



Selected Papers of #AoIR2024:  
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## STUFF (IS SOMETHING) WHITE PEOPLE LIKE: ON THE WHITE PROTOTYPICALITY OF FACEBOOK

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### Introduction

In the wake of the subprime mortgage crisis, venture capital investment in advertising-driven platforms emerged as a primary vehicle for high-yield returns.<sup>1</sup> These platforms are distinguished by their use of algorithmic targeting to guarantee advertiser return on investment. The technological sophistication of these (proprietary) algorithms promises a hitherto unmatched granularity in the specification of advertisement audience. Platforms produce, define, and improve audience categories through large-scale associations detected in captured behavioral data, which advertisers then use to ensure their message reaches their desired audience as efficiently as possible. One such category was “ethnic affinity”, developed by Facebook to personalize user advertisements according to expressed preferences. Ethnic affinity was removed from Facebook after press coverage and subsequent lawsuits alleged that the category violated the Fair Housing Act by allowing advertisers to hide housing advertisements from protected classes, including (but not limited to) those defined by race. Despite this removal, the problem of discriminatory targeting persisted, and eventually resulted in Meta removing algorithmic targeting from housing, employment and credit advertisements altogether, as part of a settlement with the Justice Department.<sup>2</sup> Although the platform does not explicitly collect data on race, to be attractive to advertisers the category of ethnic affinity had to be commensurable with their intended audience.<sup>3</sup> As the Department of Housing and Urban Development argued in their lawsuit against Facebook, ethnic affinity as category “inevitably recreates groupings defined by their protected class” in the course of its targeting function.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cooman, “Imprinting the Economy”; Shestakofsky and Petre, “Sociotechnical Change.”

<sup>2</sup> Nix and Dwoskin, “Justice Department and Meta Settle Landmark Housing Discrimination Case.”

<sup>3</sup> van der Vlist, “Accounting for the Social.”

<sup>4</sup> Worden, Pennington, and Weiss, *HUD v. Facebook, Inc.* at 5.

Facebook developed three core affinity groups—“African Americans,” “U.S. Hispanics,” and “Asian Americans”—through the algorithmic association of user interests and their attribution to individual users. In later Senate hearings, and a series of subsequent lawsuits, Facebook insisted that the targeting categories were based “not [on] their genetic makeup, but their affinity to the cultures they are interested in”.<sup>5</sup> The possibility of ethnicity, absent race, as Facebook claims it is presenting, is a reflection of the “postracial racist politics of Silicon Valley”.<sup>6</sup> It seemingly moves away from the staid, discredited, biological category of “race”, towards the behaviourally derived, and thus supposedly more firmly user-grounded, “ethnicity”, delivered through the proprietary technological sophistication of Facebook’s targeted algorithms.<sup>7</sup> But the appearance of this rupture is a marketing ploy of Facebook before it is an actually-existing difference (let alone improvement) from its competitors, that is, traditional advertising companies.<sup>8</sup> Rather than take this rupture for granted, my project understands it as the *production* of an *understanding* of technological sophistication (and race), instead of its mere existence. It joins recent literature that recovers historical continuity in these targeting categories.<sup>9</sup> One such continuity is obvious. Facebook has, and had, no such ethnic affinity-based targeting for white people.<sup>10</sup>

My study therefore seeks to establish how ethnic affinity as a category serves to negotiate tensions between the technologically fetishistic, “post-racial” aesthetic of Silicon Valley, and the political economy of targeted advertising online. I ask the following questions:

**RQ1:** How does the production of “ethnic affinities” as *data* function as mechanism of racialization?

**RQ2:** How do “ethnic affinities” interact with other mechanisms of racialization within various circuits of exchange – that is, as discursive formations, and as technical objects?

## Methodology

Through a media genealogy of ethnic affinity that tracks the birth, transformation, death, and afterlife of the category, my work seeks to understand how latent theories of racial property underwrite its form and subtend the means by which it makes its discriminations. I perform archival analysis across a variety of corpora, that reflect the variegated stakeholders in the circulation of ethnic affinity. These include archived business developer API instructions, Facebook promotional material, investigative journalism, and paratextual instructional literature of the “Facebook for Dummies” genre. I interrogate these texts not only for how ethnic affinities coheres as a discursive formation but for how Facebook’s technical systems constitute the category. The nature of how this understanding changes, and points of rupture and tension across and amongst varying stakeholders, draws attention to political decisions that make concrete some forms of possible relationship, and conceal or thwart others.

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<sup>5</sup> Newitz, “Facebook’s Ad Platform Now Guesses at Your Race Based on Your Behavior.”

<sup>6</sup> Noble and Roberts, *Technological Elites, the Meritocracy, and Postracial Myths in Silicon Valley*.

<sup>7</sup> See Nadler and McGuigan, “An Impulse to Exploit.”

