Visibility, Race, and Public Space: Technologies of Erasure on Digital Platforms

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MOVEMENTS & MOBILIZATION

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The evening the Derek Chauvin verdict was announced on April 19, 2021, a young, multiracial group of anti-gentrification protestors marched down Vanderbilt Avenue in brownstone Brooklyn. The surrounding neighborhood, like many in the area, has gentrified rapidly in the past ten years. Diners were seated along the sidewalk, more than a year into the relentless Covid-19 pandemic that brought New York City to a standstill. In a video shared on Twitter, the protestors, led by a young man in black jeans and hoodie with a light brown ponytail, stopped in front of a taqueria and began shouting at the restaurant's patrons. In the video, he can be seen standing on an orange barrier above the diners and leading a chant: "Get the fuck out of New York! We don't want you here! We don't want your fucking taqueria! Owned by white men!"[1] Some diners looked uncomfortable while others recorded the scene. Finally, the young man, laughing, added "Tip 30 percent!" as the protestors laughed and jeered, before moving on (according to a journalist posting updates to Twitter).

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Early in the pandemic, months before this particular incident, I had begun observing anti-gentrification organizers and neighborhood groups on Facebook, WhatsApp, and other platforms. At first, I observed as a participant in a mutual aid network and later as a researcher starting in August 2020, as part of my

ethnographic research supported by the SSRC's Just Tech Covid-19 Rapid-Response Grants. The pandemic has laid bare the profound and multilayered inequalities that structure US society, but the lockdowns also instigated new means of organizing and of creating networks of care, driven by concerns for racial and economic justice. Anti-gentrification organizing, of course, predates the pandemic; waves of development in the early 2000s had mobilized many neighborhood associations in the preceding years. But the pandemic lockdowns transformed much of daily life, including closing off public spaces for group meetings or land-use hearings. Neighborhood associations moved their meetings to Webex or Zoom, while new groups came into being to provide mutual assistance, such as mutual aid networks.

The video was quickly shared to a WhatsApp chat channel for a nearby neighborhood. An acrimonious, if polite, debate unfolded over how residents should respond to the social and racial inequities of urban redevelopment and displacement. Here, I examine contestations like these that intensified over public space, race, and class, on digital platforms and in the public street. Across these spaces, race and other social differences were made visible and invisible in new ways.[2]

In my research, I found that digital platforms catalyzed new forms of organizing and community building. But these technologies equally entrenched gentrification processes that marginalize and drive out lower-income residents, especially seniors and people of color in a historically West Indian and Puerto Rican neighborhood. Virtual hearings, for example, were harder to access for older residents without broadband internet or smartphones, and who were often less familiar with such technologies. Displacement could mean not only eviction or pressure to sell, but erasure in virtual and actual public space.

Divergent Spaces

From December 2020 to May 2021, I conducted in-depth ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews, with mutual aid groups and neighborhood associations, attended community calls and land-use hearings (over video chat platforms like Zoom), and followed these groups across websites, Slack channels, WhatsApp, Facebook, and NextDoor, where I analyzed conversations and visual content. My central question was whether—and how—digital technologies contribute to unequal and diverging ways of living in urban spaces. I expected that these technologies would map to different ways of moving through the city, engendering separate social spheres that reflect the ways gentrifying neighborhoods are already fractured by race and class.[3] Urban studies scholars and anthropologists have repeatedly shown that media technologies reproduce and exacerbate existing inequalities, including digital infrastructures,[4] mobile networking and wayfinding,[5] platform labor,[6] and "smart cities" and automated systems.[7] But as Paolo Cardullo contends in his study of a mesh network in a gentrifying area outside London, urban space and networked technologies shape one another.[8]

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The mutual aid network exemplified new forms of community building that arose during the pandemic. The group was founded in March 2020 by a core of people, most in their 20s and 30s, over Facebook and email. They launched a Google form sign-up and an informal email list for updates and announcements. As the group expanded, they hosted weekly “community calls” over Zoom and started a WhatsApp group. The WhatsApp group rapidly exceeded maximum membership (which at the time was around 250 people), and with group input, they created a Slack workspace (a chat-based communication platform used for office work). On the WhatsApp group, members messaged each other in real-time during the George Floyd protests, buzzing with updates about where to go or police activity. On Slack, they coordinated programs such as volunteer grocery shopping and a community fridge.

Despite these new possibilities, some organizers found that older residents were less likely to attend virtual neighborhood meetings. One white woman in her 50s told me: “Who we’ve lost are the older neighborhood residents, who are not able to navigate technology. And that’s really unfortunate, because we need their voices.” Another neighborhood association member lamented that a woman in her 70s no longer showed up for meetings because they were online: “She used to come to our meetings. She doesn’t anymore. You know, [she] doesn’t get online.”

Virtual meetings, however, were more convenient for many professionals no longer commuting. At home, they set up workspaces for videoconferencing, enabled by high-speed internet. They also tended to be familiar with tools like Slack or Google’s G Suite. One white woman in her 30s explained how working remotely allowed her to get involved for the first time: “Their meetings tend to start at like six o’clock. And if you are someone who has a nine to five, that is not in the neighborhood, that’s not super accessible. So, I was really never able to make anything.” Virtual meetings also made participating easier by “level[ing] the playing field,” making it easier to speak up, as a neighborhood association member told me: “Not everyone is going to speak up in an in-person meeting, but with Zoom, you have the option to unmute yourself and talk, or just chat to ask questions. So, it makes participating a little bit easier.” Another group member similarly found that virtual meetings worked “very, very well for people that in-person meetings didn’t always work for.”

