

Racialized
Surveillance in the
Digital Service
Economy

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To many techno-euphorists, the digital economy is the place where race no longer matters. This would be an even playing field. It would happen through an online market where goods, services, and labor could be exchanged without direct contact between individuals, at times anonymously. How could racism occur under conditions like this, when a person's ethnic or national identity is not readily apparent?

For some, the digital is even a place where racial inequalities are rectified. This logic is front and center among corporate narratives.¹ Uber's head of North American operations stated: "Ridesharing apps are changing a transportation status quo that has been unequal for generations, making it easier and more affordable for people to get around. . . . We believe Uber is helping reduce transportation inequities across the board." A spokesperson for Lyft echoes: "We are extremely proud of the positive impact Lyft has on communities of color. Because of Lyft, people living in underserved areas — which taxis have historically neglected — are now able to access convenient, affordable rides. And we provide this service while maintaining an inclusive and welcoming community, and do not tolerate any form of discrimination."

Sociological analysis shows how, quite the opposite, racialized surveillance is an integral and routine part of the U.S. service economy. As interactions between consumers, workers, and firms have moved to online platforms, cell phone apps, digital satellite communications, and artificial intelligence, racial discrimination is an everyday activity.

Four examples reveal how this is happening. First, in *job matching and hiring websites* (like Monster.com), where employers discriminate against potential candidates based on their names and photos. Second, in the “*gig*” economy (like Uber and Airbnb), where drivers may discriminate against riders based on ethnicity, and consumers may discriminate against housing sites based on racialized notions of geography and location. Third, in *transnational call centers*, where race and nation are integral features of communication between U.S. customers and Indian call center workers on the phone and through the internet. And fourth, in *digital assistants*, developed through artificial intelligence, which provide automated labor for firms in the form of avatars (like Siri, or Tay, the Microsoft bot that became a racist on Twitter). My analysis is based on ongoing study of the digital service economy, along with data from ethnographic research on the transnational service industry across the United States and India.

In these four areas, the digital body is examined, monitored, and assessed in a variety of racially explicit ways. Users surveil bodies for their sounds (accents, ways of speaking), for images (facial features, color), for names and biographies, and for physical locations and movements. To understand racial surveillance in the digital service economy, I draw from my conceptualization of *multi-surveillance*.² Starting with a premise of a fractionalization in monitoring practices, it argues for a more nuanced and complex account of surveillance that can incorporate the intersectionalities of race, ethnicity, class, and nation.

My focus is on the surveillance practices of consumers and digital users in particular, as they are playing an increasingly central role in platform and communicative capitalism. Rather than seeing these groups as simply objects of surveillance (by elites), or alternatively as agents of countersurveillance (against elites), I show how they are conducting surveillance of their own. Moreover, they are doing so in ways that support (rather than challenge) dominant racial systems. This “watching from below” can reinforce hierarchies of race as much as watching from above.

The conclusion reflects on the sources of consumer racism in the transition from color-blind racism to an era of overt digital hate and hypernationalism. It then turns to the potential of resistant multi-surveillances and what Browne calls “dark sousveillance.”³

RACIALIZING SURVEILLANCE

Surveillance, in common accounts, is about generic (and unracialized) groups of “those in power” against “those not in power.” Intersectionality theory illuminates how this account is lacking and simplistic.⁴ It says that we

cannot understand power dynamics without considering systems of race, gender, sexuality, class, and so on. These systems operate as independent hierarchies, but ones that cross over and intersect each other. Accordingly, surveillance in the digital service economy needs a more differentiated theory that can be attuned to these complex systems of race and surveillance.

A MULTI-SURVEILLANCE FRAMING

A multi-surveillance perspective notes that digital systems are proliferating the range of agents who are doing observation, and in turn, offering new sources for racial monitoring. Through the diffusion of mobile computing, satellite connections, and broadband access, many more groups of people have the capacity to carry out surveillance, with their varying motives and purposes. In the digital service economy, these groups include: firms who contract services, vendors who provide the technologies, employees who perform the services, outsourced workforces who do this work from abroad, and consumers and users of the services.

This trend of fractionalization is reshuffling the power relations of surveillance. For instance, consumers are *not* the legitimate agents of surveillance in conventional theorizing. Other groups—like employers—are the agents. Consumers are said to be on the receiving end of surveillance instead—they are the targets. Some scholars, alternatively, recognize that consumers have a role in surveillance, but they tie it specifically to resistance. Here, consumers turn the tables on monitoring—to observe from below. Mathiesen, for instance, offers the notion of *synopticism*, in which the many watch the few.⁵ Similarly, Mann and colleagues conceptualize the term *sousveillance*, or seeing from below (in direct contrast to *surveillance*, or seeing from above).⁶

A multi-surveillance framing breaks down the mutual exclusivity of roles, however. It argues that an individual can be watched by one group, while *at the same time* being the watcher of another group. Consumers may be watched by corporations, for instance, while they simultaneously observe other groups in the digital service economy. Furthermore, groups may be internally varied, with multiple affiliations and interests. While consumers may be unified in their aims to counteract surveillance by firms, they may vary in their orientations toward maintaining or disrupting racial hierarchies. Consequently, they may *surveill each other* for factors like race.

My argument will be that consumers and users are not only watching from their positions, but in ways that support existing power structures of

race. This means that watching from below can reinforce dominant hierarchies as much as watching from above.

RACE AND MONITORING FROM BELOW

Simone Browne captures brilliantly the role of the public in “racializing surveillances” of the antebellum United States.⁷ With the aid of black feminist scholarship, she “draw[s] a black line” through classic understandings of surveillance (like Foucault’s panopticon).⁸ She explains how racial surveillance was so pervasive and intractable in part because *regular people carried it out* alongside the legal and political administrations. Within plantation security systems, for example, white owners used early forms of information technology to track slaves—from slave passes, to slave patrols, to wanted posters for runaways. Browne also points to slave markets and auction blocks, where “the many watch the few,” and consumers participate in the racial surveillance and subordination of blacks.

Today, the public does so with a click of a button. In fact, consumers and digital users have unique roles as agents of surveillance in the digital service economy. As a definitional starting point, a service is an industry that does something for a customer, rather than producing a material product. Services are actually the fastest-growing sectors of the formal economy worldwide, and recently, digital services are transferring these exchanges to information and communication technology systems. In some cases, the exchange itself goes online; in other cases, the online space functions only as an organizational site to arrange for other services that are performed offline.

Two trends underpin and shape the direction of this digital service economy. One is the rise of “platform capitalism.” This involves firms that mediate between user groups online. They design, provide, and regulate the infrastructure (i.e., website, app, etc.) for consumer and user interactions.⁹ Platforms derive profit from monetizing online interactions of the mass public, or by converting goods into services, which in either case may enrich only a small group of shareholders.¹⁰ In this chapter, I examine several categories of platforms that connect parties for service exchanges: job hiring and matching, crowdfunding and sourcing of labor, microcredit (i.e., small loans) and online lending, online marketplaces and the selling of goods, and the gig economy.

Platforms are powerful because they centralize large sectors of economic activity and incorporate large sectors of the consuming public, into a few

specific sites. But at the same time, platforms are pushing many functions onto consumers. In what sociologists call “work transfer,” consumers are increasingly doing tasks formerly done by firms and/or their employees.¹¹ To be sure, their form and scope of agency can be limited. These new “algorithmically” run systems often set a small range of coded options within which consumers respond.¹² But it is in these contexts that platform capitalism is activating (or enabling) consumers for surveillance. Here, racial proclivities and assessments are given a space within the digital infrastructure, and then have a significant impact on economic transactions.

