REFLECTIONS OF A #UNSETTLEDSCHOLAR

By   Blaze Welling

Introduction

In a classroom in the summer of 2024, professor Dr. Aparjita Bhandari asked our class, "what is race?" We offered conjectures, ideas, queries, and ended up with more questions than answers. Considering the course was called Rhetorics of Race and Identity, we knew this question was bound to arise. We discussed whether race is biological, socially-fabricated and maintained; whether it is an ethnic or cultural production and how globally, we have succumbed to "race thinking" (Hesmondhalgh and Saha 2013, 180). This way of thinking about the world leads us to conceptualize our relation to others through a lens of difference that is distinctly biological (Hesmondhalgh and Saha 2013). These deliberations were thought-provoking, stimulating, and enraging. When Wendy Chun's pivotal, "Race and/As Technology; or How to Do Things to Race," was introduced, the spark that would lead to my term reflection research project was ignited. Chun's formulation of race "and/as technology" led me to question how race exists within, mediates, perpetuates, and limits such identifiers as gender, culture, ethnicity, and identity in digital spaces. I combined this inquiry with other concepts, theories, and methodologies for thinking and "doing" race. William Frey et al. (2022) pushed me toward the answers to these questions in their discussions of race as a tool mediated in both physical and digital spaces. This just led to further questions, perhaps more reflective and digressive ones, but questions, nonetheless. The question that permeated my thoughts most was how I might be engaging with racial politics of identity (Jardina 2019) passively and imperceptibly in my use of digital platforms. This led me to see if I could be more critical and more conscious of my engagement with the identifiers of race and identity and how both relate to a banal colonialism (Davis 2012; Murphyao and Black 2015; Dlaske 2017;

Carlsson 2020) imbued in my every click of the keyboard or like of a post. This concept, as noted by Carlsson, describes the "structural, everyday, invisibilized, and routinized nature of colonial operations" (269). In many ways, I see a correlation between a sense of banal colonialism and algorithmic bias – colonialism is literally programmed into the function of digital sites. Through a specific focus on blogging as a mode of engagement, my research drove me to consider and trace race and identity through the curation of a Tumblr blog. Entitled _Unsettledscholar_, my blog ran from May to July 2024 and was curated to engage with concepts of decolonization, Frey et al.'s "white racial socialization," and a critical awareness of my position and engagement with(in) algorithms (Philips and Ng-A-Fook 2024). Through multimedia observation, commentary, and reflection I considered these concepts, engaged with many unanticipated ones, and was driven to _even more_ questions. The goal of this kind of reflective work was to consider my positionality reflexively as I continue to embark on my academic journey as a settler scholar committed to understanding and perhaps unlearning settler colonialism in the racial discourse I exhume. To focus on these goals, I was guided by the following questions primarily: _How do whiteness, settlerism, and gender impact my perceptions of race and identity in a digital context? How might algorithms reflect the values of colonialism and continue to invisibilize marginalized voices?_

This paper mirrors the form of the blog, part reflection, nearly always critical, and in perpetual evolution. To sustain critical engagement, I employed the Reflective Practice Method (Moon 2004; Brookfield 2017; Institute of Development Studies) both in my blog posts and in this reflection. Revisiting the blog after the course, I recognized that my work could have been more critical and that feminist interventions and praxis might provide a key pathway forward. My aim here is to acknowledge the strengths of the reflective project while also noting its limitations, particularly in grappling with expansive concepts such as race and identity, which inevitably raise as many questions as they answer. As a settler scholar, I situate myself in relation to digital spaces, seeking to destabilize my assumptions about them. I reflect on how blogs function as both liberating and confining, and I apply a pedagogical lens to consider how such spaces can support both learning and _un_learning, even when they appear passive and uncritical.

Ultimately, this paper is about my own experience of being unsettled – about perspective, critical inquiry, and the possibilities that emerge through reflection.

What The Blog?

It is certainly worth asking: why blogging? Or, perhaps, what is blogging? I asked myself these questions at the outset of my project. My understanding of blogs had always been that they were unacademic, often female discursive spaces about things that mainstream media couldn't (or wouldn't) include in their "reputable" sources. (I imagine you wouldn't find Danielle de Lange's blog, *Style Files*, suddenly in a reputable academic journal, although, it would be wonderful. Can you imagine such a journal?) In search of an antidote to this unproductive way of thinking about blogging, I sought out research that may relate blogging to the entanglements between race, identity, and social media use through the investigations of how racist discourse is reified and amplified in digital spaces (Nakamura 2008; Chun 2009; Kotliar 2020). I wanted to investigate how the emergence of community, protest, education, and awareness might be emerging on a communal blogging platform, and, how this might open the possibility of intersections between identifying entanglements and these aspects of community, protest, education, and awareness. To my delight, I encountered recent scholarship that has begun to consider the microblogging site Tumblr as a location of both cultural repertoire and an archive (Bourdaa 2018; Hoch et al. 2020). Contemporary research has also yielded insights into how Indigenous, BIPOC, and folks experiencing gender-based violence are making use of these blogging platforms for community and advocacy (Pham 2011; Carlson and Frazer 2021). This research alongside other considerations of race and identity in the blogging form has yet to examine what kind of personal reflection can be yielded when Tumblr is used purely for reflection on race and identity.

So why not another platform? I considered using other platforms but due to personal experience and perspective as well as some critical scholarship, Tumblr seemed the most logical option. Thinking about the other "big three" social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter/X (will be henceforth called Twitter), I had to assess what each site really offered in terms of engagements with race and identity. For me, Facebook has always been a graveyard of memories reminding me of embarrassing vignettes of my pre-teen self; for this reason, it has always felt more visible and regulated due to the connections I have with my family. Haimson et al. (2021) validates this feeling suggesting that Facebook is characterized as authentic and comprised of "'real life' networks" (351). For these reasons, it did not feel like the place to try to contest and question ideas of race and identity without the risk of being censored. Twitter, on the other hand, feels more like the wild west of social media where you might be bombarded with political content, news updates, or pornographic GIFs. The last of the big three, Instagram, was a valiant contender for the research platform. With its visual and community-oriented dimensions, it could have offered a logical space to question, challenge, and maintain everyday histories (Carlson and Frazer 2021, 197). However, Instagram felt limited to the visual and I was looking for a platform that enabled a wide variety of engagement, notably discursive, visual, aural, conversational among others.

