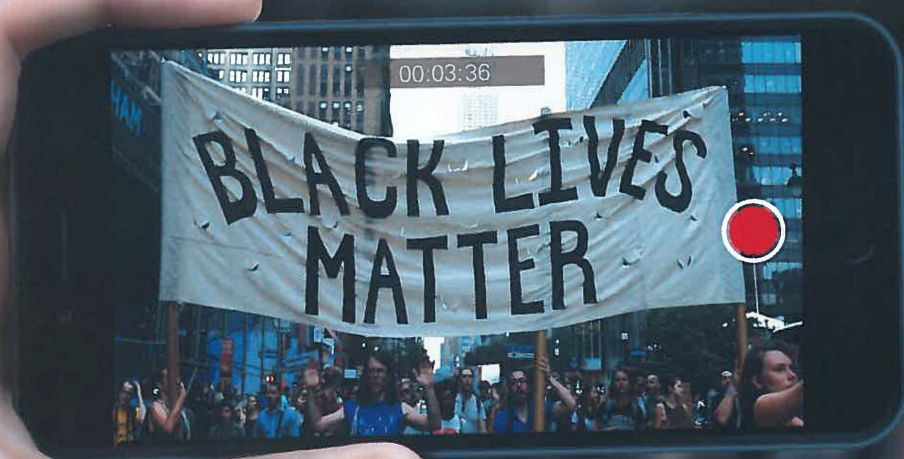
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RACE AND ETHNICITY
— IN —
DIGITAL CULTURE

Our Changing Traditions, Impressions,
and Expressions in a Mediated World

VOLUME TWO

BLACK LIVES MATTER

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Anthony Bak Buccitelli, Editor

immortality, as espoused especially by futurist Ray Kurzweil. See, for example, Kurzweil Ray, *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence* (New York: Penguin, 1999).

45. Sarah F. Brosnan and Frans de Waal, "Monkeys Reject Unequal Pay," *Nature* 425 (2003): 297–99.

46. For an investigation, see Jennifer A. Mather, "Cephalopod Consciousness: Behavioural Evidence," *Consciousness and Cognition* 17 (2008): 37–48.

47. Culum Brown, "Tool Use in Fishes," *Fish and Fisheries* 13 (2012): 105–15.

48. This is a far from uncontested area of scholarship, yet even the contestations acknowledge the validity of the discourse. See, for example, Anthony Trewavas, "Aspects of Plant Intelligence," *Annals of Botany* 92 (2003): 1–20; Stefano Mancuso and Alessandra Viola, *Brilliant Green: The Surprising History and Science of Plant Intelligence* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2015 [2013]).

49. For more on this overlap, see Daniel Wójcik, *The End of the World as We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America* (New York University Press, 1997).

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Race, Ethnicity, and Our Digital Futures: An Afterword

Tom Boellstorff

INTRODUCTION: PASTS AND FUTURES OF "THE PEOPLE"

In his classic essay "The Discovery of the People," Peter Burke noted that the English term "folklore" was coined in 1846, following the emergence of German terms like *Volkslied* (folksong) and *Volksmachen* (folktale). This reflected the influence of Romanticism, a "movement [that] was also a reaction against the Enlightenment . . . against its elitism, against its rejection of tradition, against its stress on reason."[1] The Romantic vision of "the people" was founded on an assumed isomorphism between kinship, place, and language. Italians, Hungarians, or Japanese were not just Italian, Hungarian, or Japanese "by blood": they spoke Italian, Hungarian, or Japanese and lived in Italy, Hungary, or Japan. If no such nations existed, they would have to be created through diplomacy or war. If no such languages existed, they would have to be asserted by valuing some dialects over others. If no such people existed, they would have to be delineated through selective memory, migration, or genocide.

This well-known story bears repeating in an age of resurgent racial nationalism in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere. In particular, I want to linger over a key element of Burke's analysis—the centrality of mediated cultural forms to race, ethnicity, and belonging. It is not coincidental that *volk* typically took the form of a prefix: folksong, folktale, folklore. The notion of the "people" was deeply adjectival, tied up with forms of popular culture like songs and tales.

Linkages between popular culture, mediation, and the nexus of race, ethnicity, and nation have been remarkably resilient since the eighteenth century—even as they have undergone profound changes in the face of

technological transformation. For instance, the "print capitalism" that Benedict Anderson identified as necessary for the "imagined community" of the modern nation-state was, in his analysis, predicated on vernacular languages consolidated and promulgated much earlier, in the wake of Romanticism.[2] One is reminded of Marx's aphorism: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past."[3] Durkheim similarly emphasized that "there is a close relation between what [a practice or an institution] is now and what it was in the past. Doubtless . . . it has been transformed . . . but these transformations in turn depend on what the point of departure was."[4] Or in the immortal worlds of William Faulkner, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

Culture, then, always has a history, which is as relevant to race and ethnicity as any other domain. Foregrounding this is crucial when discussing the digital, due to a persistent tendency to frame online phenomena as unprecedented (a tendency sustained in no small part by Silicon Valley hype). Buccitelli notes in his introduction that "this book is about race, tradition, and the digital," and in that spirit I seek to connect pasts, presents, and futures. I do so by exploring three themes: nation and state, place and time, language and image. None of these terms appear in the title of this book—nor in the title of any chapter—yet they surface throughout these chapters. By reflecting on them, I seek to contribute to research agendas that will further the work of this important volume.