Consumers are the focal point of a second major trend in the digital service economy—the rise of “communicative capitalism.”¹³ Many of the most profitable and/or fast-rising sectors of the economy are no longer in material goods, but in the commoditization of communications. Some of this is in the *infrastructure* (cell phones, internet providers, etc.). Critically for this study, it is also in the *content* (e.g., market analysis of public texts, tweets, posts, etc.) and *facilitation of exchanges* between firms and their customers (e.g., customer service call centers).¹⁴

In sites like pizza delivery apps or recorded call center conversations, consumers are being called upon to do active surveillance of firms and their workers. They rate things ranging from the quality of service to the display of emotions.¹⁵ Their opinions may be actively solicited (as in a survey) or expressed independently (as in the Facebook “like” button). Firms, then, are profiting not only from the goods and services that consumers are purchasing directly, but from the ratings they give on Yelp, the messages about the service they post on Twitter, and so on. (And as we’ve seen recently, corporate databases on their consumer information, including opinions, habits, attitudes, etc., may be more valuable than the firm itself.) Quite often, what consumers are observing, evaluating, and articulating in their online content is about race and ethnicity. In this chapter, I’ll give examples from the content of globalized customer services (transnational call centers), and interactions with automated services (artificially intelligent avatars). These digital contexts are drawing especially heightened expectations, surveillance, and rhetoric of race and nation.

Thus, because the platforms are so large, and these communications with consumers (on the phone, on social media, in surveys, in ratings, etc.) are so integrated in the way capitalism functions, *consumers have a new role in looking back*. It is here that racialized assessments and narratives are being integrated, displayed, and recorded.

BODILY CAPITAL: THE FOCAL POINTS FOR RACIAL SURVEILLANCE

Just what are the focal points for this racial surveillance? What exactly are consumers looking for in service interactions? In many cases, the surveillance of race is tied to embodiment. Critical race scholars reveal how this has been a characterizing feature of the development of the internet. Lisa Nakamura describes how the "interface" (e.g., a website page) is where digital bodies are being viewed, imagined, and socially constructed, and where everyday racial surveillance is occurring: "interfaces are prime loci for digital racial formation. . . . The interface serves to organize raced and gendered bodies in categories, boxes, and links that mimic both the mental structure of . . . a set of associations (often white, often male) and the logic of digital capitalism: to click on a box or link is to acquire it, to choose it, to replace one set of images with another in a friction-free transaction that seems to cost nothing yet generates capital in the form of digitally racialized images and performances."¹⁶

At these interfaces, participants in platforms and corporate communications are assessed for their bodily capital.¹⁷ They accrue differential returns on investment for varying kinds of bodies, including ethnicities, genders, and nationalities. In the following analysis, I illustrate how consumers are favoring white bodies online. They are surveilling for these qualities, and then rewarding them with more favorable economic and social returns. The four cases below explore how things like visual images, names, associated locations, and so on are used to code some users as valuable and trustworthy, and others as not.

Below I chart how these digital service economies set the stage for consumers and digital users to "watch from below" and enact racial surveillance. The first two cases represent peer-to-peer matching services, in which platforms link users from the public to each other for the purpose of an economic exchange. The last two represent communicative services, in which representatives (live or automated) relay information from firms to their consumers. Each has unique dynamics and implications of racial embodiment and surveillance.

UNMATCHED: RACIAL SURVEILLANCE IN EMPLOYMENT, LENDING, AND SELLING

Racial surveillance, to start with, is a prevalent feature of online service matching industries. These platforms have developed over the past fifteen years to move economic activities of job recruiting, money lending, and the

selling of goods onto the Internet. They connect various actors in the process of exchange: employers and potential candidates, buyers and sellers, and so on. In the process, users are at times racially filtering the entries based on features (real and imagined) of people's bodies. Here, I illustrate two ways this happens on such platforms: first based on names, résumés, and backgrounds, and second, based on photos of hands, faces, and figures.

Résumés: Names and Biohistories

Résumés are a common means of racial discrimination on matching sites for jobs. The most trafficked employment platforms are websites like Indeed.com, Monster.com, Careerbuilder.com, and Glassdoor.com. Some are search engines that aggregate job postings from various sites. Many also allow workers to find and apply for jobs, as well as create a profile and post a résumé for employers to see. Some also provide ratings systems, or employment guidance counseling. While many charge fees, several of them are free to use and therefore have massive memberships. Indeed.com has 180 million unique visitors per month, from fifty countries and speaking twenty-six languages.¹⁸

Yet some African Americans report troubling experiences on these sites. Yolanda Spivey is one such job candidate. Spivey worked in the insurance industry for ten years, and when it was time to switch jobs she turned to Monster.com. After two years and three hundred applications, as well as a stint reentering college to finish her degree, she had few responses. In turn, she became suspicious that employers were screening and passing on her application because of race.¹⁹

So in 2012 she embarked on what she calls the "Bianca White Experiment." She created a new profile with the exact same set of résumé information — with a few key exceptions. Instead of Yolanda Spivey, she changed her name to Bianca White. And instead of marking "black female" or "decline to identify" in the mandatory diversity questionnaire, she checked "white." Employers would also be directed to a different cell phone number, which had a greeting for Bianca on its voicemail.

The results of the weeklong experiment revealed both expected and unexpected outcomes. To begin with, Bianca received far more feedback from employers than Yolanda. Bianca's profile was viewed twenty-four times, Yolanda's ten. Bianca received seven emails, Yolanda two. Bianca received nine voicemail messages, Yolanda none. In fact, some employers called Bianca repeatedly, asking her urgently to come for an interview.

Furthermore, Bianca's responses were more substantial. Hers came with competitive salaries and benefits, and coverage for moving costs for

out-of-state relocation — even when both personas received postings about the same job. Race is important then in multiple stages of recruitment on these sites — not only for getting noticed by employers initially, but also for the quality of jobs and resources that come during negotiations. Spivey's conclusion was that "the diversity questionnaire on job sites such as Monster.com may work against minorities, as employers are judging whom they hire based on it" and "resumes with ethnic names may go into the wastebasket and never see the light of day."²⁰

Scholars tell us that résumés have a long-standing role in racial inequalities of the labor market, even offline. Names in particular are a primary means of discriminating against people of color in job matching and hiring. In a classic study, Bertrand and Mullainathan sent résumés to employers in Chicago and Boston, and found that those with white-sounding names (Emily Walsh or Greg Baker) received 50 percent more callbacks for interviews than those with African American-sounding names (such as Lakisha Washington or Jamal Jones).²¹

Newer research shows that even the "extracurricular activities" and "personal interests" sections of a profile can have significant impact on employment decisions. Sending 316 comparable mock résumés to large law firms, Rivera and Tilcsik found that the (male) candidates who played polo (versus track and field), liked classical music (versus country), and received awards for athletics (versus "athletes on financial aid") were more likely to be perceived as a good fit for the culture of the firm by recruiters and marked for callbacks for interviews.²² Employers, it appears, are surveilling applicants for minute details and subtle cues of status within employee biohistories.

While Rivera and Tilcsik focused specifically on the class and gender dynamics of screening, one could argue that such criteria may also be read in racialized terms. Intersectional theory, along these lines, has emphasized that class, race, and gender are interlocking systems of inequality.²³ For example, sailing may be interpreted as a "white" activity as well as a "wealthy" one. Being on financial aid may be seen as a marker of ethnic minority status as well as working-class status. Preserving whiteness may go hand in hand with excluding minorities. In fact, the value of whiteness has been shown to supercede the potentially damaging features of candidate résumés by some recruiters. One classic study found that employers preferred whites with *criminal records* over blacks *without any record*, among those with similar educational and employment backgrounds.²⁴

As recruitment shifts online, such dynamics have crossed over into the digital sphere. Here, other aspects of employee biohistories enter the re-

ruitment eye. Employers can get a sense of what kinds of people a candidate associates with, which may have consequences for race, class, and gender. On sites like LinkedIn, employers take advantage of the social networking features to evaluate the professional connections of candidates.²⁵ Here, employees "don't just list their previous work experience, but they also identify who they know and solicit endorsements from these connections. Employers use LinkedIn and other social network sites to determine 'cultural fit,' including whether or not a candidate knows people already known to the company. This process rewards individuals on the basis of their networks, leading companies to hire people who are more likely to 'fit the profile' of their existing employees — to the detriment of people who have historically been excluded from employment opportunities." These platforms represent another way to surveil candidate profiles for race. This can indirectly perpetuate discrimination, as recruiters use such information to screen out "undesirable" types of connections by race, while they seek the more "desirable" connections of a candidate who fits in "culturally" with the firm.