As previously mentioned, my experience of Tumblr before this research project was certainly less critical and more expressive. Still resistant… in that teenage angst kind of way. Tumblr offered me a space to express myself, realize my sexuality through the #NSFW (Not Safe for Work) section, and maintain my obsessions with boy bands. Arguably, this introduction to blogging may be the infection that led to the unproductive thinking of Tumblr as uncritical. In any case, this reintroduction to Tumblr, like reuniting with an old friend again, was conducted with a more critical, mindful, and reflective approach. This version of Tumblr has been canonized/memorialized/remembered in current cultural memory as a "2016 Tumblr aesthetic" that is like, so nostalgic! In this way, Tumblr has maintained its position in our present culture and memory as a space to express identity, opinions, and connect with others. Beyond this aesthetic perception, Tumblr as a platform has a deeply profound impact on its community, encouraging advocacy and sociocultural commentary.

According to Mélanie Bourdaa's article, "Tumblr as a Methodological Tool for Data Archiving: The Case of Calzona Tumblr," Tumblr is not only a useful research tool, but the site "permits the aggregation of content as animated images (GIFs), video, drawings, and text" and is valuable to uses for its fluidity, community, and user-friendly navigation (np.). The functionality of Tumblr has also "facilitated the development of 'counterpublics' on the platform, those who are marginalized in the public sphere and/

or who are in conflict with it ideologically" (Hoch et al. 2020, 2). This curation of a digital community largely appeals to people who are both "socially and politically disenfranchised," resulting in the use of this platform for community and advocacy against societal ails and ideologies (Hoch et al. 2020, 2). Minh-Ha Pham (2011, 2-3) investigates this and purports that blogs can "create new subject formations, reveal hidden histories, and reconstitute public culture [...] through a radical politics of sentimentality that refuses neoliberal fictions." Carlson and Frazer (2021) elaborate on this and specifically apply the context of the Indigenous community on social media. Their case study on the Indigenous gay community determined that some social media platforms afforded users identity affirmation, exploration of relationality, and a sense of care and support (Carlson and Frazer 2021, 68).

Putting the reflective methodology and the reflective potential of blogs together, Tumblr was the most logical option for the goals of my project. Tumblr's participatory and dialogic nature enables a sense of reflection that allows non-linear thinking and analysis (Pham 2011, 4). Through the critical reflection of the user then, the blog has the potential to become a "significant cultural site in which the struggle over the meanings of race, gender, sexuality, and political action [can] happen every day" (Pham 2011, 28). In the following section, I will assess my specific reflections on @Unsettledscholar and attempt to answer the project's guiding questions.

METHODS

This project required a methodological approach that extended beyond purely textual analysis, one that could account for the intersections of knowledge, feeling, experience, digitality, and reflection. Entering an already ongoing community dialogue on Tumblr demanded a framework that was both critical and dialogic, attentive to multimodal representations of race and identity while remaining reflexive about my own positionality. Given the academic context, a pedagogical dimension was essential: this project involved not only examining how race and identity are performed online but also learning how to engage with social media as a site of meaning-making. At the same time, an ethnographic stance was necessary to facilitate mindful entry into the Tumblr-sphere and to acknowledge my role in shaping the digital field site (Murthy 2008: 849). Finally, reflexivity was central, as the research required sustained critical self-inquiry into questions that exceeded easy resolution.

This section outlines my initial attempt to employ digital ethnography (DE), my challenges with fully realizing that method, the role of the reflective practice method (RPM) in shaping the project and post-project synthesis, and feminist methodological interventions that reoriented my understanding of the function of the blog as a research object and mode of inquiry.

Unsettling Digital Ethnography (DE)

In establish and operating the blog, I initially turned to digital ethnography (DE) to situate myself in the digital field and engage in "true situated learning experiences" (Ferster 2016: 157, qtd. in DeHart 2016). DE appeared promising as it allowed me to critically position myself as a researcher on Tumblr, leveraging the platform's "vast stores of multimedia material" (Murthy 2008: 844–45). Such affordances enable researchers like me to participate in the platform's public sphere and foster "a space of mutual accountability" (Bohman 2004: 136, qtd. in Murthy 2008: 847). However, time constraints in the course and my inexperience in ethnographic fieldwork shaped (and limited) my engagement. Rather than conducting a prolonged, collaborative ethnography (Lassiter 2005; Murthy 2008: 847), I functioned more as a "cyberstealth[y]" observer (Ebo 1998: 3, qtd. in Murthy 2008: 840). My practice largely involved passive engagement: analyzing existing posts, reflecting through my own contributions, and posing questions without directly interacting with other users. This experience revealed the difficulty in pinning down a singular methodological framework for the project. While I began with the intention of conducting ethnographic inquiry, what emerged was a hybrid and, in some ways, resistant methodology, one that defied "conventional research methodologies" (Murthy 2008: 849) and instead foregrounded reflexivity, pedagogy, and the limits of ethnographic practice in time-constrained research.

The Reflective Practice Method (RPM) and Retrospective Feminist Interventions

Given the relative failure of my ethnographic endeavours and my intention to use *Unsettledscholar* to reflect critically on how race and identity emerge in online spaces, the RPM emerged as a bright light in my research process. This goal required a method that would ensure an investigation of mine and others' experiences and actions on the platform in a way that was continuous and experiential (Institute of Development Studies). The Reflective Practice Method (RPM) offered the entrance into such critical, reflective work and prompted in-depth considerations of things I had not considered before in my use of the Tumblr platform. The methodological and pedagogical dimensions of RPM enabled this entry and offered opportunities of deep reflection through writing and reflecting. Moreover, the element of critical critique and the possibility of revising "meaning structures" so preexisting judgements and assumptions might be transformed was entirely appealing for this project (Moon 2004, 96). I envisioned this project as a form of personal experiential learning that might help me question knowledge, and my understanding of the ways certain concepts are programmed and replicated in digital spaces (Moon 2004, 71).