FIRST THEME: NATION AND STATE

There is a reason that I opened this afterword with Burke and Anderson: the nation is relevant to each and every chapter. This is fitting, since the nation-state represents the fundamental contemporary point of articulation between race and sovereignty, ethnicity and place, kin and belonging. Moreover, the relationship between the nation-state and technology is paramount to any understanding of race, ethnicity, and tradition. The nation-state could never have taken form in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries without print capitalism. Mass electronic media like radio, television, and film were central to twentieth-century forms of national culture. This is not a question of determinism but of an influence that is fundamental even as it is contingent and transformable. How twenty-first-century digital media now destabilize, retrench, or reconfigure forms of national culture is thus a key question, one to which every contribution to this volume speaks in some way.

For instance, Ritter's analysis of "performing ethnicity" focuses on "flag selfies" among Swiss youth whose parents emigrated to Switzerland from

the former Republic of Yugoslavia. The use of, say, Macedonian or Bosnian-Herzegovinian flags in service of the "personification of national identity" raises fascinating questions. In what ways is this performing ethnicity versus performing nationality? What do these "flag selfies" mean for cultural assumptions regarding race and nation when both the present-day context of their creation (Switzerland) and the tradition from which these families emigrated (Yugoslavia) involve multicultural nation-states where there is some attempt to disrupt the equation of national and racial selfhood? Other analyses of multicultural nation-states include Kibby and Fulton's exploration of how Aboriginal Australians build community in the face of national policies that deny indigenous culture and land rights, as well as Miller's discussion of "preppers," whose response to fears of a national apocalypse originates in a masculinity with "roots in the myth and symbol of the American frontier" and a notion of the United States as normatively white. Soffer's discussion of self-representation with regard to Israeli Palestinian-Arab citizens speaks to questions of ethnicity and tradition in the context of an Israeli public sphere that is ostensibly multicultural but largely excludes Israeli Arab identity from the national imaginary.

In the case of nation-states with less salient ideologies of multiculturalism, we find more direct linkages between belonging and what is presumed to be a single ethnic or racial identity. For instance, Domokos's discussion of Hungarian online responses to the European migrant crisis suggests how Hungarian ethnonationalism shapes senses of national purity and thus a "threat" of migration that overlooks, among other things, the history of Magyar migration into Europe.

SECOND THEME: PLACE AND TIME

As indicated at the outset, the nation-state form is deeply tied up with notions of place and time. Forms of feudal or imperial sovereignty were based on dominion over populations or relationships of tribute, with little attention to geography. At a certain distance from the sovereign center, the map shaded into a borderless, empty white. Nation-states, however, are fundamentally predicated on territorial sovereignty. The global patchwork of modern nations trucks in borders, admitting very little in the way of ambiguous shadings.

Place gains renewed importance with the digital in two key ways. First, online technologies facilitate communication, community, and conflict across great distances. This influence differs in many respects from the influence of older forms of communication such as radio, newspapers, and television—though the earlier forms of communication coexist with the newer ones, as forms of online radio, journalism, and video demonstrate. A second way that place is pivotal to the digital is that some online technologies create

virtual places. It is, for instance, the possibility of virtual place that makes racialized avatars and other forms of virtual embodiment possible.[5]

Many contributions to this volume explore these linkages between place, digital culture, and race. La Shure examines how Korean players of the on-line game *StarCraft* are understood in terms of both national and racial difference. We see here how online games can link places, creating contexts for interethnic interaction, yet also retrench oppositions that frame ethnicity in terms of not only nation-state ("Korean") but also transnationally ("Western"). Hess discusses how mobile devices using applications like Periscope can act as "everyday spaces of living"—and how locative media that "simultaneously embrace physical and digital worlds" can "locate" racial identity as well.

Place and time are intricately linked, and one of the best-known effects of technology, including digital technology, has been to reduce the time needed to move or communicate across place. "Folklore" and "folk" are temporal concepts, linking imagined pasts to the lived present and speculative futures. Thomas, for instance, draws on notions of folklore to examine hashtags and the "galvanizing narratives" that emerged in the context of police killings of Black Americans. Such politicized narratives foreground the relationship between time and the question of change. As Schönberger notes, changes in technology, society, and practices do not necessarily line up with each other, and temporal disjunctures can reveal emergent relationships between ethnicity, race, and the digital.

