

The background of the entire page is an abstract, high-contrast black and white composition. It features thick, expressive brushstrokes that create a sense of movement and texture. The strokes are layered, with some appearing more prominent than others, creating a complex, almost organic shape that resembles a stylized figure or a large, irregular letter. The overall effect is one of raw, emotional energy.

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Racism, everywhere and nowhere: the debatability of racism

Postracialism and the debatability of racism

In 2015 the Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* reported that Laura Huhtasaari, an MP for the right-wing nationalist True Finns Party, was a member of a closed Facebook group ‘The racist background of rapists that hide in bushes’. Under a banner montage of photos of unnamed men of what appear to be Somali and North African heritage, the group description outlines how it is dedicated to proving how ‘Muslim immigration’ had increased instances of rape in Finland and other northern European countries. As well as detailing the endless timeline entreaties to ‘defend our culture’, the newspaper report drew attention to several instances of overt anti-black racism in posted memes and comments. Given this unwelcome media attention, Huhtasaari sought to distance herself from it publicly, first contending that a rogue algorithm had ‘liked’ the page for her, and then arguing that ‘I’m not racist. Maybe I could define myself for myself?’ (Muraja, 2015). The Finnish politician’s exquisite remix of *I’m not racist, but*, is, of course, interchangeable with countless similar attempts at racism denial from a wide range of national contexts, as such minor public scandals have become a generic dimension of political life. There is something about the plaintiveness of her plea for ‘self-definition’, all the same, that acutely illustrates a central dynamic explored in this chapter, and book.

Racism, in public culture, is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. The very mention of race serves as an invitation to disprove its salience, the mention of racism as an invitation to refute its relevance. In the contemporary political context, to speak publicly about racism is to be immediately integrated into an intensive process of delineation, deflection and denial, a contest over who gets to *define* racism, when ‘everyone’ gets to speak about it. This incessant public contestation is shaped both by contemporary socio-political conditions and conflicts, and by the integration of complex, transnational media connectivity to the spaces of social action in which these conflicts are lived and played out. In the postcolonial, migration nations of western Europe and North America, this contestation centres on the dominant imaginary of these societies as ‘postracial’, socio-political spaces in which, the story goes, the divisive ‘idea of race’ no longer matters, and the violence of racism has been largely transcended. The public cultures of these societies are also shaped by dense transnational networks of media flow

and communicative connectivity that provide unprecedented possibilities to both extend and challenge racializing discourses, images, frameworks and information. The overlap between the two produces what this book terms the *debatability* of racism, the constant contest as to what constitutes racism, as to whose ‘definition’ and voice counts, and as to the consequences that should stem from these fractious forms of public recognition and denial.

This is, in introduction, a very general contention. Racism in public culture may be simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, but the analysis of it cannot linger at this level of generality, for engaging everywhere is to risk ending up nowhere in particular. Racism is not a generic phenomenon or a universal category, and the study of *racisms* requires paying attention to the historical and contextual specificity of its operations and mobilizations. Context is not defined by or limited to the borders of the nation-state, for while nation-specific or comparative studies are often the main form through which historical specificity is explored, racisms have taken shape within the transnational systems of colonial and capitalist modernity (Stam and Shohat, 2012). They have taken on renewed force within the relations and networks of neoliberal globalization, through which the racialized politicization of migration has become integral to the expression of social insecurity and cultural anxiety. And through the spatial rescaling and disordering of the enduring mutations of the ‘war on terror’, the transnational figure of ‘the Muslim’ has been shaped as a malleable focus of apparently reasonable aversion. In critical social theory, consequently, the analysis of racism requires us to focus on the interplay of structural commonalities and contextual differences, historical specificities and continuities, relational linkages and exchanges across territories and terrains (Murji and Solomos, 2015). Contemporary media theory demands similarly supple coordinates, as racist practices and understandings of racism increasingly take shape within what Ingrid Volkmer (2014: 1) describes as an ‘... unprecedented landscape of digital connections and a new architecture of globalized communication, which we are only beginning to understand’.

The idea of debatability, therefore, is not proposed as a definitive concept. Rather, it is a conjunctural orientation. That is, it proposes, in this particular socio-political and historical moment, a mode of thinking about racism *in* the media, and racism *and* the media. That racism appears to be ‘everywhere and nowhere’ suggests that the prevalence of insistent, mediated contestation as to *what racism is* must be taken

seriously. This is not a straightforward analytical task, for as Sanjay Sharma (2013) argues in relation to circuits of social media exchange, networked, interactive media generate a ‘racialized info-overload’ of ‘casual racial banter, race-hate comments, “griefing”, images, videos and anti-racist sentiment (that) bewilderingly intermingle, mash-up and virally circulate’. The everyday ubiquity of this ‘bewildering’ media productivity extends from Sharma’s social media focus across an integrated media terrain, through what Andrew Chadwick (2013) describes as a ‘hybrid media system’ that integrates ‘old’ and ‘new’ media into a system of competing and merging media logics shaping the production of news, mediation of public opinion, flow of political information, and contest of symbolic power. On this terrain, racism is not just a focus of political contestation but also a source of fascination. Long a reliable object of public scandal and ritual repudiation, it is now also a hyperlink to data-productive controversies. The ubiquity of this confusion, fascination and contestation suggests that it must be approached analytically as saying *something* about the shape and force of contemporary racisms.

At least in part, that something suggests an apparent contradiction: the more racism is regarded as having been overcome in a ‘postracial’ era, the more it is discussed, defined and denied. The extent of this contradiction has expanded significantly in recent years, for as David Theo Goldberg observes in *Are We All Postracial Yet?*, ‘Race today is supposed to be a thing of the past. But all we do, seemingly, is talk about it’ (2015: 1). The idea of debatability recognizes that this talk is hosted and shaped in a very particular media terrain, one characterized by increased communicative participation through connective media, where ‘more talk’ is a socially valorized and economically prioritized pursuit (Van Dijck, 2013). It is this apparent contradiction, under these conditions, that allows an argument to be built on these opening observations, an argument that is threaded through the chapters of this book. If the meaning of racism is historical and contingent and shifting under changing social relations and through new political conditions and conflicts, then the persistent communicative work that is invested in the attention as to *what counts as racism* does more than say something of analytical value about the cultural production of contemporary racisms. It must also be approached as a generative political dimension of how racism functions in a putatively ‘postracial’ conjuncture. In other words, in contexts where official narratives and dominant public discourses assume the ‘end of racism’

even as people who experience racism attest to its renewed formations and exclusionary and humiliating force, these everyday communicative concentrations on the status, nature and extent of racism are politically consequential.

While this argument is explored throughout the book, it requires some further initial explanation, as it underpins the approach of this chapter. For some analysts, the prevalence of this ‘talk’ suggests a troubling inflation and relativization of public understandings of racism, where ‘racism’ has become politically and conceptually overloaded (Song, 2014). For others, it suggests a critical gap between racism’s contemporary mutability and the ‘limited conceptual understanding of “racism”’ that broadly dominates in public culture (Bonilla-Silva, 2015: 57). What I have thus far referred to as ‘the postracial’ moment encompasses these dynamics, while also involving further considerations. These further dimensions can be explored by acknowledging, firstly, that the idea of the ‘postracial’ is also inevitably entangled in competing meanings, in part because of different valences between North America and Europe, but also because the ‘post’ implicates two very different imaginaries of a world without racism.

In the first, the *post* is future-oriented, as it gathers together a knot of theoretical engagements, social observations and political commitments focused on the abolition of *race*. Race, understood as a pseudo-scientific discourse increasingly ascendant during the late modern period of imperialism, nation-building and genocidal expansionism, imposed a hierarchical system of dehumanizing distinctions that retain a ‘commonsense’ explanatory purchase even in societies where biological racism has been repudiated. Thus the false category of race must ultimately be eliminated, particularly in forms of anti-racism that mobilize racial identifications, concepts and solidarities in opposition to racist violence or exclusion. As Joshua Paul argues, ‘Post-racialism attempts to develop an anti-race anti-racism capable of imagining and bringing into being a world where the pernicious hierarchies of race no longer feature’ (2014: 705). This aim has engendered a hugely complex debate, for as Colette Guillaumin remarks, ‘race does not exist. But it does kill people’ (1995: 107). In other words, the conceptual erasure of race does not necessarily impact on its socio-political and material consequences, consequences that make it *real*.

The second pronounced trajectory of the ‘postracial’ looks not to the future but to an image of the present, a present regarded as no

longer marked by the legacies of what is held to be consigned to the past. Barnor Hesse describes this widely assumed narrative of overcoming:

Since the ending of the US civil rights movement, the Cold War and the apartheid regime in South Africa, political discussion of the meaning of racism seems to be over in the West. Its sociality is overwhelmingly conceived as a problem that has largely been overcome. What remains is seen as residuum, consigned to pathology, a profound moral deviation from the western liberal and democratic ethos and ethnos. Racism has been declared an unacceptable form of western social behavior, committed by groups voluntarily on the political fringes of society or desperately by classes economically jettisoned to its decaying edges. (2004: 10)

Hesse points to the ways in which dominant understandings of racism in western countries tend to be over-determined through association with the still-recent histories of overtly racist regimes that have been discredited and defeated, and, as Chapter 4 examines, the far-right movements and parties that recall these pasts in ideological and iconographic terms (the *residuum*). Moreover, as the endless parade of public scandals over mediated racist outbursts such as Huhtasaari's suggests, racism is framed as an exceptional outburst and treated as an individual aberration, not only unconnected from any broader political or systemic patterns, but also often 'repudiated publicly so that the routine activities of racist statecraft may continue' (James et al., 2018). This broad mesh of assumptions constructs what Brett St Louis describes as the 'fiction' of the 'actually existing post-racial society' (2015: 118). This fiction is not simply a superficial cover story laid over an unchanged racist reality. Rather, this over-identification of racism with particular historical formations and lexicons constricts an understanding of how 'new' racisms constantly take shape and function. Alana Lentin (2016) has described this as the problem of dominant public understandings of racism being "frozen" in relation to past events that have been sanctioned for identification as racist'.

This fixing of the meaning of racism in public imaginaries has been helped along in no small part by the plethora of ideological projects – such as 'colourblindness' or 'reverse racism' – that took shape in the post-war and post-civil rights period to insistently declare 'the end of racism', and thus to explain away persistent forms of racialized inequality as the result of cultural pathologies or individual failings.

In the US context, Touré F. Reed (2018) underlines how ‘post-racialism is in step with postwar liberalism’s tendency to treat racial inequities as if they exist in a world apart from the economic processes that generate them’. But the wider challenge, as Angela Davis argues, is examining how the ‘persistence of historical meanings of racism and its remedies prevent us from recognizing the complex ways in which racism clandestinely structures prevailing institutions, practices and ideologies’ (2008: 2). In this understanding, the postracial is more than a fiction, it is an active political force, operative in the contrast between the ‘frozen’ – ‘there is no room for racism in this society’ – and the shifting political, economic, social and cultural processes through which racism is reproduced and renewed, and through which ‘problem’ subjects are marked out.

David Theo Goldberg’s concept of *postracialism* captures this generativity, for ‘what is at work ... is the restructuring of the conditions of racist expression, and their terms of articulation’ (2015: 113). That is, postracialism is more than confusion as to what now constitutes racism, or ideological denial of its enduring sociality. Rather, it is the totality of the ways in which racism is re-formed – through which populations and identities are marked out as suspicious, as problems to be contained, intervened in or disposed of – in societies where race is regarded as a historical deviation, overcome. Postraciality, Goldberg argues, ‘increasingly erases or erodes the possibility of identifying racisms and their underpinnings, their structures and implications’ (ibid: 88). It is a condition that both obscures the enduring historicity of racial arrangements and structures, while sanctioning and fashioning modes of racist expression that activate their racial underpinnings precisely because it is now difficult if not impossible to recall them to them:

Postraciality ... rather than expressing the end of racism, conceals within its conceptual erasure of race the driving mode of contemporary racist articulation. Racisms disappear behind the formal deletion of racial classification, state regulation, and legal refusal of racial definition. They express themselves anew in the name of racial disappearance, disavowal, and denial. Racisms proliferate in the wake of the supposed death of race. (ibid: 152)

Debatability, in part, is animated in this space between the fixed and the motile, between the denial of racisms that do not map onto the assumed shape of the past, and the insistence on *speaking of racism*

because what is taking shape requires the force of this naming. In proposing this idea, it should be clear that I do not mean that the experience of racism is open to debate, or that racially structured dimensions of social and political life are radically open to question. Rather, it is intended as a way of thinking about how the experience of racism and the operations of structural racism can be denied not only through silencing, but also through noise; not just through a lack of attention to racism, but also via an excess of particular kinds of attention. And as a theme that extends through the book, I want to suggest that this debatability, this incessant, recursive attention *as to what counts as racism and who gets to define it*, has political consequences for practices of anti-racism – practices that want to *name racism publicly*, the better to mobilize to confront it.

In contemporary theory, the tricky prefix ‘post’ is often too prevalent, and opening this analysis with a discussion of *postness* makes for an admittedly complex starting point. However, a more conventional approach, such as providing a linear treatment of definitions of race and racism, is simply inadequate to explore the contemporary political and communicative context. Understanding the productive political force of postracial confusion in contemporary societies requires that it is this recursive attention as to what counts as racism and what racism is taken to mean in public cultures, rather than an orienting set of theoretical definitions, that provides the analytical point of entry to this study. For these reasons, this chapter differs in its approach from those that follow.

It is structured around three intensively mediated incidents that sketch out a broad canvas of public dynamics produced through the intersection of ‘postracial’ confusion and digital profusion. They are snapshots, not case studies, and each one instantiates an important ‘postracial’ dynamic. By peeling away at the understandings of racism at play, they lay out an orienting sense of the confusion, contestation and polarization the idea of racism currently generates. These interpretative and political dynamics are produced through concentrated bursts of communicative energy, and examining their generation opens up ways of thinking about media dynamics and practices in the ‘hybrid media system’. In short, they open up questions about racism, and about media, that map the analytical challenges subsequent chapters respond to, and help identify the theoretical resources they must marshal in order to get to grips with the generativity of networked communications on a ‘postracial’ terrain.

The decidability of racism

Intensive and ephemeral concentrations of mediated activity and attention are a pronounced feature of contemporary media cultures, and debatability is generated when these discursive episodes pivot on confusion and polarization as to what constitutes racism.

On the 13th of January 2016 the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* published a cartoon by Laurent Sourisseau, or ‘Riss’, a long-time contributor who had been injured in the lethal attack on the magazine on the 7th of January 2015. The edition for the 13th of January followed a highly publicized edition marking the first anniversary of the attacks. Riss’s cartoon also generated significant publicity, for different if not altogether unrelated reasons. Under the heading ‘Migrants’, the cartoon posed a question: ‘What would little Aylan have become if he’d grown up?’ ‘Little Aylan’ is Aylan (or Alan) Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian boy who drowned with his mother and brother while trying to cross from Turkey to the Greek island of Kos in early September 2015. A photo by the Turkish journalist Nilüfer Demir captured his lifeless body lying in the surf on a beach near Bodrum in Turkey. It was widely circulated in social media and on news sites, and representations of his body, captured in a pose redolent of nothing more than a toddler’s slumber, rapidly circulated in symbolic forms beyond the original photo. Drawing directly on this iconic currency, a small drawing of his body bunched up in the lapping seawater is inserted in a circular inset in the top left of the cartoon, below which the main action unfolds. Two men, whose facial features are exaggerated through some hybrid of pig-like and ape-like characteristics, are chasing a woman who is running away and screaming as they advance. These figures are the answer to the headline question, and underscored by a written text: ‘*Tripoteur de fesses en Allemagne*’ [‘an ass groper in Germany’].

I first saw this image on the afternoon of its publication, when it was posted on the Facebook page of a French political activist with a large following, with the update ‘Repeat after me: No, *Charlie Hebdo* is not racist’. The image of the cartoon was a re-post from the *Médiapart* journalist Faïza Zerouala, who posted it on Twitter – ‘*Charlie Hebdo mesdames et messieurs. Voilà*’. As the image spread rapidly through the social networks I access, it circulated across contexts and through languages, generating a concentrated period of interpretation and argument. Concomitantly, this social media ‘furore’ also became the raw material for rapidly blogged media coverage on established international news

sites, with several social media ‘curated’ stories appearing on the 13th – ‘Twitter responds to the latest *Hebdo* cartoon’ – prior to full articles on the 14th, declaring, inter alia, a ‘backlash’ against the newspaper, and posing the question *is the cartoon racist?*

The meaning of Riss’s cartoon prompted an ‘enhanced news story’, that is, a news story that circulates between social media platforms and content-intensive news sites, accumulating discursive value through circulation and participation (Fox, 2016: 24–5). The image of the cartoon I saw was a close-up photo taken on a mobile phone and shared via Twitter. Screen grabs of this photo, and others like it, circulated and mingled with licensed professional reproductions as the cartoon travelled beyond its allotted position in a newspaper’s page layout, transformed into a ‘digital object’ that can be combined and recombined with other sets of digital objects through forms of remediation (Murthy, 2013: 26–7). The concentrated response to the cartoon was globally distributed, produced by clustered intensities of communicative action shaped by temporal dynamics of circulation across and within networked media spaces. Publics are always contingent, but this ephemeral communicative event took shape in a digital media environment characterized by the flow of content in and across social media platforms and news sites, accumulating reaction and commentary.

Its public, therefore, took shape in what Ingrid Volkmer describes as ‘spheres of connected discursive consciousness’ that emerge through these dense, convergent trans-border layers of communicative connectedness. This distributed discursive consciousness is conceptualized, in Volkmer’s terms, as a *public horizon* rather than public sphere – a distinction captured in the fact that while the cartoon preoccupied me, and virtual interlocutors, for days, it barely charted on the consciousness of many people who actually have to live with me on a daily basis. Public horizons are both connective and individualizing, as they are produced through the ‘techno-sociality’ of digital media platforms, which, as Poell and Van Dijck remind us, ‘are not *neutral* technologies that merely *enable* user activity [but instead] ... *shape* how users share information, curate news, and express their points of view’ (2014: 182, original emphasis). Public horizons are therefore ephemeral, not just because controversies such as this take shape in conditions where attention is the scarcest resource, but because the ‘technological zones’ of communication are also ephemeral – comment sections ‘are now closed for comments’, hotly contested Facebook threads vanish into the forgotten zone of ‘older stories’ (see Christensen and Christensen, 2013: 354).

If these are the communicative conditions under which this enhanced news story took shape, how did the question *is the cartoon racist?* emerge? A recurring characteristic of *Charlie Hebdo*'s cartoon satire is to fuse two topical stories or references into a pointed, overarching *second degré* comment. In this case, the blended elements were themselves recent news stories related to the intensification of the European borders crisis during 2015. Riss's cartoon was enhanced as a news story also because it referenced, and was inducted into, a cumulative sequence of mediated events. The photo image of Aylan Kurdi's body was shared first on Twitter, rapidly going 'viral' before being integrated into global news content. As Stanley Cohen writes in *States of Denial*, 'our knowledge is not dependent on chance. It is permanent and continuous; those single moments when a crying Rwandan orphan appears on screen are reminders of what we already know' (2001: 295). The appearance of this image on multiple screens was also the confirmation of a sublimated knowledge: of the extraordinary violence of the militarized borders of 'Fortress Europe', where borders organize hierarchies not just of mobility but also of viable human life, sifting those who 'belong' from what Zygmunt Bauman (2003) has termed the 'human waste' produced as an unwanted by-product of violent conflict and neoliberal globalization. Yet borders cannot ultimately prevent human movement, nor repress the needs and desires that propel it, and so 'by sea or by land, increased security at the EU's frontiers has not resulted in less immigration, merely in more deaths' (Trilling, 2015).

The velocity and scale of the circulation of the image of Aylan Kurdi generated a widespread representational reflex, the production of adapted versions of what was rapidly framed in media commentary as an *iconic* image. 'We live in an era', Limor Shifman notes, 'driven by a *hypermemonic* logic, in which almost every major public event sprouts a string of memes' (2014: loc 119, original emphasis). Tribute drawings and political cartoons; 'rehumanizing' images of Aylan alive and with his family; protest 'die-ins' against the inhumanity of the European border regime, with activists wearing his now indexical red t-shirt and blue shorts – the image was invested in as a 'never again' moment, willed, through its adaptation and circulation, to attain a power to shift 'public opinion' towards greater humanity, or hospitality, or justice, or at least to 'shift the media narrative' towards a focus on the *plight of refugees* rather than the *problem of migrants*. In that moment, according to Vis et al., 'the image of Aylan Kurdi created a

social media event that looked capable of becoming a critical juncture in changing attitudes for the better' (2015: 71).

In Riss's cartoon, the 'unifying' moment of Aylan Kurdi's death is mashed up with another intensive media event connected to the 'refugee issue' in 2015, but one that was held to attest to the divisiveness of 'mass migration' – the allegations of widespread sexual assaults by 'refugees and migrants' on New Year's Eve in central Köln. If the photo of Aylan was charged with 'changing public opinion for the better', the confused but cumulative force of stories of widespread sexual assaults at the celebrations in Köln was framed as 'turning public opinion sharply against refugees in Europe'. It is clear that up to a thousand women filed legal complaints of theft, sexual assault and harassment after that night, and that in the region of 20 asylum-seekers and numerous men of 'North African background' were investigated as a consequence. However the truth of the women's experiences, and their voices and testimonies, were dissolved in a powerful – and frequently overtly patriarchal – desire to frame the fact of sexual assaults as a racialized truth about the problem of migration, Islam, and Muslim men (an elision compounded by attempts to combat the surge of racist framing by minimizing the extent and seriousness of the assaults).

That what actually happened that night in Köln would be subject to investigation and factual correction over many weeks did not prevent the rapid construction of *Köln* as a particular kind of event. As Ron Eyerman writes, occurrences become events through narration, and:

... through a dialectic of actions and interpretations. Actions occur in time and space, events unfold and take shape. An event unfolds and takes shape in the interplay between protagonists, interpreters, and audience, as sense and meaning is attributed and various interpretations compete with each other. As this meaning struggle proceeds, various accounts stabilize, with perhaps one achieving some sort of hegemony, but counter interpretations or stories may continue to exist alongside. (2008: 22)

If Aylan's photo was a *we cannot say that we did not know* event, Köln was framed as a *now nobody can deny* event – a dramatic occurrence that is discursively framed as demonstrating or revealing an 'uncomfortable truth' about minority or racialized populations that must now, finally, in the light of this proof, be recognized (Demmers and Mehendale, 2010). From early January, stories in right-wing mainstream

newspapers mingled with practised forms of disinformation propagated through a network of ‘counter-jihad’ news sites to push the insistent idea that the initially confused official response represented an attempt at a ‘cover-up’. This initial framing expanded to suggest that ‘rapefugees’ and ‘migrant rape gangs’ were coordinating sexual assault plans internationally through instant messaging services. A narrative of a sexual and gendered ‘clash of civilizations’ has become increasingly important to radical right networks as Chapter 4 discusses; however, as Boulila and Carri’s research on the events suggests, this narrative was reproduced far more broadly, for ‘as the “terror of Cologne” came to stand for an exceptional attack on the German nation, anti-racist claims were said to deflect from the “real issues”’. Thus, ‘what followed was the post-feminist emergence of a consensus that German sexism had long been overcome and that only extremists (read feminists) claim that Germany has a deep-rooted problem with misogyny’ (2017: 289).

The transnational meaning struggle over Köln materialized in an online news environment characterized by speed and space, multiplicity and polycentrality (Fenton, 2010). As Mona Abdel-Fadil (2016) noted in an initial media analysis, the accelerated speed of coverage and the assemblage of sources and linked sites through rolling reports and content curation ensured that a plethora of what turned out, subsequently, to be fabricated stories circulated intensively, and the steady but relatively under-reported revision of assault figures did little to unsettle sensationalist news frames. Thus the serious but isolated sexual violence in Köln was subject to resilient ideological framing, racialized as the exclusive problem of the non-western migrant. In so doing, it indexed a particularly involved domain of postracial conflict that recurs throughout this book, as to how the contemporary racialization of ‘Muslims’ can be publicly contested in a context where the refrain ‘Islam is not a race’ is invested in, to varying degrees and valences, across the political spectrum in Europe.