<sup>8</sup> See Beauvisage et al., “How Online Advertising Targets Consumers.”

<sup>9</sup> McGuigan, *Selling the American People*; Salas, “Total Market American.”

<sup>10</sup> Cotter et al., “Reach the Right People.”

## Discussion

I argue that racism is not a tertiary outcome of what is produced as “data” in these circuits of production, consumption, distribution and exchange; rather, these circuits constitute modalities of racialisation themselves. The ethnic affinity category on Facebook operated through a “white prototypicality” that encodes white racial identity as having a fixed, normative function—the implicit standard against which racialized Others are defined.<sup>11</sup> Racial difference is produced and executed as data, as possessing a discrete, fixed form and mode of relation.<sup>12</sup> The presumed objectivity of algorithmic competency is then projected onto this extracted data, so that Facebook is able to justify charging a higher rent under the aegis of personalization. Facebook, then, determines the conditions of visibility under which racial classifications come to be defined and targeted, re-articulating racial difference as algorithmically governed forms of subjectivity. The location of race moves from phenotypical expression towards something that is, in the words of Wark and Phan, “grounded in one’s behavioural affines.”<sup>13</sup> Race is not hidden, but instead *revealed* by and as the technical system, with any resulting disparity or discrimination deemed technical errors, “glitches in the system,” rather than the responsibility of Facebook itself.<sup>14</sup> Framed as error, the problem is not the system of racial classification, but its incomplete implementation. These “biases” then provide an opportunity for technical mastery to be re-performed, reinforcing white normativity.

Historicizing digital forms of “predatory inclusion,” this project contributes to an understanding of platformization as a process that operates in and through digital artifacts but is not limited to them.<sup>15</sup> It locates the existence of the category not only in the media-specific political economy of Facebook, but as one legacy of the post-racial promise of digital technologies in the era immediately following the financial crisis (c. 2008-2016). Most previous scholarship has either overlooked the relationship between racialization and platform capitalism or theorized this relationship from a paradigm that views the construction and exploitation of social media audiences as a form of commoditization.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to these previous authors, I argue that these ethnic affinities are not best understood as a proxy of race because race *is already a proxy*.<sup>17</sup> As Wendy Chun argues, race makes the “visible innate” by linking “somatic differences

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<sup>11</sup> Browne, *Dark Matters*; Gordon, “Is the Human a Teleological Suspension of Man? Phenomenological Exploration of Sylvia Wynter’s Fanonian and Biodecean Reflections.”

<sup>12</sup> Nakamura and Chow-White, “Race and Digital Technology: Code, the Color Line, and the Information Society,” 8.

<sup>13</sup> Wark and Phan, “What Personalisation Can Do for You! Or, How to Do Racial Discrimination without ‘Race,’” 20.

<sup>14</sup> Nakamura, “Glitch Racism.”

<sup>15</sup> Steinberg, “From Automobile Capitalism to Platform Capitalism”; Taylor, *Race for Profit*; McMillan Cottom, “Where Platform Capitalism and Racial Capitalism Meet.”

<sup>16</sup> McMillan Cottom, “Where Platform Capitalism and Racial Capitalism Meet”; Rigi and Prey, “Value, Rent, and the Political Economy of Social Media”; Caraway, “Audience Labor in the New Media Environment”; Robinson, “With a Different Marx.”

<sup>17</sup> Gray, *Watching Race*; Goldberg, *Racist Culture*.

to innate physical and mental characteristics.”<sup>18</sup> “Ethnic affinities” functions as a racial technology, a “means by which origins and boundaries [of race] are simultaneously traced and constructed.”<sup>19</sup> The question of the technical here is if and how the categories of race are being transformed, not just through the occlusion of technical systems, but through the media-specific production of race, *and* its occlusion, *in and as* these technical systems: racialization is therefore one of the “structuring logics of the platform model.”<sup>20</sup> Theorizing ethnic affinity as a racial technology that descends from earlier forms of targeted discrimination, my research demonstrates how historical modes of racial property subtend, and are re-articulated in, systems of digital discrimination— as Michael Eng says, how “racial difference might function as that outside against which data coheres its integrity as data.”<sup>21</sup> In the case of ethnic affinities, white racial identity is stabilized through the production of data as “spectacle of the Other.”<sup>22</sup> It is a form of what Valdivia and Tazzioli call “racialisation through datafication”.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Chun, “Introduction,” 11.

<sup>19</sup> Chun, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Gebrial, “Racial Platform Capitalism.”

<sup>21</sup> Eng, “Lights! Race! Gender! Adrian Piper and the Pseudorationality of Data,” 137.

<sup>22</sup> Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other’”; Daniels, “Race and Racism in Internet Studies”; Gregg, “Inside the Data Spectacle.”

<sup>23</sup> Valdivia and Tazzioli, “Datafication Genealogies beyond Algorithmic Fairness,” 839.



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