It is important to note that the concept of reflection in this method has various levels as highlighted by Hatton and Smith. Particularly, to do the RPM effectively and achieve "positive outcomes," you must move through the levels of descriptive writing, to descriptive, dialogic, and critical reflection respectively (Hatton and Smith 1995, 34-35). These levels demonstrate attentiveness to alternative viewpoints, and the production and maintenance of historical and socio-political perspectives through actions, events, and materials (Moon 2004, 97). In choosing this method, I was interested in the possible outcomes of a such a reflection. Moon notes that many possibilities can arise from the RPM, particularly, but not limited to learning and understanding; continuing development; meta-cognition; and empowerment to make decisions (Moon 2004, 84). Given the focus on the interplay between race and identity, these possible outcomes resonated with me and my research ambitions. If, at the baseline, I could possibly learn and understand the impact and representation of race and identity in

a digital space, this method would be sufficient. Developing knowledge on these subjects and interacting with them provides valuable insights into my own positionality within the system that dictates these concepts. This empowers me to make informed decisions about whether to subscribe to or perpetuate these ideas and ideologies, making this method nearly perfect.

While the Reflective Practice Method is intended to be a pedagogical tool for educators in the classroom and educational setting, its experiential learning and methodological framework can be grafted into the context of my digital media engagement. Particularly, the focus on learning in this method and the possibility of "transforming conceptions" through its attention to knowledge accumulation across social agreements (Moon 2004, 17; 20) is relevant when considering the concept of "racial socialization" (Frey et al. 2022, 924) that oriented my project. This concept of becoming socialized by and through Tumblr's platform offered an "outlet for developing complex understandings of race, offer access to helpful information about racism's socio-historical roots, and lead to healthy intra- and interracial experiences" (Frey et al. 2022, 924). In the uncomfortable space of hindsight, I realize that the RPM did offer a pedagogical and practical way of engaging with content on a personal level; however, it was not critically engaging with the sociocultural, political, and historical matrixes that existed in the atmosphere just outside of and programmed within physical, digital, and psychological spaces. For this reason, and, for this reflection, I knew I had to excavate these matrixes through methods that considered how power is mediated in society and replicated in online spaces. This led me to feminist interventions, which resulted in, as you guessed it, *many other* questions. Following the completion of the course and the project, I realized that this method could have been elevated through the consideration of feminist praxis and media studies. This led me to question: *How might a combined reflexive and feminist approach to digital media provide a deeper understanding the power imbued in online spaces?*

While this work required a reflective dimension, it also begged for a combined approach that investigated the dimensions of power and gender and really pushed the boundaries on the pedagogical aspect of such project. This is where I believe feminist praxis and media studies should have emerged in my process. Given the focus

on race throughout the course, my project was heavily guided by interpretations, manifestations, and embedded aspects of race emerging in the digital space. I did not consider the ways in which feminist alterities might offer more nuanced and productive engagements in the use of such a platform. However, in keeping with the RPM, recognizing this gap in my research focus and acknowledging the possibility of such a combined analytical lens is a part of the critical reflection stage of the method.

In my investigation of feminist interventions, I encountered the concept of "critical media pedagogy," which can enable the intervention "into and against the domination of the status quo" in both traditional political power and the many social media "micro-practices" (Berliner and Krabill 2019, 5). This pedagogical stature in the context of my project would encourage me to consider my posts, reposts, and responses as micro-practices through an engagement with participatory media that should inform how I learn about, understand, and engage with the world (Berliner and Krabill 2019, 5). An element of the work that I conducted that was almost always secondary or tertiary to my engagement with Tumblr as a platform was the power embedded and literally encoded into the platform itself. This felt obvious, like a big flashing red light that I should have seen when I first began. Many media studies and feminist scholars recognize this subterranean hegemony that actively enact cultural assumptions and is embedded with stereotypes and the biases of the settler colonial system and agents that produced it (Negin and King 2019; Johnson 2020; Haimson et al. 2021). This is evidenced by Haimson et al.'s research which noted the ways that Tumblr's revisions to their platform in 2018 recontextualized the meaning of the platform for trans users by censoring what was deemed as pornographic content, when this perception and codification of the trans body was being censored using a heteronormative, Eurocolonial conception of what is deemed "inappropriate" content. It is obvious by this example, that my preconceived notions of Tumblr as a queer, liberatory, and revealing space, while being true, is also impacted by heteronormative, Eurocolonial ideas about propriety and safety. As previously mentioned, my own exploration of my sexuality took place in the annals of the #NSFW part of Tumblr. Naively, I had never considered the reasons these materials were considered "not safe;" never considered who determined the safety, and who was the one needing to be saved. These insights offered me an entirely new outlook on the platform that I had chosen to investigate. It also led me to question my own enmeshment in the system of settler colonialism and suggested that perhaps the choices I was making for this space encouraged a re-coding of materials as safe or unsafe for users who thought of this platform as a safety net.

Overall, the Reflective Practice Method has allowed me to continue to be critically reflective of my use of *Unsettledscholar* and in producing this paper, the understanding that other alternative, critical praxis are necessary to make this excavation meaningful. These excavations will continue because this project seems to be one that is in constant evolution.