Assembled and engaged in ‘spheres of connected discursive consciousness’, the media event of Riss’s cartoon was driven by what could be termed a standing reserve of interpretative energy. This energy was accumulated not only through the intermeshing of these enhanced news stories from the border crisis, but also, of course, because of the iconic and conflicted status of the newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in the aftermath of the lethal attacks on its offices in January 2015. A secondary dimension of the widespread expression of identification with *#JeSuisCharlie* was the rapid circulation of past cover images from the

newspaper, which in turn generated a proliferation of political assessments of the paper, and symbolic investments in the values it was held to represent. To an important extent, this symbolic investment generated a media event that transcended any specific relation to the content and history of the newspaper. Nevertheless, a consistent dimension of the symbolic struggles over *who is and who is not Charlie* hinged on radically different assessments of their commitment to what was widely termed ‘equal opportunities offensiveness’, that is, to an abrasive satirical method that regularly drew on religious caricatures and racial stereotypes. Riss’s cartoon not only coupled recent events fraught with racialized framing, but also evoked a standing reserve of interpretative dispute as to the racist/anti-racist character of some of *Charlie Hebdo*’s images.

A basic *News Journal* search retrieved 76 stories on online newspaper and news sites that were published about the cartoon between the 13th and 14th of January 2016, all of which referenced the question of racism in the story, while 13 articles referenced racism in their headline. It is either an accusation, where ‘racism’ is held in interpretative suspension through the use of quotation marks – ‘backlash’ over ‘racist’ cartoon – or a question: ‘Is this cartoon of Alan Kurdi “racist”?’ *The Guardian*, for example, featured the story ‘Charlie Hebdo cartoon depicting drowned child Alan Kurdi sparks racism debate’. As with each of the other 13 headline stories, it drew heavily for its substantive content on social media ‘reaction’, and selected and organized – and also flattened and reduced – this material in terms of the established journalistic convention of balance, alternating positions for and against the proposition in the headline. What is of interest here is the main interpretative criteria applied to the cartoon, and the divergent understandings of racism they support. To tease this out, the main arguments I surveyed in the news sample and in online debates are summarized here in a dialogue form:

- The cartoon is racist because of its portrayal of Alan Kurdi. While the ‘iconic’ image of his body had entered into symbolic circulation, this did not provide a political justification for portraying him as a potential rapist. The cartoon, therefore, is both appropriative and insensitive to Alan and his family, while racializing ‘migrants’ through the reproduction of stereotypes being openly used to legitimate exclusionary politics in the political atmosphere in which it was published.

- This is a literalist misinterpretation of the cartoon's satire. By fusing two proximate events, the *second degré* humour takes aim at the fickleness of public opinion, which lurched from grief to hysteria. It clearly takes aim at the stereotyping structure present in sensationalist media frameworks that homogenizes and polices minority identities in polarized categories of 'angels and devils', or good and bad migrants.
- Intentionality is a distraction; if the cartoon is dominantly interpreted as an intervention that compounds anti-migrant and Islamophobic sentiment, then it is the public reception and broadly accepted meaning that matter. What is in question, therefore, is the inability or unwillingness of its publishers to act reflexively, to speculate on the consequentiality of these images rather than insist on the primacy of intentionality in a context of heightened public racism.
- Yes, but intentionality does not need to be based on an appeal to the general primacy of authorial intent. It can be deduced from specific histories of practice, and knowledge of *Charlie Hebdo's* political history and mode of satire clarifies that this is not an expression of racism, but a satire of the popular irrationality of racism. They have a long history of anti-racist activism.
- Perhaps, but regardless, intentionality, even of the good anti-racist kind, does not guarantee control over the meaning of images. Images of 'non-European' people as beasts or monkeys cannot be extracted from historically generated repertoires of colonial and imperialist representations that worked to dehumanize and humiliate subordinated populations. In a context where white people still dress up in blackface and proudly Instagram the results, these caricatures inevitably still carry these accents and valences. Doesn't the fact that the Greek fascist party Golden Dawn approvingly shared the cartoon give pause for thought?
- How can an artist be held responsible for the uses to which their art is put? What is getting lost in this misdirected outrage is that *Charlie Hebdo* was reluctantly globalized when it was attacked, and decontextualized images now circulate and are open to misreading beyond the interpretative context of France, where the codes for this mode of satire are understood. This contextuality is important, for without some sense of this tradition it seems that Anglophone commentators lose all perspective.
- Yes, contextuality is important but there is not one unitary interpretative context. The juxtaposition of Anglophone incomprehension

and French semiotic fluency erases the – often racialized – voices in France that have an established history of criticizing how this satire supports repressive power relations in postcolonial France. Are these voices, therefore, less French? Didn't the French media critic Daniel Schneidermann point out that while he 'got' the cartoon, his younger colleagues, who have no biographical relation to this satirical tradition, 'totally saw a racist drawing'? And, that in a mediasphere increasingly organized by networked logics of sharing and mixing, an experienced author can find ways to 'signal that the message of your drawing ("*don't hassle me about Aylan, if he'd lived he would have become a rapist like the others*") does not express your thought – the author's – but that of a narrator who might be, for example, a fat ugly racist Archie Bunker type?' (Ackermann, 2016).

- So what are you suggesting? That because something might end up somewhere on the internet as part of a meme, that artists and political commentators should censor themselves? This focus on one cartoon, especially given the recent history at play here, is disproportionate, but it also dilutes a focus on fundamental principles for some kind of symbolic or textual exercise. This kind of satire treats everybody *equally*, and as such it is radically anti-racist in some very important ways. It treats people as rational actors with the capacity to distinguish words from deeds in public life, and to accept being offended as a price worth paying for this.
- It's not just this one cartoon, it's the way it synthesizes so many recurring conflicts over what racism means and who gets to decide that. People of colour and anti-racist movements have consistently organized against demeaning and dehumanizing representations, not because of some superficial preference for 'symbolic exercises', but because the symbolic has material impact and political effect. If it didn't, why would institutions and nations invest so much labour in it? So why reduce all forms of communicative injury in unequal societies to the flat category of *offence*?
- The point is that this approach is radically egalitarian. It does not allow accidents of birth and the particularities of ascribed identity to relativize the public practice of democratic citizenship. It is only this kind of universal commitment to humanity that can negate the pseudo-biology of race and the false divisions of racism.
- Yes, a universal commitment to humanity is a critical horizon for life on this planet, but its promise has always been ambivalent, because it promises human emancipation while assuming a white

European subject as the measure of what it means to be free. We can't just ignore how people are racialized precisely because of accidents of birth and the particularities of ascribed identity, in a history that is still with us, and still inscribing these formations. To just assume that there is one set of public responses that count as rational, and that these happen to be the detached responses of people not relentlessly forced to negotiate racialized representations in a racially stratified society, well, that sets oneself up as gatekeeper of the universal.

The fraught and fractious rendering symbolic of *Charlie Hebdo* is further discussed in Chapter 5, where questions of free expression, hate speech, and the differing theories of communication and consequentiality assumed in these positions are examined. This complex thickening of one of its cartoons proposes some initial observations on the idea of debatability. In terms of media theory, what is clear is that the cartoon circulated in a media environment characterized by what Nick Couldry terms 'hugely increased incitements to discourse'; the ephemeral invitation to react, share, signal or comment (2012: 126). These compressed incitements to discourse on racism/anti-racism, as we shall see throughout this book, are an increasingly prevalent and ambivalent dimension of public culture, driven by the unexpected circulation of digital objects, or the capacity of ubiquitous digital technologies to make 'hidden racism' public, or the opportunities for publicity provided to racist groups by the 'always-on' prerogatives of content production in a hybrid media system.

In the cartoon dialogue, both imagined interlocutors deploy a complex set of understandings and associations in their interpretations of racism. This complexity is reinforced by the fact that they represent very different understandings of racism in the service of *anti-racism*, of opposing racism. This is not unusual, as varying traditions of anti-racism have always operated within a spectrum of different and often divergent definitions of racism, suggesting that anti-racism is never reducible to simply being against racism (see Bonnett, 2000; Lentin, 2004). However, as interpretations circulate and cluster in an irreducibly transnational space of mediated exchange, the cartoon as incitement to discourse amplifies the extent of 'postracial' confusion and polarization as to what counts as racism, where discussions of racism are characterized by competing social and personal understandings, political investments, interpretative frameworks and analytical foundations. These competing

understandings are shaped contextually, but context in this event does not map onto neatly divided Anglophone and Francophone spheres. While some form of communicative event takes shape around digital objects such as this, the cartoon was contested not only as an interpretative text, but also as a medium for broader disagreement as to how racism should be understood, whose opinions or experiences register, and how it should be opposed.

The definability of racism

In response to the circuitries of debatability, to this constant contest over what racism means and who gets to define it, a prevalent response is to reach for the clarity and certainty of a definition. Racism, after all, is an *ism*, and widely acknowledged as morally wrong – solid grounds for assuming that its meaning can be secured. In its list of top words for 2015, the American dictionary publisher Merriam-Webster reported that consultations of their definition of ‘racism’ increased by 50% in 2015 – a year where murderous police brutality, white supremacist murders in a South Carolina church, the *#BlackLivesMatter* movement and campus protests against institutional racism were the focus of significant media coverage. More anecdotally, anyone who has spent any time discussing racism in online or social media platforms may have encountered a moment when the disagreement and ambiguity peak, and a helpful interlocutor pastes a definition from Google Dictionary, or one like it, into the thread: ‘prejudice, discrimination or antagonism directed against someone of a different race on the belief that one’s own race is superior’.

The debatability of racism is certainly in part a product of its conceptual complexity, a complexity that has led some theorists to argue that we can only speak of *racisms* in the plural. One of the most challenging analytical dimensions of racism is that it is always dynamic, shifting in historical contexts and through social and political relations, a ‘plastic or chameleon-like phenomenon which constantly finds new forms of political, social, cultural or linguistic expression’ (MacMaster, 2001: 2). These forms of expression are also always intertwined and articulated with questions of class, gender, nationality, sexuality and religious identity. In addition, widespread use of the term ‘racism’, to describe structural and ideological modes of oppression and discrimination bound up in race-thinking and racially inflected beliefs and processes, is both modern in formation and very recent in usage (Hesse, 2004). Consequently, despite the harsh and

violent realities of human exclusion and humiliation inscribed in the term, it is resistant to straightforward theoretical definition. Given, as Steve Garner argues, that ‘racism is a phenomenon manifesting itself in such a diverse spectrum of ways across time and place’, it is more productive in academic work to compare and contrast the foundations and elements of different definitions; how they combine the attention given to the historical power relationships through which certain groups are *racialized*, sets of ideas that legitimize these hierarchies and distinctions, and the forms of discrimination and practices that stem from them (2010: 10–11).

In order to grasp why racism is resistant to definition in public encounters, it is important to consider debatability as something more than primarily a question of conceptual complexity. The difficulty of producing adequate academic definitions, for example, is also a consequence of recognizing that ‘the process of naming the problem is not simply a matter of semantics but reflects the intensely political process of conceptualization’ (Bowling, 1998: 2). What holds for the convention-bound discipline of academic writing holds fast in less bounded environments – the meaning of racism in comment cultures is unlikely to be amenable to resolution through cut and paste definitions. This is because the act of defining is not just reflective, it is productive; it centres certain meanings, and marginalizes others. According to Sara Ahmed, ‘if we recognize something as racism, we also offer a definition of that which we recognize. In this sense, recognition produces rather than simply finds its object’ (2012: 44).

The incessant debatability of racism, therefore, is shaped not only by the contemporary complexity that has accreted to the term, but also because it is inherently *political*. The interpretative investment in the cartoon was less a semiotic competition than acknowledgement that the recognition of racism, and the racisms that are recognized, and by whom, entails political consequences. To recognize some form of racism may be in turn to admit to some form of reckoning with the systematic distribution of power, possibility, resources, legitimacy, belonging and even life itself over time and in contemporary socio-political relations. Consequently, definitions of what racism means in public culture have become sites of acute political contest, and intensive discursive labour aiming to derail or reverse racism’s political implications. To return to the Google definition, anyone who has had it pasted their way may see how the recourse to the dictionary holds out the promise not of shared understanding, but of a full stop; inserted into dialogue it says to an interlocutor that what we are discussing cannot be racism, or that what

you are experiencing cannot be racism, because it does not relate to the terms of this definition, it cannot be *recognized*.

Nevertheless, the desire to resolve debatability through definition is important because it is indicative of a powerful set of assumptions about public culture. Media Studies, as Peter Lunt and Sonia Livingstone (2013) argue, remains ‘fascinated’ with the concept of the public sphere, primarily through an extended critical engagement with the work of Jürgen Habermas on the conditions of political consciousness, ethical commitment and institutional procedure that could support communicative deliberation. For all the criticism directed at the undeclared class, gendered and racial exclusions implicit in the concept – a somewhat free-floating concept that does not always map onto Habermas’s conceptualization – it has endured as a critical touchstone for considerations of the democratizing potential of internet-enabled participation (Papacharissi, 2011). For the purposes of this argument, it is also important to recognize that, in its most general sense, the idea of the public sphere provides a resilient framework of self-understanding for journalists, news organizations, media regulators and arguably many media audiences and users. In this vision, as James Curran summarizes, the media’s primary role is to ‘assist the collective self-realisation, co-ordination, democratic management, social integration and adaptation of society’ (2002: 136).

Faith in the capacity of a definition to guide public understanding is informed by two intersecting ideas derived from this broadly liberal-democratic understanding of mediated public spheres. The first is that public life is characterized by the use of public reason, that ideas and arguments succeed by being tested in a ‘marketplace of ideas’, and that the public is united in turning attention to what Risto Kunelius terms ‘inclusive argumentation’. This, he argues, is the

... imaginary idea type situation that informed a great deal of 20th-century public speech. It favors caution in naming others, emphasizes the epistemic (objective, fact-based) dimension of public argumentation and assumes there is at least a strategically motivated consensus or compromise that social actors can achieve ... this is the idea of publicity that provided legitimation for journalism (and the free press) in the period of both the political press and the commercial press. In the former, the public sphere was imagined to take place ‘between’ news outlets, in the latter (professionally and objectively) ‘inside’ news outlets

... freedom of speech in this mode is policed by references to the rationality of what is said. Rationality, in turn, is defined by what is taken to be true (factual arguments) or normatively acceptable, often using ‘the nation’ as the key ideological benchmark or container. (2013: 34–5)

The second is that this rationality is produced through debate between a plurality of voices, guaranteed at a systemic level by a – variously regulated and legitimated – diversity of media actors and institutions that address and constitute the public sphere. This plurality creates the conditions for *consensus*, a paradigm, as Des Freedman argues, that ‘relates to a long-standing and highly influential notion of power that in advanced liberal democracies, power is widely distributed, pluralistically organized and contributes to a relatively stable social arrangement’ (2014: 16). Students of these approaches may preempt the main critiques of how power is formulated in this perspective, and Freedman’s three further paradigms of *chaos*, *control* and *contradiction* depart from them. It is critical to note, also, how the distribution of power in this paradigm has a postracial inflection. The assumption that consensus can be reached on a definition of racism, a definition that will in turn guide and discipline public contestation, is only imaginable if the public is imagined, however inchoately, as an aggregation of individuals whose lives are substantively unmarked by legacies and enduring conditions of structural, racial reproduction. To open these points out, the second snapshot explores these imaginaries of public understanding by considering the US context in which 50% more people in 2015 felt the need to consult their Merriam-Webster dictionaries for a definition of racism.

For many US commentators, the 2008 election of President Barack Obama represented definitive evidence of the transformation of racial realities in the United States. The substantial achievement of a black president in the context of US history was parlayed by many commentators into an encompassing narrative of a definitive break: with a *racial past* of slavery, legalized segregation and supremacist violence, and crucial proof that the enduring legacies and impacts of this racial system had been transcended. Reflecting on media coverage that combined ‘assertions of racelessness with strikingly reductionist resorts to race to “explain” voting patterns’, the historian David Roediger noted how ‘such careening representations of the Obama campaign reflect an overwhelming desire to transcend race without transcending racial inequality,

as well as the impossibility of doing so' (2008: 217). Roediger's formulation is important because it fixes on race as a political question, as a mode of ordering social relations where 'race defines the social category into which peoples are sorted, producing and justifying their very different opportunities with regard to wealth and poverty, confinement and freedom, citizenship and alienation ... Though genetic differences among groups defined as races are inconsequential, race is itself a critically important social fact' (ibid: xi–xii).

In 2015, as Americans reached for their dictionaries in record numbers, the social fact of race was killing black people and consigning them to premature death with such spectacular frequency that it forged the stark message of the main social movement to emerge in this period – *Black Lives Matter* (BLM). The phrase is stark not only because in its utterance it is impossible to evade the extraordinary fact that it must still be uttered, but also because of its contrast with the assumption that the Obama era marked the substantive inauguration of a 'postracial' society. As Joshua Paul writes, the symbolic meaning of President Obama's 2008 election was hailed as evidence that 'the democratic experiment had realized its meritocratic claims to be post-race. This narrative of social perfectibility positions president Obama as a bellwether for the fast-approaching post-racist society' (2014: 702). Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor explicitly contrasts this framing with the formation of the BLM movement:

There are ... periodic ruptures in the US narrative of its triumph over racism as a defining feature of its society ... The Black freedom struggle of the 1960s, while the United States was simultaneously waging a war in Vietnam (supposedly in the name of freedom), exposed the country as a whole as deeply racist and resistant to Black equality or liberation. More recently, the Los Angeles Rebellion in 1992 reignited a national discussion about the persistence of racial inequality. In 2005 the Bush administration's shameful response to Hurricane Katrina momentarily submerged the glowing self-appraisals of American society at a time when the country was, once again, locked in war and occupation ... Today the birth of a new movement against racism and policing is shattering the illusion of a colorblind postracial United States. Cries of 'Hands up, don't shoot', 'I can't breathe', and 'Black lives matter' have been heard around the country as tens of thousands of ordinary people mobilise to demand an end to rampant police brutality and murder against African Americans. (2016: loc 283)

The ‘colorblind illusion’ broadly refers to the assumption that the formal political equality won by the freedom movements of the 1950s and 1960s ushered in an era of official *racelessness*, a correction that recalibrated the essentially meritocratic character of US society. Yet in the absence of a substantive transformation of the stratified distribution of wealth and possibility that characterized a historically embedded racial system, gross material inequality endured, and according to some calculations, expanded on a range of fronts. As Taylor writes, ‘poverty is but a single factor in making sense of the ever-widening wealth gap between African Americans and whites. Over the last twenty-five years, the disparity in household wealth has tripled; today white median wealth (as opposed to income) is 91,405, compared to 6,446 for African American households’ (ibid: loc 315). In Dana-Ain Davis’s terms, this legacy of segregated inequality has fused with the subsequent neoliberal contraction of the welfare state to produce what she terms ‘muted racism’, a product of official ‘color-blindness’ that, regardless of the historical legacies and contemporary structures that maintain racialized inequalities, ‘forces claims of racism into silence’ (2007: 349).

The Black Lives Matter movement is most intensely associated with the protests and resistance that followed the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9th 2014 (see Lipsitz, 2015), but it is the acquittal of ‘neighbourhood watch volunteer’ George Zimmerman on July 15th 2013 for the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin – on February 26th 2012 – that Deva Woodly (2016) identifies as a formative ‘moment of painful politicization’ for a renascent black liberation movement, a day where ‘the virtual public sphere was awash with conversation, dissections of the trial and evidence, and polemical rants, but more prominent than all of these were outcries of pain’.

People had also taken to the virtual sphere following Trayvon’s murder, as it took 45 days of organizing and protest before Zimmerman was arrested and subsequently charged (protestors adopted bags of Skittles candy – which Trayvon had bought in a local shop immediately prior to his murder – as a symbol, waving them at demonstrations, and mailing them to the local police department). Woodly’s description of the visceral need for public sharing and mutual recognition recalls Zizi Papacharissi’s discussion of ‘affective publics’, where latent ties and solidarities are activated by the networked structures of expression that digital media provide, often in the real time of an event. The impact of connective media on collective political mobilization has been subject to the equally reductive claims that ‘social media’ *cause* radical political

action, or are a hyped-up distraction in understanding it. Writing against these approaches she argues that ‘the connective affordances of social media help activate the in-between bond of publics, and they also enable expression and information sharing that liberate the individual and collective imaginations’ (2014: 8).

Yet while the pluralizing and multiplying effects of connective media are often predominantly associated with progressive possibility – with the democratic redistribution of communicative power – the same structures and affordances facilitated the participatory dehumanization of Trayvon Martin. During the trial coverage, the meme genre of *Trayvoning* proliferated images of young white Americans posing for photos while playing dead, with a hood up and bag of Skittles in their hand. In a reflection on this practice, Lisa Guerrero and David J. Leonard (2012) observe that while the ‘technologies of communication appear new, the technologies of oppression are anything but’. They place the memification of Trayvon’s murder in a lineage of practices that produced collective white supremacist pleasure in the destruction of black bodies, most notably the practice of taking photos with ‘souvenirs’ from bodies at lynchings. This lineage is simultaneously denied and deepened by the silence of the ‘postracial’:

While the trend can be interpreted as a new technology of lynching, its character remains separate from lynchings of the past whose act, and the dissemination of lynching photographs highlighted White power and White supremacy. The ability to ‘act’ like a dead Trayvon Martin only to get up and head back into White suburbia is illustrative of this same feeling of power and privilege, but invisibly so. White people don’t take part in ‘Trayvoning’ to ‘declare’ White supremacy; they take part in it because the declaration has been rendered unnecessary by various sociocultural, sociopolitical and socioeconomic forces. In fact, the absence of the explicit claim to it emphasizes the power and privilege even more.

Bags of Skittles entered into symbolic circulation to mark the innocence of a life violently taken, but once in circulation symbols are charged with memetic potential, in this instance appropriated as a mocking indicator of that life’s historically sanctioned disposability. In their detailed study of media coverage of the trial, Erhardt Graeff et al. (2014) conclude that ‘broadcast media is still important as an amplifier and a gatekeeper, but it is susceptible to media activists working through participatory media

to co-create the news and influence the framing of major controversies'. Reviewing these circulatory dynamics at the scale of the media system, Safiya Umoja Noble, in her essay 'Teaching Trayvon', turns to Guy Debord's notion of the *spectacle* to examine how the political desire to get justice for Trayvon through publicity, and to link his murder to a 'national conversation about racial justice', was subordinated to 'the creation of Trayvon and George as commodities', as mediated stories for consumption (2014: 14). The idea of 'the spectacle' is in a tradition, stretching from Frankfurt School analyses of the Culture Industry to 'definitive' conceptualizations of contemporary mediatization, that seeks to theorize the ever-deeper penetration of mediated representations to subjectivity and social relations (see Jensen, 2013). In Debord's aphoristic *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), the spectacle is the insistent flow of media content and commodity drive that extends capitalism's structuring force into how people communicate, formulate desires, and shape their understandings of political and social possibility. The spectacle is not just distracting, but also alienating, as 'the spectacle is not a collection of images but a social relation among people mediated by images' (thesis 4).

Noble traces how the coverage of Zimmerman's trial inevitably produced Trayvon as a commodity, a story primed for dramatic rendition, opinion generation and sensationalist revelation regardless of the trial's outcome ('The spectacle aims at nothing other than itself', thesis 14). However, this spectacle was also racialized. The adversarial narrative of a trial, intensively mediated in its day-to-day 'revelations', accentuated the ways in which race, in the postracial moment, was rendered both hyper-visible and invisibilized – hyper-visible, in that Trayvon Martin was marked out as an object of legitimate suspicion by nothing more than his blackness, presumed out of place in the undeclared but potent *whiteness* of the private property of a gated community. For Zimmerman this was enough to conjure up and act upon a stereotypical mélange of risk, threat and criminality, and during Zimmerman's trial, it was sufficient for Trayvon to effectively be put on trial, his behaviour and character scrutinized for exonerating confirmation of threatening black masculinity. As Noble argues, media narratives were suffused with an established textual repertoire of 'black male criminality' that shaped the commodity of 'Trayvon'. These narratives were not uncontested, as significant mobilization went into 'counter-narratives' designed to reclaim Trayvon's humanity. Moreover, the spectacle had something for everybody, as competing news outlets emphasized different angles and frames according to the presumed positionality of their target audience.