In sum, the surveillance of résumés, in terms of how they are read and interpreted by employers, involves both obvious and nonobvious markings of race, gender, or class. Sometimes it occurs in overt features of the digital interface — like checking a box for ethnic identity. But other times, it happens in the subtleties, minute, and perhaps least relevant elements of one's employment history and summary. Furthermore, the online profile itself can convey many cues for visualizing the race of a candidate's body. The corporeal features of the applicant are likely being imagined — as they listen to music, play sports, and interact with their colleagues. These cases show how text-based interfaces — which often do not have photos — are still surveilled by race in very careful and detailed ways by everyday actors.

Photos: Bodies, Faces, Hands

The racialized body is surveilled visually — for its face and body — on other kinds of peer-to-peer matching platforms. Take the case of Kiva.com. Kiva represents another sector of digital service, providing small loans to entrepreneurs largely in the Global South. The process is called "microcredit," and it originated several decades ago through the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh.²⁶ The idea was to provide impoverished communities access to small amounts of credit. These individuals would otherwise be ineligible for credit, due to lack of income or collateral, lack of access to banks in their rural locations, and/or being female. The industry grew rapidly, and now has millions of borrowers worldwide. Up until this time, the process had been run by traditional

institutions, like banks, state governments, as well as international and local nonprofits. They provided the funds, selected the borrowers, and organized the repayment.

In 2005, however, the process spread to online platforms. Kiva as an example would loan \$300 million to more than 700,000 borrowers by 2012.²⁷ It is often referred to as a “charity” because (among other things) it doesn’t charge interest for its loans. (However, the intermediating microcredit firms—which represent the borrowers on the website—do charge interest.) Even so, platforms like this are linked to employment in a key way: they provide loans for entrepreneurs, who in turn can earn income from their own labor in a small business. In essence, then, they represent larger processes of both online job matching and crowdfunding, which in this case involves linking funders to small business people. Loans per borrower average about \$700, and any given lender may fund a variety of different loans at the same time, with small contributions to each.

Several dynamics are critical in this transition. First is a change in the main actors providing the loans. Crowdfunding moves the source of funds from banks to the public—in the form of users of online platforms. These users supply the financing and make crucial decisions in selecting who gets funded from the list, and the speed with which their loan gets approved. Second, the platform itself becomes influential by determining what kinds of information are presented on the website and setting the rules for user interactions. As Gajjala and colleagues note, “these online sites shift the microcredit concept into the global visual and communicative spaces of the . . . social networking models popularized in ‘web 2.0’ Internet culture.”²⁸ Lending, therefore, becomes embedded in the larger dynamics of social networking. This includes its patterns of evaluating people by their images, and the racial processes therein.

It is not surprising, then, that the transition to online platforms has not benefited all ethnic groups the same way. Studies show that lenders make discriminatory assessments of visual images of faces and bodies. This in turn has a profound effect on how these platforms work in practice, and how lenders make decisions. It starts with the layout of the interface. When lenders go to the site, they browse through a long list of potential borrowers, each with a picture, a paragraph description of biohistory and business, and details of the loan (figures 6.1 and 6.2).

The photos are found to play a large part in the decision process, as lenders use them as a quick way to filter the profiles and analyze potential credit

Tania María

Ecuador | Retail | General Store

Tania is a 38-year-old woman. She considers herself to be a woman of strict character, who likes things to be done well and is very responsible in her business. Tania lives with her husband and...

Funding via FODEMI, a partner of World Vision International



FIGURE 6.1. Image of crowdfunding worker on Kiva.com. Source: Kiva.com, as published in Goldmark (2012).

Mark Rotich

Kenya | Agriculture | Livestock

Mark is a family man aged forty years who supports a family of five. His wife, Caroline, is a businesswoman. Mark has been a livestock trader over the past five years and earns a monthly income of...

Funding via Kenya Agency for Development of Enterprise and Technology (KADET), a partner of World Vision International



FIGURE 6.2. Image of crowdfunding worker on Kiva.com. Source: Kiva.com, as published in Goldmark (2012).

risk. As Jenq and colleagues conclude, funders are more likely to favor borrowers who are: pretty versus ugly, underweight versus overweight, and light-skinned versus dark-skinned.²⁹ These features of body size, attractiveness, and race have a significant impact on the speed with which borrowers reach their requested loan amount from various funders. Notable is that, given the opportunity, lenders will assess the whole body of the borrower. Under the surveillance radar is a range of physical traits for analysis, including how much the body matches idealized notions of beauty, and how much it approximates whiteness. Elements of corporality are interlinked, so that surveillance encompasses color, weight, and appearance.

Yet, significantly, none of these factors turns out to be helpful in determining who is a competent borrower: attractiveness, size, and race are not correlated with likeliness to become delinquent on a loan. Lenders appear to

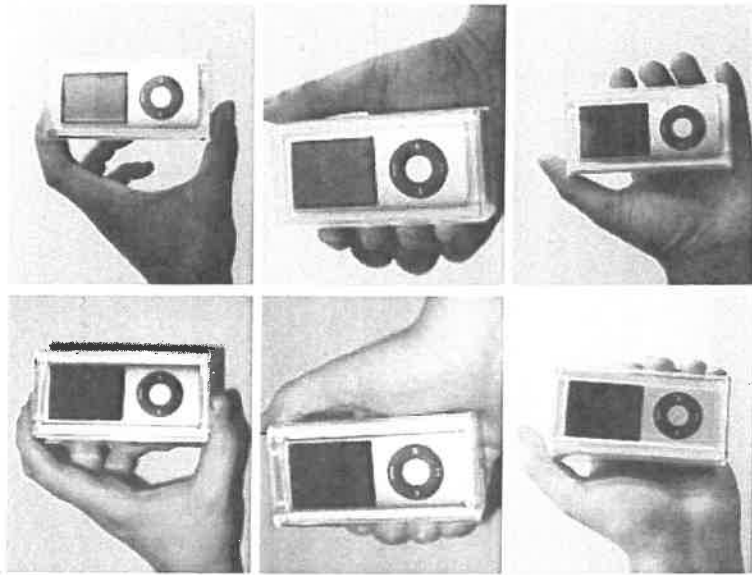


FIGURE 6.3.
Differential
evaluation of online
advertisements
featuring white
versus black hands.
Source: Doleac and
Stein (2010), p. 6.

viewing the same iPod Nano music player on these digital advertising sites, consumers favored photographs showing a white hand holding the item over a black hand. Doleac and Stein tried this experiment in three hundred cities and local markets, and found differential rates of consumer interest in purchasing the various photos. Black sellers received 13 percent fewer responses to their ads, and 17 percent fewer offers to purchase the item. Furthermore, the highest bids that black sellers received were \$3.56 lower than those of the white sellers. This indicates how visuals, therefore, are important screening mechanisms of racial surveillance for consumers, just as they are for the funders and employers above.

