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E-Seminar 71

BOOK SEMINAR

Digital Unsettling: Decoloniality and Dispossession in the Age of Social Media

by
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&

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Discussants

Elena Gonzalez-Polledo (Goldsmiths, University of London) & Vita Peacock (King's College London)

16 May – 30 May 2023

Nina Grønlykke Mollerup (ninagmollerup@gmail.com) 16 May 2023

Dear all,

I would like to announce the opening of our 71st e-seminar: "Digital Unsettling: Decoloniality and Dispossession in the Age of Social Media" by Sahana Udupa (https://www.en.ethnologie.uni-muenchen.de/staff/professors/udupa/index.html) (LMU Munich) and Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan (https://as.nyu.edu/faculty/gabriel-dattatreyan.html) (NYU).

The e-seminar will run from today and until May 30.

Unlike our usual working paper format, this e-seminar will revolve around a published book. We will be discussing the introduction and the chapters, 'Campus' and 'Extreme'.

As usual, first, our discussants, Elena Gonzalez-Polledo (https://www.gold.ac.uk/anthropology/staff/gonzalez-polled-elena/) (Goldsmiths, University of London) and Vita Peacock (https://www.kcl.ac.uk/people/vita-peacock) (King's College London) will post their comments. Subsequently, Sahana and Gabriel will post their reply after which I will open the seminar for all to contribute.

To post a comment to the e-seminar, write directly to medianthro@lists.easaonline.org. You need to be subscribed to the list from the email you are writing from.

If you have not yet had the chance to read it, the full book is open access and you can find the link on the network's website (https://easaonline.org/networks/media/eseminars) or access it directly here: https://opensquare.nyupress.org/books/9781479819164/.

I'm looking forward to what promises to be an interesting and thought-provoking e-seminar.

Cheers,
Nina

Elena Gonzalez-Polledo (E.Gonzalez-polledo@gold.ac.uk) 16 May 2023

Dear all,

Very many thanks for the opportunity to contribute to this debate around "Digital Unsettling" by Sahana Udupa and Gabriel Dattatreyan. I have thoroughly enjoyed this monograph and, since reading it, have been haunted by the set of crucial questions that situate politics at the intersection of anthropology and media studies.

I read this manuscript at a critical time. Some of the dangers it warns against have become the most important shifts media regimes have accomplished on a global scale – the closing distance between the need to sustain human life and to relate through means other than material, a shift through which Povinelli, via Arendt, has recently reframed biopolitics[i]. Actions reframe not only what people do but who they are, setting off cascading effects that are not easy to anticipate, evade or reverse. Engaging with an array of examples, Udupa and Dattatreyan show how a frame of digital action reveals human exceptionality as rooted in the very conditions of existence of digital global ecosystems. At the same time, they argue, media becomes a device

critical to reframing human existence through practices of 'adjustment' to the conditions of specific times and places, as evidenced in the ways that Indigenous and other social movements negotiate mediatized struggles for access and justice. This utopian-dystopian character of digital worlds can be understood, after "Digital Unsettling", as embedding new and diverse cosmopolitics – around global qualities of performative affects, recursive histories and legacies of violence, and political affinities shaped through mediation as a knowledge-making practice.

Data, in this context, is weaved into the crises of late digital capitalism. This framing evinces the emergence of a new politics by data – that encompasses diverse practices, from hate speech to a politics of truth – which has disastrous consequences for minority groups. The repositioning of the international new right through anti-gender, anti-liberal nationalist campaigns signal a new point at which, as Udupa suggests, digital exchanges produce ordinary hate as a condition of digital capitalism, relentlessly compelling sharing and exposure. The endurance of coloniality in hate speech on Twitter, as in other contexts that seek liberation through digital politics, traces its roots to colonial logics and relations: data concentrates value as data platforms read and aggregate populations, bodies, materials and affects through algorithmic processes. Doubling on the speculative capacity of digital practices to create value, data regimes reveal that life itself is rooted in infrastructural affordances, affects and capabilities. Amade M'Charek has recently called this quality of the digital 'tentacular'[ii] – at once revealing the entwined digital fabrics that refract personhood, while at the same time allowing its 'phenomenal' qualities to be experienced, embodied, and exploited.

Reading the manuscript and navigating its routes in and out of contemporary contexts of extreme surveillance, automation, digital labour and truth-making – lead me to questioning whether media anthropology theories can create conditions for liberation. A key strength in these chapters are the authors' persuasive links between affective, political, and historical cosmopolitics. But the grip of coloniality in these chapters also follows emergence of totalising knowledge regimes – described elsewhere by scholars such as Rebecca Lemov or Colin Koopman[iii], among others, as intricately entangled with Anthropology's own extractive and cataloguing methods. Here the colonial university and its extractive knowledge ecologies become an entry point to engage how the circulation of textual, visual and sonic materials on data platforms enact capacities to resist by digital means – repositioning prefigurative politics and articulating dissent in new (algorithmic-mediated) orientations. For Dattatreyan algorithms produce culture and are themselves culture, producing knowledge through new environments, proximities, repetition, and circulation. I wondered if this position might also produce an ethnographic understanding of digital capitalism and its liberal fantasies of continuous improvement, drawing also on 'incompleteness' as a necessary engagement with coloniality and the politics of digital assembly[iv].

Udupa and Dattatreyan navigate a range of digital contexts and worlds through a technique of ethnographic-cinematographic composition they describe as an 'aesthetic of juxtaposition that has the potential to unsettle normalized understandings' (p.16). This set of methodological and political sensibilities orient them and readers towards recognising and radically valuing the presence of others (p.18). Their book grapples with how anthropologists and media scholars straddle field sites as loci that are diversely imagined, but always already connected. As researchers in the fields of media studies and anthropology, the authors have made a home in the crossing to advocate for a multimodal anthropology that can harness reflexive sensibilities

and interdisciplinary complicities 'to build a more just and equitable world' (p. 192). As I ponder their last chapter, I am left with new questions that interrogate the relevance of anthropology in media worlds: how can anthropology grapple with cosmopolitics beyond the totalizing logics of digital capitalism and the infrastructural affordances of media platforms? Can digital mediations enable anthropology to listen differently to the patterns that connect worlds? How does the pervasive grip of coloniality pattern the ingression of the digital in collective practices of resistance, subversion, and liberation? I thank Udupa and Dattatreyan for offering "Digital Unsettling" as a ground to unpack these questions, and as a generative engagement that does not settle for a single answer.

Many thanks again, and all my best wishes,

EJ Gonzalez-Polledo

References:

[i] Povinelli, Elizabeth A. 2021. *Between Gaia and Ground: Four Axioms of Existence and the Ancestral Catastrophe of Late Liberalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, ch. 3.

[ii] M'charek, Amade. 2020. "Tentacular Faces: Race and the Return of the Phenotype in Forensic Identification". *American Anthropologist* 122 (2): 369–80. Tentacular Faces: Race and the Return of the Phenotype in Forensic Identification - M'charek - 2020 - American Anthropologist - Wiley Online Library

[iii] Lemov, Rebecca M. 2015. *Database of Dreams: The Lost Quest to Catalog Humanity* New Haven; London: Yale University Press;

Koopman, Colin. 2019. *How We Became Our Data: A Genealogy of the Informational Person*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

[iv] Harney, Stefano, Fred Moten, Denise Ferreira da Silva, and Zun Lee. 2021. *All Incomplete*. Colchester New York Port Watson: Minor Compositions.

Vita Peacock (vita.peacock@kcl.ac.uk) 16 May 2023

Thank you Sahana and Gabriel for the opportunity to engage in a close reading of "Digital Unsettling", and to open the discussion in the EASA community of Media Anthropologists. This is a striking and original work of scholarly importance, not just for media anthropology but also political anthropology, historical anthropology, and surveillance studies. After an overview I will describe what I see as the major strengths of the book, before moving on to how this discussion might continue to move forward.

"Digital Unsettling" turns upon a paradox. It takes as its central conceit that the use of hegemonic social media, and to a lesser extent, other forms of digital communication, on the one hand have advanced extreme right-wing, authoritarian and (surveillance) capitalist interests and speech acts; while on the other hand have also released an efflorescence of left-wing and decolonial solidarities, particularly in the wake of the 2020 instantiation of the Black Lives Matter movement. Their 'unsettling' is, in one sense, this aporia, that digital media are enabling both of these things at the same time, neither cancelling the other out. The authors do

not attempt to resolve this paradox but instead use it as a form of heuristic dynamism, able to further ‘unsettle’ existing habits of thought in anthropology and elsewhere.

In this undertaking the authors adopt what they call a ‘decolonial sensibility’, which, among other things, remains sensitive to what we might think of as the dark side of egalitarianism. This is to say that laudable desires for universal commensuration and communion are permanently at risk of being co-opted by interests seeking to entrench existing forms of social inequality. This extends even to the academy, where horizontalist concepts can sometimes be more pernicious than hierarchical ones (Peacock 2015), because in failing to conceptually acknowledge pervasive forms of asymmetry, they not only silently reproduce, but even potentially enlarge them. The authors situate themselves against a ‘liberal’ (and in its flattening of the value of all social relations into equivalence, favourable to conditions of capitalism) interpretation of exchange online, which allows them to open up their reading of social media through the colonial past.

For me the greatest strength and contribution of the book lies in the authors’ fearless use of their own positionality as scholars working in and across India, the U.S., the U.K., and Germany – including a poignant moment at which Sahana discovers an artefact from her ancestral village inside the Pitt Rivers’ Museum. They offer a way of seeing the digital, that is at once inside and outside, here and there, at home and in the field, which upsets the old anthropological habits of distance. This kind of perspectival work recalls the contribution of Simone Browne’s “Dark Matters” (2015) to surveillance studies, in which she offered the field not simply new material with which to think through surveillance, but a whole way of seeing that is at once through and beyond technological infrastructures. And once one had assumed that perspective, one could not then subsequently unassume it. The optic had shifted.

In this respect the authors offer readers, particularly those, like myself, who have been raised and educated in former colonial powers (in this case the U.K.) an opportunity for, as they say citing Aimé Césaire, ‘disalienation’. The teaching of colonial history has been significantly marginal, to the point of erasure, in British schools, and ongoing efforts to alter the curriculum continue to be obstructed by the kinds of right-wing forces that Sahana investigates. Even as a history undergrad at Cambridge, not so long ago in historical terms, I took a course (which at the time incorporated a radical new kind of global history) called ‘The West and the Rest’, a title that would be unthinkable now, partly because of the ‘unsettling’ that the authors identify. This is important because in marginalising (or even erasing) this colonial memory and the violence involved, it forecloses the possibility for political work in the present that historical memory does, something manifest in my current work with privacy activists in Germany, for whom the memory of fascism, and its encoding in Germany’s post-war constitution, is a frequent reference point.

In their deployment of the category of unsettling, the authors invoke a sense of historical liminality to the contemporary moment, and the role of the digital in facilitating it. In this they would find agreement from several speakers at a recent conference (https://www.ssrp.cshss.cam.ac.uk/symposium-2023/) in the UK, for whom we are living at a crossroads in our relationships with digital technology, when things can be tipped in very contrary ways. As the theorists of the Manchester School would argue, liminality will normally yield, in one way or another, to structure, and the evidence they present does suggest a symbolic war being waged online, for how the world might be ‘resettled’, if you like, in the wake of the

fourth industrial revolution. It is thus in the spirit of the call for a 'just and equitable world' in the last line of the book that I offer these thoughts on what might be necessary to consider, if we are to resettle the world along these lines.