Rather, ‘what we know is that despite the efforts at counter-narrative and empathetic outpourings, the dominant narrative of black criminality prevailed in one of the most important sites of power – the courtroom’ (op.cit.: 17).

In order to seek justice for the racially ordered taking of his life, Trayvon Martin entered into symbolic circulation as ‘Trayvon’, in part framed and scripted in terms of constructions of threatening and suspicious blackness historically generated with the ‘racial formation’ of the US (Omi and Winant, 1995). He was symbolically reproduced within a capitalist media system where texts of black male deviancy are exchanged for profit, an assembly of associations that in turn produced ‘Trayvon’ intertextually, as a commodity to be projected onto and consumed. And this hyper-visibility, the suspicious fact of blackness, enforces the concomitant invisibility of race understood in Roediger’s terms as a ‘social category into which peoples are sorted, producing and justifying their very different opportunities with regard to ... life and premature death’ (op.cit.: 17). Media forms obscured the systemic dimension, as the adversarial story of a trial was mediated through short news segments and updates, and narrated as a tragic encounter between two individuals. Postracialism is present in the interplay of hyper-visibility and invisibilization that erases the historical and systemic conditions that positioned Trayvon as a suspicious body fatally out of place in a private gated community. Racism, again, appears everywhere and nowhere.

Noble’s use of Debord’s famously elusive idea of the spectacle is primarily designed to mark distance from pluralist imaginaries of the public sphere. By highlighting the communicative work invested by an affective public in attempting to undermine the commodification of ‘Trayvon Martin’, her theory of media power is less Debord’s treatise on mass delusion than Freedman’s fourth paradigm, that of *contradiction*. The media system, Freedman argues, is neither an undifferentiated power bloc (*control*) nor a field of power radically diffused and fractured by the digital media revolution (*chaos*) (2014: 18–24). Rather, it is comprised of actors and institutions that have material, social and ideological relations with vested interests and elite power, that regularly reproduce hegemonic forms of ‘common sense’, but that are nevertheless ‘not immune from the movements and ideas that circulate in society at any one time and the seek to challenge these power structures’ (ibid: 25). Analyzing the contradictions of media power, Freedman argues, requires an approach that

... emphasizes structure and agency, contradiction and action, consensus and conflict; an analytical framework that recognizes the existence of unequal power frameworks but acknowledges that they are not forever frozen; and a perspective that takes seriously the activities of producers and audiences while recognizing the existence of uneven consciousness. (ibid: 28)

Noble's approach layers an analysis of media power with the attention given to the undeclared power of racial articulation. In focusing on the challenge of teaching 'Trayvon', she emphasizes the ways in which activists and academics can work with media logics by strategic reframing and contestation, and also work against them by creating spaces for relocating 'racial incidents in socio-historical context' (op. cit.: 25). Yet this necessary embrace of contradiction underlines the intersection of inequalities in communicative power with the power of (post)-racial stratification, the processes through which, as Robin D.G. Kelley (2013) observed, a murdered teenager was put on trial for the crimes 'he would have committed had he lived past 17'. By foregrounding this mesh of power relations, the idea of debatability marks a critical distance from the pluralist understanding of 'debate'. Put bluntly, definitions of racism or other forms of oppression are unlikely to be shared in what Stuart Hall (1980) called 'societies structured in dominance', and thus the proposition that conceptual consensus is possible is latent with postracial presumption. Similarly, 'national conversations' on racism can never simulate the inclusive argumentation among individuals idealistically attached to deliberative notions of debate, because such discussions occur in public cultures where powerful, historically produced discourses and repertoires of racialized representation circulate and shape hierarchies of value in the 'marketplace of ideas'.

The integration of connective media and participatory networks to the hybrid media system certainly diversifies public discourse; however, the liberal imaginary of public debate rests on an inadequate examination of how power is challenged, reproduced and re-formed within its structures and dynamics. The 'affective public' of #BLM illustrates how the recognition of racism in 'postracial' societies depends on political mobilization and struggle; and in media cultures of endless and abundant content creation, interventions in 'debates' by those with less power and resources will always be strategic, and exact an affective cost. The idea of debatability foregrounds this, and underlines the need to examine how discourse unfolds in and through interlocking and sometimes contradictory forms of power.

The deniability of racism

The prominent hashtag response to #BlackLivesMatter, #AllLivesMatter, is an evocative artefact of the postracial formation. That is, its ostensibly agreeable, universal *raceless* message is only expressed in this form as a specific negation of the lethal social fact of race. It attempts to force BLM's claims of police and structural racism into silence by positioning their reference to black lives as a divisive reaction, as 'bringing race into it'. This form of denial is important because it signifies how 'postracial' racism may be silencing but it is not silent. The discursive game-playing of reversals and negations represented by this hashtag response has been a defining feature of the politics of racism since at least the 1970s. As its logics are now rehearsed every day in radio interviews, comment threads and Twitter storms, this discursivity must be regarded as an important dimension of debatability.

In the build-up to the 2015 UK general election, the BBC screened a documentary 'Meet the Ukipers', about the anti-immigration and anti-EU United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP). It featured an interview with a Kent city councillor, Rozanne Duncan, who openly and somewhat cheerfully discussed her deep and visceral dislike of 'Negros' and 'people with Negroid features' – features she helpfully described in detail – and to ensure that the viewer understood the depth of her aversion, even recounted a story about overtly discriminating against 'Negro children' in housing allocation decisions in council affairs in the past. If the previous sections have emphasized racism's political motility and mutable modes of expression, Duncan's openly phenotypical anti-black racism appears to reach back into the repudiated past and stage a defiant revival. This is particularly jarring in the context of the UK, where anti-racist movements powerfully combatted the racism brought to bear on 'postcolonial' migrants to Britain from the Caribbean and Indian sub-continent; where legislation banning various forms of racial and ethnic discrimination has been enacted over decades; where the development of ethnically mixed working-class communities in many British cities complicates and often actively unsettles nationalist assumptions; and where a stylized but nonetheless resonant notion of multiculturalism has become part of official attempts to re-position Britishness as an inclusive identity. In this context, as Ben Pitcher argues, 'to openly proclaim racist beliefs is effectively a declaration of one's moral degeneracy' (2009: 13). Yet even after the programme was broadcast, and Duncan was fired

from the party, she continued to insist through the media that she was *not racist*.

'I'm not racist, but ...' is a globally resonant cliché, thickened with layers of ironic deployment and mimetic enjoyment. This over-exposure does not prevent it from enduring as a vital political grammar, as *denial* has historically been formative in the expression of racism. In the extensive international literature on racism, a recurring theme is the layered resilience of racism denial; assumptions, practices and tactics that relativize or dismiss forms of racism and minimize their impact on the lived experience for those racialized in 'societies structured in dominance'. Denial takes different forms and is produced by different actors and agencies, but forms of denial serve to 'close down any space in which to question racism and the structures that produce and sustain it' (Macedo and Gounari, 2005: 3). Consequently, many key works on contemporary racism find themselves positioned as having to write about, and write against, the denial and disavowal of racism as dominant modes through which contemporary racisms are consolidated and rearticulated.

Such contemporary theoretical ideas as 'colour-blind racism', 'racism without racists' (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) and 'muted racism' (Davis, 2007), for example, seek to explain the shifting yet obdurate nature of racial stratification, inequality and discrimination in contexts with significant official and popular commitment to ideas of equality, diversity, multiculturalism and anti-racism. These system-level analyses are complemented by a literature on social and communicative interaction, where notions of 'racial paranoia' (Jackson, 2008), 'the racism of denial' (Giroux, 2003), 'ambient racism' (Sharma and Brooker, 2016) and 'racial equivalence' (Song, 2014) examine how denial works as a formative aspect of what Philomena Essed (1991) termed 'everyday racism', a silencing of the experience of racism that must be negotiated in social interaction and institutional context (see Harries, 2014, for a discussion of young people's response to these micro-processes). Sara Ahmed (2010), in her work on 'willfulness', has explored the reversals that proliferate in the gap between the 'official prohibition' of racism and the lived experience of racialized exclusions and dynamics:

It can be willful even to name racism, as if the talk about divisions is what is divisive. Given that racism recedes from social consciousness, it appears as if the ones who 'bring it up' are bringing it into existence ... racism is very difficult to talk about as racism can operate to censor the very evidence of its existence. Those who talk about racism are thus heard as creating rather than

describing a problem ... when you use the language of racism you are heard as ‘going on about it’, as ‘not letting go’. It is as if talking about racism is what keeps it going.

Read in these terms, Duncan’s resolute refusal to recognize the character of her speech is coherent with the variegated ways in which racism is denied even as it is being performed. Further, her dehumanizing focus on ‘negroid features’ positions her racism as a spectacular outburst that serves to confirm the positioning of UKIP at the extremes of the electoral party system, and the contention of other parties that UKIP are uniquely responsible for racism in British politics. Such outbursts also fit an established form of mediated scandal – the interview with Duncan was released to the media prior to the BBC’s broadcast of the documentary – that is routinely read as distracting from the silenced operations of structural racism, precisely because their event-like irruption drives a ritual of public repudiation of racism-as-anachronism (Davis, 2008; Hartigan Jr, 2010). However, comments like Duncan’s have significance beyond this, in that while they act to silence, they are far from silent acts – they are fluent.

Duncan sought at length in the programme extract for an explanation for her aversion and willingness to discriminate. She was, in short, fascinated with her own racism. And her fascination produced a kind of fluency as her explanations ranged across a repertoire of forms of denial, derived from decades of political investment in silencing the experience of racism from being heard and taken seriously. In his examination of the politics of racism in the UK, Ben Pitcher describes a ‘language war over racial reference’, whereby ‘any direct approach to the question of race must be channeled through a public discourse that explicitly signals the illegitimacy of racist beliefs and practices’ (2009: 14). This language war is a result not only of the success of anti-racist movements in opposing public manifestations of racism, but also of the concerted emphasis on adaptive discourse and communicative strategy that characterizes the ‘new racism’ diagnosed in western Europe since the 1970s. The public inadmissibility of race after the Holocaust, and the strong post-war aversion to parties and movements that laid claim to a Nazi and fascist lineage, forced movements of the ‘new right’ to turn to a discourse of irreconcilable *cultural difference* rather than *racial hierarchy* to publicly justify the politicization of migration.

This complex heritage is explored in a variety of ways in subsequent chapters, but a sense of it emerges from the compressed fluency

of Duncan's explanations. Firstly, and recalling Hesse's argument that 'what remains (of racism) ... is consigned to pathology' (2004: 10), she speculates as to whether she needs regression therapy to identify a repressed fear, 'something in my psyche' that would explain her behaviour, because 'I don't know why, I wish I did'. From this reproduction of the broadly liberal conviction that racism is now nothing more than an individual maladjustment, she segues into one of the key strategies of the so-called 'new racism', *differentialism*. She stopped 'young negroes' getting social housing in the 1980s because back then there were no black people and foreigners living in Thanet, and it would have been unfair to them. Unfair, because as the post-Powellite new racism in the UK or *Nouvelle Droit* in France then argued, cultures have their own place, and are better off kept separate as contact leads inevitably to conflict. It isn't the 'colonials' or migrants' fault, they're better off in their own place, as they 'too have natural homes'. It's not about race, it's about culture; but if there is racism it is *reversed*, as it is the act of migration that threatens national unity, and the refusal/inability of the racialized to integrate to a unified, national way of life. To refuse these 'uncomfortable truths' is to bow, inevitably, to 'political correctness'. And while ultimately she accepts that 'there is no justification' for her attitudes, she also appeals to context, recounting how she reminds her daughter that she was born in a different time and place, and that while she is marked by it, she is reflexive enough to recognize the need to change. Performing for the camera, she replicates the 'subjective, autobiographical and confessional modes of expression (that) have proliferated ... across print journalism, literature, factual TV and digital media' (Dovey, 2000: 1).

While we might expect this fluency from an experienced party activist of the political right, it is also a feature of what Miri Song regards as a wider 'culture of racial equivalence'. Song situates her discussion of public understandings of racism in the contemporary UK in an argument about the critical need for concepts that are adequate to the shifting dynamics of racism in a multicultural society. Echoing John L. Jackson's notion of 'racial paranoia' in the US, Song argues that contemporary society is characterized by high levels of awareness of 'racial identity', and of the dangers of committing 'public racial indiscretions', yet also by understandings of racism that are 'often highly imprecise, broad, and used to describe a wide range of racialized phenomena' (2014: 1). This imprecision is more than the product of the multivalent disagreement and confusion elicited by Riss's cartoon. A significant consequence of

this, she argues, is the ‘growing tendency in Britain to regard almost any form of racial statement, made by anyone (of any hue), as automatically, and indiscriminately, “racist”’ (ibid: 4). This collapses a ‘bewildering’ range of racialized interactions into a catch-all category of racism, without attention being given to formative social relations and the distribution of power in a historical and political context. Further, this equivalence is secured through a proliferation of mediated accusations of ‘reverse racism’ – that is, of a discursive tactic designed to extract the consideration of racism from a shifting yet historically structured ‘system of power and domination’ and reduce it simply to a prejudice that anybody can hold.

Song’s examination of a ‘culture of racial equivalence’ demonstrates how the fluency compressed in Duncan’s denial has become widely distributed. Discursive tactics that emerged and have transnationally proliferated since the 1970s for strategic political advantage in countering anti-racist politics are now routine scripts. They are part of a discursive sedimentation that is amplified by the communicative forms of both mainstream media debates and, as Song’s central evidential focus on Twitter responses to ‘scandalous’ incidents of purported public racism demonstrates, social media interactions. In emphasizing the immediacy and potential networked reach of connective media platforms, and the issue of anonymity, she argues that the problem with ‘soundbyte technologies’ is that

... such charges of racism (and reverse racism) tend to be monolithic, and delivered in formats which are not conducive to the elaboration of detailed and careful argumentation and explanations; as such, these brief articles, blogs, and Tweets do not properly assess the nature and specific of each racial interaction or event.

This is undoubtedly true, but by privileging the assumptions of rational critical debate as the normative horizon for social media interaction, the argument neglects to account for the variety of ways in which communication is motivated, and *mediated*. As Geert Lovink argues, the textual flow of ‘comment cultures’ has ‘created systems that are no longer solely concentrated on interpretation of the text itself. We do not care so much what the text precisely “says” but what the wider ecology is. Instead of a close reading, we practice intuitive scanning’ (2011: 57). In a hybrid media system ‘racial incidents’ have a generative value, driving interaction and sharing, yet outside of such spectacles, there is also, as

Sharma and Brooker (2016) show in their study of the hashtag *#notracist*, a constant use of the hashtag in steady but low-volume tweeting that 'is not about any specific event or issue as such ... but (gathered) around a wide array of sub-topics which bubble away on Twitter without ever trending or becoming visible'.

Public debate as to what constitutes racism is constituted through discourse. A pronounced dimension of 'postracial' societies is that debate is filtered through discursive repertoires and scripts of denial that are now sedimented into public culture, and that are given expression through a complex range of communicative dynamics and motivations. They are amplified as sense-making frameworks both within the tensions of a political conjuncture and by the mediating configurations of communicative forms and platform specificities. In the surfeit of searchable and flattened-out evidence and sources, they can always be 'proven' through instantly linkable examples of 'reverse racism', or political correctness, or multicultural censorship, and injected into any unfolding discussion of racism. Debatability suggests that we need to examine how denial is effected not just through silence but also through noise.

The background of the entire page is an abstract, high-contrast black and white composition. It features thick, expressive brushstrokes that create a sense of movement and texture. The strokes are layered, with some appearing more prominent than others, creating a complex, organic shape that resembles a stylized letter or a calligraphic mark. The overall effect is one of raw, artistic energy.

2

The politics of representation in postracial media culture

Debatability and the politics of representation

‘It would not be too far-fetched to suggest’, Roger Silverstone writes in *Media and Morality: On the Rise of the Mediapolis*, that the ‘primary cultural role’ of the media is ‘the endless, endless, endless playing with difference and sameness’. Media work cannot help but involve what he terms ‘boundary work’, from the macro-boundary work of addressing and shaping publics, to the micro-boundary work that shapes the every-day flow of representations and constructions of the social world. This is a world assembled from ‘the continuous inscriptions of difference in any and every media text or discourse: from the crude stereotypes of otherness to the subtle and not-so-subtle discriminations of dramatic characterization, narrative construction, political punditry, internet chat rooms and talk radio’ (2007: 13). Silverstone’s characterization at once captures why the analysis of representation is a foundational focus of Media and Cultural Studies, and the breadth of genres, texts and practices that the idea of *representation* has come to encompass and implicate. The idea of ‘boundary work’ does more than underline the fact, both patently obvious and frequently obscured, that representations are constructed, crafted, curated and circulated. It emphasizes that they proceed from and through forms of economic, institutional and symbolic power, the power to draw, delineate and attempt to define.

Representations of race – and its intersections with gender, class and sexuality – have provided a critical focus for this constructivist project of ‘the politics of representation’, and decades of studies have emphasized the role of media representations and narratives in propagating and resisting racialized mythologies, premises and ‘commonsense’ assumptions. Writing in 1981, in this then nascent area of research, Stuart Hall argued that ‘amongst other kinds of ideological labour, the media construct for us a definition of what race is, what meaning the imagery of race carries, and what the problem of race is understood to be. They help us to classify out the world in terms of the categories of race’ (1981: 35). Studies of this ‘ideological labour’ now comprise a vast body of literature, spanning fiction and non-fiction media genres and the racialization of groups, populations and identities in their historical and contextual specificity. Yet even as Hall underlines the significance of ‘the media’ in the boundary work of race, he warns against the kind of deterministic, mediacentric and sometimes quasi-conspiratorial

understandings of power that the homogenizing shorthand of ‘the media’ invites. ‘It would be simple and convenient’, Hall continues, ‘if all the media were simply the ventriloquists of a unified and racist “ruling class” conception of the world. But neither a unifiedly conspiratorial media nor indeed a unified racist “ruling class” exists in anything like that simple way’ (ibid).

Further, the meanings of representations are shaped by their circulation and integration into flows of images, narratives and other forms of symbolic content. The representations discussed in the previous chapter – the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoon, the construction of ‘Trayvon Martin’, the BBC programme taster – became ‘debatable’ when they entered into wider and unpredictable circulation as objects of media commentary, memetic engagement and ‘real-time’ critique or satire. The sheer flow of symbolic content in contemporary transnational, hyper-visual digital environments intensifies and extends the terrain of representation even as it renders public horizons of reception and engagement more complex. The unevenly distributed yet markedly changed practices of everyday media representation in and through connective media alter this terrain’s relations and terms. The ‘politics of representation’ today, therefore, is more than an academic field of textual research. It is a distributed practice increasingly integrated into everyday media engagements with the flow of symbolic content, and honed to contest or accentuate, however ephemerally, the register of representations of race.

The aim of this chapter is shaped by exploring this observation in relation to the established field of study. The significance of mediated representation, and the sheer scale of the research that has been produced, places a generic demand on studies of media and racism, such as this one, to provide some kind of inevitably partial yet purposeful survey of the field. In some survey or introductory texts discrete studies are often decontextualized and knitted into a patchwork diagnosis of both ‘racism’ and ‘the media’, providing a model of how not to address this demand. Beyond such mechanistic applications, it is difficult for survey or summary approaches to draw out the relationality of racisms when ranging, however reflectively, across a sample of media genres, political contexts and modalities of racialization. The first section, therefore, foregoes this more conventional approach of providing a thematic and theoretical overview. It instead suggests that what is currently at stake in the ‘politics of representation’ can be assembled from a discussion of recent critical perspectives that question the limits and purpose of representational analysis. These criticisms provide points

of orientation for thinking through fundamental questions of representation, politics and racism, and thus this alternative survey approach is used to build a critical scaffolding for thinking about representation and postracial debatability.

It does this by focusing on a recurring form of controversy in postcolonial nation-states, the critique of racist representations in contexts where race is held to be a ‘frozen’ dimension of the past. It draws on the idea of ‘racial debris’ (Amin, 2010) to approach how images derived from colonial modernity continue to be reproduced, circulated, invested in and contested in the current ‘postracial’ moment. The first step involves a discussion of the work of Stuart Hall and Frantz Fanon on the vital question of how and why representations figure in the ‘work’ of race, and what this tells us about the idea of ‘race’ itself. The final section then takes these conceptual approaches to the politics of representation to the contemporary politics of ‘blackface’ in the Netherlands and Flanders. It explores a situation where anti-racist activists and racialized communities have politically opposed forms of media and cultural representation as images indexed to particular historical archives, provoking a politics of representation that takes shape in and through the circulation of images and texts across time and space. But in so doing, these images also act as a prism for a conjunctural critique of contemporary racism under socio-political conditions characterized by a now-familiar contradiction – the denial of race coupled with a relentless focus on the problem of ‘ethnic and religious difference’.

What is living and what is dead in the politics of representation?

Over the decades of the broadcast era, an enormous body of work has been produced on what is often called the ‘politics of representation’, a formula which emphasizes that, under conditions of massively unequal access to symbolic resources, the process of representation cannot be separated from the power to represent, and the cultural power of representations from prevailing socio-political relations and structures. Assessing how the social order and social relations are reproduced and made meaningful through the symbolic production and circulation of images and stories is regarded as critical to understanding the operation of ideology and hegemony. Examining how boundaries are inscribed is important to unsettling and challenging the naturalization

and legitimization of exclusion from, or coercive inclusion in, the imagined community. Dominant media and cultural studies methodologies draw on a rich body of constructionist theory and semiotic concepts to approach representation as a fluid and active process of meaning production, where the irreducibly polysemic dimensions of representation must be examined in relation to the power relations through which representations are produced, and which are encoded in their construction of the social world. Such approaches, Shani Orgad argues, focus on the ways in which media representations ‘are involved, often in subtle, latent and highly sophisticated ways, in the reproduction and/or contestation of power relations and inequalities, for example of class, gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, age and nationality’ (2012: 25).

Despite, or perhaps because of this centrality, recent critical evaluations have suggested that the academic ‘politics of representation’ is a somewhat exhausted enterprise. Exhausted does not mean empty; as we shall see, in contexts where anti-migrant sensationalism, Islamophobic discourse and anti-black mythologies circulate resiliently, ‘the field of representation remains a place of struggle’, as bell hooks argued a quarter of a century ago in *Black Looks* (1992: 3). What is less clear, this body of critique contends, is what this struggle can hope to achieve under contemporary media and political conditions, and what insights and possibilities it contributes to beyond an analysis of the text. In the following discussion, some main lines of critique are examined in order to build points of orientation for situating the politics of representation under the conditions outlined in the previous chapter.

One such trajectory is an assessment of the suppleness of central concepts employed in the analysis of representation, such as the question of *mediated visibility*. In contexts where indigenous peoples have been dispossessed and erased from stories of the nation, and racialized populations framed as ambiguous supplements to the nation’s taken-for-granted whiteness, ‘inclusion and exclusion’ from the imagined communities and social worlds of media representations features as an organizing concern of the field. Historical accounts of film and television, for example, document regimes of unquestioned invisibility or tightly circumscribed inclusion; as John D.H. Downing argues in an essay on broadcast history, ‘American television in its first two generations inherited and diffused – on an hourly or daily basis – a mythology of whiteness that framed and sustained a racist national self-understanding’ (n.d.). And, of all the issues that have informed academic analysis, the question of visibility/inclusion in non-fiction programming is the one

that most keenly animates public contest. Here there is an important contrast between theoretical and mobilizing understandings. Cultural theory generally underlines the instability of meaning, and broadly postmodern approaches insist on the death of referentiality in image-saturated environments. However, the idea that media texts that make a discursive claim to represent the social world should *reflect* aspects of what is recognized by those who inhabit that social world retains a powerful ethical and political charge. Reflectionist assumptions suffuse media professional understandings as to the media's capacity to truthfully capture what is happening in society, and these assumptions are dialectically engaged by the various monitoring and advocacy projects that work 'premised on the idea that the media should somehow mirror the society on which they report' (Orgad, 2012: 19).