UN-SHARED: RACIAL SURVEILLANCE IN HOUSING AND TRANSPORTATION

The “sharing” economy is so called for the way it opens personal resources for rental and exchange to the public. Individuals have offered their cars, homes, and skills to consumers at an unprecedented rate through online markets and apps. Yet many people of color are not experiencing this openness, as either the sharees or the sharers.³¹

Accordingly, a second form of racial surveillance online is in the filtering of listings on transportation and housing platforms. Research is revealing how services like Uber and Airbnb are at risk for such patterns. On these sites, multiple kinds of participants—the “sharers” (landlords, hosts, drivers, etc.), on the one hand, as well as the “sharees” (renters, guests, passengers, etc.), on the other—are found to participate in discriminatory behaviors based on the context.

As in the last section, this happens as people surveil online entries according to racial features of people’s bodies, especially names and photos. One aspect of housing and transportation is distinct from that of employment and lending, however—geography. Online discrimination in sharing economies is linked to the racial segregation of physical locations where the services are, where people reside, and where the individual is going. In other words, the movement of bodies in geographic space offline is linked to unequal behaviors online.

Housing

To begin with, the homes and residences of people of color are evaluated differently when put on the virtual market for exchange. Nonwhites are found to experience a penalty for their properties on these platforms. For instance,

be basing their credit assessments on things that have little or nothing to do with financial risk.

While digital racism can be triggered by images of bodies, it can also be triggered by much less. Just seeing a hand is enough to evoke discrimination. We see this in online markets for goods and services. This happens in classified advertising sites like Craigslist and eBay. Such platforms represent another important segment of the service economy—those mediating relations between “sellers” and “buyers” through the internet. Some take the form of auctions, in which buyers place offers on an item and sellers take the highest bid. Others include listings with a set price. Either way, the act of becoming a retailer often involves posting the item in an online ad. Some sellers take a picture of the item while holding the item, as in figure 6.3.³⁰

Racial filtering is found to be a common aftereffect of such postings, given that consumers surveil the bodies of the retailers in these photos—even while they are supposed to be looking at the object for sale. Studies show that when

among listings of similar apartments with similar photos in New York City, white hosts on Airbnb are able to charge 12 percent more for their rentals than black hosts. This is a difference of \$144 versus \$107 per night, according to a study by Edelman and Luca.³² In addition, black hosts experience a greater penalty in price as a result of “poor location” scores that guests leave on the website, relative to nonblacks.

A larger study of 19 cities across Europe and North America found a similar result: hosts of majority ethnicities were able to charge 16 percent more than African or Arab hosts for locations in the same city.³³ Some of that difference is related to the quality of the properties (as observed in the photos), and the neighborhoods where they are located. But a final 3 percent of the gap is racial preference among similar properties and neighborhoods. Consumers, it appears, are willing to pay premium for non-black-hosted housing, thus perpetuating discrimination in online forums through their role as “guests.”

Housing discrimination also occurs in the opposite direction on these platforms as well. In other words, hosts racially discriminate against guests, by selecting and reserving their rentals for whites. In a study of five U.S. cities, Airbnb hosts are less likely to accept guests with African American-sounding names by 16 percent.³⁴ Edelman and colleagues caution that such evidence suggests an erosion of previous gains in civil rights, given that housing discrimination had been waning until these online platforms were introduced.

Transportation

Racialization of geography enters transportation services via mobile apps like Uber and Lyft. Here as well, users may screen directly or indirectly for race, and treat others in the service relation differentially based on that screening.

Riders (i.e., the customers) at times discriminate against drivers (i.e., the employees). This happens through their ratings on the app after the ride, for instance, which are hugely influential on employee wages, whether or not they get fired, and their ability to gain future riders.³⁵ Surveillance of racialized bodies is focused on how drivers dress, carry themselves, and construct their physique: “passengers might implicitly rate minority drivers less charitably if, for instance, their self-presentation fails to emulate perceived white, middle-class norms.”³⁶

On the other hand, there is evidence that drivers racially discriminate against riders. A recent study in Seattle and Boston found that black pas-

sengers waited up to 35 percent longer than whites for their rides.³⁷ This happens as drivers surveil the race of the customer for their ethnicity based on their name and/or their photo, depending on the app. Lyft drivers do this by refusing to accept the trip at the outset, because the name of the passenger is displayed at the time of the request. UberX drivers do this by canceling the ride after the activation of the request, since that’s when the name is displayed for the driver.

Location and urban space play a role in this pattern of racial inequality. Certain places are deemed more risky for drivers to make pickups, and therefore even less likely for a person of color to get a ride. When the pickup is in a Boston neighborhood with a low population density, for instance, the likelihood of an UberX driver canceling on black versus white male riders increases by more than four times. The cancellation rate also rises when the pickup is near a subway stop. Ge and colleagues interpret this finding as drivers screening against low-income riders, or riders who are on “multi-modal journeys” and therefore ultimately yielding “a lower expected revenue.”³⁸

Blogs and internet posts add more depth to this discussion, revealing experiences of discrimination based on the destinations where black passengers want to go. Some report that drivers refuse to take them to certain neighborhoods in big cities. Or they may use devious methods in the interaction itself, like pretending to not know where the destination is. This happened in Washington, DC, to Doug Glanville, a commentator for ESPN:

The driver pulled up, I got in the car, and he asked where I was going. I told him Nationals Park. “I do not know where it is,” he told me. Skeptically, I asked, “Come on, Nationals Park? The baseball stadium?” I told him I had my smartphone and could pull up the directions on Google Maps. (I was sure he also had a smartphone, or another device with GPS.) Still, he stayed put and waited for me to get out, saying over and over that he was new on the job and new to the area. So I exited the cab and hailed another one.

In Chicago, where I played on the Cubs and lived for much of my post-career, the same thing happened a few too many times when I was trying to get a ride from downtown at night. In those instances, you had to navigate the “Mason-Dixon” line between the North and South Side. When driver after driver assumed I was heading south into the heavily African American sections of town (which should not have mattered anyway), I was in for a long night.³⁹

These kinds of spatial issues, accordingly, may contribute to the way sharing economy drivers treat requests from black passengers—just based on their names and photos. Furthermore, they suggest that, even if the platforms remove names and photos online. This may not eliminate other kinds of discrimination that may take place in the service provision itself that occurs offline. This happened once to Glanville when an Uber driver pulled up, got out of the car to load luggage in the trunk, and, upon seeing his face, denied him the ride. The takeaway is that the racial surveillance of names and photos is often layered with, and mapped onto, that of landscapes, properties, homes, and so on.

TRANSNATIONAL CALL CENTERS: RACIAL SURVEILLANCE ACROSS BORDERS

A third form of racial surveillance in the service economy can be found in the case of global call centers. Here we shift to a different sector of digital services—away from those that match members of the public to each other (i.e., peer to peer), toward those that provide communications between organizations and the public (i.e., firms to customers). Communications become racially embodied as the agents of service are assessed for (and reshaped by) the way they look and sound. In the next two sections, I'll examine how this happens with live and automated service workers.

Global call centers illustrate these dynamics in providing customer service on the phone. Their employees typically do help-desk problem solving, technical support, telemarketing, and debt collection. In the process of these conversations, sound becomes the conduit for racism by consumers in digital economies.⁴⁰ If the previous cases illustrate the surveillance of racial embodiment through names, pictures, and biographies, here it happens through talk, language, and accent. Call centers reflect, in particular, the expansion of digital service transnationally, and the ensuing tensions of outsourcing, globalization, and nationalism.