The first is to further critically examine the interplay between digital mediation and other forms of mediation that exist in conditions of co-presence, and the kinds of political subjects and political behaviours this interplay produces. To give one example from my fieldwork with the Anonymous movement in Britain between 2014-2017, hegemonic social media was extraordinarily effective in transforming adherents' sense of meaning, and even impelling them to travel – sometimes over large distances on extremely modest means – to attend protests at which they knew no-one. However once there, faced with a different kind of mediation through an in-person ritual, their subsequent political engagements took a different shape or, as was often the case, fizzled out. Digital communication was thus not a destination but a point of travel between different forms of co-presence. Would one way out of this aporia be to connect digital and extra-digital life more closely diachronically, to show where digital mobilization produces meaningful political change, and where it does not? The institutional context of Goldsmiths University, or the urban contexts of Bristol or Glasgow, all house left-wing sensibilities in various ways, that cannot be peripheral to their willingness to advance decolonial projects hashtagged online.

My second comment is around the version of the digital that is being explored in the book, specifically the overarching emphasis on hegemonic platforms (although other platforms such as the Indigenous project Isuma.tv are mentioned). This is not a critique of the book, which reflects the reality of where most political actors are gathering, but a concern I have about present prevailing modes of political action. I would draw the authors' attention to discussions currently being had around 'technodiversity' at CATT (https://www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/research/centre-anthropology-technics-and-technodiversity-catt) at UCL, in Black Digital Humanities (cf. Amaro 2022), and in Bell et al. (2022), which suggest that the means through which socio-technical relations emerge is central to their political potentials. The contemporary form that social media is taking is the culmination of a long historical process of marginalising and silencing socio-technical alternatives. To give an historical example from one of the subjects of the book, the #RhodesMustFall campaign, Drayton suggests that to present the arguments for keeping the statues of Rhodes as a form of reverence to 'history' (2019), is to neglect the historical reality that Rhodes was a contentious figure even in his own day, with voices of opposition that were silenced when the statues were first erected. It is worth attending that one form of disalienation is not replaced with another form of alienation from this counter-history.

Besides these general reflections a particular high point for me was Sahana's masterful dissection of the political modality of a troll attack, and Gabriel's much-needed discussion of the effect of social media on academic career-building, which I hope will stimulate further work.

Thank you again to Sahana and Gabriel for the space to share these thoughts, and to Nina for coordination. I look forward to the development of the e-seminar.

Vita

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Nina Grønlykke Mollerup (ninagmollerup@gmail.com) 17 May 2023

Dear all,

Now that we have had comments from the discussants, the authors will post their responses today. After that, I will open the e-seminar for all to contribute.

Cheers,
Nina

Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan (egd231@nyu.edu) 17 May 2023

Dear Elena,

Many thanks for your generous reading of our book. In your instructive comments, you highlight Amade M'Charek's conceptualization of the digital as "tentacular" and the growing importance of data extraction practices in accentuating the conditions of polarized discourses. In the "Extreme" chapter, we draw attention to these processes as linked to digital capitalism. In the following chapter, we delve deeper into the political economy of data relations. Here, we mobilize "capture" as a concept to signal "processes of appropriating and disciplining labor, time, meanings, and bodies for digital capitalist accumulation, by laying a recursive trap of continuous online engagement that is observable, traceable, plottable, and in historically specific ways, manipulable" (97). One form of this continuous engagement is the stark expansion of extreme speech but the colonial materialities of these data relations are also evident in vast global disparities in content moderation, in algorithmic racism, and in extractive data practices that have cast a wide net of surveillance.

Here again, using a decolonial lens, we explore and critique the liberal moral panics around data surveillance that we see today by tracing contemporary forms of data capture and extraction to colonial knowledge practices and the very emergence of anthropology as the

science of the colonizer: “Capture…was the very modality through which the terms for seeing the “primitives” and the non-West as bounded entities that could be observed and deciphered through data collection, collation, prediction, and modification were braided with the colonial logics of power in the nineteenth century. The formative years of anthropology as a discipline in this period crystallized and institutionalized the ambition and acts of capture through systematic data collection without the approval of observed peoples” (100). These developments related to digital transformations, as we seek to demonstrate throughout the book, “reveal the durability of the world systems, ideologies, and fantasies that colonial and imperial conquest built while laying the grounds for new mechanisms of differentiated exploitation and dispossession” (124-125).

In relation to these seemingly totalizing developments, you evoke Harney and Moten’s book, *All Incomplete*, to query whether an approach that highlights culture as algorithm and algorithm as culture “might also produce an ethnographic understanding of digital capitalism and its liberal fantasies of continuous improvement, drawing on ‘incompleteness’ as a necessary engagement with coloniality and the politics of digital assembly.” Incompleteness, as Harney and Moten conceptualize the term, has something in common with unsettling insofar as both terms convey a sense of unfinishedness that belie a totalizing and linear narrative of Euro-Western progress. A careful engagement with incompleteness or, as we have done, with unsettling, lends itself to an ethnographic approach but also one that is historically attentive, revealing continuities, repetitions, ruptures, and absence.

Whilst an ethnographic attention to the algorithmic as cultural can offer a historical reading of enduring colonial forms, practices, and mechanisms, it also offers a way to attend to how social media is mobilized in the present moment in ways which unexpectedly generate affinities and networks of connection - ways to fill the absence or attend to the unfinished with the unexpected, the wayward, and the unsettling. As we show in the Knowledge-Citation chapter, an “ algorithm as culture approach…recognizes the collective fashioning of thought, ideas, and practices and the recursive role the algorithm plays in making these collective ideas visible and in conversation with one another. (132)” By approaching algorithmic composition as cultural, we point to how “ social media…facilitates a kind of algorithmically curated waywardness, a Benjaminian potential for taking a digital stroll through Twitter’s curated content with the hopes of accidentally running into signposts that direct one to unanticipated but important insights and, potentially, to actors who stand in solidarity.” (135)

This potential, we demonstrate, “offer the means…to bypass and effectively call into question traditional models of knowledge production and dissemination and to accelerate the formation of a decolonial digital culture that is productive of particular forms of resistant knowing” (136). However, in our book we caution that projects to foster and amplify what Jack Halberstam describes as ‘low theory’ are readily monetized by corporate owned social media platforms and, as such, point to the stark limits of the liberatory potential of the digital. Importantly, we also discuss how modes and registers of submerged, low, or decolonial knowledge/theory are being hijacked by right wing groups who use social media to disseminate populist propaganda under its guise. These moves, we suggest, demonstrate the ways algorithms as culture can be manipulated to reproduce the hegemonic status quo and forces us to contend with how unsettling liberal presumptions on the internet can also be utilized to consolidate power.

You conclude your remarks by asking a series of rhetorical questions we think are crucial for the discipline: "How can anthropology grapple with cosmopolitics beyond the totalizing logics of digital capitalism and the infrastructural affordances of media platforms? Can digital mediations enable anthropology to listen differently to the patterns that connect worlds? How does the pervasive grip of coloniality pattern the ingression of the digital in collective practices of resistance, subversion, and liberation?" We greatly appreciate that you see our book as the grounds to unpack these crucial questions for the discipline. We hope, in our conceptualization of montage, we have provided a starting point for thinking through a methodological way forward for how we, as anthropologists of the media, might "listen differently to patterns that connect worlds."

Gabriel & Sahana

Sahana Udupa (sahana.udupa@lmu.de) 17 May 2023

Many thanks to Nina for chairing the e-seminar, and all network members for this opportunity to discuss our new book.

We thank Vita for her highly thoughtful and attentive engagement with our work.

Vita's comments touch on several key conceptual points raised in the book, foremost of the limits of liberal thinking. Vita rightly notes that a decolonial sensibility, which we embrace and develop in this book, unsettles the entrenchment of liberal thinking, prodding us to pry open the multiple ways such thinking forecloses the liberatory potential of digital networks as well as ways of knowing what is at stake. Vita's incisive take on horizontalist concepts—as potentially more damaging because of their failure to "conceptually acknowledge" and grasp asymmetry— thoroughly resonates with our critical engagements around liberal thought.

Throughout the book, we stage several examples of platform entangled politics to highlight "how easily (and readily) hegemonic colonial power instrumentalizes liberal thought" while we simultaneously also articulate an epistemological position to think about this crisis differently. In the campus chapter, for instance, we take up a direct instance where right wing forces invoke liberal enlightenment values to reiterate universities as spaces to foster 'freedom' of thought and place demands, under this banner, to platform speakers who "traffic twenty-first-century versions of late nineteenth-century race science and eugenic thinking" (52).

In the extreme chapter, we push back against liberal framings of the "threat of the digital" and the proposal that digital communication is to be entirely blamed for an upsurge of populist and hateful sentiments. We instead highlight longer processes of coloniality, showing "how coloniality has retrenched itself in online spaces through racist, casteist, misogynistic, and exclusionary discourse". We question "existing normative categories in liberal thought that tend to erase colonial continuities by framing the digital as a radically new constellation and the reason for an unexpected crisis" (p. 24). Moreover, liberal thinking can lead us to drawing false equivalences, as one might notice starkly in how the implications of extreme forms of speech tend to be mapped and assessed. With "decolonial sensibility" as our conceptual resource and epistemic position, we propose that "…vitriolic exchange is not a level playing field of profanities distributed equally among different ideological groups but a volatile arena where deeper colonial histories press on the present, allowing contemporary digital

communicative forms to affect vulnerable groups in particular ways. In other words, the sheer use of vitriol and profanities says less about the implications of speech acts, since the mere occurrence of certain kinds of speech does not lead to comprehending who is affected and in what ways" (58). Here, as Vita's insightful work on privacy activists in Germany bears out and as she reminds us about history teaching in British schools, the erasure of historical memory—and the liberal thinking that eases this erasure—can indeed "foreclose the possibility for political work in the present that historical memory does".

We are delighted that, with a keen attention to how colonialities press on the present and our reflexive navigations of the turbulences of the digital, Vita has expressed our work has offered a new optic, a shift in perspective.

We also thank her for highlighting the complicated relationship between co-presence and digital mediation in social movements. This relationship is crucial if we are to understand and mobilize the potentials of our contemporary conjuncture.

One of the key components to building connections between diverse and dispersed actors across online and offline spaces of organizing, it seems, is to cultivate a sense of shared struggle. The examples we have offered in the Campus chapter highlight the ways in which histories of colonial injury and shared experiences of contemporary racism enable bridges between online and offline spaces of contact and organizing. Organizers in the Rhodes Must Fall movement and its antecedents pedagogically cultivated what Vita has aptly described (drawing on Césaire) as a shared sense of disalienation. Learning from Rhodes Must Fall, perhaps the experience of being collectively confronted by colonial history can become the ground for meaningful and durable political action that has the potential to fluidly encompass various interfaces and interactional frameworks. Regardless, we think Vita is correct that further research that engages with the relationship between online and offline forms of social activism is much needed. This sort of research, we believe, would necessitate a close engagement with what counts as meaningful political change for various actors.