In media cultures characterized by the incessant proliferation of images and a diversification of producers, audiences and markets, the question of visibility is often regarded as quaint. Yet it is a form of postracial fiction to consider it 'fixed' in a linear progression towards greater representational complexity. Over the last few years, for example, the exclusion of actors of colour from dramatically meaningful film roles has been subject to significant public commentary. A 2016 report by the British Film Institute demonstrated that almost 60% of British films made in the preceding ten years had 'no named black characters', and only 13% had a 'black actor in a leading role' (Addley, 2016). In the same year, a widely-publicized Tumblr page 'Every Single Word' featured edits of well-known Hollywood movies where all dialogue spoken by white characters was removed (allowing one to watch the entire *Harry Potter* series in 5 minutes and 40 seconds, and the reduction of what seems like forever before the ship finally sinks in *Titanic* to 54 seconds). In 2018, a collective of 16 actors and comedians in France published *Noire n'est pas mon métier* ['Black is not my profession'], which, as well as discussing the racism and sexism they experienced in the film industry, documented the near absence of any roles that did not conform to resilient stereotypes – 'do you speak African?' – and called for the 'right to banality' as actors (Maïga et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, the question of visibility is often understood simplistically or instrumentally, lending itself to essentialist and reified ideas of racial or group identity that elide the intersectional dimensions of oppression and the complexity of lived identities. And, as Herman Gray (2013) has argued, the objective of greater visibility and 'representation as an end in itself ... perfectly expresses the logic of market choice, consumer sovereignty, self-reliance, and cultural diversity', and thus cannot integrate a consideration of how the proliferation of images undercuts the

foundations of a politics of recognition predicated on exclusion and overt marginalization under past conditions of ‘media scarcity’. Of course, as these cinema controversies suggest, the question of visibility/inclusion shades almost immediately into interpretative evaluations of the discursive construction of representations; the ‘right to banality’ is explicitly framed as a demand to play ‘all the women in film and theatre’ and not just stereotypical roles of ‘African mamas and prostitutes’ (du Boucheron, 2018). The question of *stereotypes* thus provides a further imperative of media analysis, for, as Simon Cottle summarizes,

It is in and through representations ... that members of the media audience are variously invited to construct a sense of who ‘we’ are in relation to who ‘we’ are not, whether as ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’, ‘coloniser’ and ‘colonised’, ‘citizen’ and ‘foreigner’, ‘normal’ and ‘deviant’, ‘friend’ and ‘foe’, ‘the west’ and ‘the rest’. (2000: 2)

Like the question of visibility, the relevance of *stereotyping* is also subject to postracial assumption; in a context where media consumers/users are schooled in the constant play of intertextuality and ironic referentiality, stereotypes, the story goes, are a dwindling product of a less sophisticated, more ‘overtly racist’ past. Yet it is precisely this postracial sensibility through which stereotypes are recomposed. The idea of ‘ironic racism’, or ‘hipster racism’, for example, describes the recuperation of racist or gendered stereotypes as nothing more than ironic signifiers, curiosities and remnants of a past that *we* have repudiated, and which can now be enjoyed on the licence of knowing referentiality and performative self-awareness. Nevertheless, the resilience of particular repertoires of representation, the practices which have produced them, the forms of symbolic reduction and containment they propose, and the contemporary investments and mutations they acquire, require understanding ‘the content of stereotypes historically – to bring the repressed historical dimension of stereotyping back into the light of its analysis in the present’ (Pickering, 2001: 8). Without this attention to historicity and the shifting investments of contemporary articulation, the analysis of stereotypes is quickly reduced to a hunt for binary relations, inadvertently naturalizing race and soliciting idealist proposals as to how to ‘correct’ or ‘smash’ them. As Shohat and Stam argue in *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, ‘The focus on “good” and “bad” characters in image analysis confronts racist discourse on that discourse’s favoured ground. It easily elides into moralism, and thus into fruitless debates about the

relative virtues of fictive characters ... and the correctness of their fictional actions' (1994: 200–1).

Further lines of criticism depart from a widely-held methodological reservation. In a review of 'research on racism, ethnicity and the media', Downing and Husband point to the dominance of *textual research* in relation to representation, suggesting that it is a consequence of a general disciplinary focus on 'deciphering' communication as a symbolic process, the relative ease of accessing media content for research, and the primacy placed on analyzing meaning as a determining dimension of cultural and political significance (2005: 26). While this proposes a somewhat pragmatic case for this dominance, it is also important to underline how this situation emerged. That is, the focus on *reading* the products of media culture, interpreting how texts signify and make meaning in a wider field of intertextual interaction, was informed by the shift in cultural and critical theory in the 1970s/80s to take 'ordinary' cultural processes seriously: to think about how 'dominant meanings' are encoded textually but never stable in their signification; to grapple with how mediated images and narratives are interpreted and put to work in identity negotiation, political ideology and social understanding; to depart from primarily behavioural, transmissive or functional models of media's significance, and normative theories of implicit cultural value, to examine complex and often contested circuits of cultural production. Representation, it was argued, is a process, and the 'struggle', the aim of deconstructing racialized representations, bell hooks argued, is not about sifting 'good and bad imagery', but about intervening in these circuits by 'transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews' (1992: 4).

The issue with the prevalence of textual analysis is that it has come to dominate *over* those other dimensions necessary to support such an intervention. Trumping the other 'components of a Critical Cultural Studies approach' that requires attention to also be paid to production and political economy and the reception and use of cultural texts (Kellner, 2015: 10–16), it has detached from the necessarily relational dimensions of media research. Nick Couldry, for example, models media research as a 'pyramid with four apexes' of media *texts*, *political economy* of media production, the *technical properties* of media, and the *social uses* of media technology and content – the pyramid can be turned to prioritize any one apex, but they remain mutually implicated (2012: 6–7). Otherwise diverse lines of critique stem from a reckoning

with this dominance as *limitation*, including its neglect of the materiality of representation. ‘Non-representational’ theories of digital media and assemblage emphasize that it is not enough to analyze media-as-text as digital objects are processual, ‘a particular articulation, the end result of specific interactions with specific programs at that specific moment’ (Jarrett and Naji, 2016: 6). In his research on race and the cultural industries, Anamik Saha argues that this limitation in respect of digital technology is the continuation of a pronounced research deficit, and that understanding representation as a process requires a rebalancing away from how the cultural industries ‘*represent* race to how cultural industries *make* race’ (2018: 11, original emphasis). The limitation of textual analysis is that while it ‘can highlight the discourses and ideologies that underpin racialized representations of difference, they cannot tell us how and why these representations come to be made in the first place’ – a limitation that also stymies the transformative goal articulated by hooks, as the marginalization of production studies stunts a consideration of how and in what ways practices and strategies may shift representational politics (ibid: 21).

The question of limitation underpins further lines of critique. One of the most consistent is the contention that the politics of representation is a *distraction*, or, as Adolph Reed Jr (2013) puts it, a ‘cultural politics is worse than no politics at all’. In a juxtaposition of *The Help* – a 2011 film set in 1960s Mississippi about a young white journalist’s attempt to write a book from the point of view of black house maids – and Quentin Tarantino’s (2012) *Django Unchained* – a ‘revisionist’ slave revenge spaghetti western – Reed’s focus is on why the latter received a reading as ‘subversive’, while the former was dismissed as patronising for erasing the multiplicity of ways in which black people were organizing their own emancipation during the Civil Rights period. They are, he argues, in effect ‘different versions of the same movie’, as both dissolve the prevailing social relations and structuring political economy of historical formations into individualized narratives of overcoming. He criticizes readings of *Django* by ‘black and leftoid commentators’ who framed the film as validating a ‘history of autonomous black agency and “resistance” as a politico-existential desideratum’, as assigning significance to representations of heroic or resistant ‘black heroes’ effects a discursive casting of ‘political and economic problems in psychological terms’. It also artificially separates the signifying text from its status as a commodity produced within what Reed defiantly refers to as a ‘mass culture ... thoroughly embedded in capitalist material

and ideological imperatives', and thus integral to the reproduction of the very conditions of injustice the politics of representation seeks to engage.

Defiantly, as Reed's argument draws explicitly on one side of 'mass culture versus popular culture' debates that have taken a variety of shapes over decades, from the Frankfurt School critique of 'the culture industry', to theories of cultural imperialism, to often exaggerated though nonetheless substantive disagreements between political economy and cultural studies (see Fenton, 2008). It is not my intention to rehearse these debates here, and Reed's resistance to investment in the transformative power of images/narratives also suffuses a number of other critical positions, from scepticism regarding the individualizing drive of narratives of empowerment to a more profound critique of the *mediacentrism* which the politics of representation can cultivate, where the 'world is considered to be a product of representation, with the media then being the central means of that representation' (Hesmondhalgh and Toynbee, 2008: 12; see also Couldry, 2012).

Rather, the focus here is on Reed's contention that a politics of representation *is worse than no politics at all*. Firstly, it should be noted that what he sees as the neglect of sustained anti-capitalism in some representational politics is not an oversight, but quite conscious. Racialized people can object to racist imagery from a variety of political positions, and community or media watch groups may be motivated to confront prejudicial representations, without implying that 'this reform will have greater impact on society than other reforms' (Alcoff, 2006: 28). Beyond this, Reed's delineation of the 'politics of representation' is organized around two assumptions: that the dominant purpose of textual analysis is to recover resistant or transformative dimensions, and that textual analysis inevitably obscures the political economy of production. While this certainly describes particular trends in academic production, including a much commented tendency to distil political hope from 'resistant' readings of popular cultural texts, it is hard to see how this delineation incorporates research that takes seriously the need to interpret the texts of the media industry in terms of the context of their emergence and production. In her study of representations of Arabs and Muslims in US television drama after 9/11, Evelyn Alsutany, like Reed, critiques the focus on 'positive' or empowering images, not because this kind of cultural politics distracts from more fundamental political struggle, but because it fails to understand how cultural politics intersects with this wider political struggle.

In the post 9/11 conjuncture, US television drama conspicuously featured ‘good Muslim’ characters to an extent that comprised ‘a new representational strategy whereby sympathetic representations are standardized as a stock feature of media narratives’ (Alsutany, 2012: 10–11). To consider these representations in isolation from a wider, interactive ‘hegemonic field’ of ‘government and media discourses’, however, would be to miss how this emergent strategy fictively inscribed the wider discursive distinction between ‘extremist and moderate’ Muslims, honed during a period of military imperialism, domestic surveillance and coercion, and exaggerated, compulsory patriotism. These ‘simplified complex representations’, while appearing to directly challenge the negative stereotypes associated with racism, ‘simultaneously produce the logics and affects necessary to legitimize racist policies and practices’ (ibid: 14). That is, by projecting an attachment to multiculturalism and a postracial consensus capable of withstanding the temptation to ‘demonise’ an enemy, they circumscribe ‘acceptable forms of Muslim American identity’ and obscure how the securitarian response to the attacks involved intensively racializing forms of collective surveillance, profiling, and immigration ‘reform’ (see Kapoor, 2018). Alsutany’s argument that ‘it is no longer the case that the Other is explicitly demonized to justify war or injustice’ (op. cit: 16) is critical to understanding how, as the next chapter examines, racialization often proceeds not by rejecting multiculturalism or diversity *tout court*, but by sifting and ordering acceptable and unacceptable forms of diversity. Her method of examining the emergence of a particular representational strategy in and through the political conjuncture opens up more possibilities for understanding political formations in heavily mediated societies than insisting on capitalist media as a superstructural distraction, *tout court*, from the underlying political real.

A very different line of critique builds on this circulation of racial meaning in public culture to argue not that a focus on representation distracts from politics, but that certain tendencies reduce representations solely *to* politics. In a reading of Bob Marley’s image in consumer culture, Ben Pitcher (2014) argues for thinking about how racial meaning is shaped and shifted through articulation, performance and adaptation, and thus often ‘exceeds the parameters’ of racism and anti-racism, necessitating ways of thinking about race in cultural circulation which is not reduced to this categorical approach. Pitcher’s argument is a departure from prevalent critiques of representation in consumer culture which emphasize how the mediated imaginaries of

consumer societies are inconceivable without an ‘aesthetic cosmopolitanism’ (Urry, 2003) that is semiologically voracious: commodifying, co-opting, hybridizing and riffing on cultural styles and referents, on *difference*. Scholarship on the commodification of race, as Anamik Saha summarizes, examines how racial markers are used to differentiate cultural products ‘that have no discernible difference between them in terms of use value; in which case symbols of race and ethnicity, especially when tapping into the fears and desires bound up in imperial nostalgia or postcolonial melancholy, are able to give commodities a competitive advantage’ (2018: 67).

Some assessments of the commodification of difference hew towards the paradigm of distraction by arguing how a ‘soft cosmopolitanism’ predicated on mobility and the appreciation of difference provides cultural capital for liberal individualism (Calhoun, 2002) and a form of stylized multiculturalism that is the ‘ideal form of ideology of global capitalism’ (Žižek, 1997). Pitcher’s argument is different, conceiving of consumer culture as a space in which meaning is produced and reproduced in artefacts and practices often dismissed as trivial but which are part of the ‘ensemble of relations’ which constitute race as a site of meaning. As a consequence, the tendency to read solely ideologically is reductive, as ‘to try to confront racism without acknowledging the full complexity of racial meaning is to undermine anti-racism and place an arbitrary and rudimentary limit on how we conceptualise it’ (2014: 23). This complexity, therefore, requires a vigilance against critical readings that sift representations according to whether they confirm or contest forms of racism, eliding the ‘meanings of race in excess of racism’ (ibid: 17). Pitcher’s emphasis on processes of meaning generation suggests a final point of orientation; *intertextual circulation* and the accretion of commentary as productive dimensions of the process of representation. In an assessment of media sociology scholarship on race and representation in the US in recent decades, Ronald N. Jacobs (2014) emphasizes the need to recognize how

... racialized representations derive meanings from intertextual circulation of factual and fictional media. Consequently, it is important for media sociologists to study the full range of mediated representations. Second, media representations of race are connected to the larger field of political and social representations. Third, while media representations have clear ideological tendencies, they are also multivalent and polysemic texts, offering a variety of interpretative paths. Because of this fact, it is important to

study racial representations as part of a larger struggle over meaning, in public as well as private communicative spaces. We cannot only study texts themselves; we must also explore how media texts become objects of commentary and critique in a variety of multiple yet overlapping publics.

Jacobs is focused here on the need to consider representation beyond the hermeneutic relationship between the media text and the reader/audience, yet his emphasis on how racialized representations derive meaning, and what this demands of analysis, provides an insightful starting point for thinking about the digital media environment. Herman Gray, in echoing Pitcher's dissatisfaction with a 'binary formulation of dominance and resistance' in critical analysis of issues of representation and meaning, similarly underlines that the generativity of circulation is critical to analyzing digital media. Circulation mobilizes public sentiment and resonance, and requires 'thinking about the work of race in media (and media on questions of race) along the lines of media circulation, intensification and proliferation of affective investments and not just the legibility and authenticity of representation' (2013: 792–3). Conceiving of circulation in these terms is not a preamble to a celebration of connective media's modes of participation or the 'resistant practices' of users (an assessment of how digital media platforms both enable and constrict anti-racist politics is undertaken in the final chapter). For one thing, this is not simply a question of social media users 'talking back' to media representations, as the increased production and circulation of commentary is a political economic imperative of the 'high choice' media environment. A consequence of this accelerated, attention-seeking dynamic is media hyper-responsiveness, if not reflexivity, regarding potentially racist representations.

Further, in a context where online news sites have significantly expanded the competition for attention, accelerated news cycles demand concerted content production, and news sites must compete in a context of 'distributed discovery' through social media platforms and aggregator sites, it is no longer simply that 'a more participatory media environment ... provides digital media users with new opportunities to engage with the news by commenting on stories, sharing them, discussing them with others' (Nielsen et al., 2016: 14). What was often termed 'user-generated content' has shifted from being a celebrated – if in practice highly circumscribed – complement to news witnessing and story elaboration (Peters and Witschge, 2014) to providing a source and topic of news. Take the video 'This is America' by Childish Gambino/Donald Glover, which

was released on May 5th 2018 and accumulated ten million YouTube views in 24 hours (Beaumont-Thomas, 2018). The layered and allusive video invites a reading in terms of the history of anti-black violence in the US, and a reading is what it received; by May 8th, *Time*, *Business Insider*, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, to name but a few, had published online responses collating and building on social media disseminated ‘decodings’ of the ‘hidden meanings you may have missed’ as ‘the internet was quick to pick up on tons of hidden messages that were scattered throughout the video’ (Yzola, 2018).

The oft-neglected hermeneutic overspill of circulation and commentary that Jacobs integrated into the intertextual process of representation is now structured into the economy and operations of contemporary ‘news-as-comment’ culture. Concomitantly, this structural intensification of circulation and comment overlaps with, and undoubtedly shapes, the extent to which symbols and representations have become mediating conduits for the politics of race. The politics of representation has acquired a renewed visibility as a distributed digital practice, commercial media imperative and modality of racialized politics, and the critiques of representation analysis discussed provide points of orientation for responding to it. The following sections attempt to carry these points forward by focusing on a recurring form of the politics of representation shaped by the dynamics of debatability – the politicization of image repertoires derived and adapted from the colonial past as ways of forcing a reckoning with the coloniality of the ‘postracial’ present. The next section moves towards a discussion of that generativity by revisiting the relationship between representation and race.

Human chains, chains of equivalence

In a lecture first delivered in 1994, Stuart Hall called for an account of ‘why race is so tenacious in human history, so impossible to dislodge’ (2017: 43). In ‘Race – the Sliding Signifier’, Hall juxtaposes the fact that all attempts to ‘fix the idea of race foundationally’ in biology, genetics, physiology or various formulas of pseudo-science have failed, and yet the widely-cited conviction that ‘race is a construct’ has not dislodged forms of racialized ‘commonsense’ in society. Hall is pointing to the durability and motility of racialized meaning and logics beyond the radical break announced, following the Second World War, with race as

a putatively scientific concept. As Mark Mazower notes in his history of twentieth-century Europe, ‘In an age of empire and social Darwinism, notions of racial hierarchy were ubiquitous, and few Europeans on Left or Right did not believe in ideas of racial superiority in one form or another, or accept their relevance to colonial policy’ (1998: 101). While the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries constituted a period of significant political and institutional investment in racial eugenics, targeting both the ‘unfitness’ of the industrial working class and the threat of racial mixing across colonies and metropolises (Sussman, 2014; see also Rowbotham 2011: 87–94), in practice ‘the concept of race had an exceptionally amorphous and indeterminate meaning’ (Mazower, op. cit.: 102). It is this indeterminacy that Hall picks up on, yet it is important to recognize that, following the implacable genocide of European Jews in the *Shoah* and Roma in the *Porajmos*, the need to refute biological knowledge that justified hierarchical categories of human difference was a compelling political, scientific and civil prerogative.

The problem that Hall outlines is that despite this discrediting of phenotypical and genetic discourses of racial difference, it is symptomatic of racial discourse ‘that the physical or biological trace, having been shown out of the front door, tends to sidle around the edge of the veranda and climb back in through the pantry window’ (2017: 36). It is this relation between persistence and indeterminacy that leads Hall to underline the insufficiency of proclaiming that race doesn’t exist, not because of a conceptual or political investment in it, but because the lack of a scientific base does not account for race as a ‘sociohistorical fact’. Race is a fiction, but not an easily dispelled story, because it works as discourse:

I do nevertheless want to advance the scandalous argument that, socially, historically, and politically, race is a discourse; that it operates like a language, like a sliding signifier; that its signifiers reference not genetically established facts but the systems of meaning that have come to be fixed in the classifications of culture; and that those meanings have real effects not because of some truth that inheres in their scientific classification but because of the will to power and the regime of truth that are instituted in the shifting relations of discourse that such meanings establish with our concepts and ideas in the signifying field. (ibid: 45–6)

Hall introduces this key move by pre-empting objections to it: How could something with the historical weight of race be explained at the level of signification, of cultural meaning? His argument stresses the

importance of representations to the ‘concrete historical work’ of racism, but this turn to a semiotic vocabulary does not entail that race only exists as a system of self-referential differences. Rather, visible differences are made meaningful *through* discursive practices. There is no point denying, Hall notes, that there are differences in appearance between humans; however, it is when these differences are encoded and organized within discourse ‘as a system of marked differentiations, that the resulting categories can be said to acquire meaning, become a factor in human culture, regulate conduct, and have real effects on everyday social practices’ (2017: 50). This key move requires an account of how race works ‘like a sliding signifier’, and it also propels the argument into a colossal field of study and controversy as to the specifically modern production of race under colonialism, capitalist modernity, and the formation of European nation-states. Lingering momentarily at the edge of this field, appreciating Hall’s argument requires recalling the sheer historical pervasiveness of racial frameworks and logics. In *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* (2016) Patrick Wolfe follows other historians in insisting on the modern status of race (see also Bethencourt, 2013; Fredrickson, 2002; Hannaford, 1996). While race is striated with older forms of religious, phenotypical and civilizational prejudice, these relations are not ‘imbued with the discursive formation that today we call “race” ... a distinctive configuration of ideological elements that we do not find configured in this way before the late eighteenth century’ (2016: 7).

This configuration establishes linkages between physical characteristics and ‘cognitive, cultural and moral ones’ and classifies these differences in hierarchical terms, marking out levels of inferiority from the European norm. Ideologically, the production of race is marked by a form of reconciliation between two dimensions of Enlightenment discourse, ‘the great taxonomies of natural science with the political rhetoric of the rights of man’ (ibid: 8). Race produced populations as not capable, or yet ready, to be integrated into the universal as ‘bearers of the rights of man’; ‘Race enabled universality to presuppose distinction’ (ibid: 15). As Goldberg (2002) has demonstrated, these practices of distinction involved both ‘naturalist’ convictions of immutable and inferior difference, which were consolidated in the rise of ‘racial science’, and ‘historicist’ ideas of ‘native’ civilizational improvement under the supervision of European governance. Wolfe’s account stresses that the attention given to these ideological developments is insufficient without a consideration of race in practice, or *racialization*, the ‘assortment of

local attempts to impose classificatory grids on a variety of colonised populations, to particular though coordinated ends' (op. cit.: 10). Race was integral to the legitimation and organization of regimes of European colonialism, but as a mesh of knowledge and practices circulating and adapting across territories, and shifting according to the subject populations and varyingly exploitative and exterminationist ends of 'bodily exploitation' and 'territorial dispossession'. And, as European colonial domination was conducted through racializing rationales and practices, 'reciprocally, colonialism subsequently came to furnish a racialised mythology that could be displaced back onto stigmatised minorities within Europe itself' (ibid: 11).

MacMaster (2001) underlines this displacement in a discussion of the factors which drove the 'simultaneous appearance of a modern, exclusionary racism in its anti-black and anti-Semitic forms right across Europe after 1870'. The dislocations of rapid industrialization and urbanization, and the seemingly uncontrolled growth of the working class, fuelled a romantic and reactionary rejection of modernism and a nostalgia for 'organic' community and the aristocratic order. Racism provided a 'powerful ideological means of expressing a much more rigidly defined nationalism', one where the 'imagined community' is defined by blood and lineage, and where the tensions created by the expansionist militarism of the nascent international order required the fitness of an internally coherent 'race nation'. What Étienne Balibar terms the 'reciprocity of determination' between racism and nationalism is manifested not only in the aim of conferring 'the political and cultural unity of a nation on the heterogeneity of a pluri-ethnic state' (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991: 52–3) but also in the concomitant elevation of political and racial antisemitism. Across Europe, though with different national emphases and political articulations, Jewish populations were increasingly subject to racial science, but also cast as a 'stateless other', unassimilable to the national 'family', and inherently suspicious because of their presumed rootlessness and relations to corrosive forms of internationalism. MacMaster links the extension of male suffrage and the growth of mass politics to the marked mobilization of antisemitism, while the growth of associative life, transport and communication networks, the press and 'mass culture' 'vastly increased the channels through which colonial and racist ideas could be diffused' (op.cit.: 26).