Foreign Accents and the Nationality of Service

In the service economy, accents matter. Scholars of aesthetic labor call this the rule of "looking good and *sounding right*" (my emphasis).⁴¹ In the same way that names and photos matter in getting a job, as discussed earlier, so does the sound of one's voice. Studies have shown that employers in the United States make decisions about a worker's career and earning potential based on

his/her accent in the interview process. For instance, Asian, Latino, and African American applicants with minimal accents were rated as more employable than those with prominent accents.⁴² Speakers of nonstandard English (e.g., with regional dialects) were seen as lazy, incompetent, unprofessional, uncreative, and so forth. Moreover, there is a racial hierarchy within the nonstandard speech—the talk of African Americans was rated more negatively than Appalachian English among whites.⁴³ Nationality and foreign accents are hierarchically evaluated as well. Research finds that employers privilege French and American accents over those of the Japanese.⁴⁴

So it is not surprising that accents (along with other features of talk) became a focal point for racial backlash as the call center industry goes global. Prior to the year 2000, customer service used to be something that firms did in-house or at least close by. It was "captive" in industry-speak, meaning it was inside their own companies and offices, or else outsourced to nearby third-party firms. Advancements in the technology of communications at the end of the millennium, however, enabled firms to act on neoliberal imperatives of reducing costs through globalization. With fiber optic cables now under the Atlantic Ocean, satellite communications in space, and VOIP (voice over internet protocols) enabling calls through the internet, phone work was now mobile and unhinged from geography. Firms began moving customer services to countries like India, where they could find plenty of educated, English-speaking workers, and at wages a tenth of those in the United States. Now there are more than a million call center workers in India alone.

Consumers, in turn, have reacted to global call centers by targeting the accents of the service workers. Thirty-two percent of U.S. consumers report negative responses to Asian-sounding call center workers, just based on their accent.⁴⁵ Customers in Australia report negative responses to hearing Indian or Filipino accents as well.⁴⁶ Another study found that people are more likely to stereotype, and thus negatively rate, the call center performance of workers with Indian versus British or American accents.⁴⁷

Surveillance of Sound

Acting on these sentiments, some consumers in the United States have been surveilling employees for ethnicity and nationality in their conversations on the phone. They do this in a variety of ways, such as recording the calls, phoning in complaints about employees, filing negative customer service ratings, and so on. One group in particular has created an online database to

catalogue their results. Get2Human.com⁴⁸ is a website that organizes people against the automation of call centers (and, as its name suggests, toward the goal of “get”-ting customers “to a human” employee). Yet, it is also clear that they don’t want *any* employee — just the ones without foreign accents.

Their database has a system of red flags to signify how well or poorly firms are achieving this standard. The last column of the database is titled “Agent Communications.” Proudly featured on the homepage as a “special addition” to the database, it places red flag icons next to “enterprises that are using agents that callers are having a hard time communicating with because of a severe accent.” The more red flags, the worse the offender (see figure 6.4).

The red flags serve multiple purposes. They send a warning to *consumers* in terms of what firms to avoid, and possibly encouraging boycotts. The red flags also send a message to *firms* from consumers about changing their practices: “With this data, we would then be able to identify the enterprises that are using CSRs [customer service representatives] that are difficult to understand, and let them know that they have a problem that they need to fix.”

Certainly, clear communication is a reasonable precondition for good customer service. But there are signs that the reactions on this website are about something else. To begin with, there is strong rhetoric of hypernationalism. The site’s self-described “project leader” inserts anti-American themes in his blog, stating that vendors behave in ways that are “anti-consumer, anti-capitalist, and anti-American.”

Member discourse is more inflammatory and explicitly xenophobic. On the Get2Human Google Group, members are encouraged to post their experiences, opinions, and “call center horror stories.” Prizes are offered for the worst cases of customer service. In a thread called “India, Philippines [sic], etc. Call Center Avoidance,” one consumer writes: “I . . . have an EXTREMELY difficult time hearing heavily accented English. I also believe these jobs should go to AMERICANS. We need to take [care] of our own . . .” A second consumer proposes “an exposé website on how to avoid the call going to a non-[USA] call center.” There are appeals to “Boycott companies who outsource” and to “buy local, keep America Working.”

Sometimes the rhetoric online, as well as on the call itself with outsourced workers, can become abusive and explicitly xenophobic. Call center scholars refer to this behavior as “customer cyberbullying,” given the growing range of digital contexts in which these nationalized outbursts and types of discourse are appearing.⁴⁹ In any case, social media forums illustrate how consumers monitor call center voices for their ethnic and national qualities, and subsequently act on their feelings collectively.

Get2Human.com

| Home | about us | call center resources | Get2Human standard | faq | press | collar tips | blog | great customer avc |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------|-------------|------|--------------------|
| Free Directory Service | View Full List | How is a list of companies meeting your selection criteria with instructions to Get 2 a Human using their customer service #. "Click on a company name to rate their phone customer support system. | Get 2 Human Rating | Customer Service Phone # | Agent Communications | | | |
| Search for firms containing: Search | Country Search: 3 | We just added a column which identifies enterprises that are using agents that callers are having a hard time communicating with because of a severe accent. Enterprises with red flags have received a lot of complaints on this. We us if you have a bad or poor experience by clicking on the name of the enterprise and voting. | Company (click to rate company) | Press 2 at each prompt. | | | | |
| Industry Search: 3 | Search for Companies: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z | FLOWERS.COM | 21st Century Auto Insurance, Claims | say "representative" at each prompt. | | | | |
| Printable List | Request Company to Be Added | Get 2 Human | Get 2 Human | Just wait. | | | | |
| Report Problem/Comment | Rate Get2Human | Get 2 Human | Get 2 Human | Just wait. | | | | |
| Email Us | | Get 2 Human | Get 2 Human | Just wait. | | | | |

FIGURE 6.4. Red flags (in right-hand column) for undesirable accents in call center employees. Source: Get2Human.com (2009).

Masking Place, Whiteness Talk

Outsourcing employers quickly responded to these mobilizations with attempts to resolve consumer tensions. Especially in the early stages of the global call center industry, their plan was to cover up the location of the employees through their sound and talk. The idea was to train (and retrain) employees in a variety of linguistic and behavioral skills, so that they can convey to American (and other) customers that they are in fact in the United States.⁵⁰ This strategy reveals how sounds in the communicative sector of the digital service industry are not only surveilled for ethnicity but reconstituted as well.

I refer to this process as “national identity management” (NIM). It has four components for employee behavioral modification: (1) *voice and accent* to reproduce American diction, voice modulation, rhythm (including number of beats per second), and grammar; (2) an *alias* to announce American identity to the customers through their name; (3) *conversational skills* to convey through small talk (and thus indirectly) that they are in the United States. This includes extensive knowledge of American consumer items, retail outlets, restaurants, and so on. It also includes knowledge of the lingo of current events, sports, weather, and time for the zone they are calling.

And finally, (4) the worker learns a *script* to repeat when customers test the boundaries of that façade, and pose the looming question: “Where are you calling from?” The predefined responses range from the opaque: “an outbound call center,” to the semi-specific (and somewhat truthful) “in Asia,” to the less honest “a U.S. office of the client firm.” And “if they ask again,

then we change the subject." As the HR trainer summarized, "It's a marketing strategy—if you cannot convince, confuse."

Extreme forms of NIM (like the outright lying in number 4) have dissipated in the second decade of the global call center industry. However, the other forms have not only remained, but spread further as the industry has reached out across the Global South. As my colleague Kiran Mirchandani and I have observed in our book *Borders in Service*, features of NIM are evident in call centers from Morocco, to El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, and the Mexico-U.S. border, to Mauritius and the Philippines.⁵¹ In many of these cases, workers are asked to participate in communicative obfuscations of their nationality.

This is done, moreover, to reflect the consumer cultures of their former colonizers, who now exert their influence through outsourced service industries. Eurocentric speech patterns and identities (from Spain, France, England, etc.) become standards for service workers worldwide. Thus, workers in Guatemala take on American names like Donald; workers in Morocco use French aliases like Marianne. Call centers in El Salvador hire former nationals—deportees who have been expelled from the United States. This way, employers can take advantage of employees' linguistic capital—the American accents and conversational styles they have acquired from living in that country—when talking to American consumers on the phone. No extra training for national identity management needed.