SCOPE

Self–Identification and Self–Positioning

When I sat down to make the *Unsettledscholar* account, I considered the ways I would introduce and identify myself. The allowance of anonymity or pseudonymity on Tumblr made the possibilities for self-identification vast and, arguably more difficult than other platforms that require your personal details (Haimson et al. 2021, 350). I did realize that complete anonymity felt like a veil of protection that wouldn't result in online backlash or the threat of being "cancelled." Instead, I opted to identify myself by name, pronouns, and academic position in my introductory post entitled "Don't get too comfortable, you're about to be unsettled" (See Figure 1). I attempted to orient myself in this post, particularly outlining my settler scholar positioning, the anticipation of perhaps less than ideal results, and a sense of being unsettled. The entitled address was, for the most part, self-directed as I anticipated lingering in a state of discomfort and feeling unsettled with who I am and what I may have been contributing to this space.

Curating the Experience

Building from this introductory post, I realized that if I was attempting to engage with specific forms of

media and ideas on the platform, I must be conscious of what accounts and hashtags I follow. I began the project by following accounts and tags that specifically related to race and that I was interested in reflecting on. I specifically followed the tags #academia, #canada, #colonization, #indigenous, #indigenousrights, #racialjustice, #resistance, #settlercolonialism. These allowed me to refine the content I engaged with, so I didn't fall into the trap of doomscrolling and engaging with largely meaningless content. Additionally, I began following accounts that I noticed posted on these topics consistently. This resulted in me following five accounts:

1. @intersectionalpraxis
2. @olowan-waphiya
3. @alwaysbewoke
4. @allthecanadianpolitics
5. @enbycrip

These accounts largely engaged with the topics of race, identity, gender, and oppression through social commentary (@intersectionalpraxis), combined anger and celebration (@Olowan), overt anonymity (@alwaysbewoke), a pseudo news source (@AlltheCanadianpolitics), and as individual thoughts (@Enbycrip). The combination and varied approaches to similar and related topics helped me gain a more fulsome picture of the way content is produced and perhaps how these large concepts are being tackled. Notably, most of these accounts also reference other blogs they have that might differ in terms of content and commentary. This connotes an understanding of what the function of their blogs might achieve. Particularly, each expresses the desire of sharing thoughts on topics that might be otherwise undiscussed or unaccepted on other social media platforms. Here, we see folks recognizing Tumblr's capacity to produce counternarratives that operate as both self-expression and self-representation among marginalized communities (Curwood and Gibbons 2009; Jenkins et al. 2013; Gonzalez 2019). Each of the accounts I have selected use their "bio" section to self-identify themselves as queer, non-binary, disabled, neurodivergent, leftist, or Indigenous. @alwaysbewoke is the anomaly here where they have omitted any self-identification and have utilized the anonymous element that differentiates Tumblr from other social media sites (Haimson et al. 2021, 350) (See Figure 5).

Many of my own posts related to the content discussed in our class and responses to content found on Tumblr through the "re-blog and comment" functions. Eventually, I was presented with content that related to concepts discussed in class and within the scope of my research. In Figure 2a and Figure 2b, I noted similarities to our discussions of Tuck and Yang's "Decolonization is not a metaphor" which I had previously reflected on in the blog weeks before. These forms of multimodal engagement allowed me to draw connections between course concepts, my positionality, and experiences presented online within this the supposedly nonhierarchical and uncensored media environment.

The affordances that Tumblr could allow for my reflection made it an ideal platform for me to exercise my reflective practice on what it means to be a white settler scholar and how digital media impacts my perceptions.

Unsettling the Scholar: Reflective Engagement Through Hatton and Smith (1995)

Using the levels of reflection outlined by Hatton and Smith (1995, 34-35), I wanted to map how my engagement with the RPM evolved through distinct stages: from descriptive writing to critical reflection.

Step 1: Descriptive Writing

My introductory post to the blog, entitled "Don't get too comfortable, you're about to be unsettled" (See Figure 1), served as a form of descriptive writing according to Hatton and Smith's stages. This foundational stage that "merely reports events or literature" provided an overview without engaging in analysis or interpretation (Hatton and Smith 1995, 40). I used this post to set the scene for my engagement, selecting a knowledge base that could help my audience (and myself) begin to grasp what the blog would be doing. This aligns with Hatton and Smith's (1995, 41) observation that descriptive writing often "serves to establish a context in an initial accounting for what took place," offering a foundation upon which further reflection might develop.

Step 2: Descriptive Reflection

I suggest that my meme analysis and commentary on Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's "Decolonization is not a Metaphor" represent a progression into

descriptive reflection. While this stage does not fully engage in critical reasoning, it begins to hint at personal interpretation, albeit limited, and shows an awareness of broader implications (Hatton and Smith 1995, 40-41). At this point, I was engaging with content that required interpretive work, but my reflections remained largely grounded in description and surface-level judgement.

Step 3: Dialogic Reflection

Dialogic reflection emerged more fully in my re-blogging activity. By "stepping back" through this interactive process, I began to explore my own position and role within the discourse. I questioned the meaning and weight of my contributions, especially in comparison to those who are more directly impacted by racism, colonialism, sexism, transphobia, among many other issues. This phase resonates with Hatton and Smith's (1995, 41) notion of reflection as a "form of discourse with one's self [sic], an exploration of possible reasons." The tension I experienced, particularly around the idea of Albert Memmi's (1991) "colonizer who refuses," prompted deeper internal dialogue about positionality, voice, and complicity in digital spaces.

Step 4: Critical Reflection

I situate this paper itself in this final stage of critical reflection. Though still evolving, this phase reflects my increasing ability to interrogate my own biases, recognize my omissions (particularly my lack of early engagement with feminist praxis and media studies), and contextualize both my work and the Tumblr platform within larger ideological frameworks. Hatton and Smith (1995, 41) define critical reflection as involving "reason giving for decisions or events which takes account of broader historical, social, and/or political contexts," and my analysis is increasingly shaped by this approach.