It is within the historical force of these factors that Hall sets out his argument about the 'sliding signifier' and the resilient adaptability

of race. The key to this notion lies in noting that, counterintuitively, race is a signifier, not the signified. In Saussure's theory of the sign, the signifier is the form a sign takes, while the signified is the concept communicated. In naturalized understandings of race, it is race that is signified by a signifier such as skin colour. Yet Hall inverts this relation, because 'what looks literally as if it fixes race in all its materiality – the obvious visibility of black bodies – is actually functioning as a set of signifiers that direct us to read the bodily inscription of racial difference and thus render it intelligible' (op.cit.: 63). And these signifiers are 'sliding', that is, they are constantly linked to other signifiers, such as gender, producing meaning relationally through representation. Thus 'there is always a certain sliding of meaning, always something left unsaid about race'. Hall draws on Ernesto Laclau's idea of a 'chain of equivalences' to argue that race is stabilized only by sliding between different domains of 'truth'. The level of obvious visible differences slides towards the 'domain of science', the genetic truth which can only be accessed by sliding back to reading the body, and can also 'be metonymically displaced further up the signifying chain' to behaviour and background to secure assumed differences in cultural achievement or intellectual capacity. The work of discourse, therefore, is neither purely symbolic nor scandalously superficial, as

... the chain of equivalences that race *makes possible* between genetic, physical, social and cultural difference does actually exist. Not only does this chain of equivalences remain extensively present in the world, in the meanings we use to make sense of social life and social practices everywhere, but also, even though it is 'only a discourse', it has for that very reason a reality because it has racial effects – material effects in how power and resources are distributed, symbolic effects in how groups are ranked relationally to one another, psychic effects that form the interior space of existence of every subject constructed by it and caught up in the play of signifiers. (ibid: 69)

To understand the chain of equivalence at work in 'the practices and operations of *relations of power* between groups' under colonialism, consider a famous passage from *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952 [2008]), where Frantz Fanon excavates a moment of profound disjuncture that occurred shortly after his arrival in Lyon from Martinique in 1946. He encounters a child on a train, and the child turns to her mother:

‘Look, a negro!’ It was an external stimulus that flicked me in passing. I smiled slightly.

‘Look, a negro!’ It was true. I laughed.

‘Look, a negro!’ The circle was gradually getting smaller. I laughed openly.

‘Mum, look at the negro. I’m frightened!’. Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be frightened of me. I wanted to laugh till I burst, but that had become impossible.

Impossible, as Fanon finds himself not merely looked upon but ‘fixed’ by a gaze, a way of seeing that suffuses the child’s field of vision. Far more than simply an uncomfortable and insulting encounter, Fanon realizes he is ‘the object the other is looking at’, an object pre-figured by the weight of race. ‘The force of language, through the mouth of a child’, Lewis Gordon observes, ‘froze Fanon in his tracks. He found himself dried up and laid out in a world of ice-cold exteriority’ (2005: 15). The encounter is not just with a child, but with the historically produced, racialized schema of the ‘white gaze’ that seeks also to compel him to recognize himself in violently circumscribed ways, ‘to be black in the eyes of the white man’. This stark ascription is Fanon’s often misunderstood ‘fact of blackness’; the fact is not any essential or natural state of racial difference, rather it is the implacable force of racialized objectification. It is the *social fact* of being subjected to and positioned by the historically accrued ideas and practices of race, through which he is ‘over-determined from the outside’. In this ephemeral exchange, Fanon realizes that his body is encoded by the ‘epidermal racial schema’ produced, distributed and enforced by the world-making of colonial modernity – the ‘fact’ that Fanon is subject to is the ‘crushing objecthood’ thrust upon him by racial formation. As his biographer, David Macey, writes, ‘For the Martinican Fanon, the experience of coming under the white gaze reproduces the primal experience of his island’s history: slavery and a colonization so brutal as to be a form of trauma or even annihilation’ (2012: 166).

Fixed by the putative ‘truth’ of race, Fanon must cast ‘an objective gaze at myself, discovering my blackness, my ethnic characteristics – and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all, above all, “*Y’a bon banania*”’ (2008: 85). The inscription of racialized blackness, the codification of skin under conditions of administered subordination,

slides towards its indexical loading with cultural presumption and mythic projection. Fanon's accentuation of the chain of equivalence underlines Hall's argument that race cannot be reduced to a question of bad ideas about biology and the colour of skin; rather, as Peter Wade summarizes, 'the whole apparatus of race (racial categorizations, racial concepts, racisms) has always been as much about culture as it has been about nature ... race has always been shifting between these domains' (2010: 45). The *naturalization* of social relations of domination under colonialism requires constant reproduction, and Fanon's descriptions of how racialized difference is ascribed draws on evocative metaphors of the significance of mediated representation. Fanon is 'haunted by a galaxy of erosive stereotypes' as 'the white man has woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories'.

Above all, above all, *Y'a bon banania*. Time and again in *Black Skins, White Masks*, Fanon makes reference to this phrase, a slogan from an advertisement launched in 1917 for a popular chocolate drink, Banania, which featured a smiling, fez-wearing *tirailleur sénégalais* – Senegalese marksman – from France's West African Colonial Army.¹ In the English translation by Charles Lam Markmann quoted here, the phrase is rendered as 'Sho' good eatin' (2008: 85), drawing an idiomatic link between the historical stereotyping of African American Vernacular English in cinema and advertising, and the equally patronizing signification of 'patois' French. The phrases share a common supremacist fantasy – that the 'smile is the gift of the happy slave' (Gordon, 2005: 17) – yet the figure of 'Bonhomme Banania', the happy colonial subject deployed to maintain the colonial order, connoted a particular form of domestication, 'that the French empire had successfully transformed "barbarous savages" into loyal soldiers keen to do their bit for their *mère-patrie*' (Fell, 2011: 227). *Y'a bon banania* 'constitutes one of the most important characters in Fanon's theatre', Noémi Michel argues, as it encapsulates the multiplicity of intersecting racializing practices that he is subjected to in public and private spaces, laughing from the walls:

Taken together, they give us a sense of the complex and various rituals of race. They shed light on the multiple *forms* and *instances* that take part in the discursive production of subjects marked by racial difference under colonialism. The figure condenses a plurality of *forms* of subjection. *Y'a bon banania* takes a visual form. The figure sticks to the black subject through visual codes of bodily, clothing and chromatic attributes, such as the 'black'

skin colour, ‘imposing’ and ‘muscled’ body, ‘thick’ lips, ‘smile’ of ‘white teeth’, red colour of the army tarboosh as well as the ‘yellow’ of the banana and the background of the advertisement. *Y’a bon banania* takes the form of a verbal or textual address: it appears in advertisements, children’s books, and carries others terms such as ‘banana’, ‘Yassuh boss’, ‘savage’, ‘nigga’ and ‘jungle’. It becomes part of a stereotype as it participates in a structure of meaning and knowledge consolidated by several narratives and legends that put the black in the fixed role of a stupid child or a brute savage. *Y’a bon banania* interpellates under the form of artefacts: it appears on coffee cups, perfumes, nylons. In short, the figure points towards the *protean nature* of the conventional discourses of race. (2016: 246)

The Fanon who wrote *Black Skins, White Masks* had left the ‘overseas department’ of Martinique in 1943 to fight in the Free French Army, briefly returning there before commencing studies in Lyon, and the essays that make up the book are in part a reflection on the ‘fact of blackness in the face of French non-racial claims to the contrary’ (Lee, 2015: loc 786). While French republican ideals, and citizenship of the Fourth Republic (1946–1958), held out the promise of universality through cultural assimilation and legal status, the racial apparatus of colonialism continued to enforce hierarchical racial differences and thus dehumanized relations, excluding him from the humanist – and explicitly gendered – promise of being ‘a man among other men’. He is compelled, in the racial apparatus of colonialism, to signify, *to be made meaningful* in the chain of signification in which his skin is immediately taken as a sign, the visible difference that can be *read* in a discursive economy of racialized fear and desire, contingent acceptance and ‘natural’ inferiority, objectification and the relational colonial production of the white norm. For Fanon, the steady reproduction of racialized representations comprised a systemic dimension of colonialism. Misrecognition is produced through concrete material practices that disseminate a ‘constellation of postulates, a series of propositions that slowly and subtly – with the help of books, newspapers, schools and their texts, advertisements, films, radio – work their way into one’s mind and shape one’s view of the world of the group to which one belongs’ (Fanon, op.cit.: 152). Above all, then, *Y’a bon banania*; Fanon’s ‘eardrums burst’ at the awareness that he cannot escape the circulation of popular cultural representations, commodified fantasies and their layered signification of ‘blackness’.

Hall's scandalous exposition and Fanon's anatomy of a moment trace the discursive shaping of race in very different historical contexts from the present moment. And yet 'chains of equivalence' lattice the examples encountered in the book thus far: the assumptions of 'black male criminality' that were fatally inscribed on Trayvon Martin's body; the insurmountable cultural differences that justified discrimination against young black British people in Rozanne Duncan's imagination; the orientalist fantasy of hyper-sexuality rendered through physiological caricature in Riss's ambivalent cartoon; the surveillance of 'radical Islam' which in practice implicates anyone of 'Middle Eastern appearance'. Racism, as Hall emphasizes in a different essay, 'Race and reaction' (2017[1978]), is always historically specific, though 'it may draw on the cultural and ideological traces which are deposited in a society by previous historical phases, it always assumes specific forms which arise out of *present* – not past – conditions and organisation of society' (ibid: 146, original emphasis). The next section examines a politics of representation shaped around such historical deposits, their contested circulation, and what they articulate about the present conditions of a society.

Blackface: discourse and debris

In October 2011, a video was uploaded to YouTube showing the artist and activist Quinsy Gario being violently arrested by Dutch police in Dordrecht. Along with another artist, Kno'ledge Cesare, he had been attending the *Sinterklaas intocht*, the start of the national Saint Nicolas festival, which is broadcast live from a different city every year. Stopped from unfurling a banner with the slogan 'Zwarte Piet is Racisme' – Black Pete is racism – the police proceeded to use considerable force in removing the artists from the festival for the crime of wearing t-shirts with the same slogan. The ritual will be televised; in the build-up to Sinterklaas celebration on December 5th, St Nicholas arrives in the Netherlands from Spain on a steamboat laden with presents for the good children. The wise old saint enters on a white horse, and he is assisted by a troupe of clownish *Zwarte Piets* who are played by white Dutch women and men with their faces 'blacked up' while wearing 'Moorish' costumes, wigs of black curly hair, thick red lipstick and golden earrings. In the widely recounted version of the story, the Petes are merely blackened by chimney soot. However, the video of Gario's treatment intensified hitherto sporadic protest against 'Black Pete' not just as a

racist representation, but, as the slogan suggests, *as racism*. At the same time, the zealous police action indicated the depth of cultural investment in the figure, and anger that the innocent fun of children could be politicized in this way. Not only is Black Pete not racist, but how can there be racism in the Netherlands, when race does not exist?

The annual festival is major business, and images of Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet abound in advertising, television programmes and public images. The period between the characters' entry and the present-giving festivities of December 5th is characterized by media presence and private rituals, marking out the period as especially oriented towards families, children and the enjoyment of shared national tradition. For these reasons, Gloria Wekker argues, Zwarte Piet constitutes what Stuart Hall termed a 'ritualized degradation', that is, a 'representation that is so natural that it requires no explanation or justification' (Wekker, 2016: 140). Above all, above all, Zwarte Piet; sporadic protests against the caricature had been organized by people who had migrated from former Dutch colonies such as Suriname since at least the 1970s (Esajas, 2014). However Gario and Cesare's protest marked a significant intensification of protests, not only because of the immediate response to their virally witnessed treatment, but because the ritual image provided a generation descended from these 'postcolonial' migrants with a potent and versatile focus for anti-racist activism, including the basic need to insist on the salience of racism to understanding society in the Netherlands (Coenders and Chauvin, 2017: 1245).

This insistence confronts, as Markus Balkenhol and colleagues (2016) argue, a denial of racism which goes hand in hand with a 'nativism' informed by a 'preoccupation with Dutchness' and the problem of the 'cultural and religious alterity ... associated with postcolonial and labour migrants and their descendants' for this thwarted national essence. Thus Zwarte Piet became not only a contested representation and prism for anti-racist critique, but also a mediating object for the defensive, racialized reproduction of national identity and culture. This dynamic of denialism and insistence thrusts Zwarte Piet into ferocious circuits of debatability, a struggle over the meaning of racism conducted through contesting how 'shared, often unexamined fantasies with regard to race continue to shape the ways in which "we" and "they" are constructed and perceived, while dominant common sense has it that race is thoroughly absent in the Netherlands' (Wekker, 2016: 31). This is played out through a politics of representation that activates many of the dimensions and questions accumulated in the chapter thus far, and

analyzing it requires unravelling main lines from the mesh of ways in which Zwarte Piet is made to mean.

The period of renewed protest from 2011 witnessed increasingly high-profile actions and counter-actions which began to generate international media coverage. In 2012 the Saint Nicholas Society began petitioning for the festival, including Zwarte Piet, to be protected as ‘national cultural heritage’. In response to this attempt to fix Zwarte Piet’s meaning within the framework of heritage, activists insisted on the question of history, requesting a United Nations human rights body, the Working Group of Experts of People of African Descent, to draw attention to its roots as a degrading representational *practice*. In a subsequent letter to the Dutch government in 2013, the Working Group situated Zwarte Piet in Fanon’s ‘galaxy of erosive stereotypes’, contending that ‘the character and image of Black Pete perpetuate a stereotyped image of African people and people of African descent as second-class citizens ... [they experience it as] a living trace of past slavery and oppression, tracing back to the country’s past involvement in the trade of African slaves in the previous centuries’. This internationalization of the issue intensified the affective nationalism of the response, particularly after a television interview with the group’s chairperson, the Jamaican historian Verene Shepherd, who stated that ‘the working group cannot understand why it is that people in the Netherlands cannot see that this is a throwback to slavery and that in the 21st century this practice should stop’. A Facebook page, *Pete-ition*, set up to rally support for a wilfully misunderstood tradition, garnered nearly two million likes within a few days (Groot and de Kroon, 2013).

The general contention, therefore, that Zwarte Piet signified within a modern tradition of dehumanizing stereotypes, that, like *Y’a bon*, took archival shape under colonialism’s relations of domination, triggered a public hermeneutic contest as to the figure’s fixable meaning. Insistence on the putative non-racial signification – it’s just soot – became so repetitive and scripted that the European Network Against Racism (2014) was able to publish a list of suggested responses to common justifications for Zwarte Piet (e.g. ‘Why aren’t his clothes black as well then? And going down a chimney does not give you big painted red lips or afro hair’). Establishing the origins of the Sinterklaas tradition, and plausible links with similar figures elsewhere in Europe, became, Wekker argues, a ‘national pastime’ where ‘the reasoning seems to be that if it can be proven that there are figures comparable to Zwarte Piet in other parts of Europe, or if he can be shown to have Norse or

Germanic origins, then there is no possibility that he can be associated with racism' (op.cit.: 154). As a corollary, by establishing a genealogy for Zwarte Piet's blackness that preceded modern coloniality, the tradition could be distanced from the forms of 'blackface' closely associated with the US and the UK – the associative framing that loomed large in international criticism.

In order to understand these implications, it is necessary to draw attention to two intersecting traditions of colonial representation, the first of which is the practice of representing people of African descent as primates. Because they are held to resemble humans but are still regarded as animals, "ape", "gorilla" "monkey" and related terms became favorite epithets to degrade those whose otherness and inferiority were believed to be manifested by and *inscribed* upon their bodies, people who, while they appeared human, were seen as less than human' (Greene, 1998: 5). In representational terms, simians, Donna Haraway notes, 'occupy the border zones between (the) potent mythic poles' of nature and culture (1989: 1). The fusion of assumptions about Darwinian evolution with eugenicist racial science in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries fixed 'negroes', immigrants and the industrial working class as sub-populations defined by their immutable hereditary characteristics (Sussman, 2014: 88–106). The established simianization of blackness and racial otherness in (settler) colonial popular cultures rapidly integrated this new imaginary of racial hierarchy, and the production of such images proliferated during turbulent periods when the border zone between human and those racialized as less-than-human was socially and politically contested.

Consequently, regimes of racialization have drawn on the unsettling proximity of the primate to reinscribe the racial difference of the insurgent or troublesome 'primitive', in representations frequently laced with gendered and hyper-sexualized motifs: post-emancipation Black Americans as 'urban coons', inferiorized by the absurd contrast of their grotesquely magnified lips and facial features with the ill-fitting pretension of their dandified outfits; the cartoonish simianization of post-famine Irish people in Victorian and Edwardian popular culture, their bestial stupidity and innate propensity for violence underlining, as the historian Thomas Babington Macauley wrote, that 'they did not belong to our branch of the great human family' (de Nie, 2004: 10); the 'more ourang-outangs than men' framing of Aboriginal Australians, slated to die out 'naturally' as a species through slaughter and neglect, even as early twentieth-century scientists wondered if they represented the

‘missing link’ in the Darwinian puzzle (Foley, 1997). Donning ‘black-face’, like simianization, is a practice that inscribes racial difference; however, its genealogies produce slightly different inferences. The popular cultural spread of blackface minstrelsy in Victorian and Edwardian Britain, Michael Pickering (2008) suggests, represented a form of ‘symbolic expulsion’ bound up in processes of national self-definition:

In this way, what was constructed as ‘racially’ inferior became *interior* to national identity even as this was hidden behind its exterior front of civility and progress. The civilizing process of modernity required its de-civilized counterpart, and it found this in its own racial fantasies. Built as they were around its peculiar and complex conflation of mimicry and mockery ... blackface fantasies set up a sense of contrast between the modern self, upright in the prow of its rationality, and a disorderly black low-Other who confirmed white racial superiority and advancement while appearing to have been made safe by being made ridiculous. (Original emphasis)

Research on the modern sources of Zwarte Piet’s iconography emphasizes the myriad ways in which images of the figure emerge from an archive of representations of blackness in Dutch visual culture, with significant variation in its appearance before it became more standardized in the second half of the twentieth century, with the proliferation of commercial and festive images on a national basis (Brienen, 2018). Prior to this, however, certain dimensions become increasingly fixed through representational practices at different moments. While the very inclusion of a ‘Moorish’ courtly servant is ‘embedded in the systems of exchange and commodification as well as the circulation of images during the nineteenth century’ (Smith, 2014: 228), it also signifies an earlier period of the ‘Dutch golden age’ of commerce, overseas expansion and involvement in the slave trade. As Brienen documents, the contemporary visual form is heavily influenced by nineteenth-century children’s books’ illustrations, which display over time an ‘altered visual tradition ... responding to the hardening of racial categories and hierarchies that occurred during the nineteenth century’ as well as to the possible influence of blackface minstrelsy and the nascent popularity of ‘golliwog’ dolls in books and as consumer products (2018: 182–7).

While these genealogies are important for understanding the transnational chains of signification which have shaped a localised repertoire, Wekker’s observation as to the limits of empirical assertion also pertain to critiques of Zwarte Piet. As Jasmine Cobb has argued, ‘there is

never a culturally neutral ground for racial depiction – no place where our representational contexts have taken a reprieve from old ways of knowing race that create enough distance for the postracial to occur’ (2011: 418). In other words, the racism at stake in *Zwarte Piet* does not depend on establishing a determining connection to ‘old ways of knowing race’, but rather on recognizing the chains of equivalence at play in how blackface practices signify under changed socio-historical conditions. The idea of ‘racial debris’ provides a compelling way of approaching these practices. In his essay ‘The remainders of race’, Ash Amin offers this metaphor as a way of understanding the circulation of such racial references, images and logics held to be ‘past’ but which are rearticulated under particular social and political conditions. His argument is particularly pertinent to self-consciously ‘postracial’ contexts, where racism ‘quickly resurfaces even when thought to be thoroughly dismantled’ (2010: 2).

Simianization and blackface practices constitute forms of such debris, and often it is the postracial assumption of their non-referentiality which informs their reproduction. In 2014 when Barack Obama travelled to Brussels for a NATO summit, the Flemish-language Belgian newspaper *De Morgen* published a satirical ‘special article’ presented as having been sent to the newspaper by Vladimir Putin. The article included an image where the faces of Barack and Michelle Obama are digitally altered with distinctly ape-like features. Putin, the joke set-up suggests, is capable of anything, including the kind of ‘open racism’ that is no longer tolerated in such post-racial western polities as Belgium. Stung by the appalled response on social media, *De Morgen* apologized, noting that ‘we wrongly assumed that racism is no longer acceptable and that in this way it could be the subject of a joke’ (Mackey, 2014). However, Amin’s notion presses beyond such familiar postracial fictions to suggest paying attention to ‘the potentiality of accumulated racial debris, variegated and dormant from different eras’. This requires, he argues, digging into the ‘archaeology of a racial present’ to explain the relationships between endurance and change in the dynamics of racism, and how ‘mixes of past and present racial practices become especially vengeful towards the racialized other’ (2010: 3). That is, when does racial debris become weaponized as racial shrapnel?

In some readings of the *Zwarte Piet* controversies, the reactive insistence on the innocence of tradition cannot be understood without thinking about forms of not just affective investment, but racialized pleasure. For Philomena Essed, Black Pete and the broader proliferation of social media-enabled ‘blackface scandals’ can be understood as what she terms

‘entitlement racism’, a turn to a discourse of freedom of speech as a ‘licence to offend’ and recuperate racist practices as a pure or sophisticated instance of free expression to which one is entitled (Essed and Muhr, 2018). For Egbert Alejandro Martina (2013), the intensity of investment in the ritual despite the argument that it constitutes a form of dehumanization suggests it endures also as a form of enjoyment, where ‘racial domination as a pleasure in the Sinterklaas tradition is produced through a ritualised denial of race and an intimate choreography between Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet, in which the figure of Zwarte Piet acts as a sign of subjugation, punishment and pleasure’. The reproduction of Zwarte Piet, therefore, is suffused with the vengefulness towards the racialized other that Amin detects, but these forms of investment must be explained, as per Hall, conjuncturally. With a preemptive nod to the kind of criticism of the politics of representation offered by Adolph Reed, Gloria Wekker points out that to focus on the Zwarte Piet conflict is not to prioritize ‘cultural politics’ above the violence of socio-economic inequality, but to work from how it has become ‘the symbolic spearhead of a now year-round debate on fundamental racial inequalities in Dutch society’ (2016: 143).