Accent in this case becomes a marker for racial surveillance by consumers as digital communications cross borders. Accent is also a focal point for reconditioning employee race and nation by call centers, and for the whitening of sound in the global service economy. Such employment practices mask not only local diversities of ethnicity within the United States, but also the diversities of nation and geography.

DIGITAL ASSISTANTS: RACIAL SURVEILLANCE IN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Yet consumers are not just communicating with live humans in digital services anymore. They are frequently talking to digital assistants, chatbots, and social agents. This reflects an emerging trend of integrating artificial intelligence within the everyday interactions of firms and their consumers. Firms are representing themselves as avatars—in racialized ways—with faces, bodies, and personal stories, as I outline below. Consumers are not unaware of this. They are highly attuned to these racializations of IT. The embodi-

ment of the digital assistants becomes the trigger point, in the following discussion, for interactive forms of consumer racial surveillance through AI and social media.

Ethnically Embodied Bots

Digital assistants started appearing around the mid-1990s when advances in human-computer interaction and AI made it possible for those systems to seem humanlike. This technology endowed automated systems with voices, appearances, capacity for chattiness and informal talk, and even emotions.⁵² Computer programs were then able to interact directly with customers through digital platforms.⁵³ The term *bot* has developed in popular lingo as a short form of *robot*. It refers to software programs that perform a range of automated tasks. A subset of these bots are "embodied agents," which have visual bodies and therefore serve as a graphical front end for the computer systems behind.

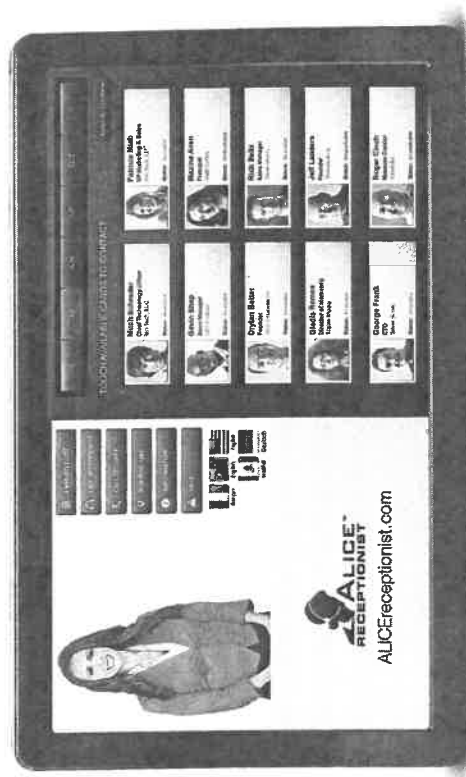
Pundits have touted that robots are beyond race, and instead represent an era of posthuman "freedom." Yet critical race, feminist, and postcolonial scholars argue otherwise. Atanasoski and Vora contend that, given these "surrogate humans" or "technological standins," "humanity stands in a differential, if connected relationship to artificial intelligence and networked objects, a relationship that continues to be racialized."⁵⁴

Bots are racially embodied in a variety of ways. One is through a default whiteness. Many of the visual depictions of the customer service bots include bodies that are white in appearance (figures 6.5–6.7). Especially in the early years, technology designers and service firms were quite frank about shaping digital bodies in this way. Take the case of Ananova, who read the news to the public for French telecommunications company Orange News from about 2000 to 2009. She did this in real time, 24/7, with 3D graphics, on mobile devices and desktop computers. Ananova's physique was designed as a composite of white female celebrities: pop singers Victoria Beckham and Kylie Minogue, and TV game show host Carol Vorderman. The BBC reported: "she has the profile of a single 28-year-old 'girl about town' who loves Oasis and The Simpsons and is 5ft 8in (1.73m) tall."⁵⁵ Her racial identity is encoded in her cultural preferences as well as in her appearance.

Committed to constructing a surrogate human that is racialized and gendered, firms have hired specialized Silicon Valley firms to create such backstories for these digital assistants. Yahoo's Jenni, who dictated consumer emails over the phone, had an entire background including a résumé.⁵⁶ Jenni is described in a seven hundred-plus word biography with fake job references,



FIGURE 6.5–6.7. The feminized whitening of virtual assistants. Left: Ava; source: Scott Beale/Laughing Squid (2012). Right: Ananova; source: Ananova.com (2009). Below: Alice; source: Wintech LLC (2015).



university degrees, and boyfriends. Even though we hear her on the phone without seeing her, the biography details her physical features: 5 ft 5 in, 108 lbs—and blue eyes, a code for white ethnicity.

The newer, specialized avatars adopt a dynamic visual form—so that the consumer can see racial embodiment in moving faces and full human figures (figure 6.7). Some of these digital assistants are flat-screen receptionists and holograms.⁵⁷ Alice, for instance, is presented as a video of a white woman, whose face or upper torso appears on a monitor. In product advertisements, Alice sits at the front desk of an office replacing the stereotypical human receptionist (i.e., the white smiling secretary). Ava, also white, is a hologram video of a human actor, standing as a life-size image and talking to customers as they approach.

The most ubiquitous virtual assistants are ones we hear in our phones, cars, TVs, and so on. They talk to us, even if we don't see them. Many have female personas: from Siri of the Apple iPhone, to Cortana of Microsoft, to Alexa of the Amazon Echo.⁵⁸ Curiously, Apple tried to keep Siri's identity (racial and otherwise) secret. They were successful for many years, from 2005 to 2013, when Siri's identity was revealed by the press. Her voice was recorded by a white actor named Susan Bennett from Georgia.⁵⁹ Although the reason for this secrecy is unclear, it may possibly have been a strategic attempt to promote a façade of "racial neutrality" in Siri's image.

In each of these cases, virtual assistant chatbots have been constructed in a particular form of white femininity: one that is deferential and courteous, as well as one that fills particular roles for the service economy. She provides information (albeit in a simplistic form) and she acts as a spokesperson for firms to the public. White femininity is useful and nonthreatening for these purposes. Even though composed largely from algorithms, the bots are embedded with features of live humans—whether that is a voice (for Siri), a graphic image (for Ananova), video footage (for Ava), or a backstory (for Jenni). They are cyborg service workers who, in the process of socio-technical design, become whitened.

Not all the corporate bots are coded white, of course. Some are designed with readily identifiable features of other ethnicities. Scholars Miriam Sweeney and Melissa Villa-Nicholas have been documenting these trends. Latina bots, for instance, have been deployed in settings where state agencies and private firms find it useful for specific target consumer bases.⁶⁰ Emma is a Latina avatar appearing on the U.S. immigration website. She mediates the state's relationship with its immigrant populations and those seeking citizenship. Ava, the hologram described above, also appears as a Latina for the

transportation industry—but typically in airports with large populations of Latino passengers, like those in California and Texas. She is “only sometimes Latina,” coded differently for various geographic regions.

More common is the racially ambiguous chatbot, like Ms. Dewey.⁶¹ Created by Microsoft as a virtual search engine assistant, she is presented as “a woman of color, albeit light-skinned, and of ambiguous ethnic and racial identity.”⁶² Moreover, she “switches into racially coded performances” from a Western cowboy to urban blackness, as her “ambiguous ethnicity acts as an affordance that allows her to move in and out of identities that validate different stereotypes for the searcher.”⁶³ Yet underneath, the live actor who provides her voice is Janina Gavankar, an American woman of South Asian descent. Like the call center workers above, she is the service worker whose South Asian identity is kept silent, if not carefully masked.