I now understand both my personal engagement and Tumblr's infrastructure as part of a system that produces and reproduces ideologies tied to colonialism, "race thinking" (Hesmondhalgh and Saha 2013, 180), and structural oppression. Critical reflection "demonstrates an awareness that actions and events are not only located in, and explicable by, reference to multiple perspectives but are located and influenced by multiple historical, and socio-political contexts" (Hatton and Smith 1995, 49). This progression demonstrates my developing ability to critically reflect, and suggests

that reflection is an iterative, ongoing process – one that requires continued attention and accountability as a writer, participant in digital discourse, settler scholar, and as a human being.

Discussion: Finding Direction Toward Answers

Despite working on this project very consistently over the last few months, I still feel like I haven't yet grasped definite answers to my questions. What has shifted, however, is my perspective. I now approach my research with greater critical awareness and see clear "evidence of learning or change in behaviour" (Moon 2004, 83). Importantly, the affordances of Tumblr enabled me to explore and share ideas that might be less socially acceptable, or even censored, on other platforms like Instagram, where user surveillance and neoliberal aesthetics tend to shape what is deemed appropriate discourse (Hoch et al. 2020, 5).

What follows are critical reflective response to my initial guiding questions, acknowledging that these answers are tentative, partial, and still unfolding. *How does my whiteness, settlerism, and gender impact my perceptions of race and identity in a digital context?*

At the outset of my project, I felt like a voyeur – observing conversations around race, identity, and gender safely from the periphery. This discomfort pushed me to explicitly self-identify on the blog as a white settler scholar, recognizing the importance of positionality in digital spaces. I chose not to include a photo of myself, maintaining a degree of anonymity, but this decision, too, deserves interrogation. Was this about safety, discomfort, or the privilege of choosing visibility? Does anonymity, in this context, obscure accountability?

In reflecting on my role, I return to Albert Memmi's (1991) concept of the "colonizer who refuses," a figure who rejects the colonial system, yet remains implicated in it and privileged by this ability to reject and critique it. While I self-position as critically engaged, I am wary of whether this identification cushions or absolves me. Am I, in naming my complicity, merely distancing myself from the systems I benefit from, rather than critically engaging with them? Emma Pérez's (1999) notion of the "decolonial imaginary" comes to mind here as it urges us to imagine beyond colonial logics,

yet I still question whether this project is creating space for such futures or reinforcing existing hierarchies. Who does this work serve? Who might it harm? Is my voice, even unintentionally, speaking over others?

Much of the content I engaged with centered on Indigenous sovereignty, history, and lived experience, fields all closely tied to my own academic work. This alignment allowed for a deeper and more sustained reflection, particularly as my research traditionally focuses on rhetorical representations of Métis nationhood. However, the emotional labour of reading, viewing, and thinking through difficult content associated with the mistreatment of Indigenous peoples in North America was at times overwhelming. I found myself turning to platforms like Instagram or TikTok to consume "lighter" content, a shift that underscored my privilege of being able to disengage when things get heavy. I can close the tab and leave it behind. This very act is refusal, but I'm still unsure of it is allied and critical.

The fact that many of the Tumblr accounts I followed explicitly self-identify as BIPOC highlights the weight of their digital expressions. These platforms often reflect the lived reality of their users, not simply curated performance. This recognition has prompted me to consider what it means to be accountable in digital spaces, not just as a viewer or researcher, but as a participant with the power to disengage when others cannot.

So, I suppose I should address the guiding question of this section. In short, yes, those things that identify me within this colonial system do impact my perceptions and engagements in digital spaces. Particularly, they manifest through my ability to refuse and disengage and to hold the reality of these lived experiences at arm's length, or I guess at a closed tab's length.

How might algorithms reflect the values of colonialism and continue to invisibilize marginalized voices?

Despite applying specific criteria for engagement through a careful curation of the blogs and hashtags I followed, I was still presented with content that fell outside of the scope of my intended focus. Notably, some of this content appeared under general or misleading tags like #resistance, which were often attached to posts unrelated to race, identity, or colonialism. More strikingly, my "For You" page frequently suggested posts that I "might like," regardless of the tightly structured framework I had designed (see Figure 3). This experience reflects what Johnson (2020,

9951) describes as machine learning systems that "predict, adopt, and utilize patterns from the external social landscape." These predictive mechanisms do not simply mirror our explicit actions but are shaped by broader data inputs, user behaviours, and cultural assumptions that the algorithm interprets as relevant.

As Johnson (2020, 9942) further explains, algorithms often emerge from "innocuous patterns of information processing," where machine learning intersects with and reinforces human cognitive biases. This interaction became especially visible when my feed began to suggest content about disabled bodies, empathy, and emotional healing. These recommendations were unexpected given the specificity of my engagement with topics like settler colonialism. However, they prompted me to reflect on possible algorithmic linkages between discourses of vulnerability, marginalization and resistance, and how these connections might be culturally coded into the platform. This, in turn, reveals important questions about the intersections of colonialism, resistance, disability, gender, etc., and how these ideas are flattened or misrepresented through algorithmic logic.

Simultaneously, the platform also offered me targeted advertisements, often jarringly disconnected from the context I was building. One repeated example (see Figure 4) invited me into a "journey of love and loss," a phrase loaded with emotional appeal but devoid of relevance to my project. The appearance of such content raised deeper concerns about the ways commercial logics intersect with algorithmic ones. Even as I attempted to structure my account to prioritize a focus on race, identity, and anti-colonial discourse, the algorithm intervened with content optimized for capitalist consumption. This reflects the ways algorithms not only track interest but also infer desire, constantly shaping digital experience through speculative assumptions rooted in profit-making and mainstream norms.

Ultimately, these moments reinforced the idea that digital platforms, even those perceived as open, decentralized, and community-driven, are shaped by systems of visibility and erasure that echo broader structures of colonialism and capitalism. The algorithm does not only reflect what we seek; it also constructs meaning through optimization logics, privileges normative voices, narratives, and affective tones while marginalizing *many* others. In this way, the digital terrain remains complicit in colonial epistemologies, amplifying

voices aligned with dominant ideologies while continuing to obscure or marginalize others.