The protests against Zwarte Piet were multi-layered: disrupting the reproduction of a dehumanizing practice, through this disruption insisting on the representation’s connections to a disavowed colonial past, and through avowing this past demanding a reckoning with the contemporary coloniality of racial arrangements in the nation-state. That is, Black Pete is both racist, and, as the slogan insisted, racism. While assessments of the movement’s impact in forging an expansive agenda vary (for discussion see Esajas, 2016), in connecting the power to exclude through representation to the power to exclude in terms of belonging and citizenship, it created a space of ‘intersectional social justice activism’ connecting struggles against anti-black racism and an ‘increasingly gendered Islamophobia discourse and practice’ (de Jong, 2019: 273). In so doing, it disrupted the public fictions of what Wekker terms ‘white innocence’: ‘an important and apparently satisfying way in which the Dutch think of themselves as being a small, but just, ethical nation; color-blind, thus free of racism; as being inherently on the moral and ethical high ground, thus a guiding light to other folks and nations’ (op.cit.: 2). That there is no racism in the Netherlands, as with all European postracial fictions, is woven both from specific threads and the loom of the post-war ‘break with race’ discussed previously. As de Leeuw and van Wichelen summarize:

Dutch victimhood of Nazism during the Second World War fuelled the idea that a *real* racism equals antisemitism. It was impossible for the Dutch to conceive of themselves as being antisemites and by extension racists. The terms ‘anti-fascism’ and ‘anti-racism’ – strong in the 1970s and 1980s – indicate a general social rejection of racism. Hence it was not because the Dutch had worked through their own racist past (colonialism/slavery/antisemitism), but because of moral outrage towards French colonialism in Algeria, Apartheid in South Africa, racism in the United States, or the perception of the Vietnam war as a new imperialism. The lack of self-reflection with respect to Dutch history ... created the strange paradox that the Dutch perceived themselves as exemplary anti-racists defined in relation to racism and racist regimes outside the Netherlands rather than their own racism within Dutch society. (2016: 348)

The protests’ insistence that the Netherlands cannot be innocent of the ‘reciprocal determination’ between race and nation intensified the dynamics of debatability, and in destabilizing Black Pete as an ‘innocent’ image, produced a series of ancillary questions and complexities for both media practices and the wider ‘political and social field of representation’. As Chauvin et al. note in their (2018) study of children’s television programmes, the public resonance of the *Zwarte Piet* protests provided mainstream media producers aiming to cater to an ‘inclusive’ public with a dilemma to navigate, for ‘in an increasingly disputed narrative field, it takes more and more work to never have been racist’. Representational tactics also picked away at the seams of innocence; if racism is something that always happens over there, then let’s take *Zwarte Piet* ‘over there’ to see what they think. To frequently bemused reactions, the journalist Thijs Roes made a video report where he showed pictures to passers-by on the street in Montgomery, Alabama, where in 1955 Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat. Sunny Bergman’s film ‘Our Colonial Hangover’ (2014) parlayed London’s ‘conviviality’ (Gilroy, 2004) into a sustained admonishment, where as a blacked-up *Zwarte Piet* in Hyde Park she is met with astonishment and aggression, while just happening to bump into Russell Brand, who informs her that ‘we’re scared of your tradition’.

At the same time, these tactics are ambivalent. Roes’ video plays on the irony of Black Pete being judged negatively in a supposedly racist heartland, while further universalizing the North American experience

of racism as the gold standard against which variations are judged (see Salem and Thompson, 2016). Bergman's role-play raises the question, as Chandra Frank (2014) notes, as to the forms of privilege at play in a white film maker dressing up in blackface and deciding that 'perpetuating the very racist structures that underlie Black Pete are not as important as "proving" that Black Pete is racist'. This criticism echoes a recurring limitation experienced in various public processes aimed at producing alternative Black Pete images acceptable to 'both sides' (see Wekker, 2016: 143–50). In analyzing the irruption of a 'Zwarte Piet' debate in Flanders in Belgium, Olivia Umurerwa Rutazibwa argues that the public dynamics of discussion reproduced the coloniality inscribed in the image of the exotic, childish helper, with primarily white male experts tackling the objective question of 'what constitutes as racism and what not', while the 'affected visible minority communities' were primarily invited to 'anecdotally expand on the emotional pain that Zwarte Piet might cause them and their community' (2016: 196). And as Chauvin et al. (2018) examine, the commercial prerogative of navigating social conflict served to strengthen modes of recognition that furthered denial through the floating inclusivity of 'diversity':

Media producers claimed to have found a middle ground between the (misplaced) racial sensitivities of a minority and the majority's attachment to tradition. Multicultural compromise was thus deployed to undercut criticisms of racial discrimination, replacing the latter with a liberal call to respect emotional diversity. Unsurprisingly, the focus on respecting 'black feelings' – while presenting them as mistaken – was mirrored by calls for mutual tolerance between the proponents and opponents of Black Pete. By portraying multicultural society as free of conflict, these calls resulted in framing persistent anti-racist critique as disrespectful of 'white feelings' and this ultimately as anti-liberal and anti-multicultural.

What, then, of the politics of representation under conditions of postracial debatability? This case study examines how the image of Zwarte Piet is the subject of contested interpretations that link it in time and space to archives of colonial images and racialized stereotypes, and also to folkloric depictions and carnivalesque figures, shaping a tension between varying attempts to establish genealogies of the image and the inescapable ways in which it signifies in and through resilient practices of 'blackface'. As the image circulates under conditions of intensive contestation, it accrues adaptations, idealizations and subversions, and

what Gray (2013) terms an ‘intensification and proliferation of affective investments’. This media circulation and affective politics implicates the image in the wider field of social and political representation, indexing it not just to an elision of the nation’s colonial past, but also to attempts to make visible the enduring colonial relations in the contemporary social formation of the nation-state. That this can never simply be separated out as a ‘cultural politics’ is demonstrated by the force of the reaction to the protests. Wounded innocence is not just evasive, it is vengeful, and *Zwarte Piet* was inevitably reloaded as racist shrapnel, made to stand, in nativist politics, as evidence of a culture under threat and a national tolerance betrayed by the ungrateful – and sliding – cultural, religious, racialized other (Balkenhol et al., 2016). The prevalence of racisms vested in the myth of the overly tolerant nation and the overly-tolerated other is further explored in the next chapter, which examines the question of representation more specifically in relation to journalistic framing.

Endnote

- 1 The poet and first president of an independent Senegal, Léopold Senghor, who served in the French army during the war, took aim at the paternalistic caricature of the loyal child-like subject in a 1940 poem dedicated to African soldiers killed fighting for France, promising to ‘destroy the Banania laughter on all the walls of France’. Its charge as an ‘erosive stereotype’ was heightened in the aftermath of the liberation of France, when the role of soldiers from North and West Africa in the Free French Army was deliberately elided, and in 1944 Senagalese *Tirailleurs* were massacred by French troops in a camp in Thiaroye for protesting against the appalling conditions of their demobilization.

The background of the entire page is an abstract, high-contrast black and white composition. It features thick, expressive brushstrokes that create a sense of movement and texture. The strokes are layered, with some appearing more prominent than others, creating a complex, organic shape that resembles a stylized letter or a calligraphic mark. The overall effect is one of raw energy and artistic spontaneity.

6

Anti-racism and digital media culture

Introduction: the contradictions of the internet

From the insistence of anti-Black Face activism on the relation between the symbolic and material oppression, to the spontaneous expressions of anger and sorrow channelled into organizing to seek #Justice4Trayvon, to reporting fake ‘Islamist’ pages on Facebook, anti-racist actions and perspectives have featured consistently in the preceding analysis. The aim of this chapter is to provide an analytical framework for thinking about the significant range of anti-racisms that take shape through and in relation to digital media culture. It seeks to draw out different understandings of anti-racism at work in and across contexts, the forms of media work they engage in, and the public horizons that drive their interventions. Prior to that, however, a tension that has shadowed these previous discussions, and that loomed large in the analysis of connective media-enabled ‘hate speech’, needs to be addressed.

As Veronica Barassi (2015) notes, ‘the development of mobile technologies and web 2.0 platforms has marked a new and complex transformation of repertoires of mediated political action’. These emergent possibilities for communicative participation and cooperation were rapidly invested with democratic promise, a promise distorted in the clumsy combination of technological determinism and Eurocentrism that marked discourses about ‘Twitter Revolutions’, and which paid insufficient attention to the dependence on infrastructures and platforms under corporate control and organized as commercial enterprises. As a consequence, a significant body of academic work has been divided between those that ‘argued that the new web, for its interactive features, was offering unprecedented possibilities for user engagement, creativity and cooperation ... and those that have instead highlighted the fact that far from being democratic, web 2.0 technologies were in fact strengthening new forms of capitalist exploitation and corporate surveillance’ (2015: 7). This contradiction needs to be addressed initially to situate mediated anti-racist action, and a useful starting point can be found in our global font of modern knowledge.

The online encyclopedia *Wikipedia* is now so ubiquitous that *Wikipedia* entries on aspects of *Wikipedia* constitute a distinctive genre on the site. The entry ‘Racial bias on Wikipedia’ focuses on collating criticism of its often scant and patchy entries on ‘Black history’, and racial bias in the framing and exposition of particular entries.

The banner message at the top of the article warns that ‘the examples and the perspective in this article deal primarily with the U.S. and do not represent a worldwide view of the subject’ (a qualification sometimes lacking in academic discussions of racism). Famous for its presumed fidelity to a ‘wisdom of crowds’ logic, the ‘racial bias’ entry links to a *Huffington Post* article which argues that the preponderance of ‘technically inclined, English-speaking white-collar men’ within the site’s user hierarchy accounts for ‘Wikipedia’s gender and racial bias problem’ (Boboltz, 2015). The *HuffPo* article takes this one-line demographic summary from, in turn, a hyperlinked Wikipedia entry, this time concerning ‘The average Wikipedian’.

The entry goes on to highlight efforts to address the problem, pointing to several ‘edit-a-thon’ initiatives, including one involving Wikimedia D.C. and Howard University – a historically African American institution – during Black History Month in 2015, which brought together staff and students to coordinate a list of entries that needed to be expanded, and to identify potential entries that were completely absent, often centring on African American achievements neglected or marginalized in the existing database (Smith, 2015). While, as *Wired* reported in the same year, the Wikipedia Foundation has demonstrated a commitment to enhancing ‘the coverage of women, minorities, the LGBTQ community and other under-represented groups on Wikipedia’ (Lapowsky, 2015), not all such initiatives are conducted as cooperative ventures, nor focused on a representational logic. The #whitecurriculum campaign in the UK, for example, which seeks to challenge the often taken-for-granted whiteness, Eurocentrism and elided coloniality of modern social science and humanities curricula, chose the same period to seek to organize a ‘decolonise Wikipedia’ editing event (WMCW collective, UCL 2015). Here, the aim was not just to augment the site with new or expanded entries, but also to unpick the practice of knowledge production through a critique of what Barnor Hesse (2007) terms the ‘white analytics’ which ‘routinely ignore colonial and racial formations’ in established thought and institutionalized knowledge.

There is no contradiction between Wikipedia’s institutional commitment to diversity and the resilient pervasiveness of ‘white analytics’ in its mode of knowledge construction. As José Van Dijck documents, central to Wikipedia’s operation are its ‘five pillars’ or principles, including the ‘core content policy’ of striving for a ‘neutral point of view’ (NPoV). The NPoV rule, she argues, is ‘a guiding principle for building a functional apparatus, but that apparatus simultaneously shapes the meaning

of neutrality as the “average opinion” or “shared interpretation” (2013: 142). Van Dijck quotes the historian Daniel O’Sullivan, who criticizes this view-from-nowhere proceduralism as a ‘bureaucratic policing’ that stunts the project’s ‘potential to proliferate voices and dissent’, meaning that ‘it is in danger of merely mirroring the typical knowledge economies of the West’ (2011: 48, in 2013: 141–2). Neutrality imagined in such terms intimately overlaps with the #whitecurriculum’s pithy notion of the racialized-as-white subject as the ‘Greenwich Mean Time of identity’ (op.cit.). It also feeds smoothly into the drive of debatability, where the salience and status of racism as a topic, causal factor or ‘accusation’ is a recurrent focus of Wikipedia’s ‘edit wars’.

In a large-scale data study in ten different language versions, Yasseri et al. (2014) ranked the topics that produce edit wars according to the occurrence of ‘mutual reverts’, that is, where one editor substantially undoes the work of another, restoring a previous version, and vice versa. Topics such as ‘Muhammad’ ‘Race and intelligence’, ‘circumcision’ and ‘Christianity’ featured in the English language top ten, whereas ‘Israel, Adolf Hitler, The Holocaust and God’ were the most contested-in-common across language groups. Robert S. Wolff’s (2013) study of the ‘Origins of the American Civil War’ entry examines one such revert conflict by focusing on the ‘crowd-sourced’ crafting of the entry, drawing on the changes to the entry over time and the discussions archived on the entry’s discussion page. Noting how historical entries become sites where the ways ‘the past possesses different meanings’ are articulated, Wolff documents an editing conflict over the inclusion of the term racism, prompted by its deletion by a contributor from descriptions of ‘non-slaveowning whites in the South’ on the grounds that ‘The term is a modern one and not neutral for a historical article’ (2013: 68).

Given Wikipedia’s privileged position in Google’s search rankings, it is frequently a site not just for debatability’s circuitries but also for racist trolling and information laundering. In particular, articles on ‘race and intelligence’-related topics are prime sites of sustained activity for the far-right.¹ In a report for the Southern Poverty Law Centre, Justin Ward (2018) notes how the organizational assumption that editing is undertaken in good faith to improve the quality of an article means that while anonymous vandalism is easy to detect, adept contributors associated with ‘scientific racism’ and ‘human biodiversity’ journals and blogs ‘tend to maintain a moderate, non-confrontational tone and adopt a posture of academic neutrality, so they are less likely to run afoul of site-wide rules and more likely to make edits that stand’.

These glimpses of racist and anti-racist struggle over publicized meaning on Wikipedia work with, against and around what Van Dijck terms the site's 'consensual apparatus', not only comprised of the principles and community orientations mentioned, but also managed through a 'sociotechnical system of sophisticated protocols distributing permission levels' to different contributors within a hierarchy of user categories (op. cit.: 136). This user hierarchy involves the integration of human and non-human agents, as the use of 'bots' – scripts for automated editing – are critical to dealing with the sheer scale of content produced through site activity. Wikipedia's 'engineered social order', as Van Dijck describes it, 'is an integral system of human–bot interaction that helps produce and maintain a kind of modulated sociality which is unprecedented in scale' (ibid: 138). These various forms of racist antagonism, and varied trajectories of anti-racist action, are facilitated and shaped by the form, structures and processes of *Wikipedia* as a sociotechnical system.

That these opposing political tendencies take shape in and through *Wikipedia* indicates that the internet, as Whitney Philips and Ryan Milner point out, is *ambivalent*, that is, the already-existing ambivalence of 'basic behavioural and aesthetic dimensions of everyday expression' are 'thrown into hyperdrive ... by the tools of digital mediation' (2017: 15). The idea of ambivalence recalls how previous, critical histories of media technologies and forms have underlined the need to avoid 'asserting that everything has gotten worse, or ... assuming that there has been a continuous improvement' (Briggs and Burke, 2005: 4). That this pattern of assertion has renewed the temptation of pendular swings of optimism and pessimism may be frustrating, but it can be comprehended in relation to what 'new media' seemed to offer: the redistribution of communicative resources and possibilities beyond the 'few-to-many' power relations of the mass media era. In Des Freedman's (2014) evaluation:

Going back to the 'sterile debate' between digital optimists and pessimists about the extent to which digital platforms facilitate opacity *or* transparency, scarcity *or* abundance and indeed distributed *or* concentrated power, the point is that an emphasis on contradiction allows us to understand that it is not a question of choosing one or the other but of appreciating the tensions and constraints that shape the dynamics of the digital world. Indeed it is entirely possible that social media can be tools of empowerment

and control, that the internet is subject to centrifugal *and* centripetal pressures and that the web both encourages new voices *and* consolidates existing ones. By accentuating a materialist approach that acknowledges the contradictions of capitalist development ... we can avoid the pitfalls of a binary approach and reject the determinism of those who fetishize technology above all else. (2014: loc 2079)

Freedman's insistence on capitalist contradiction has particular resonances on the terrain of race. The paradox of corporate social media is that while it now presents a significant infrastructure for public discourse, it is privately owned, and attuned to 'deriving profits from all communicative aspects of life' (Langlois, 2014: 170). *If the service is free, you are the product*; as is by now well-known, social media corporations accumulate immense stocks of data, not just informing targeted consumer and behavioural profiling but also facilitating forms of surveillance predicated on accruing patterned knowledge about the practices, habits and lives of their users. Profiling and surveillance are historically racialized practices, and therefore the 'racial structure' of the internet has emerged as a key site of Internet Studies' otherwise relatively limited engagement with race and racism (see Daniels, 2012). The presumed neutrality of technology has been critiqued by examining how a 'racial ideology *about* technology' associates 'whiteness with "progress", "technology", and "civilization", while situating blackness within a discourse of "nature", "primitivism" and pre-modernity' (Hobson, 2008: 114). Research on structuration goes past such cultural narratives and the everyday racism amplified in online spaces to ask, as Charlton McIlwain questions, 'what significance and use-value does race have in the political economy of the web, and how does racial meaning and value get systematically produced and circulated throughout the web?' (2017: 1077).

Research on Google's search engine, for example, has demonstrated how racial logics become embedded in code and informational architecture. Safiya Noble's work on how 'privately managed, black-boxed information-sorting tools have become essential to many data-driven decisions' (2018: 2) offers the idea of 'algorithmic oppression' to describe how, for example, the commercially oriented curatorial work of algorithmic sifting proliferates racialized and sexualized imagery of women of colour. The technical features and affordances of social media platforms are similarly implicated. The photo-sharing platform

Flickr's 'auto-tagging' feature generated headlines for adding the labels 'ape' and 'animal' to photos of black people (Hern, 2015). A study by the independent investigative journalism newsroom *ProPublica* in 2016 demonstrated how Facebook's advertising micro-targeting allowed advertisers to exclude target audiences by 'ethnic affinity' – a category Facebook assigns to users on the basis of online behaviour rather than opt-in identification – raising the possibility of automated discrimination in ads for rental housing or services (Angwin and Parris Jr, 2016; for further methodological discussion, see Neel, 2016). The US-based Data for Black Lives Movement (2018) has subsequently called on Facebook to commit anonymized data to a public data trust which would be available to black researchers and community-led organizations to 'fill the gaps in publicly available data that is outdated, full of errors, and often collected as a tactic of law enforcement, with the intent of criminalization and surveillance'.

Contradiction entails, however, that at the same time as historically entrenched forms of racist profiling and stereotyping may be extended and amplified through corporate digital structures, the same structures facilitate their public contestation. It is not just the case that connective media provide a contingent but important site for racialized subjects to confront their elision or misrepresentation, or, indeed, the limits of always having to respond to racism. Digital media platforms have been formative in the flourishing of anti-racist media projects, actors historically marginalized from or forced to struggle for inclusion in a mediated public sphere dependent on capital-intensive print technologies and broadcast infrastructure. Consequently, a prominent genre of projects focuses on increasing the presence and diversity of 'voices' from communities or backgrounds consistently excluded from the national public sphere, or granted access under particular conditions and through limiting frames.

Sustained media practices have also developed from responses to crises where media misrepresentation has played an acute role. *Megafonen* (Megaphone), the 'new popular movement' that first took shape in the Stockholm suburb of Husby in 2008, was founded after the murder of a local football player, Ahmed Ibrahim Ali: '... it was out of frustration over what was perceived in Husby youth community as a discriminatory representation of the murder ... that the Megaphone took off as the voice of Husby, challenging the dominant media's stigmatising stereotypes of suburbia – a new "megaphone" for voices seldom heard' (Schierup et al., 2014: 14). As a social justice,

housing and popular education movement, *Megafonen*'s media work has been shaped by '(understanding) ... the need to create our own platforms, structures and activities which allowed us to develop intellectually, socially, mentally as equal citizens' (quoted in Schierup et al., 2018: 11). This embedded media capacity proved critical during the Stockholm urban uprising in 2013, where *Megafonen* was able to document police violence and 'stubbornly (work) to make the public and politicians look beyond the burning cars to see the reality of unequal citizenship and the structural issues to explain what was taking place' (ibid: 15). Similarly, *Trappy Blog* is one of several websites to be developed in the deprived and socially segregated *quartiers populaires* of Paris – in this instance in Trappes in the Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines area – with the intention of providing young people with a platform to not only respond to sensationalist reporting, but also to develop local journalism for and about their neighbourhoods. While using social media in conventional ways, *Trappy Blog* has disseminated its journalism by reaching agreements with *France Info* and *Alternatives Économiques* to feature its articles on their sites.

As with the far-right networks discussed previously, cross-platform media logics have ensured that in each of these cases, projects that have been initiated on one platform have been able to 'scale up' their operations and extend their remit and forms across sites of media work, expanding from the desire to 'give voice' to developing journalism practices, forms of community media, and funding strategies. The reality of contradiction is not just that the expanded media space allows for the circulation of more 'racist and anti-racist content', but also that its political economy, architecture and platform affordances simultaneously extend racializing processes while expanding the space for anti-racist action. Capturing the reality of contradiction, therefore, requires far more than lists and counter-lists, sobering or inspiring though these examples of racializing extension and anti-racist amplification may be. To understand, as Barassi (2015) argues, how the internet and connective media are impacting on political participation and democratic processes, 'we should not focus on disruption and continuity, but we should instead explore the complex dialectics between transformation and continuity; between the technical and the social; between the political economy of the web and its lived critique'. The next section lays out the dimensions of an analytical framework for anti-racism in digital media culture, before proceeding to examine domains of anti-racist action with a mediated dimension.

Anti-racism and digital media: an analytical framework

Anti-racism: plurality and divergence

The first dimension is the particularity of forms of anti-racism. In an essay assessing the critical relevance of contemporary practices, Ghassan Hage (2015) identifies six key functions evident in histories of anti-racism: *reducing the incidence of racist practices* ('making it difficult for racists to externalise their racism whether in society at large [everyday racism] or within institutions [structural racism]'); *fostering a non-racist culture* (challenging stereotypes, educating people about the 'consequences of their views', working to demonstrate how racism works with and intersects with other processes and structures); *supporting the victims of racism* (from emergency material, physical and emotional support to insisting on the 'social and historical nature of the psychological fault lines that make racialized subjects particularly vulnerable to racist injury'); *empowering racialized subjects* (avoiding creating heroic relations of dependency and supporting and being led by the struggle of those racialized in society); *transforming racist relations into better relations* (by approaching racism as a set of 'bad relations' that require challenge and transformation into better modes of co-existence); and *fostering an a-racist culture* (to work from transforming relations to a 'state of affairs in which racial identification is no longer a relevant or salient mode of identification') (2015: loc 2995–3091).

While these aspects recur in the media actions discussed subsequently, to take them directly as a framework for anti-racism is complicated by the fact that anti-racism, as Alastair Bonnett notes, 'cannot be adequately understood as the inverse of racism' (2000: 2). Varying traditions of anti-racism operate with different understandings of racism, its relations to 'race', its intersection with class and gender and what is required to confront it. This divergence is often shaped not only by the contextuality of movements, but also by differences over tactics that recur across contexts, such as whether and how to confront far-right street movements (see Bray, 2018, for a discussion). It is also the case that anti-racist mobilizations, particularly involving larger left movements and/or professional non-governmental organizations, differ hugely on the question of 'empowering racialized subjects' and trusting in the leadership of those who experience racism in society (Lentin, 2004: 237–304).

Further, as Hage argues, ‘anti-racism needs to always remain in touch with the alter-racial, those imaginings of a non- or a-racial society with which it needs to be continuously injected at every stage of the anti-racist struggle’ (2015: loc 3205). As Chapter 1’s discussion of varying interpretations of postracialism indicated, these alter-racial visions can differ profoundly. And, as the subsequent discussion of anti-racist universalism and decolonial anti-racism in interpretations of Riss’s Alan Kurdi cartoon demonstrated, they can be openly antagonistic to each other. In some assessments, this poses a political problem. According to Michel Wievorka, ‘scavenging’ has an accretive power for racist discourse, but works to weaken anti-racism, for

... racists are not troubled by possible internal contradictions ... but anti-racism cannot function this way; it does not stand in a perfectly symmetrical relationship to the evil that it opposes. It becomes ineffectual and even counterproductive the more it appears to be incoherent and, worse still, incapable of overcoming its contradictions, whereas racism draws its strength from amalgamating the processes it effects. (2015: 147)

Do the complex cultural space of digital media production, and the often intensive generativity of social media dynamics, exacerbate this? This chapter emphasizes the need to avoid totalizing assessments, and to focus on the contingency of media dynamics and the contextual shape of political action. However, it does argue that given the temporal-spatial shifts in how racism produces racialized populations as a problem, and how it integrates a shifting corpus of rationales, discourses and associations, the networked and transnational space of exchange structured by digital media provides significant opportunities not just for anti-racist connection, but also for imagination. When viewed transnationally, Alana Lentin argues in her study of European anti-racist movements,

The temporal differences between anti-racisms in different settings, their varying speeds, the diversified conceptualisations of ‘race’ and racism and the radically different standpoints of activists, both across countries and between organisations in a single society, contribute to ensuring that something is always ‘going on’. (2004: 305)

It is the wager of this chapter that, while the individualizing drive and subjectification of social media remains to be reckoned with, digital media space intensifies this sense of ‘something always going on’ in

multiple ways: the transnational sharing of resources and sources of inspiration; the mediated commemoration of events and well-known and unjustly obscured anti-racist activists; digital storytelling about past and current struggles and the repertoires of action and thought they mobilize; rolling interactive critiques of media texts, and challenges to dominant news framings; visual archives and meme circulation that provide access to what could be termed an ‘anti-racist debris’. A proper survey of different traditions of anti-racism is beyond the scope of this chapter, but as an observation, it is often the case that histories and iconographies of resistance from the US dominate the anti-racist imagination. Digital media culture provides transnational access to important historical resources and contemporary connections from multiple contexts.² The challenge, under these conditions, involves not only the dynamics of contradiction, but also translation and relational work.