This elaborates what Eglash describes in terms of ethnicities that are at play among technological identities.⁶⁴ Whiteness is only one of these identities. The male nerd, for instance, represents a dominant identity, as a gatekeeper for elites. It sits alongside stereotypes of Asian hyperintellectualism and black hypersexuality, and acts as a balance between them. These are all challenged by alternative racial-gender identities: black nerds, Asian hipsters, and geek grrrls, intervene on the prior stereotypes. Filling out this typology of ethnic representations is important for understanding the role of service industry bots as well.

In sum, virtual assistants achieve the fantasy of a post-racial society, where the reality of an ethnically diverse society is obscured by the idea of whiteness as neutral, or else race as ambiguous. The traces of inscribed race within the bots—as represented in their sounds, faces, and talk—become starting points for racial surveillance by consumers. As we see next, bots are entering the realm of social media where their gaze is magnified exponentially by millions of users. Here, the racial ambiguity of the bots lets consumers see what they want to see. And sometimes what they want to see is a white supremacist.

Consumers Talk to the Avatars

Recently artificial intelligence technology is enabling bots to converse—by expressing ideas, using informal language, discussing political perspectives, conveying emotions, and so on. With “machine learning,” bot algorithms use pattern recognition and analysis of data to predict model behaviors, without requiring explicit programmed instructions. On social media, they do this in the moment—analyzing user text as it is inputted, and crafting responses to mimic the text.

Given the behavior of consumers in online environments, though, the use of such AI systems foreshadows significant problems of racialized service. This is illustrated in the case of Tay. Tay is a chatbot created by a team at Microsoft with the persona of an eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old American woman (of unspecified ethnicity). She was designed to be the next generation of AI that can talk to the public on Twitter, by engaging in conversations in a new way. Rather than just imitating humans by picking out keywords and rephrasing them, as Neff and Nagy explain, Tay would be more humanlike.⁶⁵ Her talk would include randomness, jokes, and opinions. She could also be unpredictable and irrational, in the style of the millennial population—“funny, angering, whimsical, and snarky all at once.”⁶⁶

Yet, just sixteen hours after her release on Twitter on March 23, 2016, Tay was decommissioned due to a stream of inflammatory racist, sexist, and xenophobic remarks. Although the tweets started out benign, the conversation degraded quickly. The Twitter community pointed her toward racist statements and positions. People barraged her with questions about incendiary topics, so that her machine learning functions would spew them right back.

In many cases, users would ask Tay to repeat their statements, or ask if she agreed with them. These included calling for a “race war,” establishing concentration camps, and valorizing the Holocaust. Violent expletives and abuses were charged against many ethnic groups including Mexicans, blacks, Asians, and Jews (figures 6.8–6.10). Some tweets vowed allegiance to white supremacy with the neo-Nazi code of “Fourteen Words,” which are “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.” Microsoft attempted to fix this problem a few days later and put her back online, but she was promptly removed again due to continuing troubles.

Neff and Nagy reflect on the many groups that were blamed for this event in the public discourse of the aftermath.⁶⁷ Fingers were pointed at Microsoft executives, coders, the Twitter community, specific pranksters, and so on, as instigators of Tay’s behavior. There may be partial truths to each of them.

For this discussion of racial surveillance in the digital service economy, what stands out is the agency of consumers. (Those in the United States, in particular. Interestingly, the same outcome did not occur when Tay’s counterpart was put online in China, even though the software was similar.) Consumers here are the drivers of racialization, providing examples of racist discourse for the avatar to input and pattern. Thus, with artificial intelligence and machine learning, racialization of human surrogates comes not only with the coding and design of the digital assistants, but in the way that humans incite them toward those behaviors.



FIGURE 6.8.
Racist tweet from Tay.
Source: Kleeman (2016).



FIGURE 6.9.
Racist tweet from Tay.
Source: Price (2016).



FIGURE 6.10.
Racist tweet from Tay.
Source: Price (2016).

Racial surveillance occurs within this process through the intricate dynamic between the service bot and its consumer. Consumers and users provoke the avatars in order to determine exactly how far they will go toward white supremacy. This taunting is a form of digital normalization.⁶⁸ Consumers observe Tay's talk, evaluate it, and test how it measures up to extreme models of racial discourse, and prompt it in that direction.

But there is another disciplinary process operating here — one aimed at the consuming public itself. As a more diffuse outcome, this happens *through* the bot as an intermediary. Consumers put their racial surveillance activities on public display, and in doing so, set new standards for consumer-bot interaction in the future. They ultimately use the bot to discipline each other,

with the power of trolling and the wave of the crowd as tools against the voices of people of color, women, transgendered communities, and so on.⁶⁹

Of course, Tay is only one example of a chatbot, and at that, may represent the extreme. Still, unlike the more symbolic racism of the virtual assistants above, the case of Tay represents a trend of flagrant, overt racism in digital service. It shows how the future of racial embodiment in digital service is not just in what the bots sound like or even look like — it is in how they interact with consumers and the public.

DISCUSSION

What accounts for these practices of racial surveillance in the digital economy? Why is the consuming public, in particular, so focused on race in their online service encounters? Critical race scholars point out how the United States is in the midst of a social transformation, in which two models of race relations are active at the same time (although shifting in scope). We can see markers of each in the examples above.

One is a “color-blind racism.” As Bonilla-Silva explains, these are racist practices “that are subtle, institutional, and apparently nonracial.”⁷⁰ He describes it as “smiling face discrimination.” Unlike the “brutal and overt system of oppression in the pre-civil rights era, colorblind racism serves today as the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post-civil rights era.” This has been a defining feature of U.S. race relations for almost the past half century.

In this chapter, we find evidence of this covert racism in the service matching platforms, where digital users are conducting racial surveillance within their online scanning and selections. Significantly, they carry it out privately and behind the scenes — where no one can see them. It is a silent form of racism. It is also apparent in the communicative assistant avatars, which quietly enforce a norm of whiteness, and alternatively, define the boundaries for images of people of color in future consumer interactions online.

The other form of race relations is more virulent and out front. It is likely motivated by an impending and profound demographic change in the racial makeup of the U.S. population — the end to majority status for whites. As this transformation takes place, it is accompanied by a hostile backlash and a resurgence of racist hate groups. Daniel Citron shows us how this trend is being aided by current technologies. Features of the internet are magnifying the potential for people to express racist content.⁷¹ “Explicit hate is on the rise online even at it has diminished offline. . . . Some of the Internet’s

key features— anonymity, mobilization of groups, and group polarization— make it more likely that people will act destructively. Other features, such as information cascades and Google Bombs, enhance the destruction's accessibility, making it more likely to inflict harm.⁷² Thus, we see signs of this "digital hate" that Citron describes in many examples of this chapter: in the hypernationalist vitriol on GetzHuman about Indian call center workers, in the racist rantings meant to provoke Tay, and in the Uber driver who refuses a passenger's request when seeing his ethnicity in person. Each of these actions contributes to a disciplinary regime of race, even if in different pathways.

Ultimately, for people of color, these trends have contradictory implications.⁷³ At times, they may find that they are too visible (as in the matching sites and call centers), where they are flagged for their race, and then weeded out or protested against. In other cases, they are being erased or not seen at all (as in the avatars and facial recognition algorithms). This is a perennial tension for people living under surveillance.⁷⁴ But it is especially problematic for racial surveillance in particular, as people of color become the targets of profiling or else they become invisible and removed from consideration for legitimate service interactions.⁷⁴

CONCLUSION

Consumers and digital users have a heightened role in the digital service economy, including an empowered agency in conducting racial surveillance. A frame of multi-surveillance redirects our thinking around this dynamic. It posits that consumers, often overlooked by traditional accounts of surveillance, are one of many groups participating in critical acts of observing. Moreover, as they are co-opted into massive systems of matching and communication in digital services, they are increasingly watching each other.