Finally, Vita urges us to consider that "the means through which socio-technical relations emerge is not a side issue but central to their political potentials and therefore that the contemporary form that social media is taking, has involved a long historical process of marginalizing and silencing of socio-technical alternatives." While our focus has been on hegemonic social media platforms—for the sheer size and breadth of the influence it wields—we agree this focus should not obscure from view multiple projects for recognition and how technical means are central to such efforts. Aside from Isuma TV discussed in the Knowledge/Citation chapter, we touch briefly on "alternative visions of the internet" in the Capture chapter. Drawing on Marisa Elana Duarte's insightful work on "network sovereignty", we discuss how "Indigenous communities in Oceania, the US, and Canada have pushed for sovereign rights not only to the lands but also to the airwaves and airspace that are critical to the telecommunications infrastructure" (125). Decolonial critiques of artificial intelligence, which we present in the Home/Field chapter, invite attention to the centrality of technical materialities for political possibilities, as hegemonic technical architectures march at a dizzying pace of 'advancement' while the efforts to carve out alternative pathways confront the shrinking means to question and upturn dominant values that guide 'high technology'. Without doubt, there is much more to be explored in this direction.

Sahana and Gabriel

Nina Grønlykke Mollerup (ninagmollerup@gmail.com) 17 May 2023

Thank you to Vita and Elena for their comments and to Sahana and Gabriel for their responses.

The e-seminar is now open for all to contribute. To post a comment, simply send an email to mediantro@easaonline.org.

We do at times experience problems with institutional email addresses. Should you experience any problems posting, please send me an email. You can always check if your mail made it through here: http://lists.easaonline.org/listinfo.cgi/medianthro-easaonline.org.

Cheers,
Nina

Max Kramer (max.kramer@fu-berlin.de) 18 May 2023

Dear all,

Thank you for this intriguing discussion of an important book by Sahana and Gabriel. Although all of the chapters make important conceptual interventions, I will stick in my comment to the chapter on extreme speech as it made me think of the journey the concept has taken in the last years since Sahana and Matti launched it in 2017. I would like to trace some differences in emphasis between the current use and its earlier iterations. Earlier the focus had been on discursive regimes in the context of the global rise of far-right populist parties and movements during the last decades. The critical trajectory of the concept was directed at the normative and legally driven approaches to online 'hate speech'. In my eyes, the explanatory and analytic power of the concept was derived precisely from its challenge to the liberal (and mainstream journalistic) explanation of the problem where hate (speech) often seemed like a free-floating irrational affliction, a lack of good manners or collective madness without that which Sahana and Matti had called for: a culturally attuned analysis of its "political economic-historical contexts". What I particularly like about the concept is how it works descriptively and analytically without morally condemning good or bad speech but rather by showing that 'this speech has these kinds of effects because of these institutional, historical and infrastructural meditations and requires those subjectivities to be sustained'.

What the current iteration of "extreme speech" probes deeper into are practices and processes that involve the intersections between civility/incivility and control. The former is seen in its historical connection to rationality when used as a trope to legitimize colonial endeavors and power over populations claimed to be emotionally or rationally 'not yet there'. Sahana and Gabriel show how the same trope of rational civility now empowers far-right handles in India which have a long tail of trolls and function with a clear division of affective labor. The authors explain how control comes in through affective relationality between these 'rational' proxies and uncivil, joyous and deeply cultural transgressions that mostly target racialized minorities.

The concept has gained more depth in its perspective on political-economical mediation, the interplay between affective registers of digital capital in, and the colonial histories of current power dynamics (the chapter on capture is an important entry point for media-anthropologist to questions of digital capitalism). Extreme speech seems to have moved from a concept that

primarily speaks about culturally encoded performative registers beyond the liberal and legal scripts to one which engages more with conditions of online actions and the limits of agency. Thinking back to the earlier uses it was quite possible to imagine that extreme speech may include forms of online speech that contain some emancipatory potential through performative registers that push against the liberal script. Perhaps the former iterations were – due to their discursive focus on “competing moral frames that guide speech acts” (Udupa and Pohjonen 2019, 3051)– even to some degree involved in an understanding of the political that Sahana and Gabriel now call the “confrontationalism” of social media.

Thus, the chapter on extreme speech made me think that it has not just been given a different emphasis but, perhaps, points to another understanding ofthe political: did the focus on racialization and digital capital shift the analytical focus of what ‘extreme’ means away from discursive struggles to a stronger emphasis on historical-structural mediation and affect? Has extreme speech become something of *a condition* for minoritized and racialized actors in which they are often caught? Are there ways to scale up solidarity movements while somehow keeping below the threshold of surveillance and co-optation (e.g. by media-avoidance tactics, by framing and rhythm)? If much of the control now comes as a form of tactics from above, could there be an ethical trajectory of extreme speech imaginable from below? Although I agree with Sahana's and Gabriel's reply that liberal thought creates "false equivalences" with implications for how "extreme forms of speech tend to be mapped and assessed" I still wonder what ambivalences may be implied in pushing against the ‘liberal’ and ‘rational’ in the absence of other institutionalized protocols in today’s reemergence of fascist and authoritarian politics?

Thanks a lot again for sharing this important work!

Max

References:

Udupa, Sahana, y Matti Pohjonen. 2019. “Extreme Speech| Extreme Speech and Global Digital Cultures — Introduction”. *International Journal of Communication* 13 (0): 19.

Sahana Udupa (sahana.udupa@lmu.de) 18 May 2023

Dear Max

Thank you for your comments and for your deep engagement with the “extreme speech” concept. Since its inception, this concept has underlined the importance of conjunctural analysis in drawing out the nature and implications of vitriolic expressions. The shift you are seeing perhaps relates to the greater focus in the initial phase to develop a critique of the hate speech discourse to more recent works with an expanded focus on historical, political and technological conditions that have made extreme expressions a core aspect of right-wing movements.

In the “Extreme” chapter in this book, we build on the key intervention of the concept to depart from the “rational center versus the irrational periphery” analysis: “The perception of danger

in the digital age…develops from and reinforces a liberal self-understanding of calm rationality. Our key focus in this chapter is to highlight the limits of this self-understanding and to complicate the framing of online vitriol as a contemporary crisis in the liberal social order and associated moral panics that recenter the "rational West" as the locus and subject of crisis…We show how a decolonial reading of online vitriol opens up new critical pathways to inquire into the nature of online vitriol—who is targeted and how—as well as ways of knowing what is damaged through speech." (57)

You have noted that "earlier uses" of the concept still granted some emancipatory potential to extreme speech practices, which appears to fade in recent articulations. In this book, with reference to protesting students on university campus, we note that, "Naming and shaming as an affectively charged tactical manoeuvre in the student protests…illustrates the disruptive potentials of extreme speech in unsettling liberal modulations of civility as an encoding of class and race privilege and a gloss for the status quo." (61)

While research should never lose sight of the ambivalences and subversive potential of extreme speech within social media's confrontational cultures—and the vast cultural struggles over meanings of civility that underlie them—this approach to discursive struggles is precisely what leads to an analysis of historically inflected conditions that help vitriolic cultures to proliferate and become available for dominant and majoritarian groups. This is not a moral condemnation of speech but an attention to the conditions that make extreme speech acts possible in the first place. In particular, it brings into focus how majoritarian and dominant actors engage in or regulate extreme speech while keeping their hold over the definition of legitimate speech.

Within majoritarian and authoritarian contexts, extreme speech indeed becomes, as you say, an inescapable state in which minoritized and racialized actors "are often caught." Extreme expressions on their part cannot then be assessed as mere mirroring tactics with equal effect and valence. On the one hand, this requires that research would have to guard against drawing false equivalences. On the other hand, it prompts us to recognize that under harsh and oppressive regimes, solidarities among racialized minorities might develop a variety of other tactics alongside subversive extreme speech practices, some of which you mention in your comment.

You ask, "If much of the control now comes as a form of tactics from above, could there be an ethical trajectory of extreme speech imaginable from below?" This is a great question, and I do not have an answer. I look forward to reading more from your study on minority extreme speech, including whether an ethical trajectory should be imagined for extreme speech and whether minoritized actors feel the need for articulating such ethical vectors. While we have touched on piety in other works on religious politics (Udupa & Kramer 2023), a broader question around ethical trajectory of minority extreme speech awaits to be addressed more fully.

Finally, you rightly point out that the extreme speech concept is today more attentive to the generative limits of digital capitalism. In the "Extreme" chapter, we discuss at length the broader "participatory condition" of digital communication which has enabled reinvigorated forms of right-wing extreme speech (57). In the next chapter we delve deeper into the participatory cultures of digital networks to consider online extreme speech as "a specific conjuncture of digital affordances and affects that has allowed colonial histories of racialization, religious majoritarianism, and ethnic divisions to impinge on and violently shape

the present.” We hone our attention on the global political economies of digital capitalism and mobilize the concept of capture:

“Capture, as we employ the concept here, signals processes of appropriating and disciplining labor, time, meanings, and bodies for digital capitalist accumulation, by laying a recursive trap of continuous online engagement that is observable, traceable, plottable, and in historically specific ways, manipulable.” (97)

The first critique we offer sheds light on a curious and disturbing continuity. Contemporary data relations that aim to extract and monetize “behavioral surplus” share affinities with problematic anthropological-colonial tropes around capturing the natives in their ‘natural’ environments. We demonstrate “striking parallels between colonial anthropological capture and social physics practiced by the high priests of the Silicon Valley”, suggesting that “not only has there been a historical precedent to contemporary forms of digital capture, albeit in a vastly different technological setting, but also that there is a continuity in terms of the sensibilities and ambitions powering them” (104). We cite the case of Silicon Valley pundits such as Alex Pentland who have expressively articulated their ambitions to subsume independent thought within the social physics models for the greater good that is believed to serve everyone’s best interests. In these imaginations, there is an explicit reference to models of behavioural psychology. But we show that the current data extraction regime also has “unacknowledged traces of colonial anthropology” (105).

In the next sections of the chapter, we demonstrate that Western liberal contemplation around digital capitalism fails to fully address the vastly uneven ways in which mechanisms of digital capitalism have unfolded globally. Building on Sareeta Amrute’s (2020) work on racial capitalism and other critical studies, we take up algorithmic racism and differentiated labor relations as evidenced in the global asymmetries in online extreme speech moderation as gateways to interrogate this unevenness and the structures of dispossession it depends on and perpetuates. We thus return to the extreme speech problem as linked to recursive data relations of digital capitalism, highlighting other forms of asymmetry linked to this broader phenomenon.

Sahana

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Max Kramer (max.kramer@fu-berlin.de) 20 May 2023

Dear Sahana,

Thank you for your helpful reply. I now realize that I omitted a crucial step in the development of the extreme speech concept. It was the 65th e-seminar of this network in which you presented on "Decoloniality and Extreme Speech" in 2019. I assume that this seminar was a crucial moment in the making of the book.