Anti-racist action: agency and public political culture

If anti-racism is a heterogeneous site of political traditions, understandings and strategies, what does anti-racism in and through digital media seek to achieve, and on what basis? Here, once again, it is worth adapting from research on anti-racist politics to think about media practices. In her study of political movements, Lentin maps anti-racist practices ‘along a continuum of proximity-to-distance from the public political culture of the nation-state’ (2004: 36). The concept of ‘public political culture’ is drawn from John Rawls’ understanding of it as a widely shared and thus legitimating ensemble of ideas associated with ‘democracy as a principle ordering of the modern, western state’ (ibid: 2). Lentin’s continuum, while acknowledging that these positions are very often blended in practice, places forms of anti-racism in relation to these hegemonic ideas. At one end, proximity involves combating racism through discourses of human rights, meritocracy or fairness, values assumed to be upheld by the state, and ‘inscribed in national political culture’. At the other, distance is marked by a focus on the state as an ambivalent institutionalization and nexus of power, hence ‘anti-racism in this view necessarily contains a critique of modern nation-state histories, which are as much narratives of colonialism, fascism, and the suppression of immigrants’ rights as they are those of universal suffrage, the defence of human rights and the suppression of totalitarianism’ (ibid: 3).

This provides a basis for analyzing the divergent ways in which anti-racists understand and relate to the nation-state as *both* a racist and

anti-racist configuration, and therefore whether and to what extent they look to the institutions of state, and the norms of public political culture, for the ‘solutions’ to racism (ibid: 39–44). Proximity-to-distance, in terms of mediated anti-racism, has two intertwined dimensions. The first is discursive, focusing on what values and vocabulary an action lays claim to, the extent to which these draw on the presumed norms of the public sphere *as anti-racist norms*. The second is practice-based, involving the degree to which the action intervenes in the logic and dynamics of the platform/medium, or depends on intervention in the medium by a regulatory or disciplinary agency to confront racism.

Practices may simultaneously mark their distance from and draw on the presumed norms of public political culture. For example, Van Zoonen et al.’s (2010) study of response videos on YouTube to Geert Wilder’s propaganda video *Fitna* demonstrates how one cluster of videos sought ‘dialogue’, patiently ‘explaining Islam’ and engaging in comment thread discussion, whereas another cluster was aimed at ‘culture-jamming’ by uploading hundreds of very short videos tagged as ‘Fitna’ or ‘Geert Wilders’, thus ‘exploiting the typical internet features of information abundance and burying the movie under other ones with a contrasting message’ (2010: 1289). This simultaneity illustrates that the continuum is intended as a heuristic device, an analytical orientation to examining actions, not a drive to categorize them or rank them for ‘purity’. For example, the direct action of tearing down the anti-Muslim subway posters, and going to court to have them legally removed – as discussed in Chapter 5 – are separated from each other on this continuum by the question of legality. Yet in practice, direct action and legal remedy are not always in tension, with both deployed within large movement strategies. On the other hand, there is ostensibly less of a gap between the Black History Month edit-a-thon and the #CurriculumSoWhite intervention, in that both are intervening in the consequences of neutrality-as-colourblindness. However, given the former was conducted in public cooperation with Wikipedia, and the latter autonomously, their orientation to the consensual values of ‘public political culture’ is quite different.

Anti-racist media: genres, practices, publics

This analytical framework requires paying attention to the multiplicity of media practices, and the varying publics that they seek to address and potentially mobilize into some form of action. This applies to social media practices, for as Tim Highfield notes, ‘To understand everyday

politics *on* social media, we also need to understand the practices, logics and vernacular of everyday social media' (2016: loc 1348, original emphasis). It also needs to be considered how these practices are appropriated, scaled and adapted for political interventions. Anti-racist media practices draw on the resources and repertoires of action developed through broader oppositional media work. Leah Lievrouw (2011) provides a useful typology of 'genres of alternative and activist new media', focusing on *culture jamming*, *alternative computing* (such as antifa hackers 'doxing' far-right activists by accessing their identities and personal details on far-right sites and making them publicly available) *participatory journalism* (as with *Megafonen* and *Trappy Blog's* work), and *commons knowledge* (central to the edit-a-thon strategies of mobilizing 'outsider' knowledge) (2011: 19–26). Social media use is most closely associated with the final genre, of 'mediated mobilization', where users 'cultivate interpersonal networks online and ... mobilise those networks to engage in live and mediated collective action' (ibid: 25).

As activist media genres assume some form of collective action, it is important to broaden the conceptual framework to include media interactions that are less coordinated and more ambient. Of relevance to anti-racist practice is the literature on 'citizen media', defined by Clemencia Rodriguez as 'communication spaces where citizens can learn to manipulate their own languages, codes, signs and symbols empowering them to name the world in their own terms' (2011: 24). In Baker and Blaagaard's (2016) formulation, the category of 'citizen media' holds open a space for 'unaffiliated' action in relation to the collective orientation of 'activist' media, despite the evident overlaps in practices and genres. While their conceptualization of citizen media as 'the physical artefacts, digital content, practices, performative interventions and discursive formations of affective sociality produced by unaffiliated citizens as they act in public space' (ibid: 16) usefully broadens the scope for thinking about anti-racist media practices, the concept of 'citizen media' arguably does not. It is the intention, in conceptualizations of citizen media, to reclaim the idea of 'citizen' to a sense of participation beyond a formalist understanding of the political status conferred within the system of nation-state sovereignty. Yet if, as Chapter 3 argued, it is the very system of stratified rights that produces migrant 'illegality', then it is difficult to anchor the category of 'citizen media' in relation to anti-racist politics that, *inter alia*, contests how race is renewed in and through the distribution of citizenship.

Finally, it is necessary to think about the publics addressed, shaped and called into being by these media practices. While this analysis has been consistently critical of ideas of the ‘public sphere’ conceived of as unitary and given political coherence by processes of public deliberation, it must also be noted that the desire to address, intervene in, or influence *the* public remains a critical threshold for many – though by no means all – forms and traditions of anti-racist activism. It is important to be careful as to what this threshold does and does not involve. Imagining ‘the public’ as a space of political action does not mean orienting action towards the insidious banality of ‘public opinion’, blunting critique and interventions so as not to alienate a mythic ‘middle ground’, reproducing the policing of public/private distinctions in the service of ‘acceptable politics’, or conceding legitimacy to dominant constructions of whiteness. Rather, it is the recognition that, in the context of the nation-state, where struggle is focused on building consciousness of racist structures and practices, forging alliances, and forcing change within institutions, state practices and the distribution of socio-cultural power, ‘the public’ retains this unitary, rather than unified, charge.

Of course, this charge co-exists with a keen awareness that the conditions and processes of public discourse have become hugely complex, and that the proliferation of technologies that shift the conditions for participation in public communication also transforms the contours and textures of publics. While decades of media and communication research have cumulatively examined the (uneven and unequal yet powerful) globalization of communications, it is certainly the case, as Ingrid Volkmer argues, that there is a residual ‘dominance of the paradigm of territorial boundedness of publics in the debate of public communication’ (2014: 13). However, a more subtle yet equally pressing limitation is the difficulty of conceptualizing the scale, multiplicity and subjectivity of communicative terrains:

Whereas decades ago, trans-border communication was understood as being either ‘international’ (i.e. connecting nations), ‘trans-national’ (reaching sections of several nations simultaneously) or ‘spatial’ (a secluded sphere of digital flow), today’s globalized communications across advanced micro-networks of subjective platforms are no longer ‘trans-border’ but rather discursively interrelated. In this sense, the communication sphere within a globalized scope is no longer an extension but is situated in inter-related subjective micro-networks. In other words, the global and

the national and even the local are no longer distinct spheres but merge in particular in contexts of communicative spheres across diverse sites of subjective micro-networks. (ibid: 2–3)

These conditions transform understandings and practices of public engagement, and exist in tension with the critical threshold of ‘the public’ enfolded to the still-resilient political formation of the nation-state. Further, they proliferate, as Chapter 1 discussed, what Volkmer calls ‘public horizons’. The ‘horizon’ is infused with a sense of possibility, not only of the ‘reflexive interdependence’ and potential relations that develop between actors, but also of limit, as these dynamic and shifting densities of communicative action are ‘scattered across different discursive sites within globalized communicative horizons’ (ibid: 8). This adds a further layer of ambivalence, and informs, as the next section examines, the concerted theoretical attention to frequently significant, yet transient and contingent, mediated publics.

Mobilizing oppositional and resistant publics

Counter-publics and public formulations

Arguably there is a pronounced inattention³ in Media and Communication Studies to histories of independent media-making informed by anti-racist aims and sensibilities, beyond struggles to transform dominant modes of representation (Chapter 2), or to challenge structural inequalities in access to media institutions. This empirical inattention is most pronounced when contrasted with the degree of critical theoretical engagement invested in questions of representation and recognition, particularly in relation to conceptualizing the ‘public sphere’. One of the most influential interventions on these lines has been Nancy Fraser’s (1990) notion⁴ of the ‘subaltern counter-public’. Fraser takes aim at the ideological presumption of open access to the political life of the ‘bourgeois public sphere’, and the attendant understanding of the democratic role of deliberative engagement. In her analysis, this idealization is ahistorical, predicated on eliding how ‘Women of all classes were excluded from official political participation precisely on the basis of ascribed gender status, while plebeian men were formally excluded by property qualifications. Moreover, in many cases, women and men of racialized ethnicities of all classes were excluded on racial grounds’ (1990: 63).

When these historical elisions are addressed, Fraser argues, it becomes clear that the public was never unitary, but composed of multiple, competing and frequently silenced, antagonistic publics. While these legally forced exclusions have been democratically resisted and transformed over time, a latent idealization of the public as a space of interaction between equal interlocutors endures. This promotes magical thinking; the durability of structured and informal inequalities vanish from idealized sight, and the multiplicity and antagonisms of intersecting publics are elided in favour of the insistent unity invoked in ‘the public’. The idea of subaltern counter-publics disrupts this imaginary, conceptualizing them as spaces ‘where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs’ (ibid). These spaces have a dialectical character, in that they are often maintained as ‘spaces of withdrawal and regroupment’ while also functioning ‘as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed towards wide publics’ (ibid: 68).

In a reflection on Fraser’s argument in her essay on the historical emergence of ‘the Black Public Sphere’ in the US, Catherine R. Squires (2002) accepts this dialectical dimension while questioning the suppositions that the counter-public as *concept* can too easily reproduce. The ‘counter’ dimension has, in much usage, been given coherence through either a presumption of ‘shared marginal identity’, or the expression of relatively coherent counter-ideologies. This tendency to fix resistant and mobilizing practices within ‘counter-public’ collectives often fails to reflect either the intersectional ‘heterogeneity of marginalized groups’ or the diversity of public-making practices. Publics are not straightforward expressions of group identity, rather

... a Black public is an emergent collective composed of people who (a) engage in common discourses and negotiations of what it means to be Black, and (b) pursue particularly defined Black interests. This definition, although still wedded to the idea that there is a Black social group, does allow for heterogenous Black publics to emerge, and also for people who do not identify as Black, but are concerned with similar issues, to be involved in a coalition with Black people. (2002: 454).

This emphasis on the coalitional practices and tensions at play in a given formation stresses that resistant publics do not solely take shape as a reaction to oppression, but also as a consequence of ‘internal politics’

and contingent access to material and symbolic resources. Based on a reading of African American liberation struggles during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Squires integrates the idea of a ‘counter-public’ into a more relational, heuristic model. A public can *enclave* itself, focusing on internal debate and collective intellect, while avoiding repressive and derogatory treatment in the wider public sphere, or respond as a *counter-public*, engaging in wider debate and movement-building, or act as a *satellite*, deliberately building shared interests and capacities on its own terms (to the extent possible) while strategically engaging in periodic wider public engagement (ibid: 457–63).

The counter-public encompasses media activism, but as a dimension of broader collective and communicative mobilization. Nevertheless, discussions of resistant and alternative media action have, in recent decades, been oriented to this concept, and it is important to situate it in the digital media era by carrying forward the careful differentiation that emerges in historicized accounts such as Squires’. Éric Fassin (2018), for example, draws substantially on Fraser’s account to argue that social media has become a space where that which normally remained inaudible in ‘dominant public space’ in France can now be heard. The ‘counter-publics’ forcing anti-racist, feminist and queer perspectives into the ‘national conversation’ demonstrate that their marginality is not, as is so often suggested in dismissive account of ‘identity politics’, a consequence of ‘separatism’, but a product of exclusion. Racialized people in France, he argues, seized on social media as a ‘subaltern counter-space’ in a context where there was no room in dominant public space for the anger that had gathered in protests against state racism and racism in public culture, and where social media was an obvious alternative to a mainstream media that simply ‘never gives them the chance to speak’.

In his assessment, this powered a particular dialectic between movement retrenchment and public agitation, as a powerful political vocabulary derived from the decolonial movement, Afrofeminism and other anti-racist and intersectionalist political currents became more pronounced in an ‘expanded discursive space’. Fassin’s use of the idea captures the force of certain political relations in contemporary France, namely that the public organizing of decolonial and autonomous anti-racist movements has been treated, by politicians on the left as well as the right, as an unacceptable expression of ‘communitarianism’ that violates the ‘neutrality’ of the Republican public sphere. That is, counter-public activity is framed as *contrary to the public*, a charge which leaves the racialized construction of the public outside of the discussion.⁵

Yet while the idea of counter-publics remains relevant as a starting point for capturing relations of exclusion and antagonism in public culture, and the contextual specificity of his discussion is a useful reminder that transnational platforms also facilitate intensely localized dynamics, the counter-public idea does not fully capture the ways in which coalitional anti-racisms are networked and mediated.

In the febrile atmosphere following the January 2015 Paris attacks, a mesh of political opinions and identifications was mediated through the deceptively dialectical hashtags *#JeSuisCharlie* and *#JeNeSuisPasCharlie*. In Simon Dawes' analysis, the speed with which these hashtags circulated underscored the slowness of 'traditional French media to even acknowledge the polysemy ... of discordant voices (that) sought to make themselves heard to say that, although they also condemned the attacks, they were not Charlie' (2017: 180). When it did become a focus of mainstream media discussion, little attempt was made to distinguish the very different critiques mediated by the negation of 'I am Charlie', framing instead the hashtag as evidence of a division between 'the reasoned political subjectivity of the French state and media, and the discredited moral subjectivity of those who "do not accept or understand republican values"' (Dawes, 2015: 4).

As Romain Badouard's (2016) study of the *#JeNeSuisPasCharlie* hashtag demonstrates, the assumption that these two opposing hashtags mapped onto any such substantive polarization of public debate was not borne out in the data. At most, the polyphony could be organized into three broad, equally distributed tendencies: a rejection of *Charlie Hebdo* as an incarnation of the 'spirit of 1968' reviled by ultra-Catholic, traditionalist and identitarian tendencies on the capacious French political right-wing; a widespread critical position best described as 'I am Charlie, but', which sought to condemn the attacks while marking a distance from the politics of the publication, or from the coerciveness of 'national unity'; and a concentrated focus by French Muslims on the effects of the celebration of a 'right to offend' in a public context where Muslim identities are consistently held up for scrutiny and adjudication.

To capture this mediated multiplicity, Dawes turns to one of several concepts formed to capture the transience of digitally mediated formations. Drawing on Axel Bruns and Jean E. Burgess's (2011) idea of 'ad hoc publics' that are mobilized through and shape intensive media events begins to mark out certain limits to the analytical value of the 'counter-public' for media analysis. While the ad hoc public of *#JeNeSuisPasCharlie* was formed in opposition to the dominant media and political establishment

framing of the attacks, and ‘in part gave expression to a sense of voicelessness for the Muslim community in the French public sphere’, the hashtag was not a straightforward mechanism for mobilizing counter-publics. It acted as a discursive device for the ‘heterogenous construction’ of a collective identity given transitory coherence through how oppositional expression is materialized by and through Twitter (Dawes, 2017: 185–8). Consequently, Salovaara argues that the dominant focus on *what people were trying to say* through the hashtag ignores the ‘spatiality of events, their networked structure, and the role of human and non-human actors in re-assembling complex political subjectivities’ (2015: 103).

The interplay of these dimensions indicates why Twitter’s ‘near instantaneous, multiplex, globalized, socially networked and public’ character has prompted considerable theorization as to how it facilitates and shapes public formations (Murthy, 2013: 100). Co-joining an analysis of the ‘techno-sociality’ of connective media to Squires’ anti-essentialist analysis, Sanjay Sharma’s (2013) study of ‘Black Twitter’ emphasizes the problem of reducing Twitter’s ‘digital-race assemblage’ to the expression of ‘*a priori* identitarian categories’. The idea of ‘Black Twitter’ – a shorthand encompassing significant African American Twitter usage, the circulation of memes and hashtags, and the prevalence of ‘Black cultural trending topics’ – gained general attention initially as a way of countering perceptions of the internet as a white space, while also, inevitably, being fetishized as a cultural novelty (Brock, 2012). Sharma argues that the significance of Black Twitter ‘does not hinge on claiming a “hashtag community” as a radical online anti-racist practice’ (2013: 48), recalling Paul Gilroy’s criticism of anti-racisms that misrepresent ‘the rich complexity of black life by reducing it to nothing more than a response to racism’ (1990: 208).

It also draws attention to the limits of focusing on user identity and behaviour to the exclusion of the technocultural operations of digital media, leading to ‘inadequately perceiving the production of new forms of racial coding, interaction and emergence’ (ibid: 64). Analyzing the mobilization of (anti-racist) publics does not require jettisoning a focus on political agency and the discursivity of interventions, but requires attending also to their *materialization*, and thus their contingency. ‘Networked publics’, as boyd has suggested, must be understood in relation to ‘(1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology and practice’ (2010: 39). By focusing on Twitter as a platform, and conceptual understandings of the public formations

it connects and structures, the remainder of this section sets out some ways in which anti-racist politics has taken public shape through the micro-blogging site.

Hashtag publics

In the previous chapters, the discussion of Twitter has focused on its role as a platform for news dissemination, processes of disinformation, and expansive participation in heightened and intensive ‘public horizons’. In a discussion of social media, politics and ‘affective publics’, Zizi Papacharissi (2014) captures these aspects in her description of it as a ‘social awareness system’, built on its ‘always on’ and ‘real time’ properties, acting as a conduit for information flows between different networked publics. The generativity of Twitter stems from its particular communicative affordances, as ‘addressivity and conversational markers are essential to the formation and direction of information flows via Twitter. Networked publics are further textually rendered through the use of hashtags that define a topic of a direction for information sharing’ (2014: 33).

Hashtags, as *#JeSuisCharlie* attests, do not just organize content and connect dispersed users. They also act as discursive devices, intensifying and diversifying engagements, amplifying certain themes, and shaping evanescent sociality. Papacharissi distinguishes between ‘endogenous tags’, which are generated by Twitter-specific activities, and ‘exogenous tags’, which relate to an event outside of the Twitter system, such as breaking news or response to a political situation (ibid: 33–4).

This communicative architecture and the practices that have developed through it accentuate Twitter as a ‘contemporary medium for storytelling, enabling co-creating and collaborative filtering that sustains ambient and affective engagement for the publics it interconnects’ (ibid, 2014: 27). Taking these dimensions and practices onto the terrain of anti-racism, one way of understanding anti-racisms mediated by Twitter is as interventions in dominant modes of story-telling; disrupting some, augmenting others, and collectively narrating still more. Perhaps the most evident of these is confronting racist expression and racializing logics, in everyday encounters in the informational flow or through the intensive and accelerated dynamics that take shape around breaking news or spectacular events. Elizabeth Poole et al.’s (2018) study of the hashtag *#StopIslam* examines how an anti-Muslim hashtag was disrupted by being flooded with counter-narratives. While this hashtag is regularly attached to a steady stream of tweets about different

events or news stories, and is regularly used in multi-hashtagged posts, it received heightened use after a terrorist attack in Brussels in March 2016, and it is this immediate aftermath their study covers.

It demonstrates how an ‘ad hoc public’ took shape around jamming and redirecting the hashtag through messages of solidarity and contesting the racializing connection made between non-state violence and ‘Muslim culture’. While the message ‘Stop Islam’ seems unambiguous, #StopIslam as a form of metadata and a rhetorical device is more contingent. Hashtags, James McVey and Heather Woods point out, ‘rely on semantic abstraction in order to open up conversation to the public world of strangers. The discursive flexibility of the hashtag allows it to bound the scope of digital discourse while simultaneously opening up the discourse to widespread viral circulation’ (2016: 2). Viral circulation in turn opens it up to counter-narrative dilution and contest, so much so, in this instance, that it garnered significant media coverage (*The Washington Post’s* story, ‘#StopIslam Twitter-trended for all the right reasons’, also draws attention, of course, to the fact that the hashtag was *able* to trend; Dewey, 2016).

Poole et al.’s account is careful to push past the headline celebration to draw out some other aspects: participating in the hashtag exposed some users to trolling, and once the viral event dissipated, the hashtag reverted to its ambient use as a rhetorical organizing device for anti-Muslim racism. This is hardly surprising, as the hashtag is deployed as a quotidian gesture by small yet dense far-right constellations that have greater network longevity than intensive ‘ad hoc’ formations. As a semiotic marker and algorithmic construction, a hashtag cannot definitively be ‘reclaimed’. It is also undoubtedly the case that such forms of engagement produce amplification. Increased participation in public discourse, Philips and Milner argue in their treatment of ambivalence, is subject to the ‘double-edged sword of affective attunement’, where participation involves ‘unprecedented immediacy, public visibility and at times outright ferocity’ (2017: 191). Yet for all the risks posed by the ambivalence of amplification, the underlying problem is that social media *anyway* amplifies the public visibility and circulation of racialized discourse, and as such, anti-racist activism cannot leave it to be propagated unchallenged. Interventions should be reflective and strategic, certainly, but if engagement amplifies what is already circulating, it is still better that racist content proliferates with opposition coagulating in the flow.

Teasing out the precise dimensions of contradiction and ambivalence activated by and within specific public formations guards against a

tendency to regard ephemerality and ambient connection as evidence of the political weakness of ‘hashtag politics’, without sufficient consideration of the public horizon of such actions. A critical distinction made by Squires (2002) in her discussion of the Black Public Sphere is that to judge communicative action solely according to its productive relation to other forms of political action is to confuse the ‘discursive actions of a public sphere, and the political success of that sphere. Political strategies and activities emerge from exchanges of ideas and inspiration, and the primary function of a public sphere is to support such discourse. Whether or not these ideas foment successful political campaigns is another matter, albeit an important one’ (2002: 452).

This distinction is not made in the service of a banal distinction between theory and practice, or between a realm of rarified contemplation and the world of pragmatic action. Rather, it resists reducing the development of shared understanding, argument elaboration, collective identification and ‘internal’ critique to teleological assumptions about political mobilization. It is not incidental, therefore, that recent research examining anti-racist engagement on Twitter hones in on how hashtags have been mobilized to disrupt postracial story telling, not only to insert the salience of race to ‘social conversations’ but also to insist on its complexity and intersectional force. Hashtags work to drive discourse in particular directions, providing openings for stories, experiences and critique. In her study of ‘racial justice activist hashtags’, Rachel Kuo understands this as central to building sustained networks, as ‘their primary value may be in elevating and circulating discourse, but these hashtags can help establish grounds for participation, build individual and collective identity, and organize for collective action’ (2016: 496).