Conclusions

This project feels less like an endpoint and more like a beginning. The questions that guided the project have not been "answered" in a traditional sense but have continued to catalyze ongoing reflection and helped surface tensions that I am still working to understand.

In considering how my own positionality shapes my perception of race and identity online, I became increasingly aware of my own privilege and my ability to step away from such emotionally demanding content, the power to remain anonymous, and the authority to remain silent. I questioned whether my self-positioning as a "settler scholar" functioned critically or acted as a form of self-protection. Similarly, considering how the system, particularly Tumblr's algorithms reinforced colonial logics and obscured marginalized voices became a dominant thread in my reflection. Despite my curation, I encountered content shaped by commercial interest and speculative correlations.

Reflecting on these experiences through Hatton and Smith's (1995) four-stages toward critical reflection allowed me to trace the progression of the project:

- My initial Tumblr posts and meme analysis operated at the descriptive level.
- As I engaged more intentionally with content, I was able to begin interpreting and situating what I was seeing, though still without sustained critical reflection.
- The acts of re-blogging, questioning my own authority and position, and recognizing my discomfort marked a shift that became dialogic. This space operated as a personal and critical excavation of my own complicity, motivations, and voice in a more relational and uncertain way.
- This paper represents my step toward critical reflection, where I attempt to account not only for my own thinking but for the wider historical, social, political, and technological contexts in which that thinking occurs.

Importantly, the "failure" of my use of digital ethnography was itself a methodological revelation. My limited engagement with users and reliance on passive observation meant that I could not realize the collaborative and dialogic potential that ethnography aspires to. Yet this failure also revealed how ill-suited conventional ethnographic expectations can be in ever-evolving, algorithm-drive digital environments like Tumblr. Rather than producing findings in the traditional sense, *Unsettledscholar* underscored the instability of the field site itself and highlighted the necessity of reflexive, hybrid methods.

I now see Tumblr not only as a social media platform, but as a digital archive and repertoire, acting as a living record of discourse, affect, and refusal. It stores knowledge and enacts it through performance, repetition, and curation. Engaging with the platform as both scholar and user pushed me to reimagine digital research as something deeply embodied and ethically charged.

Moving forward, I will carry this critical posture and the discomfort of methodological failure into my archival and scholarly work, asking not only what is visible, but what is rendered invisible and why. I will continue to interrogate the platforms I use, the voices I amplify, and the histories I contribute to. Though this project didn't yield definitive answers, it reshaped questions, and that is certainly evidence of growth.
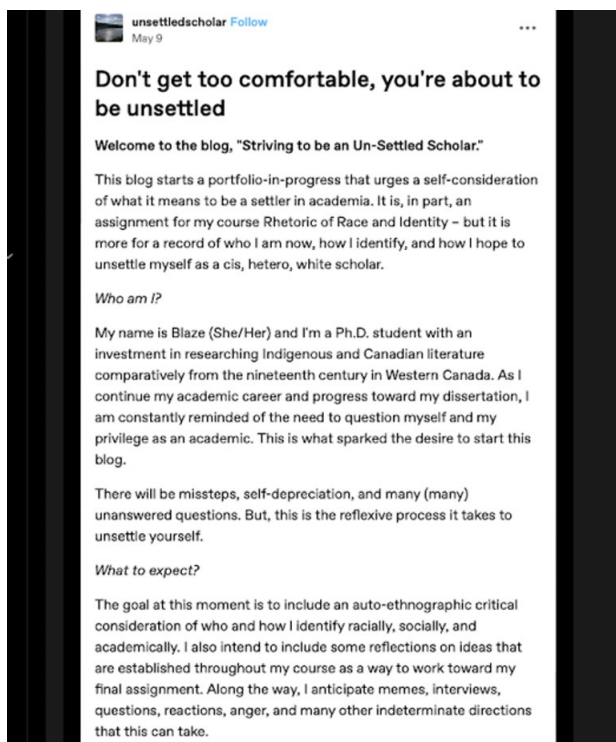
Figures

Fig. 2.1 – Introductory blog post, "Don't get too comfortable, you're about to be unsettled," *Tumblr,* @unsettledscholar, May 9th, 2024.
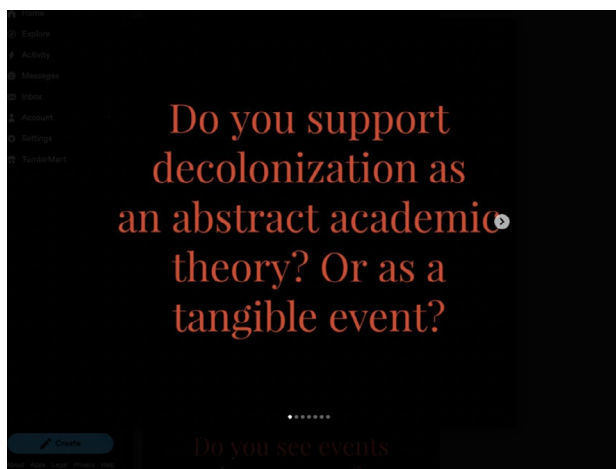

Fig. 2.2 – "Do you support decolonization as an abstract academic theory? Or as a tangible event?" Image carousel, *Tumblr,* @ghoularchive, Oct. 7th, 2023.

Fig. 2.3 – Response to "Do you support decolonization as an abstract academic theory? Or as a tangible event?" Image carousel, *Tumblr,* @ghoularchive, Oct. 7th, 2023.