In my own work, I am looking at what could perhaps be called "minority extreme speech" through the lens of tactics employed by Muslim activists in India (as you know, I formerly investigated the extreme speeches of Indian Muslim leaders and not those of online activists). I think that some of the latter developments in the concept make it even more useful to address tactics of online speech as deeply contextual, affective and rhythmic interventions that, at times, get caught in outrages or manage to test the limits of public morality (e.g. through shaming, as you pointed out). Understanding these practices through the longer colonial histories of the racialization of Indian Muslims is, I think, a task that can gain a lot from your extreme speech chapter.

Best wishes,

Max

Uday Chandra (uc17@georgetown.edu) 20 May 2023

Dear Sahana,

I was fascinated by the framing of the book as a move away from liberal approaches to social media in the direction of decoloniality. I was also struck by the centering of this decolonial turn around campus politics, which has become salient again in the US, UK, India and elsewhere. Not only is the politics of knowledge implicated in "unsettling," but what we do as academics and as students matters immensely to those far beyond university campuses. My question is whether it is possible to distinguish between (1) forms of virtue signaling, even posturing, as credential seeking in a neoliberal game and (2) genuine efforts to democratize and decolonize universities. Is there a clear line of demarcation we can speak of? Or are the emancipatory gestures imagined in liberal analyses of the internet necessarily intertwined with neoliberal logics that produce agency and affect? More generally, can we conceive of democratization and decolonization of knowledge without taking into account the material and affective character of our new digital infrastructures?

Thanks again for the opportunity to read and participate in this forum.

Best,

Uday

Katrien Pype (katrien.pype@kuleuven.be) **20 May 2023**

Dear Sahana and Gabriel,

Congratulations on this wonderful book! It is provocative, very well written, erudite, and thick. You are discussing painful and worrisome experiences and empirical phenomena. I can only imagine that this fieldwork, the constant confrontations with violence and abuse, must have been, at times, very disturbing. Unsettled on personal level. The flawless and engaged writing makes for a great reading experience.

I see that many colleagues have already shared excellent reflections and started a deep conversation; I will limit myself to two questions. Before I move on, I feel I must mention that I am a Belgian anthropologist, trained in the Global North. I have been carrying out fieldwork in Kinshasa, a former colonial space, for over two decades. My reading of the two chapters (introduction; and extreme) is informed by my background as an Africanist.

(a) Montage as a technique.

You write that you are uncomfortable with the fixation on "comparison" in anthropology, and show us that a focus on montage can draw attention to connection, very much like a time line in one's social media feed. These connections are – as you also write – inspired by your personal backgrounds, academic foci, and the algorithms that these have been feeding. As Vita wrote ("fearless use" of your own positionality), you have been very open in acknowledging that your personal and academic backgrounds have contributed to this project. I am wondering what the focus on "connection" obscures. Comparison often leads to insights in analogies and differences. I understand you want to get away with the comparative gesture, and "montage as method" seems to me to fit perfectly in a Latourian study of the social as association. But what is the "cost" of the method of montage? If montage is about connection and juxtaposition, there is a huge world from which you/the researchers are "disconnected" – what about the events that do not appear in your timelines, and thus will not be part of the collected data. The whole world of silos, filter bubbles and echo chambers would render the montage as method even more difficult, I guess. Hence my questions: How did you go about? Did you "accept" the fact that exclusions then could not be taken into the analysis (indeed, we cannot study "everything"), or did you mobilize strategies to also connect with what you individually would not be connected to? What are, apart from the mentioned "affordances" of montage as a method, the limits? What kind of knowledges become obscured/unavailable?

(b) The parasitic leader and the underlings:

In the Extreme chapter, you analyse the social and discursive dynamics of a silent, rationally engaged, and eloquent leader supported by a (limited) group of underlings, sharing emotional, insulting, violent discourse online. Are these statements made based upon the research on UK right wing and Hindu right-wing discourses? I am trying to figure out in how far that statement would be generalizable.

I was struck by the fact that in my own research (on online vitriol from the Congolese diaspora, Pype 2020 "Stones thrown online"), this description of the silent, rational but parasitical leader does not hold true: there, a charismatic leader engages in verbal abuse and threats, addressed to the political leadership and cultural elite that supports them. In this context, as I write in the

chapter, the history of the genre of online vitriol, “mbwakela”, is to be traced back to the interactions between rival women, vying for the attention, affection, and resources of the same man, in colonial Kinshasa (then called Léopoldville). Through time, the genre entered the music sphere, which became an important space of political critique, and it traveled along to the diaspora, with musicians migrating around the world, and ultimately mwbakela moved online as well.

You mention regularly that attention needs to be paid to local forms of protest, and histories of communication genres; I wonder whether this relationship between the silent, authoritative leader and “underlings”, and their interdependencies, and distinct forms of interacting (underlings engaging in passionate but unruly communication) could be traced back to specific forms of leadership-followers interactions outside the digital sphere, e.g. a history of protest movements would most probably show that people everywhere, and also since Enlightenment, have been protesting in violent, non-rational ways.

Thank you again for this captivating book! I am eager to read the other chapters; and have enjoyed the discussion so far. I have been learning a lot!

Best,
Katrien

Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyam (egd231@gmail.com) 20 May 2023

Dear Uday,

Thank you for reading our work and for your thoughtful questions concerning the politics of knowledge and campus protests. To your question concerning “virtue signaling” and “posturing” as “credential seeking” in struggles to democratize and decolonize universities: In our project we were less concerned with differentiating sincere/insincere authentic/inauthentic actors or, even, efforts to decolonize than we were trying to 1. Discern the historical underpinnings and contemporary cross-border connectivities that undergird campus based social movements today 2. Think through the online and public responses that these movements engender from university administrators.

To the former, we were particularly interested in the kinds affective counterpublics that emerge within and across universities, “counterpublics which work to collectively describe and interrogate the relationships between economic disenfranchisement, racism, and their colonial antecedents” (30). For us, affect was central to our analysis precisely because it conceptual weight and heuristic potential doesn’t hinge on an evaluation of specific performances but, rather, offers a way to think through the ways in which “hashtags, images, and particular repertoires of digital performance create the conditions for students across national contexts to link institutional racisms and structural epistemic colonialities endemic to universities, even if unevenly and in tension, with issues of enduring economic inequality” (31). We underpinned our discussion of cross-national, digitally enabled campus protest and their particular histories with my on the ground observations and engagements with protests that unfolded at Goldsmiths, University of London just before the pandemic. This allowed us to contextualize the broader affective currents linked to online debates/discussion concerning, for instance #RhodesMustFall, in a particular struggle and the kinds of resonances on the one hand, and

opportunities for networking across borders, on the other, that these social media flows engendered in New Cross, London.

Of course, as we acknowledge early on, university actors – whether students, academics, or administrators - can and do take up political discourses and positions in online and offline spaces in ways which are potentially self-aggrandizing, diversionary, and, to use your phrase, credential seeking. As we state in our introduction, specifically regarding decolonization and its contemporary manifestations: "The debate around decolonization and the skepticism it generates in its evocation is linked to the ways in which the concept has been used to garner individual acclaim inside and outside academic worlds" (10). Social media has, of course, amplified the potentials for what you and others have described as virtue signaling. I say amplified because it is important to recognize the potential for this sort of political/epistemological opportunism is not new. What we argue is that, despite these actors, it is important not to lose sight of the multiple student led struggles to "unsettle the presumption of the university as a liberal settlement where speech is "free," ideas are neutral, and access is universal" and the impacts that these online/offline and cross national efforts have had as they push "for a revised dialogue about the university that places its specific histories of erasure, elitism, and expropriation in settler colonial, imperial, and postcolonial contexts into relationship with one and other" (23).

Best wishes,

Gabriel

Sahana Udupa (sahana.udupa@lmu.de) 20 May 2023

Dear Katrien

Thank you for your generous feedback and questions!

The phenomenon of parasitic leader and underlings is not a generalizable phenomenon, but it typifies a certain form of abusive culture. This form of abusive leadership is more likely to be found in constitutional liberal democracies with greater institutionalization of speech governance, aligned with understandings around responsible public speech and decorum. In India, one finds what you identify in the Congolese context—political actors claiming prominence and gaining social visibility through performances of explicit vitriol alongside patterns of parasitic leadership with abusive underlings. For instance, the top leaders' speeches and online presence oscillate between these two modalities (Pal, Chandra, and Vydiswaran 2016).

One other factor that needs to be accounted for in the long tail phenomenon is the vastly expanding digital influence and political consultancy sector, raising troops of paid trolls, proxy workers and clickbait amplifiers and targeted penetration of WhatsApp groups to bolster "organic traction" for political sponsors. One might describe this as "incentivized long tail". An upcoming special issue on "disinfo for hire" in Social Media + Society (edited by Jonathan Corpus Ong and Rafael Grohmann) will examine some of these dynamics, especially in the global South context.

You are also correct that patterns of "offline" and "predigital" cultures of public assembly thoroughly seep into and frame online abusive 'leadership'. In another paper on "gaali"—an emic term for blurred boundaries between comedy, insult, shame, and abuse— I trace some of the current online trends to "the historical emphasis on language play as a key strategy for many political parties in India to "semiotically dominate the opposition" (Bate 2009), often also involving incendiary speeches before large public gatherings (Hansen 2001).

Lastly, thanks to Uday for his questions. As Gabriel has responded, Digital Unsettling traces the tensions surrounding multiple instantiations of "decolonization", and how this has reignited student led movements pushing back against epistemic injustices and material disenfranchisement, while being drawn into diversionary strategies that university actors have tended to convey lately.

Sahana

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Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan (egd231@nyu.edu) 21 May 2023

Dear Katrien,

Thank you for your questions and for engaging so generously with the book. To your query regarding the limits of montage as method: It is important, I think, to briefly explain why we moved towards connection and radical juxtaposition as a way to approach our inquiries. Our turn to montage pushes against simplistic relational/geographic understandings typified by enduring notions of the 'West and the Rest' that continue to implicitly and, at times explicitly, shape research. These sorts of geographic presumptions that underlie comparison, ultimately, have the potential to evacuate a careful engagement with power and reinforce certain social, political, and cultural categories at the expense of others. The persistent notion of the 'native' anthropologist, for instance, is very much a product of this sort of thinking. Of course, as you rightly state, comparison leads to insights regarding analogy and difference. But, as we argue, there are the lingering questions regarding what is being compared, who is doing the comparison, and what is being left out without a reflexive acknowledgement of its absence.

We were interested in the ways that the digital condition reframes the what and the who by recalibrating "comparison as a shifting, moving, and deeply affective strategy of knowing that is constrained and enabled by various power relations and affinities by placing, in the various

networked platforms we traverse, the semiotics, repertoires, political economies, and histories of multiple locations into iterative dialogue and unstable encounter" (15). By taking up this unfolding recalibration, we productively invested in our commitments to feminist thought and its insistence on the partiality and situatedness of knowledge production. We also more reflexively engaged with our own shifting and sometimes contradictory positionalities, offering up our own experiences across contexts as a site for analysis. In our estimation, what is left out in this book - what isn't or cannot be engaged because it is outside our network of relations and our reflexive frames - comes into sharper relief and, hopefully, inspires additional research.