The study examines hashtags that circulated and garnered attention transnationally, but which were initiated and achieved resonance and intensity in a particular context, in this instance ‘racialized and feminist online publics’ predominantly located in the US. Racial justice activist hashtags are circulated to call attention to injustice, by highlighting neglected issues or to reframe discourse by drawing out aspects elided in dominant narratives. Kuo draws on Squires’ heuristic model of publics to argue that hashtags, even in the volatile space of Twitter, can support ‘enclave’ practices, shaping ‘internal’ discourse production and shared understandings – ‘hashtags offer discursive frame processes in articulating and circulating observed events and experiences’ (ibid). Enclavic formations on Twitter can never be hermetic; the idea of ‘context collapse’ has migrated from academic discourse to wider usage precisely

because it captures the widely-shared experience of navigating the relationship between an ‘imagined audience’ and the overlapping publics of connective media platforms (Marwick and boyd, 2011). However, these hashtags also have a counterpublic valence, as ‘members of a racialized digital counterpublic who have been perceived as “invisible” within the public at large utilize hashtags to make their presence and message more visible to publics dominated by whiteness’ (Kuo, op.cit.).

Given the lingering polarization of perspectives on social media and politics, the idea of ‘hashtag politics’ is unlikely to lose a resonance of misplaced gravity, or of a misguided turn to the symbolic at a moment when social movements appear fragmented and politically weakened. However, empirical studies have drawn much of the heat from this polarization by examining the public horizons articulated around these kinds of hashtags, and examining their networked formation and modes of expression. They are aware of the tensions between the utility of connective media and how the ‘architectures of digital media networks can reproduce the emphasis on the individual that is at the core of neoliberal racial ideologies, creating the potential for dominant racial logics to map easily onto digital networks’ (Florini, 2015: 441).

Theresa L. Petray and Rowan Collin (2017), drawing on the feminist anthropologist Sherry Ortner, draw attention to the ‘serious games’ of playful, ironic or memetic communications within hashtag publics. Their study of the hashtag #whiteproverbs examines the satirical recasting of common forms of racism denial, stereotyping and ‘justifying non-White disadvantage’ as folk sayings – proverbs tell stories, but mediated by this hashtag, they disrupt a practised story of innocence and denial. The hashtag foregrounds the importance of humorous reversal, sarcasm and pointed exaggeration to Twitter’s ‘platform vernacular’, opening a space where civility and ‘respectability’ cannot be easily pressed as putative requirements for public dialogue. While this study analyzed a large corpus of tweets, it paid qualitative attention to the engagement of participants ‘involved in movements for Aboriginal and Torre Strait Islander equality, refugee rights, and anti-racism more generally’ (2017: 7). For these participants, the hashtag was not a surrogate form of activism, but a discursive exercise in building shared understandings, highlighting ‘the rules of whiteness and race as currently played out in Australia’ (ibid: 8). While hashtag publics are characterized by significant divergences in network power (Papacharissi, 2014), this corpus of research suggests that in particular contexts and contingent constellations they provide a meaningful space of expression for those who experience racism and

intersecting oppressions to examine them, and to negotiate positions, develop analyse and establish connections.

It is a somewhat different issue if ‘hashtag activism’ that confronts racist expression and racializing logics claims a more substantive or direct relation to social change and political mobilization. Here there is certainly a risk, as Natalie Fenton argues, that ‘collective solidarity is replaced by a politics of visibility that relies on hashtags, “Likes” and compulsive posting of updates that hinge upon self-presentation as proof of individual activism’ (2016: 44). There is no ideology without desire, and the individualizing drive of social media is in constant tension with the negotiation of ‘reflexive interdependence’ in mutable public formations. In relation to anti-racism, the temptation of self-presentation as proof of individual activism acquires a particular inflection. Sara Ahmed (2004a) has argued that white declarations of anti-racism risk failing ‘to examine how sayings are not always doings, or to put it more strongly, to show how the investment in saying as if saying was doing can actually extend rather than challenge racism’. This tendency is what Ahmed terms ‘the non-performativity of anti-racism’, where performative speech, in John L. Austin’s sense, means that ‘the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action’ (1975: 6).

The gesture of recognizing whiteness, and testifying as to confronting one’s own racism, is often presented as ‘evidence’ of anti-racist commitment and as a form of political action. However, ‘anti-racist speech in a racist world is an unhappy performative’: the conditions are not in place that would allow such ‘saying’ to ‘do’ what it ‘says’. Instead, such ‘non-performative’ declarations recentre whiteness that has ‘happily’ demonstrated that it is not racist, and thus ‘allows racism to remain the burden of non-white others’ (ibid). This non-performativity is invited by social media, heightened both by the corporate imperative of discourse production, and the cultural presumption that connective media platforms are racially neutral, and thus coded as ‘white’ (Brock, 2012). And while non-performative, it involves performance; declarations and ‘call outs’ that constitute what Tim Engles calls a ‘white antiracist slacktivism’ that ‘carries a sense of responsibility only as far as self-aggrandizing *expressions* of solidarity’ (2017: 104, original emphasis).

While the individualizing drive and subjectification of social media are constantly to be negotiated as structural aspects of these platforms, destructive behaviours can be and are reckoned with within movements and networks. The potential of counter-public formations to generate a mobilizing sense of ‘something always going on’ is important for

anti-racist imaginings, for building shared understandings, and generating ideas and affinities. The value of this, particularly given the communicative and political-conceptual challenges of postracial debat-ability, does not depend on ignoring the ways in which Twitter is also a space of ambiguous and destructive drives, and modulated and managed participation.

Acting on, acting through media

Social media and media criticism

In myriad ways, social media platforms are used to engage, critique and even attempt to hold media representations and reporting to some form of account. As Chapter 2 suggested, this ceaseless circulation articulates a quotidian politics of representation and offers the possibility of more sustained interventions in media practices. It does so ambivalently, in an environment where it inevitably contributes to the production of an extraordinary scale of commodified discourse. Critical treatments of the boosterish notion the ‘attention economy’ emphasize how the corporate capture of attention has become a means of producing value, or attempting to (Fuchs, 2014). The generalized struggle for attention in heavily mediated contexts has consequences for forms of political action that must generate means of ‘attention acquisition’ (Tufekci, 2013). The expanded capacity to comment on media work, and in some instances to impact on it, proposes another vector of ambivalence: how can those engaged in media critique *draw attention* by participating in the flows and through the platforms that constantly ‘solicit us as subjects of attention’ (Read, 2014)?

Recent research on media audiences suggests that digital participation encompasses shifting modes of *paying* attention. The ‘hybrid media practice’ of combining watching a live broadcast or stream with simultaneous engagement through social media platforms has been described as ‘back channelling’ (Finger and De Souza, 2012), ‘co-connected viewing’ (Pittman and Tefertiller, 2015) ‘second screening’ (Laursen and Sandvik, 2014), or the actions of an emerging ‘viewertariat’ (Anstead and O’Loughlin, 2011). For Vaccari et al. (2015), the process of switching between live broadcast and Facebook and Twitter in particular is best described as dual screening, a ‘complex bundle of practices’ more mixed than the ‘TV first, social media second’ implication of ‘second screening’. The preponderance of research on dual screening is focused on news

consumption, particularly in relation to the immediacy of intensive media events, and oriented towards testing the relation between these practices and forms of political participation (de Zúñiga et al., 2015). Accelerated news cycles and ‘totemic political events’ such as elections provide ‘greater opportunities for active and strategic intervention, framing and reframing by a wide array of actors’ (Vaccari et al., 2015: 1042).

Apryl Williams and Vanessa Gonlin (2017) investigate ‘second screening’ within Black Twitter’s milieu, but their focus is on commentary practices around the television show *How to Get Away with Murder* (for which Viola Davis was the first black woman to win Lead Actress in a Drama at the Emmy Awards). They are dismissive of the idea that these practices are inherently ‘dialogue-enabling’, given inequalities in technology and social platform capital. Rather, second-screening practices are used to reflect on what ‘fuller representations of Black women that challenge the typical media portrayals of women of color’ could look like, and how the question of authenticity is to be navigated and negotiated. Such practices are closely related to the community-building orientation of counter-publics, shaped not so much towards an intervention in media practices as discursivity refracted through a shared textual focus.

The surveillance orientation and addressivity of social media extend established forms of critical engagement with media representation which presuppose the social significance of media and its role in circulating racist discourse. Media monitoring – a ‘series of observational, analytical, evaluative and critical activities by independent (non-media) organizations focusing on the practices and the products of mass media and mass media workers’ (Van Dijk, 1995) – is arguably the most prevalent of these.⁶ The immediacy of social media allows for media monitoring to be folded into the news story or media event. The *Collectif Contre l’Islamophobie en France* (CCIF), which is relentlessly targeted by right-wing and also ultra-laïc media, uses its blog to fact-check and analyze hostile media coverage, and often to directly respond to the sources, integrating its media monitoring into its broader surveillance of incidents of anti-Muslim racism. Beyond organized groups, a vast range of actors use dedicated Twitter accounts and Storify blogs to monitor and critique media output in often very specific ways. The now-defunct Tumblr ‘Réflexe Niqab’ documented a journalistic ‘niqab reflex’, using images of women in niqab to anchor stories that had some general or marginal reference to Islam or immigration, and also using photos of veiled women from other contexts and times to illustrate stories about contemporary France (for example, in a story about a survey of how

‘French people do not want religious signs visible in businesses’, a photo of a veiled woman sorting pomegranates in Afghanistan was used).⁷

Given the popularity of the business model of tapping out racism as a way of generating online ‘outrage’, strategies have developed which seek to minimize the value of racist clickbait, from circulating versions of deliberately provocative articles on text storage sites so that they can be read without directing traffic to the host site, to more sustained strategies. The campaign Stop Funding Hate was established in the UK in the summer of 2016 in response to sustained anti-migrant headlines in the British right-wing press, particularly *The Daily Mail*. It set out to reduce the profitability of sensationalist headlines by targeting companies with published ethical guidelines who were advertising in these newspapers, and used Twitter to publicly draw attention to the incongruity.⁸

The capacity of networked publics to hold racializing reportage or representations to some form of account is not insignificant. At the same time, it is shot through with ambivalence. Sara Ahmed has written of the ‘defensive fantasy’ of the ‘angry person of color’, which functions to position racism as an excess of emotion: ‘It is as if we talk about racism because we are angry, rather than being angry because of racism’ (2012: 159). In the context of the churn of social media, and its association with immediate and unruly affect and response, there is a risk that anti-racist expression is folded dismissively into assumptions about the ‘angry internet’ – *Slate’s* ‘Year of Outrage’ project in 2014 was introduced by noting that ‘People were upset about TV Stars and wheelchairs and lattes and racism and war’ (Turner, 2014). Knowing when and how to navigate the noise is an increasingly important strategic question.

In some assessments, noise is a structural feature of the communicative environment. In *Now*, French anarchist collective The Invisible Committee states that ‘This world no longer needs explaining, critiquing, denouncing. We live in a fog of commentaries and commentaries on commentaries, of critiques and critiques of critiques of critiques, of revelations that don’t trigger anything, other than revelations about the revelations’ (2017: 6). Acting politically in this noise, they argue, is not to give up on speech, but to commit to speech that commits one: ‘one can talk about conflicts, and one can talk *from the midst of conflict*’ (ibid: 7). In the same vein, Macgilchrist and Böhmig (2012) make a case for media critique amidst media saturation as a minimal practice of ‘tiny rips’. Their study of blog responses to the launch – and saturation media coverage – of Thilo Sarrazin’s generic anti-immigrant narrative of national decline *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (‘Germany Abolishes Itself’, 2010) regards

this writing as provoking the need to constantly restabilize hegemonic meanings, where ‘the blogs written about the Sarrazin case have torn tiny fissures in the mediascape, contesting the view circulating broadly in the news media that Muslim immigrants are the cause of Germany’s current social and economic problems’ (2012: 97). The minimal task of anti-racist media critique and action on social media may be one, to mix these metaphors, of finding the tiny fissures in the fog.

Witnessing, mediating

They turn up with seemingly ever-increasing frequency in timelines: recorded in supermarkets and garage forecourts, cafes and street corners, videos of racist abuse are uploaded or livestreamed and rapidly accumulate shares and commentary. They are picked up by news aggregator and content-hungry news sites and often, depending on a combination of their egregiousness and virality, become mainstream news stories, receiving editorial framing and soliciting official comment. As a media form and practice, the proliferation of videos of racist abuse constitutes a loose sub-set of the mass proliferation of mediated witness accounts shaped by the ubiquity of smartphones and networked mobile media, which are in turn a dimension of the ‘visual sociality’ that the proliferation of online video instantiates (Lindgren, 2017: 123–4). The experience of social time and interaction is increasingly also the experience of potential moments or objects for mediation.

In its legal or moral sense, to witness is a form of mediation, a critical yet imperfect transformation from seeing to saying, from the happenstance of witnessing to the imperative of bearing witness (see Peters, 2001). The idea of witnessing also has a pre-digital sense in communication studies, integral to phenomenological considerations of the liveness of broadcasting, which produces a sense of audience co-presence in the media event while making ‘the act of witness into an intimate and domestic act’ (Ellis, 2000: 32). Thinking about mediated witnessing requires negotiating these jarring senses, as the everyday media spectator is also a subject sporadically hailed to some relation to those ‘distant others’ whose conflict, suffering or conditions are witnessed through representations. The moral ambivalence of mediated proximity is acute, as, in Susan Sontag’s (2003) formulation, we may ‘regard the pain of others’ while not being able to act on it, and can routinely access images of atrocity while not being accountable to them.

The immediacy of live-streaming and the presumed veracity of video-recording shifts the relation between ‘seeing’ and ‘saying’ as

modalities of witnessing, while also implicating the witnessing subject as a performative actor in the media event that unfolds through and around the content they circulate. ‘Connective witnessing’ has emerged as a contingent and strategic practice available to movements and individuals (Mortensen, 2015). In a short space of time bystander videos have transcended their status as ‘user-generated content’ in news packages to being easily loaded or streamed through digital media across platforms, and thus becoming an ‘integral part of civic action, which has a bearing on the orchestration, communication, media coverage and political handling of events’ (2015: 1395). The reference to civic action underlines the relation of mediated witnessing research to forms of collective action, in particular protest, which is discussed subsequently. At the same time, there is a lack of specific consideration in this literature of forms of interventionist witnessing in racialized interactions: the ways in which racialized social relations impact on who can act as what kind of witness, and how witnessing videos with an apparent anti-racist intent are circulated, framed and received in the wider media ecosystem.

Videos of racist incidents are interventions in the dynamics of an abusive situation enacted by the presence of the witness – who may be the person under attack, or a bystander – and the phone as witnessing technology. They are often circulated as an act seeking some form of justice, from specific redress such as an apology, to the assumption that public exposure exacts a social cost. They are at once a document of the everyday and of the spectacular, of the persistence of racism but also of its putatively unexpected public irruption. Consequently, one approach to the circulation of these videos has been to read them symptomatically, as instantiations of deeper racial articulation. ‘My Britain is fuck all’ – Paul Gilroy (2012) hones in on this line from a rant on a crowded tram between Croydon and Wimbledon in London by 36-year-old Emma West in late 2011. West’s riff – ‘What’s this country coming to? A load of black people and a load of fucking Polish?’ – has been viewed millions of times online, and this viral circulation led to her facing charges for racially aggravated disorder, and defending herself by explaining that she had been taking anti-depressants and drinking alcohol earlier that day. This explanation is a widespread one in relation to such celebrity or ‘everyday’ outbursts, and it begs a question not of mitigation but of symptomatic implication: why is racism the mode through which illness or unhappiness seems to be inevitably expressed?

That her manifest bitterness and resentment ‘could be articulated spontaneously as a heartfelt commentary on race, nationality and belonging’,

Gilroy argues, is a question of what was discussed in Chapter 1 as *fluency*, ‘not the spontaneous outpouring of an injured white working class that the uncomprehending or ignorant commentariat would have you believe. It is the effect of an accumulated racism and misoxeny which has been significant in fluctuating its presence in the British political life since the end of World War Two’ (2012: 394). Gilroy’s attentiveness to the affective grammar of racialized explanation and complaint, to this scripted spontaneity, cautions against constructing a genre of ‘anti-racist witnessing’ that neglects the situatedness of interactions and the repertoires they take shape through. Concomitantly, this kind of socio-textual reading also requires thinking about the video as a media artefact in circulation.

Shakuntala Banaji (2013) has examined the huge range of YouTube response videos tagged to the original video of West, mainly confessional-to-camera vlogs proposing a ‘take’ on what the incident says about racism, but also overlaying dialogue on the footage or splicing it with other visual material. As a subject of commentary, the video invites diagnosis more than symptomatic reading, with responses linking West’s outburst to putative mental illness or class position, thus enacting resilient modes of exceptionalization. Alana Lentin (2015) tracks a similar process in relation to a ‘bus racism’ video in Australia, where the intervention of other passengers was parlayed, in media coverage, into evidence of a ‘stereotype of Australian national character, as easy-going and “intolerant of intolerance”, while any connection between the passenger’s racist outburst and the politico-historical context in which it is couched fades into the background’. The question raised by this is not a mechanistic one of individualized versus structural analyses of racism, as the accumulated circulation of these videos has consequences across different domains of action.

In the absence of research, there is only speculation. As well as being of some sort of restitutive or testimonial value to those subject to abuse, videos may work performatively, disturbing, as Laila Lalami (2018) has argued, the enactment of the ‘belief that public space belongs exclusively to white people’, thus posting an incremental warning that ‘the assertion of private authority now comes with a social cost’. To enter into circulation is also to activate circuits of debatability, to signify relationally with related videos to constitute a mediated ritual of making racist speech public, which may support narrow postracial modes of recognition of what racism is, and how it is being *exposed*. However, there is much research to be done on the media and social life of this accumulation of videos: how they

accrete generic elements, the differential impacts of live-streamed and recorded documents, the tendency of recording witnesses to supply a running commentary (thus aware, in the moment of witnessing, of potential and desired audiences, and securing narrative meaning) and the ways they are remediated and framed by news outlets.

It is a different story in relation to the sousveillance of racist police violence in the US where video witnessing is centrally considered in the rich body of work on the communicative life of the protest networks organized around #BlackLivesMatter. Although the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter is used to stand in for – and creates a narrative of – linear political action commencing in the aftermath of the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and intensifying after the police murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014, the hashtag itself did not come to signify a movement until after the Ferguson protests (Freelon et al., 2016). The extraordinary police repression meted out to protestors was intensively mediated, and the impact of the proximity of professional journalists with a diverse milieu of activists and protestors has been the focus of several studies. For Barnard (2018), a significant result of Twitter's temporal role as a 'hybrid journo-activist space' during the protests was that 'networked publics' succeeded not only in drawing attention to police brutality, but also in documenting and amplifying and thus linking together individual cases of violence against People of Colour into an 'undeniable pattern explained only by structural racism' (2017: 5).

In a sharp intervention, Allissa V. Richardson argues that witnessing as a theoretical framework breaks down in relation to these particular forms of racialized violence, as it cannot explain 'what makes a poor person of color more likely to bear witness to ... police brutality, than perhaps a middle-class black or white person living in America's affluent suburbs?' (2017: 675–6). The question is blunt, but the answer is far from reductive, proposing a theory of 'mobile-mediated black witnessing'. As a practice, it emerges from a collective sense of a history of witnessing, of 'participating in a long line of storytellers' who have documented lynching, Klan violence and previous experiences of police brutality. In media terms, witness videos are circulated through 'Black Twitter' as an 'ad hoc news outlet' operating in the real time of an event or its immediate aftermath, with the effect that 'the speed with which black subgroups within the general black population communicate, internally and externally, has reshaped the imagined publics and counterpublics of raced spaces, both in the real world and online' (ibid: 691).

In a complementary analysis, Nicholas Mirzoeff's study of Black Lives Matter integrates the ubiquity of mediated witnessing into a theory of the 'space of appearance'. The public occupation of space by racialized people and their allies creates the condition 'where you and I can appear to each other and create a politics', an exchange that produces shared affect and 'no surplus for expropriation, but by our consent it is possible to mediate that dialogic space into materially shareable and distributable forms' (2017: 32). Thus secured, the space of appearance is instantiated through 'three streams of visibility': witnessing in person and through machine-generated imagery, protest as rendering injustice visible, and through mediaticization that ensures a 'co-presence between physical and digital spaces' (ibid: 90). Physically, mediatically and politically, the 'space of appearance' refutes the police injunction that 'there is nothing to see here'.

The aim of this chapter has been to assess, on the basis of the evident ambivalence of digital networks, the ways in which connective media practices are integrated to and extend anti-racist actions, practices directed both at the conviviality of online spaces, and as a dimension of multi-faceted socio-political mobilizations. While not downplaying the unsettling and often destructive aspects of this ambivalence, and the kinds of primarily performative online politics it can engender, what is striking in much of the research discussed is the extent to which activists reflexively integrate an awareness of these systemic limitations and interpersonal distortions to their political expectations and communicative practices. Political action is not driven or determined by ideas alone, but in the contemporary violently racist 'postracial' moment, the circulation of anti-racist ideas, arguments, resources and inspiration matters. The potential for transnational points of connection, translation and recognition matters also, as the affective and political awareness that something is 'always going on' provides joy without comfort in the otherwise exhausting eddies, currents and traps in the circuitries of debatability.

Endnotes

- 1 There is also the Swedish far-right 'alternative encyclopedia' *Metapedia*, originally established by the now-defunct Nazi *Nordiska förbundet* (Nordic Union) in 2006, which has grown into an 'ambitious pan-European project' providing entries in 18 languages (Arnstad, 2015: 106–7).
- 2 On, for example, the ways in which Ferguson protests were linked to Gaza solidarity protests, but also a refusal of this transnational solidarity, see Annie Olaluku-Teriba, 'Afro-Pessimism and the (Un)Logic of Anti-Blackness', *Historical Materialism*, www.historicalmaterialism.org/articles/afro-pessimism-and-unlogic-anti-blackness#_ftn12

- 3 Note here areas that are not covered in this book; Indigenous media, multicultural ‘migrant’ media, etc. See Tanja Dreher, 2010, on community media.
- 4 The idea of ‘counter-public’ in this discussion is somewhat distinct from Michael Warner’s influential discussion in *Publics and Counterpublics* (2005).
- 5 Consequently, relatively small-scale autonomous events are amplified by hostile media coverage and social media campaigns into problems that require political responses. In 2017, the Mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, announced that she was seeking to ban the Nyan-sapo Afro-Feminist festival, as it was ‘banning whites from attending’. This repeated the deliberate mischaracterization prepared through hostile media coverage; the festival proposed a range of discussion spaces, some open to all, and some organized as ‘enclaves’ in the service of self-emancipation, as the aim of the festival made clear: ‘In our communities and in a society which is western, capitalist and patriarchal, we want to struggle against all the oppressions which relate to our position as black women ... (and to) make African and African-descendent voices heard in their diversity, as our Afro-Feminism is not a monolithic whole. Finally, it is to reclaim our identities and our image as black women (and people assigned identities as women)’.
- See the website of the Mwasi Collectif Afrofeministe: <https://mwasicollectif.com>
- 6 Organized approaches to media monitoring are distinctly under-researched, despite the significant investment in the practice by international bodies that tend to monitor compliance with professional codes of conduct, and also by ‘minority’ groups and anti-racist campaigns. Downing and Husband, in one of the few treatments of the practice, question the public impact of large-scale monitoring exercises, for ‘as activists know, a single example, forthrightly exploited and vigorously defended, may have a greater impact than an extensive body of data subject to sophisticated factor analysis and theorised with elegant erudition’ (2005: 157).
- 7 <https://reflexeniqab.tumblr.com/post/101490948266/20-minutes>
- 8 <https://stopfundinghate.org.uk/>