Fig. 2.4 – "A photo of a blue surgical mask letter stamped with red text that reads: 'It is recommended to care about disabled people but it is not mandatory.'" *Tumblr*, @aropride, June 20, 2024.
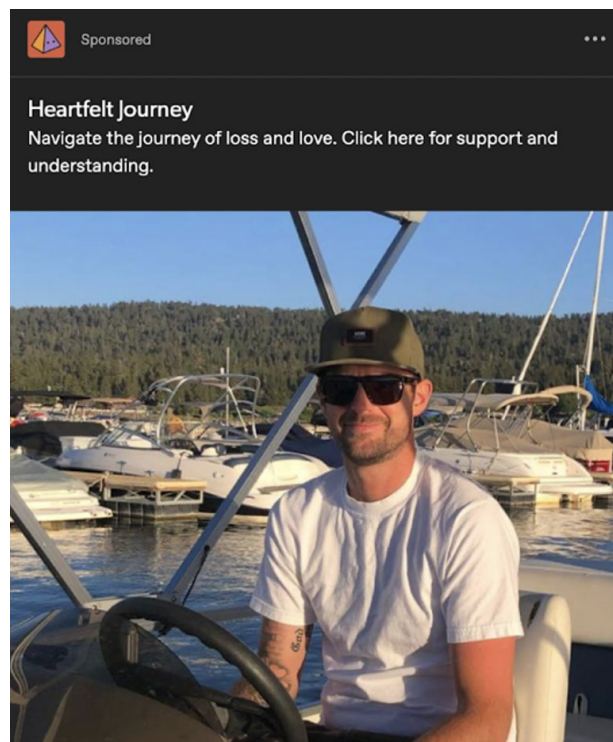

Fig. 2.5 – Advertisement entitled: "Heartfelt Journey Advertisement," showing male-presenting person, on a boat. *Tumblr,* 2024.
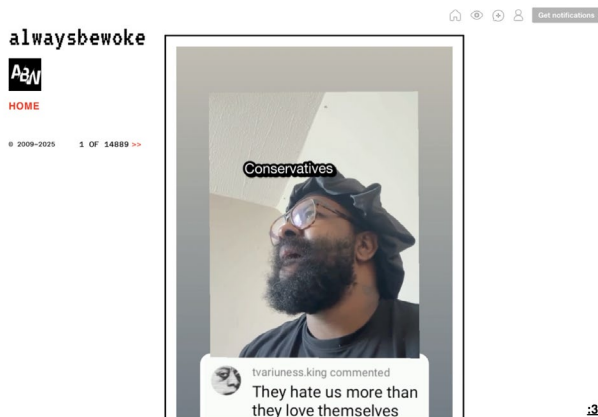
Fig. 2.6 – Account Home Page. @alwaysbewoke, *Tumblr*, 2025.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Aparajita Bhandari for organizing her course, Rhetorics of Race & Identity. The course prompted such valuable reflection that continues to unsettle me as I continue my journey as a young academic.

Thank you to Anna, Haley, and Rency, who have taught me the value of kindness, mindfulness, and humility in research. Connection is really what this is all about.

Thank you to Tumblr, for being an outlet that the younger version of me truly needed and the what the older, (somewhat) wiser version needed to realize was always a space to be resistant, honest, and true.

Works Cited

@allthecanadianpolitics. "All the Canadian Politics!" *Tumblr,* August 26, 2020. https://www.tumblr.com/allthecanadianpolitics.

@alwaysbewoke. *Always Be Woke*. *Tumblr,* December 18, 2023. https://www.tumblr.com/alwaysbewoke.

Barker, Adam and Lowman, Emma. 2015. S*ettler: Identity and Colonialism in 21st Century Canada*. Fernwood Press.

Benjamin, Ruha. 2019. *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Cambridge: Polity.

Billig, Michael. *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage, 1995.

Bourdaa, Mélanie. 2018. "Tumblr as a Methodological Tool for Data Archiving: The Case of a Calzona Tumblr." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 27. https://doi.org/doi.org/10.3983/twc.2018.1261.

Brookfield, Stephen. 2017. *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, A Wiley Brand.

Carlsson, Nina. 2020. "Revitalizing the Indigenous, Integrating into the Colonized? The Banal Colonialism of Immigrant Integration in Swedish Sápmi." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43 (16): 268–86. doi:10.1080/01419870.2020.1776360.

Carlson, Bronwyn and Frazer, Ryan. 2021. *Indigenous Digital Life: The Practice and Politics of Being Indigenous on Social Media*. 1st ed. Springer International Publishing. doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84796-8.

Carmen Gonzalez. 2019. "Teaching Across Difference Through Critical Media Production." In *Feminist Interventions in Participatory Media: Pedagogy, Publics, Practice*, edited by Lauren S. Berliner and Ron Krabill, 52–60. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge: Taylor & Francis.

Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. 2009. "Introduction: Race and/as Technology; or, How to Do Things to Race." *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 24 (1 (70)): 7–35. https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-2008-013.

Curwood, Jen Scott and Gibbons, Damiana. n.d. "'Just Like I Have Felt': Multimodal Counternarratives in Youth-Produced Digital Media." *International Journal of Learning and Media* 1 (4): 60–77.

DeHart, Jason D. "We've Never Done It This Way Before: Boundaries of Digital Ethnography." *Practices, Challenges, and Prospects of Digital Ethnography as a Multidisciplinary Method*, edited by Jahid Siraz Chowdhury, et al., IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 2022, pp. 1–21. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-4190-9.ch001

de Lange, Danielle. 2024. "The Style Files." Blog. *The Style Files* (blog). June 18, 2024. https://www.style-files.com/2024/06/18/a-neglected-hut-turned-into-a-lovely-little-retreat/.

@enbycrip. *The Queer Disabled Historian*. *Tumblr,* April 24, 2025. https://www.tumblr.com/enbycrip.

Fichter, Darlene. 2012. "Tools of Influence: Strategic Use of Social Media." Online 36 (4): 58–60.

Frey, William R., Ward, Monique L., Weiss, Amanda, and Cogburn, Courtney D. 2022. "Digital White Racial Socialization: Social Media and the Case of Whiteness." Jounral of *Research on Adolescence* 32 (3): 919–37. https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12775.

Hatton, Neville and Smith, David. 1995. "Reflection in Teacher Education – Toward Definition and Implementation" 11 (1): 33–49.