Returning to your original query concerning the limits of connection as a method: There is, of course, something problematic about becoming reliant on the social media timeline as a metaphor for connection. As you rightly point out "The whole world of silos, filter bubbles and echo chambers would render the montage as method even more difficult." We also recognize that social media timelines governed by algorithmic systems are "always working towards monetizing attention and extracting value from collectively generated data" (15). We would be dismayed if montage was taken up as a narrow method for engaging with and analyzing social media rather than as an approach that, more broadly, recognizes and is "critically attentive to the juxtapositions of contexts and conditions that social media enables" (16). Our long term, on-the-ground ethnographic endeavors and our biographical experiences in and across various locations offered us a way to direct, thicken, and complicate our forays into online networks of connection, a way to bring together, contextualize, and deepen various juxtapositions of contexts and conditions found in online fora. Additionally, and in no small part, co-writing became an important way to think across and beyond the algorithmic frame of social media and our own situated experiences in the world.

All my very best,

Gabriel

Sahana Udupa (sahana.udupa@lmu.de) 22 May 2023

Dear Katrien,

A quick additional note on methodology.

Centering "connection" as methodology entails an analytic to dwell on encounters across locations that are braided yet uneven. Drawing inspiration from historical anthropology, we gesture towards applying its analytics to the contemporary digital condition, as illustrated, for instance, in the discussion on how corporate content moderation spans geographies and seeds new forms of dispossessed labor for the scavenging work to clean up the digital pipeline for global capital.

Social media timeline as mediation/montage is an invitation to navigate these connected contexts, as we bring our reflexive journeys and ethnographic milieus to explore historically inflected encounters, frictions and enduring inequities. We thus "take up examples from India, the US, the UK, and Germany that draw from our embodied and situated knowledges emerging

from our experiences as subjects in-between each of these national contexts and as researchers invested in studying historical and contemporary processes of connection between them" (4).

Importantly, "connection" also envisions an ethic of collaboration, urging us to foster solidarities within and beyond the academy.

We are indeed aware of slippages around "what are presented as solidarities when they are expressed all too easily" (18). With keen and critical attention to such pitfalls and attempts at co-optation, we have sought to articulate decolonial sensibility as an activist-conceptual space of dissent and rearticulation in the contemporary moment that could help us to reimagine collective futures. We believe this is "even more pertinent in the face of globally resonant, digitally empowered aggressions of right-wing movements that are not new but… are built on time tested colonial methods of control, capture, and disinformation as governance. Amid these grave realities, where oppressive regimes have repowered their attacks against anyone who speaks for social justice precisely through globally circulating tropes across morphing boundaries and the hectic pace of discursive engagements online, a decolonial sensibility might offer potentials for connection that can stand up to the confused conflations of right-wing politics within and across national borders" (18–19).

In the Home/Field chapter, we describe some of our ongoing engagements around AI-assisted content moderation and filmmaking to ruminate on the ethical praxis of collaboration.

Best wishes,

Sahana

Peter Hervik (peter.hervik@gmail.com) 22 May 2023

Dear Sahana and Gabriel,

I can only echo Vita Peacock's introductory paragraph with its praise. I love reading the book, whose points and observations, I find resonates well with much of my own experience, take and research. I empathize with the stories and analysis of struggles in the Campus, not least from a personal history of research stays at UNC, Chapel Hill and work at Nordic universities. The activities around the toppling of the Confederate Monument called "Silent Sam" on campus in 2018 is but another prominent expression of decolonial, anti-racist efforts adding to those cases treated in the Campus chapter. This event includes contemporary struggles with the MAGA movement with its many faces and expressions as well as a tentative University leadership.

Two other initiatives underscore the points of the Campus chapter. Following 9/11, the The American Council of Trustees and Alumni, which was founded in 1995 by Lynne Cheney and Joseph Lieberman, launched a new vicious and unethical attack on American universities for being "Anti-American." Though I agree with the wonderfully precise Mbembe quote: "to decolonize implies breaking the cycle that tends to turn students into customers and consumers", ideologically based culture war practices and policies are equally in need of disruption. The Council published the report "Defending Civilization: How Our Universities

Are Failing America") only weeks after 9/11 filled with specific quotes and a list of 117 professors, who were “named and shamed” (although the terms were not used at the time). At the same time, the Council is a huge financial sponsor for the universities. Another initiative clad as a fight against left-wing, anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism, was founded by neocon, hate monger, Daniel Pipes called “Campus Watch.” Students could complain about their teachers for the way information about the Middle East was conveyed or just complain. Teachers and universities were then stigmatized through “naming and shaming” with published lists of which professors to avoid that should be sacked and whom they recommended. New scientific-looking journals were set up, not unlike what was shown at work in the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Look up the “Campus Watch” website, and see the current list. Pipes' tentacles have a global reach. Thus, for example, he is no stranger to Denmark. He has a Danish-language website and collaborated with the Danish extreme Free Speech Society, who also awarded him a Freedom of Speech award.

The point I wish to make of these initiatives is not simply to provide more substance to the arguments in the Campus chapter about digitally engaged efforts to unsettled and disrupt colonial continuities or the university (and schools) as targets of ideological right and far right campaigns. Along with ideas and practices of ‘banning books’, illegalizing certain topics, and stigmatizing teachers, Danish rightwing and far right politicians also find inspiration in these political and ideological campaigns. This illustrates the strong continuities of coloniality from prior to social media but communicated through social media and to some extent transformed in the process. The attacks are perhaps more powerful, economic funded, and ideologically based, and global than the Campus chapter conveys. Network alliances are obvious and so is the sharing of core values. The economic and political power of these initiatives and campaigns are overwhelming and their efforts hard to counter – except for attempts to unsettle or disrupt them. Along with this comes the transformation of universities in the last decades, not least in Denmark, into a much more utilitarian, liberalist practice defined by the needs of the business sector.

Next is an open question about “coloniality” as an empirical as well as analytical concept. It is not a point of critique or disagreement, but an issue that I find needs more direct attention and analysis. To what extent is coloniality as a concept the same phenomenon as earlier and across eras and empires? After all, Walsh argues that it is 500 years old and has a global reach. Sahana and Gabriel do well to extend the analysis to a global level, and to emphasize structural continuities well into the digital era. I was curious about how they link “past” and present” To write about them they use terms like: “Colonial legacies”, colonial “antecedents”, “sedimented” from, and “akin to.” There is an insistence on what I see as “thick contextualization”, and the grounded approach to “extreme speech” and “extremism” in specific socio-historical contexts. Add also that “decolonial critique” and “unsettling” is not exclusively tied to racism, but dehumanizing racial relations are played out in relation (as they should) to nation and nation-state relations, and market relations that again include issues of being inside/outside, minority/majority, and civil/uncivil. These elements are present in the “decolonial theory” but must always be studied in context. There are continuities (structural ones, ideological once such as liberalism) and “discontinuities” that is unevenly distributed across the globe, which the concept of coloniality and decolonial theory in Latin American vs. South Africa illustrate (Suren Pillay, “The Problems of Colonialism”, 2023). I am concerned with a certain current trend to more or less reduce contemporary issues of race

exclusively to “colonialism” and “coloniality”, even if much scholarship on racism has left this reductionist view and addressed a multifarious phenomenon where racism co-exist with other forms of subordination without reducing neither one to a simple reflection of the other. Structural, colonial continuities of power are obviously salient and strong, but as Barnor Hesse reminds us, we cannot bypass historical mega events like World War II, when we deal with colonialism, coloniality, and decolonial theory. For me, both are important and need to be integrated in the unsettling and disruption approach. Not least since the EU has decided that Holocaust teaching in schools is now compulsory. Can we teach Holocaust to 7th graders without seriously teaching racism and coloniality? How can we in the digital age unsettle events prior to the digital age? As anthropologists and other scholars, we are always quick to research the semantic and pragmatic shifts in the everyday use of key terms as well as their analytic potential, such as “immigrant”, “racism”, “migration”, “culture”, “ethnicity” and so on endlessly. Without taking anything away from the horrors of coloniality and decolonial theory or as a global system with uneven distributions of power and privilege, are there non-colonial forms of subordination and drivers of different forms of inequalities?

Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan (egd231@nyu.edu) **22 May 2023**

Dear Peter,

Thanks for your instructive comments and questions! I wholeheartedly agree with your sentiments that “ideologically based culture war practices and policies” that have a long history on US campuses, exemplified in our present moment by Campus Watch and The Council, are in need of disruption. To do so, we need to understand how these organizations (and others) use social media and other online tactics to target ‘left wing,’ ‘anti-American,’ and ‘anti-semetic’ professors in the US and how these maneuvers get picked up in other national contexts. My colleague and friend Mariam Durrani wrote an Important piece titled Digital Infrastructures of the Internet Outrage Machine: An Autoethnography of Targeted Faculty Harassment (2021). Drawing from her own experiences, Durrani outlines the ways in which right wing groups use “decontextualized keywords, automated search bots, and cross-website manufactured archives […] to perpetuate white supremacy in higher education and […] amplify and calcify existing systems of stratified difference based on race, class, and gender” (698). More work like this is needed.

In our chapter titled Campus, we decided to focus on student movements and broad university responses to them, primarily because of my experience with the Goldsmiths Anti-Racist Action (GARA) and the observations I made from my time with them regarding how student activists across borders were utilizing (hegemonic) social media sites to link struggles across geographies and issues. This ethnographic case becomes the anchor for the chapter, which ends with a short section pointing towards what you’ve marked in your comments: “the internet and its multiple platforms allow right-wing actors to place pressure on institutions by subverting the ideals of free speech, scientific freedom, and, in the most twisted cases, utilize the language of racism and anti-Semitism to root out dissent and retrench the colonial university by attacking individual academics” (53).

Extreme, the chapter that directly follows Campus, picks up on this thematic more broadly, to show “how a decolonial reading of online vitriol opens up new critical pathways to inquire into

the nature of online vitriol—who is targeted and how—as well as ways of knowing what is damaged through speech” (57). However, we don’t linger on the political economy, the right-wing ecology, and the specific practices that undergird these developments in the university. That felt (at least in the moment of writing) like a different project and, perhaps, to go back to Katrien’s question regarding method, outside our ethnographic frame.

Thank you, as well, for your close reading of coloniality as an empirical and analytical concept. I think you offer a really concise analysis of why the concept needs to be carefully contextualized lest it run the risk of missing the continuities and discontinuities of European colonialisms’ living legacy. I also agree with your assessment that the recent trend to equate colonialism with racism and racism with colonialism can lead to some quite concerning conclusions. Recently, a colleague told me about a paper they heard at a conference that theorized the Black Lives Matter movement as a decolonial project and, in so doing, elided the history and present day reproduction of anti-Black racism in the US altogether.

To answer the question, you conclude with: yes, of course, there are non-colonial forms of subordination that “drive different forms of inequality.” As someone who works in and is from India, caste is always on my mind as a powerful systematic driver of subordination in South Asia that has existed long before European rule. Yet, it is important to understand that British (French and Portuguese) colonial rule introduced racial categories and political forms of recognition that have profoundly shaped how caste and religious categories are understood, deployed, and lived. As such, an analysis of caste and race in India shouldn’t risk collapsing these categories but, rather, should be attentive to how caste and race are in relation and generative of one another.

Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan

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Sahana Udupa (Sahana.Udupa@lmu.de) 23 May 2023

Dear Peter,

Thank you for the insightful comments!