THIRD THEME: LANGUAGE AND IMAGE

At the end of the day, the digital is language in the sense that online socialities are all built with computer languages. More specifically, many chapters in this volume discuss the impact of language—long linked to national belonging and conceptions of place. This includes folklore—as Thompson notes, extending even to "stories of 'green-skinned trouble-makers,'" narratives of fictive race that reveal cultural logics of ethnicity and belonging. Language has long served as a proxy for race as well as nationality. This dynamic is particularly relevant when phrases like "the Chinese internet" mean neither "the internet in the nation-state of China" nor "the internet as used by persons ethnically Chinese" but "the internet in the Chinese language." Li, for instance, examines how the primarily Chinese-language website MITBSS, based in the United States, shapes senses of overseas Chinese identity.

Li's focus on the role of joking reveals another way that language shapes ethnicity and race in the digital age: forms of language practice. This includes genres of speech like joking—a longstanding dimension of folklore addressed as well by Tolgensbakk. The analysis of language practices also

extends to the complex semiotic ideologies brilliantly explored by Gershon in her study of how African Americans used the "Honesty Box" on Facebook to negotiate forms of gossip and insult in ways indicative of long-standing communicative practices in Black America. We can also see verbal genres at work when Buccitelli shows how "tagging" can be construed as performative, like when tagging someone "you're it!" This recalls not just dramatic notions of performance, but notions of language performativity developed by Judith Butler and others from the work of J. L. Austin.[6] In this sense, the act of tagging someone with a hashtag invokes not just tagging someone "you're it!" in a game of tag, but umpire uttering "strike" and in that utterance rendering the batter's swing a failure. Even translation can act in a performative fashion, as when Herold explores choices over what to translate (and how to translate it) on the website chinaSMACK. Here, translation becomes a source of misunderstanding rather than understanding.

If we think beyond language to questions of semiotics more generally, we find many contributors to this volume exploring imagery and visual culture in terms of representation, interpretation, and identification. How these forms of imagery and visual culture reinforce or depart from linguistic forms of semiosis constitutes a fascinating area for further research. Consider Lawrence's discussion regarding how for African Americans, the "process of identification involved in viewing police incident videos" can be "contingent on group-specific experience and feeling." Questions of the interrelation of linguistic and visual semiosis in practices and experiences of ethnicity online appear as well in O'Brien's exploration of "uses of imagery for self-representation" with regard to African American women and "thinspiration" videos. Schmitt's examination of white anti-racist activism reveals "a highly visual atmosphere in which race is as much about self-presentation and community membership as it is about body type and birth certificate." Tolgensbakk's discussion of visual humor online among Swedes in Norway provides yet another example of linked linguistic and visual representational analysis, connected as well to questions of national belonging.

CONCLUSION

The author would like to tell his own folktale about race and the internet. Once upon a time, people wrote about the internet as if it represented an escape from reality and the body, a place where race would not exist. These people were wrong, because the real world and digital worlds cannot be separated.

Like many folktales, this tale's relationship to reality is imperfect. The early generations of literature on the internet were more varied than this tale suggests—and some of this literature did, from the beginning, address race and ethnicity in some fashion. In addition, the reason race and ethnicity

are pivotal to the digital is not because the physical is part of the "real world"—it is because reality can be found on both sides of the physical/virtual divide.[7] It is precisely due to the reality of the online that considering its implications for race and ethnicity is so important. As the contributions to this volume reveal, the reality of the online can be found in complex online games and virtual environments, but exists as well in hashtags and memes. The reality of the online does not hinge on bandwidth or fidelity to the physical world: it is a function of sociality and causal consequence.

The digital futures of race and ethnicity are impossible to predict, but it is not hard to predict that these futures will have very real consequences for society, politics, and emergent possibilities for selfhood and community. These selfhoods and communities will be digital and physical, virtual and augmented—but regardless, they will be real. It is in responding to this reality that we can respond to forms of racism and ethnocentrism, seeking to forge digital futures of diversity and social justice.

NOTES

1. Peter Burke, "The Discovery of the People," in *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 11.

2. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

3. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1994), 15.

4. Emile Durkheim, *Incest: The Nature and Origin of the Taboo*, translated by Edward Sagarin (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1963), 180.

5. Tom Boellstorff, "Placing the Virtual Body: Avatar, Chora, Cypherg," in *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Body and Embodiment*, ed. Frances E. Mascia-Lees (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 504–20. Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*, 2nd ed., with a New Preface (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

6. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

7. Tom Boellstorff, "For Whom the Ontology Turns: Theorizing the Digital Real," *Current Anthropology* 57, no. 4 (2016): 387–407.

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