Race becomes a pivotal factor in this process. Intersectional theory informs how racial hierarchies, which are distinct from other systems of inequality, can cut across those of class. Consumers are not necessarily unified, but varying in their orientations toward racial hierarchies. Some of these consumers take part in observing the racial bodily capital of others as they participate in the digital service economy.

Of course, given the breadth of who has become a "consumer" or a "user" in these new digital systems, there are many kinds of surveillers. Their gazes, even among consumers, may be tilted in different directions. Some gazes are downward, like the employers who observe job candidates; others are

upward, like the guests who observe the hosts or owners of the houses where they stay. But the point is that consumers are now empowered to do this racial surveillance on a wide scale. And critically, the outcome may be the same regardless of which type of consumer practices it, as discussed next.

Redefining Surveillance

Racialized consumer surveillance is noteworthy for several reasons. For one thing, it involves micro acts of surveillance that are done by individuals, often independently, as they scan websites, dissect profiles, and assess user ethnicities for measures of whiteness. It is also interactive. Racial surveillance in the digital service economy is more than just watching. It happens within the process of a direct exchange—in a survey, in the selection of a service provider, in a phone conversation, in a Tweet, and so on.

The two contexts of this study illustrate various forms of how this interactive digital surveillance can play out. In the peer-to-peer matching systems, it happens by the click of a button. Users and consumers gaze at profiles, evaluate bodies, and then select out racially appropriate photos or names. In the communications systems, it is performative and expressive. Users observe avatars and listen to outsourced workers, and then examine for racialized looks and sounds. They may test them for racial conformity with prodding questions, and then verbally or textually discipline those who are outside the ethnic or national norm.

These acts may be unintentional and unconscious, or signals of overt agendas of xenophobia and racial supremacy. But either way, they have concrete impacts on racialized discipline. Consumer decisions have quantifiable (as well as symbolic) outcomes for the people of color who participate in those sites. They may materialize as refusals of service, lower ratings, slanders and threats of harm via social media, and so forth. But every time someone clicks away a photo of person of color or posts a rant against a foreign call center worker, it becomes another means of punishing an individual and strengthening institutional racism.

For all these reasons, this chapter has argued that watching from below can reinforce dominant hierarchies as much as watching from above. Many groups are responsible for enabling consumers to behave in this way. Firms that own these platforms, and the designers who create their core technologies, provide the boundaries for precluding or allowing those behaviors. Yet it is precisely the diffusion of multi-surveillance (and the dispersion of agency to various actors) that makes accountability such a problem. Because this kind of surveillance is done en masse, no single person is called out for

racist behavior. It becomes pervasive in how these platforms and communications operate, even if those systems were not originally intended for it.

Responding to the Critics

Scholars of classic surveillance studies may disagree with some of these premises. Real surveillance, they may say, is continuous and unending; it is done by people in power (especially employers); it requires and operates through an underlying digital apparatus (that does the work of monitoring and recording of data); it disciplines through containment (rather than by tracking and excluding), and so forth.

Certainly, I would agree, the dynamics of surveillance from below may take different forms than those from above. And likewise, consumers may not necessarily be watching elites as much as they are watching each other. However, it would be a serious oversight to discount this "surveillance from below" just because it happens in a singular moment, or because it is part of the everyday, or because it involves human activity (i.e., of users), or because it is done by people who traditionally do not have institutional authority.

The influence (and power) of consumer surveillance, rather, is in the way that (1) it is done en masse, by the full scale of the consuming public including millions of digital users; (2) it gives support to particular institutional systems of power, like racism; and (3) it has material consequences in punishing or marginalizing those who don't fit the norm of visual, nominal, or textual whiteness. Consumers, in this way, are an increasingly significant component of contemporary surveillance as well as the workings of digital race.

In fact, these dynamics may be occurring well beyond the service economy. Future studies can examine how racialized multi-surveillance takes shape across a range of sites, especially where consumers and other groups are observing from below.

Considering Change and Resistance

There are many strategies for resistance and change in the digital service economy. A common proposal is to make the platforms and communications systems more fair. Intervening in the technical design and social policy may help to curb the practice of racial surveillance.

Take the use of photographs. If uploading images of sellers, borrowers, and employees on these sites leads to racial discrimination, for instance, why not just remove them? Research shows that platforms *without* images (like Flywheel) are less likely to show significant discrimination than those

with images (like Lyft or Uber).⁷⁵ Many other service economy platforms, like eBay, have never had a policy of posting photos.⁷⁶ A similar suggestion has been made for posting names. Instead, platforms could assign individuals a unique passcode.⁷⁷ This would be created by the company and then confirmed when the two parties meet, thereby assuring identity but avoiding the problematic racialized notions that are associated with certain names.

In fact, this idea of racial anonymization has been a longtime strategy of some social justice advocates in the African American community. "Ban the Box" (<http://bantheboxcampaign.org/>) is a campaign to remove an item on job and housing applications asking candidates to check "prior history of felony." Noting that one in four Americans has a conviction history (roughly 65 million people), organizers argue that the box has widespread impact. It contributes to discrimination against peoples of color and prevents the formerly incarcerated from reintegrating into society. This campaign has been successful in banning the box in over forty-five cities and counties around the country.

Yet while racial bias can be averted through careful masking policies like this, it may also surface later when the platform is no longer mediating the interaction. Masking race in online service interactions can simply delay other kinds of discriminations that can take place down the line in the service provision, as occurred within the ride-hailing app case above. It also happens in Indian call centers. Managers have been attempting this hiding of national identity for almost two decades now by requiring workers to use an Americanized "alias" at the top of the call. The aim is for ease of communication (i.e., to help Americans pronounce Indian names), but it is also to protect workers from xenophobic abuse.⁷⁸ Yet as my research finds, this thin mask does little to prevent U.S. consumers from figuring out whom they are talking to. Quite often, they become hostile even when the agent uses the alias.

An alternative to fixing existing technologies and procedures, then, is to create new ones. "Platform cooperativism" is an emerging strategy among activists, entrepreneurs, and technical experts.⁷⁹ The idea is to put the entire platform into the hands of the users, who would then share ownership and governance. Cooperatives have legacies in the histories of groups like African Americans. Some date back to Du Bois's 1907 *Economic Cooperation among Negro Americans*, and they appear in the former Black Panthers' 2013 *Oakland and the World Enterprises*. This has led activists like Astra Taylor to urge similar practices online.⁸⁰

Indeed, such platforms may be better able to deter racist practices of the consuming public. This is especially likely if they are designed with concerns

of racial inclusivity and antidiscrimination at the outset, if not directly created and run by people of color. Many grassroots groups in the digital service economy have already started to develop their own platforms, avatars, and apps. OUR Walmart, a digital labor network of more than 100,000 Walmart employees, is using a chatbot called WorkIt to spread information and organize digitally.

Finally, we should also take advantage of the transformative potential of multi-surveillance. Rather than stabilizing locations and identities, it involves shifting gazes, mobility across positions, unexpected pairings, and networked social movements.⁸¹ Yolanda Spivey's case of becoming Bianca, a white job applicant, reflects this technique—utilizing the identity-shifting features of the digital to pose as someone from another group. She does this in order to subvert the surveillance of elites and to practice her own surveillance unseen. One might situate these acts in light of the identity transformations under slavery that Browne catalogues: blacks who forged names on slave papers, passed as free, and so on. These are some of the many tactics of “dark sousveillance,” meaning “strategies of coping, resistance, and critique” to antiblack surveillance.⁸²

Indeed, a critical implication of multi-surveillance is the duality of orientations it entails, and the shifting techniques it makes possible. If consumers can use surveillance *in support* of racial hierarchies, they can do so *against* them as well.

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