From the cases you cite, it is clear that there is indeed much more to be said about campus as a site of struggle. We are now witnessing new forms of platforming racial thinking in the academy, here in Europe and elsewhere, and the latest controversy in Germany is a sober caution that this thinking is well “within” the academy (if only peripherally) and not just imposed by right-wing forces from outside.

The liberal modulation of the anthropological discipline in the German context is itself very limiting (more on this in a recent boasblog post).

You bring up several important points about coloniality.

Coloniality, as you have noted in your comment, is conceptualized here in terms of a global unfolding of three sets of relations:

- nation-state relations established by colonial power that frame the boundaries of minority/majority and inside/outside.
- market relations institutionalized by colonial power now manifest as uneven data relations.
- racial relations naturalized by colonial power that dispose people as objects of hatred.

(Thanks to the mediaanthro e-seminar in 2020 for helpful feedback on this).

In this book, we have extended this formulation to show how they constitute a composite structure of domination with impacts beyond the actual geographies that the Empire colonized.

However, we have been mindful of other systems of power and contestation. Exclusionary extreme speech, to take one example, is shaped by structures of coercion and "realpolitik" that cannot be fully explained by histories of colonial encounter. In the edited volume on digital hate (2021), we cite Thirangama, Kelly, and Forment to emphasize that, "There are multiple genealogies of distinction and prestige that underpin regional hierarchical structures, and which often come to mingle with colonial projects but are not invented by them" (2018, 165). The specificities of national and regional political contexts call for "close contextualization" of extreme speech, which you have noted as well in your comment.

Our discussion of religious politics in India is an example. Religion and caste predate colonial power, but colonial governmentality transformed them fundamentally. Census and other modern practices of the colonial state expanded religion as a political identity and deepened its stakes in defining the conditions of "national belonging". It was during the colonial occupation that conceptions of Hindus as a "race"—one that was under threat of extinction because of their effeminacy, as opposed to the virile and lustful Muslim male—gained roots within the emergent frame of a modern nation-state. This returns to "braided and uneven encounters"—a point that came up in my response to Katrien.

On this view, recent articulations of coloniality in relation to Cold War politics as the afterlife of European colonialism (Shringarpure 2019) and post-Soviet histories as a vantage to approach "coloniality outside the traditional West-centric schematics" (Stefanescu 2012) are significant.

All these leave us with the task of uncovering interlocking systems and meanings of hierarchy and power, without adopting a reductionist stance or worse still, obliterating the proximate contexts of oppression.

Best wishes,

Sahana

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Yasmin Moll (yasminmoll@gmail.com) 25 May 2023

Dear Sahana and Gabriel,

Thank you for inviting me to participate in this e-seminar on your important and timely book. I have taught chapters of the book in my anthropology course on "digital futures" where it provoked a very lively class discussion on the ways in which putatively "neutral" technologies enable and amplify various forms of inequality. As a teaching text, the book stands out for its montage approach, which really helps students make more meaningful connections across seemingly disparate sites and contexts. So aside from the book's obvious theoretical value to critical scholars and ethnographers of digital technologies, I would also recommend it without hesitation as a course text!

I would like to focus my engagement with your book on the concept of decolonization. A key aim of the book lies in "revealing the complex ways in which the internet is entwined with persistent global calls for decolonization." You write that "As they emerge in online spaces, these calls for decolonization evoke the unfinished struggles for emancipation from Euro-Western domination that persist in settler colonial worlds and so-called postcolonial worlds, despite transfers of power in the mid-twentieth century that suggest otherwise."

While recognizing that "decolonization has become an increasingly contentious and debated concept," you nevertheless "take up decoloniality not only as a subject of study or as an analytical departure point but as a political register of potentiality toward building meaningful opportunities to radically reimagine worlds." Within the field of media anthropology, this radical imagination entails, above all, a "digital unsettling" that "leaves behind liberal tendencies that inform a significant part of voluminous scholarship on digital movements and practices." Indeed, a key feature of the "decolonial sensibility" you advocate is that it is critical of liberalism and the ways in which liberal presuppositions undergird coloniality.

But might there be some deep liberal presuppositions informing contemporary calls for decolonization in the Euro-American academy? And might these be themselves enmeshed within the taken-for-granted epistemic secularity of disciplines like both media studies and anthropology?

These questions are prompted by my research into the conceptual history of "Islamic media"

within the Arab academy (Moll 2020). I trace how the intellectual and institutional career of Islamic media as a category of knowledge from the 1950s onwards was inextricably bound to aspirations for epistemic emancipation. Here, the decolonization of the discipline of mass communication hinged on returning the concept of media, iʿlām, to its Qur'anic roots and with that to its transcendent and universal moral purpose. I argue that this decolonizing project within media studies provincializes more familiar secular Euro-American ones that interrogate epistemic universalism as oppressive and imperialistic in favor of epistemic pluralism as liberatory.

In a forthcoming article (Moll 2024), I similarly look at how the 1980s call for an "Islamic anthropology" unsettles decolonization as transparent concept, ethical praxis, and political sensibility within anthropology. In our field's journals and books, as with those of other critical social sciences and the humanities, to decolonize is to undo the "epistemic racism" (Mignolo 2015) of Eurocentric universalism and take seriously the knowledge traditions of the West's internal and external others so that we may "liberate ourselves from canonized knowledge, ways of knowing and praxis of living" (Mignolo 2021). A "more democratized and decolonized" discipline is, by definition, a more diverse one (Harrison 2008). The academy moves in this way from an imperialistic universalism to what Mbembe (2016) calls a "pluriversity" – an open-ended epistemic diversity that celebrates the co-presence of different ways of knowing as intrinsically good and self-evidently emancipatory.

I call for recognizing the strangely familiar particularism of these taken-for-granted invocations of what decolonizing disciplines demands through contrast with the epistemic decolonization project of Islamic anthropology. This project had a universalist aim and a transcendent horizon: it sought to decolonize ethnographic knowledge through making it Godly.

Like with Islamic media, I look to Islamic anthropology to show how the decolonizing desire to question universal claims to knowledge – and reject on principle the ranked evaluation of difference and categorical exclusions that accompany universalisms – needs to be provincialized as belonging to particular traditions of critical inquiry and their attendant emancipatory politics. These traditions are secular and tacitly liberal. Indeed, as I see it, contemporary calls for the epistemic decolonization of the liberal academy still aspire to a democratic ethos of friendship across difference that would exclude only those who exclude or harm, mirroring the aspiration of liberal democracy even in seeking imagined "radical" alternatives beyond it.

I see this understanding of decolonization as animating your book. Indeed, you explicitly take aim at the "nefarious" ways in which "decolonization has been deployed in online spaces as a means to masquerade majoritarian and hegemonic political projects in postcolonial nation-state contexts as liberatory." One example you cite from India is the attempt "to elevate Hindu knowledge systems above Western epistemological traditions." This might recall how the Islamic media theorists and anthropologists I researched tried to elevate Islamic knowledge, however variously interpreted, above Western epistemological traditions to decolonize the Arab academy. My point is not that "we" should agree with such visions of what decolonization entails, but rather that our disagreement and insistence that such calls are ersatz might owe more to secular liberal suppositions than we admit.

To put these points in terms of a question: Is there a tacit secularity to "digital unsettling" as you conceive it? And, if so, why might that be important to a "decolonial sensibility" that "enables a praxis of connection" and "participatory cultures," as you have defined it?

Thank you for entertaining these longish musings prompted by your ambitious book! I look forward to the rest of the seminar and conversation.

Yasmin Moll

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Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan (egd231@nyu.edu) 26 May 2023

Dear Yasmin,

Thanks so much for your wonderful provocation and for your kind words. It was great to Zoom into your class a few weeks back and I'm so pleased your students got something from the book. I'll attempt a somewhat provisional response to your incisive queries. Your questions locate decolonization, very pointedly, in epistemic struggle. From the vantage point of the university and within our discipline of anthropology, I fully concur that the recent surge in engagements with decolonization are, in the most optimistic of readings, a desire for "pluriversity." A pluriversal vision of a decolonial epistemic future (as per Quijano, Mbembe, Rosaldo, and others), as you rightly point out, sits uneasily with Islamic "universalist aim(s) and a transcendent horizon." In this sense, the decolonial, as it has been mobilized to evoke (epistemic) pluralisms, is undoubtedly shaped by secularist, Euro-Western political philosophies including but not limited to liberalism.

However, to focus solely on the epistemic level, leaves out a broader engagement with coloniality as it manifests in particular places and times. As Sahana has developed in previous work and we have extended in our book, this broader engagement necessitates an

acknowledgement and careful reading of "nation-state relations established by colonial power that frame the boundaries of minority/majority and inside/outside; market relations institutionalized by colonial power now manifest as uneven data relations; racial relations naturalized by colonial power that dispose people as objects of hatred." Seen within this larger frame, epistemic struggle takes on a different dimension.

Turning back to the example you pointed out from our book where we discuss Hindutva right wing groups and how they have, in recent years, invested in elevating "Hindu knowledge systems above Western epistemological traditions": These sorts of moves (particularly in their mediatization), must be read in conjunction with the rapid rise of political Hinduism, its attendant uptick in casteist and anti-Muslim violence, and the liberalization/marketization of India's economy. Once read through this conjuncture, for me at least, it is difficult to take the sort of epistemological claims of Hindutvavadis as outside their temporal and material ambitions, as they swirl within a decidedly (neo)colonial political economic framework.

I really look forward to your article and book! Some of the arguments you've briefly shared here are so important for us to think with and deeply consider.

All my best,

Gabriel

Simone Pfeifer (s.pfeifer@uni-koeln.de) 27 May 2023

Dear Sahana and Gabriel,

Thank you so much for your very insightful and provocative book and the rich discussions you have had so far in response to the comments and questions. My apologies for being late to the very deep discussions, to which I can only make a few minor points. I would like to pick up on some of the methodological issues that have already been raised in the discussion. I have been working on the securitization of Islam in Germany, political violence and anti-Muslim tropes from the perspectives of everyday life of Muslims in Germany and digital media practices more generally and my comments refer to the introductory and the extreme chapter that I have read.

I am particularly inspired by your critical positioning and methodology across "divided geographies and social locations" and your attentiveness to historical processes, the structures of coloniality within the digital, and "what is just outside of the frame". The notion of montage and "radical juxtaposition" in the surrealist and anti-colonial traditions are very intriguing propositions and I would like to expand on some comments and questions and your responses.

1. Montage as a Method

As you point out, the theory of montage stems from the Soviet cinematic tradition (p. 16) and is very much related to the medium of film, which allows for a certain temporality of viewing (in the sense of filmic time as well as the duration of a film). Film also preformats the order and temporality of images that the viewer gets to see, in this might differ from the digital in terms for example of algorithmic and individual participation. In your application of montage to the digital, you extend this specificity of the medium to adapt it to the digital, algorithmic and also to your own positionality. I was wondering how the notions or methodologies of collage and assemblage come into play with regard to the "radical juxtaposition" that the digital

enables, perhaps also in relation to the ways algorithms organize the connections. It seems to me that these notions might offer the possibility of nuancing different dimensions or kinds of connections in the digital and simultaneous processes of connection, delinking, and exclusion, visibility and invisibility and the power dynamics involved. I would love to hear your ideas about the notions of collage and assemblage and why you might have chosen not to use them.