Hesmondhalgh, David and Saha, Anamik. 2013. "Race, Ethnicity, and Cultural Production." *Popular Communication* 11 (3): 179–95. https://doi.org/doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2013.810068.

Hoch, Indira N., Stein, Louisa, and McCracken, Allison, eds. 2020. *A Tumblr Book: Platform and Cultures*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11537055.

Institute of Development Studies. 2024. "Reflective Practice (Participatory Methods Archive) – Participatory Methods." *Institute of Development Studies*. 2024. https://www.participatorymethods.org/resource/reflective-practice-participatory-methods-archive/.

@intersectionalpraxis. *Long Live the Resistance*. *Tumblr*, April 24, 2025. https://www.tumblr.com/intersectionalpraxis.

Jardina, Ashley. 2019. *White Identity Politics*. Cambridge Studies in Public Opinion and Political Psychology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://www-cambridge-org.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/core/books/white-identity-politics/5C330931FF4CF246FCA043AB14F5C626.

Jenkins, Henry, Ford, Sam, and Green, Joshua. 2013. *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. New York: New York University Press.

Johnson, Gabbrielle M. 2020. "Algorithmic Bias: On the Implicit Biases of Social Technology." Synthese 198:9941–61.

Kathleen Woodward. 2019. "On Feminist Collaboration, Digital Media, and Affect." *In Feminist Interventions in Participatory Media: Pedagogy, Publics, Practice*, edited by Lauren S. Berliner and Ron Krabill, 70–91. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge: Taylor & Francis.

Kotliar, Dan M. 2020. "Data Orientalism: On the Algorithmic Construction of the Non-Western Other." *Theory and Society* 49 (5–6): 919–39. https://doi.org/doi.org/10.1007/s11186-020-09404-2.

Lauren S. Berliner and Ron Krabill. 2019. "Introduction: We Have the Tools We've Been Waiting For: Centring Feminist Media Pedagogies in a Time of Uncertainty." *In Feminist Interventions in Participatory Media: Pedagogy, Publics, Practice*, edited by Lauren S. Berliner and Ron Krabill, 1–17. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge: Taylor & Francis.

Memmi, Albert. 1991. *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. Expanded Ed. Boston: Beacon Press.

Moon, Jennifer A. 2004. *A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning: Theory and Practice*. 1st ed. https://doi-org.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/10.4324/9780203416150.

Murthy, Dhiraj. "Digital Ethnography: An Examination of the Use of New Technologies for Social Research." *Sociology (Oxford)*, vol. 42, no. 5, 2008, pp. 837–55. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038508094565.

Nehal, Raashid, et al. "Digital Ethnography Divide and Blended Learning Practices." *Practices, Challenges, and Prospects of Digital Ethnography as a Multidisciplinary Method*, edited by Jahid Siraz Chowdhury, et al., IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 2022, pp. 164–178. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-4190-9.ch012.

Nakamura, Lisa. 2008. *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*. University of Minnesota Press. https://books-scholarsportal-info.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/en/read?id=/ebooks/ebooks2/pda/2011-12-01/1/11661.9780816646128.

Negin Dahya and W.E. King. 2019. "Feminist Perspectives and Mobile Culture(s): Power and Participation in Girls' Digital Video Making Communities." *In Feminist Interventions in Participatory Media: Pedagogy, Publics, Practice*, edited by Lauren S. Berliner and Ron Krabill, 34–43. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge: Taylor & Francis.

Ohtomo, Kazuma, Harakawa, Ryosuke, Ogawa, Takahiro, Haseyama, Miki, and Iwahashi, Masahiro. 2022. "User-Centric Multimodal Feature Extraction for Personalized Retrieval of Tumblr Posts." *Multimedia Tools and Applications* 81 (2): 2979–3003. https://doi.org/doi.org/10.1007/s11042-021-11634-0.

Oliver L. Haimson, Avery Dame-Griff, Elias Capello, and Zahari Richter. 2021. "Tumblr Was a Trans Technology: The Meaning, Importance, History, and Future of Trans Technologies." *Feminist Media Studies* 21 (3): 345–61. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1678505.

@olowan-waphiya. "LAND BACK 🦬." *Tumblr*, April 24, 2025. https://www.tumblr.com/olowan-waphiya.

Pérez, Emma. 1999. *The Decolonial Imaginary Writing Chicanas into History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Pham, Minh-Ha T. 2011. "Blog Ambition: Fashion, Feelings, and the Political Economy of the Digital Raced Body." *In Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, 26:1–37. doi.org/10.1215/02705346-2010-013.

Philips, Patrick and Ng-A-Fook, Nicholas. 2024. "An Unsettling Artificial Intelligence: Algorithms, Curriculum, and Futurities." *Journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies* 16 (1): 11–39. https://doi.org/10.14288/jaaacs.v16i1.198635.

Pillow, Wanda. n.d. "Confession, Catharsis, or Cure? Rethinking the Uses of Reflexivity as Methodological Power in Qualitative Research." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16 (2): 175–96. https://doi.org/doi.org/10.1080/0951839032000060635.

@rhetoricsofraceandidentity. *Rhetorics of Race and Identity*. 2025. *Tumblr*. April 24, 2025. https://www.tumblr.com/rhetoricsofraceandidentity.

Skey, Michael, and Marco Antonsich, eds. *Everyday Nationhood: Theorising Culture, Identity and Belonging after Banal Nationalism*. London, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Steele, Catherine Knight. *Digital Black Feminism*. New York: New York University Press, 2021.

Smith, Barbara. *The Truth That Never Hurts Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom*. New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 1998.

Tuck, Eve and Yang, K. Wayne. n.d. "Decolonization Is Not A Metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, & Society* 1 (1): 1–40.

Welling, Blaze. "@unsettledscholar on Tumblr." *Tumblr*. Accessed June 20, 2025. https://www.tumblr.com/unsettledscholar.