2. Ethics of responsibility

Another issue I would like to address relates to the practice of connection and ethics of responsibility for researchers that you highlight. In the chapters I have read, you weave in your own reflections and positioning in a very sophisticated and pointed way to deepen your analysis. Like Katrien has already mentioned, I can only imagine how this constant exposure to vitriol, violence and hate affected your research also on a personal level. In my own research experience in an interdisciplinary research group looking at videos and images of political groups fighting violently in the name of Jihad and engaging with potential supporters of these groups in Germany, it was sometimes very difficult to extend the ethics of responsibility to groups of people who might be deeply involved in the exertion of violence. Often people and groups changed their social media profiles and channels from public to private with various stages of digitally controlling access to these groups/profiles and controlling who could see what kind of information, yet sometimes this was only one particular phase in the lives of young people. Particularly in the case of 'Felix', who was part of Sahana's research, these ethical themes came again to my mind. In your description, Felix became more complex as a young person, at the same time assertive as well as insecure, engaging in varying kinds of media practices as part of the right-wing youth group AfD Munich and he later decided to turn his Instagram to private. I wondered how his digital engagement developed further and if an ethics of responsibility and connection extends to individuals like Felix?

Thank you so much again for your fascinating and important book and I'm very much looking forward to engaging in the other chapters.

Best,

Simone

Sahana Udupa (sahana.Udupa@lmu.de) 27 May 2023

Dear Yasmin,

Thank you very much for your thoughtful and incisive comments. It was indeed a pleasure to join your class virtually with Gabriel and think together about some ideas we have proposed in the book.

My effort to respond to your comments is only a beginning of what would hopefully be a long engagement with you beyond this e-seminar.

I will add a couple of concurring notes on the decolonizing project of Islamic media scholarship and your argument that the "transcendent and universal purpose" for media conceived in this project "provincializes more familiar secular Euro-American ones that interrogate epistemic universalism as oppressive and imperialistic in favor of epistemic pluralism as liberatory." Your

important work on the topic resonates with Max Kramer's (2021) research on Islamic media and his extensive documentation of media practices of Jamaat e Islami Hind, a politically visible da'wat organization for Muslims in India. Max forwards an analysis of the booklet, "Cyberistan", authored by Sadatullah Husaini [the amir] in Urdu, as a reference text for prescribed norms of conduct for Jamaat members on social media. "We have to give an answer in God's presence for every uttered word", Hussaini appeals to his readers, urging them to be mindful of what they say and do online. "There needs to be a clear purpose [maqsad]", he continues, "since Muslims need to portray exemplary behavior". In the AE article, Max and I have approached this as the modality of "piety" in digitally mediated religious politics in the postcolonial context, which refers to an active effort to shape "subject-positions of pious selves and objects of pious behavior (norms for online chatting, citations of religious holy texts, avoiding extreme forms of speech and so on)." In this rendition of media as a context for cultivating pious selves, a different episteme is invoked, one that "returns the idea of media", as you state so elegantly, to a transcendental moral universe. At the same time, however, by reminding his readers in his subsequent elaborations that "Muslims need to portray exemplary behavior", he is also implicitly guiding their attention to the reality of the nation state and their minoritized position. Epistemic struggles, in this context, might be better read in conjunction with the nation-state structures and material conditions that underwrite subject positions. We advance this emphasis in the book by approaching coloniality as historically enduring forms of oppression structured by nation state, racial and market relations. Epistemic battles to "decolonize" knowledge—as they emerge from political projects of majoritarianism and upper caste domination—stand starkly different from epistemic struggles from a minority position.

This leaves us with the second question, which I understand as a concern about pluriversality and whether Euro-American liberal presumptions might be lurking behind our call for an ethical praxis of connection. Is there a tacit secularity to "digital unsettling"? My thoughts on this difficult question are tentative, scattered and part biographical.

My short response is that the political praxis of connection articulated in the book is not shaped by an explicit orientation toward the Godly and the transcendent. However, the absence of the religious/Godly is not always filled up by the secular. The secular does not suffuse the space that religion vacates. From the conceptual worlds I have learnt and lived, a sensibility of connection is neither religious nor secular, it is ecological. It is eclectic in its repertoire—the range of sources is diverse and enmeshed. Reading Kannada novelist Shivarama Karanth's works as a child, I absorbed evocative imaginaries that marveled at the droplets falling from the sky merging into the ocean, of birds chirping and the Yakshagana drums beating in rhythmic unison. The capacious imagery of the ocean and the rhythms of the village evoked a sense of "oneness" of the human condition in nature. As they have stayed on, they provoke a certain quest for vishvapragne (world-thinking, world-being). Yet, this genealogy is not the same as learnt principles of critical inquiry rooted in "secular liberal suppositions" nor is it about pristine ontologies. As an eclectic longing, it has opened up to me the profound possibility of different pathways that would converge—with struggle, effort and imagination—toward liberation. Kannada poet Kuvempu's philosophy of "vishvamānava" (world-human) as a collective struggle for liberation from the conditions of "alpamānava" (inferior human) and related trajectories in Kannada Dalit thought (Devanuru Mahadeva and Siddalingaiah) have shaped my conceptual worlds, and I would therefore find no other starting point than "connection". As droplets from the sky meet and converge in the ocean, we aspire for a

sensibility that can connect diverse struggles toward conditions of dignity. These struggles, as we have sought to demonstrate in the book, are at once spatial, symbolic and material.

We hope there will be many more occasions to continue this discussion and engage with your insightful scholarship.

Best wishes,

Sahana

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David Zeitlyn (dzeitlyn@gmail.com) 27 May 2023

Dear Sahana and Gabriel, dear all,

I am late to the party and haven’t had time to read as much of the text as I would like, so I will refrain from getting involved in some of the important issues about data and decoloniality that are raised.

While the workshop is running, I therefore restrict myself to a couple of points from the intro about the theoretical framework: Comparison and montage, plus an reflection on where digital collage might take us.

On Comparison we have this from page 15: “In (colonial) anthropology, comparison is used as a means to position the West in relation to the rest— sometimes explicitly, often implicitly— to develop culturalist insights about specific locations. This “West and the rest” paradigm has also informed comparative approaches in other disciplines, such as communication studies and development studies.”

As I understand it comparison does not have those implications (or has them no longer). As Matei Candea has argued (2019) ‘lateral comparison’ does not need “The West” as the ground

against which comparison takes place. We could compare hate speech within India with that from South Sudan (choosing the second term to make connection to the much older anthropological literature eg. on Nuer and Dinka enmities now given new valencies online) and we could do this without bringing in the West at all.

You are using Montage as the way that you practice comparison - by juxtaposing interesting and various cases. As you say this comes out of film theory but there it is developed in contrast(!) with another term, collage, that you do not use.

I talk about this pair a little bit in my Anthropological Toolkit book but what I have not thought about until now, given your helpful prompting, is what Collage might look like when applied to digital ethnography.

As I write this, I see that Simone Pfeifer has asked the same question!

In film Collage is about rough cuts, about making the filmic process visible. So perhaps the analogue would be to be more explicit about the research processes, the sorts of interaction that ground the material analyzed in the book as well as engaging in a different sort of data ethics – so if I wanted to suggest that a student group examine the same material that you did, then how would they go about it? It may be impossible now (quite properly some at least of the material you have collected may have to be protected and embargoed), but what if we think in the longer term? Say 50 years hence – so not a group of MY students but perhaps my intellectual great grandchildren. Just as we may return to EP on the Nuer and re-examine those works (including archives of his field photos) through a decolonial lens, what provision will there be for re-examining your work as an exemplar of early C21st digital ethnography in the future?

Best wishes

davidz

Sahana Udupa (sahana.udupa@lmu.de) 27 May 2023

Dear Simone,

Thank you for your pointed and concerned comments. And greetings from ICA Toronto! Aside from hectic panels, there is now a fire alarm at the conference hotel and many of us have been evacuated. So, typing this up from a crowded café in downtown Toronto (perhaps the situation is already better back at the hotel).

Researching right-wing actors is exhausting, especially when regimes become hostile to critical research or worse still, begin to wield the authoritative will to squash dissent. Interpretative and emotional labor that goes behind this type of research, in my view, should be foregrounded as part of the reflexive navigations of the field and coping mechanisms we develop along the way.

We might note here that recent anthropological scholarship on right-wing political cultures has raised some important questions around long-standing virtues of engagement, collaboration, reciprocity and friendship that have established ethnography as the hallmark method of the discipline. Moral and political dilemmas that surround anthropological inquiries into

unpleasant topics are not new (Bangstad 2014) but the current wave of resurgent right-wing populist politics world over has revived questions around propriety and ethics concerning how anthropologists should carry out ethnographic research among individuals and groups who peddle despicable political ideologies, and to what end. Without doubt, when the political right is the subject matter, what are taken to be obvious guiding principles of ethnographic practice become muddled with ethical difficulties. If anthropologists extend generous attention and listening as a means to create spaces where actors speak and voices get heard, they face the risk of extending social legitimacy to right-wing positions. In the craft of writing and notes taking, and in the encounters with right-wing interlocutors that precede them, what distance is to be secured and what critique is to be realized? These are painful questions with no easy answers. I would still venture out and say that if the foremost concern of anthropology is to engage actors as actively "making" meanings in their lived worlds and situate such accounts within relations of power, it is important to understand their worldviews, guided by a commitment to learn and see the insider views as a "working morality" (Hervik 2019; Boromisza-Habashi 2013).

This ethical stance "avoids a tendency for critique to precede understanding and for a moral-evaluative framework to predetermine what to expect" (Udupa 2023, 239). Ethnographers have to make an explicit choice to ensure this "understanding" does not turn into a political stance favouring the political positions expressed by interlocutors. Ideally, such critical reflection is achieved in writing and other forms of academic knowledge production as well as policy and community-based engagements.

For Felix and other interlocutors of his type, field research would require that we continue our efforts to remain in contact, and incorporate observations of practical difficulties, including stonewalling tactics, as part of our analysis of how this interactional frame unfolds during the course of our study.

Best wishes,

Sahana

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Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan (egd231@nyu.edu) **28 May 2023**

Dear Simone and David,

Thank you for your questions regarding montage. I appreciate your close attention to the potentials (and limits) of our application and extension of this 20th century filmic praxis to analyze participation cultures and algorithmic ordering of social media. Simone, to your question as to why montage and not collage or assemblage: We felt an affinity for montage because of the way anti-colonial thinkers, particularly Césaire and Senghor, took it up and repurposed its medium specific intervention "as a means to crack open objectivist colonial renderings of worlds, and as a tool, as Césaire expresses, for "disalienation"(16). I'm sure assemblage, as articulated and practiced in European art worlds (here, I'm thinking Duchamps) and in social theory (Deleuze & Guattari) could offer an interesting way to think about socio-material forms of collection and configuration in online fora; However, for us, it didn't quite resonate with the historical and political attentions we were drawing out in this project. The same could be said for collage, although David's point that collage (in film) is about making processes visible connects quite deeply with the kind of reflexive work we have attempted.

I've grown increasingly interested in collage and the ways it has gotten picked up in anthropology. In a recent article with Deborah Thomas (2021), Leniqueca Welcome animates collage as a "palimpsestic practice…that allows things that may at first seem dissimilar across multiple times and spaces to be scrambled and compressed together to illuminate critical connections that may usually pass unnoticed in a linear progressive model of time" (13). Her critical digital practice of layering images from her fieldsite (and home) of Trinidad as a way to ethically witness and represent coloniality and state violence is, I think, a powerful (and reflexive) way to mobilize collage as a tool for ethnographic visual storytelling. Perhaps there is a way to theoretically extend collage to engage with online, image-based compressions of time-space in ways that are equally useful. I'd be excited to see that project develop!

David, thanks for your question about comparison. I think what's at stake, as I started to elaborate in my response to Katrien, isn't necessarily what is being compared (India to Sudan or Sudan in the present to Sudan in the past). Rather, it hinges on the epistemic frame for comparison and how reflexive whoever is doing the comparison is to their own positions/locations/frameworks.

Thank you both for your careful reading!

Best wishes,

Gabriel

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John Postill (jrpostill@gmail.com) 29 May 2023

Hi all,

Sorry to join the seminar so late, it's the marking season down here in Melbourne.

In response to Peter, Ethiraj wrote that "ideologically based culture war practices and policies" must be disrupted.

They were both referring to right-wing groups active on campus, but isn't this precisely what decolonialists - and other critical social justice activists - are also doing, waging an ideologically based culture war?

Having studied the anglophone culture wars for the last five years, I think we need to critically examine both sides of this endless conflict, including our own ideological blinders.

It's important, for one thing, to differentiate among 'anti-woke' actors and not huddle them all together under a 'right-wing' umbrella. There are quite a few leftists (from milquetoast Guardian readers to hard-core Trotskyists) who oppose decoloniality, not least the International Committee of the Fourth International who led a non-partisan critique by a range of historians of the New York Times' ill-fated 1619 Project. This Project was an attempt to rewrite American history from a strictly racial perspective: https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2019/12/21/bynu-d22.html

Or consider Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò book, Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously, where this anti-colonial Nigerian philosopher takes issue with 'these ubiquitous demands that we decolonise' and wonders whether decolonisation has become a catch-all trope, often used to perform contemporary 'morality' or 'authenticity,'" in a 'mostly incomprehensible terminology'. See https://areomagazine.com/2022/06/17/olufemi-taiwos-against-decolonisation/

There are also, of course, numerous colleagues of all skin colours scared to even talk about decoloniality, whiteness, white fragility, etc, in public for fear of retribution. I'm not quoting the right-wing press here, just drawing from private conversations.

John

Sahana Udupa (sahana.udupa@lmu.de) 29 May 2023

Hello John,

We invite you to read the book and get back with precise comments on how we engage decoloniality and theorise digital unsettling in the book.

Best wishes,

Sahana

Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan (egd231@nyu.edu) 29 May 2023

Hi John,

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Best wishes,

Gabriel

Sahana Udupa (sahana.udupa@lmu.de) 29 May 2023

Dear David,

Thank you for your generous feedback and your question on data ethics. Researchers today, as we know, are expected to be familiar with elaborate requirements of data management, including protecting commonly acknowledged "special categories" of data, procedures of encrypting personal data and data strands that could lead to the identification of natural persons, as well as data storage and use that can prevent unauthorized access and malevolent use. These requirements place several restrictions on sharing 'primary data' in anthropological projects, even as we aspire to be guided by the principle that Association of Internet Researchers has elaborated very well: "IRE 3.0 [Internet Research Ethics 3.0] is premised on primary commitments to…cross-cultural awareness, coupled with the experientially-grounded view that ethics starts by asking and answering critical questions rather than taking a more deductive, rule-oriented approach".

Data protection requirements, especially in the EU context, raise some challenges as well as offer opportunities with regard to data sharing. Distinct types of data that we draw on in this book are available in different ways. Social media episodes and examples are traceable via the weblinks offered in the reference list. Many expired weblinks can be retrieved using archiving initiatives such as the "way back machine" https://archive.org/web/ or researchers could also use https://perma.cc at the time of drawing the web source. The second type are the 'processed data', as illustrated by annotated datasets of the AI4Dignity project. We have made these datasets available for researchers through a simple approvals process. Films and multimodal creations, including podcasts, constitute yet another type of shared 'data' and reflections on process. We continue to dialogue and think with fellow scholars about newer ways to make both our research materials and research processes more visible, and more open to generative inquiries.

We are quite sure that the next generation of researchers will find these efforts a vital aspect of how 21st century digital ethnography emerged and expanded.

Best wishes,

Sahana

David Zeitlyn (dzeitlyn@gmail.com) 29 May 2023

Thanks, Sahana.

You and other readers might enjoy a somewhat polemical piece I wrote about long term archiving: “For Augustinian archival openness and laggardly sharing: trustworthy archiving and sharing of social science data from identifiable human subjects” 2021 /Frontiers in Research Metrics and Analytics 6 (63). http://journal.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/frma.2021.736568

I am discussing old style anthropological data but most of the argument applies for the results of digital research as well.

I would say that the “way back machine” https://archive.org/web/ cannot be relied upon to have a complete record - a while ago I was trying to trace some early experiments of web publishnig and archive.org was misleading - they'd picked up the top page so reported that they had it but had not scraped underlying pages lower down the file hierarchy

And as other people have found trying to use sites like youtube there is churn with "controversial " material so they cannot be relied upon even in the short term let alone the long term. Researchers have to keep their own data safe and then think about how to keep it safe for their successors (with all the contested ambiguities of what "keeping safe" might mean for different groups of people).

LOTS to discuss!

Best wishes,

David

Sahana Udupa (sahana.udupa@lmu.de) 29 May 2023

Thanks, David.

Large archiving initiatives are indeed incomplete and uneven.

Looking forward to more discussions!

Best wishes,

Sahana

Philipp Budka (ph.budka@philbu.net) **29 May 2023**

Dear Sahana, David and Gabriel,

Very interesting and important point on web/internet archives. While I agree that these are mostly incomplete they are still contributing to a better understanding of web/internet history. And this, I would argue, adds decisively to decolonization projects.

I wrote a little bit about that in German, particularly in respect to diachronic comparison in the study of digital-visual practices:

Budka, P. (2021). "Kultur- und sozialanthropologische Perspektiven auf digital-visuelle Praktiken. Das Fallbeispiel einer indigenen Online-Umgebung im nordwestlichen Ontario, Kanada (Anthropological perspectives on digital-visual practices)". In R. Breckner, K. Liebhart & M. Pohn-Lauggas (Eds.), *Sozialwissenschaftliche Analysen von Bild- und Medienwelten* (pp. 109-132). Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110613681-005

And I have some shorter, not yet published, papers on the utilization of web/internet archives and tools such as the Wayback Machine into digital ethnographic and anthropological projects, e.g.:

Budka, P. (2021). "The rise and fall of an indigenous web-based platform in Northwestern Ontario, Canada". Paper at Research Infrastructure for the Study of Archived Web Materials (RESAW21) Conference: "Mainstream vs Marginal Content in Web History and Web Archives", Online (hosted by University of Luxembourg, Luxembourg), 17-18 June.

Budka, P. (2020). "MyKnet.org: Traces of digital decoloniality in an indigenous web-based environment". Paper at Engaging with Web Archives (EWA20): "Opportunities, Challenges and Potentialities", Online (hosted by Maynooth University, Republic of Ireland), 21-22 September.

Happy to share these texts if of interest.

Thank you for the lively e-seminar!

Philipp

Sahana Udupa (sahana.udupa@lmu.de) **29 May 2023**

Dear Philipp

Thank you for sharing the article links! I look forward to reading them.

There is definitely much to explore around diverse online archiving projects and how they are redefining archiving power and the "author function".

Best wishes,

Sahana

David Zeitlyn (dzeitlyn@gmail.com) **29 May 2023**

Thanks for these references, Philip.

Sound very useful indeed!

On archives (including digital ones) for wider b ackground there's an oldish paper I wrote for Annual Reviews: "Anthropology In and Of the Archives: Possible Futures and Contingent Pasts. Archives as Anthropological Surrogates". 2012. *Annual Reviews in Anthropology* 41, 461–80:https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092611-145721

More recently there's an annotated bibliography in the Oxford Bibliographies online "Archives (revised version)." In Oxford Bibliographies in Anthropology. Ed. John Jackson. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199766567/obo-9780199766567-0198.xml?rskey=jSOQm3&result=1&q=archives#firstMatch

I am not sure how widely accessible this is - if people have problems accessing it please contact me directly.

Best wishes,

David

Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan (egd231@nyu.edu) **29 May 2023**

Dear David and Phillip,

Thanks for these articles on archiving/archives/data ethics. Much appreciated! David, I'm reading your piece on long term archiving now and it's excellent. I'll be incorporating it into my graduate teaching next year.

Best wishes,

Gabriel

Sahana Udupa (sahana.udupa@lmu.de) **29 May 2023**

Thanks for sharing these amazing works, David!

Continuing the thread, sharing this piece on the dark side of archiving:

https://academic.oup.com/ccc/article-abstract/9/2/212/3979301?redirectedFrom=fulltext

I will be signing off now. Heading back to Munich from ICA Toronto.

Thank you again.

Best wishes,

Sahana

Peter Hervik (peter.hervik@gmail.com) 29 May 2023

Dear John,

While I appreciate your comments (and references), I think you are misreading them. Stating that my comments about ideological cultural war strategy is a simple association with right-wing groups on campus is reductionist. And worse, the claim resembles news journalism. There has to be a conflict. Conflicts have two sides. Only if two sides are included can it "objective." First, it is a fact that the culture war strategy was historically raised and invested much energy by right-twing. Mostly associated with president Ronald Reagan. In Denmark, this cultural war strategy was applied with full force in 2001 in practice but not in language. That happened in 2003. The strategy, we learned, included three priorities: against the public service station "Denmark's Radio" (doomed left-wing); anti-communism; and anti-Islam. The government priorities were copied directly by the large daily Jyllands-Posten in 2004. In 2005 the Danish Cartoon Controversy broke out. This speaks volume to the kind of power that is behind the culture war strategy. These relations of power comprise all elements of the decolonial approach conveyed by the seminar authors and Sahana in earlier work. Secondly, is one thing to reduce comments and perhaps the seminar book manuscript as well to "there are always two sides to the conflict" disregarding the careful attendance to specific socio-historical contexts. It is another thing to bypass the asymmetry of those sides you impose on our work. The Danish case mentioned above is an illustration of just how much power is involved. Disruption is the first and perhaps best thing we can hope for.

Best regards,

Peter Hervik

Nina Grønlykke Mollerup (ninagmollerup@gmail.com) 30 May 2023

Dear all,

The 71st EASA Media Anthropology Network e-seminar is now closed.

Thank you to Sahana Udupa and Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan for sharing their work with us, to Elena Gonzalez-Polledo and Vita Peacock for sharing their insights as discussants and to everyone who participated.

Thanks also to Sahana for organizing this seminar.

As always, the transcript will be available on the network's website as soon as it is ready – we will let you know.

Cheers,

Nina