Over the course of the pandemic, some of these online spaces became composed of whiter, younger, more affluent residents, according to my observations during weekly calls and accounts of interviewees. Some digital platforms also exacerbated this shift more than others, such as knowledge work platforms like Slack. Mobile-based apps WhatsApp and Instagram, in contrast, were key tools for young people of color organizing racial justice protests.[9] The mutual aid group's WhatsApp channel, for example, became popular with a wider swath of residents than their Slack channel and regular community calls, which attracted a core of regular volunteers and organizers.

Making Public Space White

On the mutual aid's WhatsApp channel, where many more neighborhood residents were present and active than on Slack, these tensions came to a head over the taqueria protest. The chat functioned as a more public space than the Zoom meetings or Slack, with participants posting a regular stream of updates about Covid, requests for assistance, advice on Covid tests, and general support and camaraderie.

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The video of disruptive protestors, however, sparked a discordant debate highlighting deep-seated differences along lines of race, class, and political views. Many white residents in their 50s and 60s had bought property in the late 1990s to early 2000s as part of an earlier wave of gentrification. Typically, they had become active in neighborhood organizing in response to large-scale development projects in the mid-to-late 2000s. They founded multiple neighborhood associations and opposed large developments on the grounds that they would increase density and displace low-income residents. The mutual aid group, in contrast, was made up of younger people, mostly renters who had arrived recently (although a few had grown up in the area), motivated by social justice activism, especially racial justice. Many were white but multiple people of color were very active in the group, more so early on.

The argument on WhatsApp initially took place among white residents with conflicting views on gentrification and racial issues. One person commented: "The video basically says it all," and then called the leader "stupid" for "heckling the diners." Others piled on to agree, saying the actions fed right-wing attacks on Democrats and that people were "confusing self-righteousness with morality." Another mutual aid member then argued for taking the protestors' frustrations seriously: "There's a lot of anger… about the racialized dynamics of gentrification that has made it impossible for many long-term neighborhood residents to survive here." One older white neighborhood association member defended his view, contending that he had "long been working to mitigate the effects of gentrification."

In these and other conversations, marginalized residents were often invoked as vulnerable Others in need of help. When such residents spoke for themselves, they often made explicit their racial or minoritized identities. One older Latina member of a neighborhood association, for example, expressed her concern that she would be pushed out of the neighborhood like many of her extended family. In the WhatsApp debate, a younger Black woman referenced her racial identity directly in the thread, saying, "as a Black person whose family has been in Brooklyn for many generations, I understand the trauma of watching your neighborhood change." She went on to say she was calling out her racial identity "because I think it's important to acknowledge in a dialogue about perspective," but noted she found "a lot of this language in this discussion to be quite patronizing." She asked how the group might instead reach out to the protestors for dialogue, given, as another person pointed out, how the conversation excluded those "who aren't online."

Repeatedly in my research, I found that white organizers spoke for and about those they imagined to be displacing, who were perceived as older, poorer, and more vulnerable, typically Black and Latinx families and seniors. These same residents were underrepresented in both the mutual aid network and neighborhood associations. One Black member of the mutual aid group expressed sharp disappointment that the group hadn't sought out his perspective or built stronger ties to other longtime Black residents:

> My view as an organizer is if you identify people who are willing and have clearly something to say, you find it the way to connect with them on their terms and get that information… You want to engage the long-time residents who are, you know, Black or Latino… And I wasn't hearing or seeing that … There are people out there who have really developed more of that expertise, so why not hear from them?

These online conversations often reproduced the racial marginalization taking place through displacement. Race, as many scholars contend, is often materialized through techniques of visibility and visualization, "epidermalized" in Black skin, in Frantz Fanon's words. As scholarship on race and technology shows, digital technologies make race visible in new ways, in which the visual becomes a way of knowing race.[10] But in my fieldwork, these technologies could also erase or submerge racial distinctions, making public space implicitly white. People of color risked being racialized—that is, marked as racially different—when they asserted their identities and experiences.

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These online erasures reflected processes of displacement and ways people of color are sometimes literally not seen by white residents. One young white woman who had moved recently to the area was highly conscious of having been one of the "gentrifiers" when she lived in Bushwick but didn't perceive white residents in her new neighborhood in the same way: "[In Bushwick] I felt like I knew who the gentrifiers were and that I was one of them. [Here], I don't assume that people who are out at restaurants… are gentrifiers." It seemed to her that the neighborhood was already white and professional, as evidenced by the bourgeois patrons of outdoor dining. In interviews and conversations with Black and Latinx residents and at neighborhood meetings, however, it was clear that displacement, while contentious, was never a given.

Conclusion

Digital platforms contributed to making race visible and invisible in public spaces that were often implicitly white. At times, platforms provided new means for organizing that enabled rapid mobilization for protests and fostered emergent networks of mutual care. But at others, they recreated ongoing displacement and marginalization. Over the period of my fieldwork, some groups became increasingly white, a source of frustration for those concerned with racial justice. Programs that engaged community members directly were more successful, such as a grocery program that paired shoppers with individuals and families or a community fridge. But these programs rarely drew new participants into core organizing work or decision-making. As one young white organizer told me, her group "definitely had reservations about Slack… just in terms of accessibility," precisely because it was a tool for professional knowledge workers, and that it was "a real barrier for participation."

The technological infrastructures necessary to support decentralized community organizing don't yet exist, a recurring challenge for organizers, from decision-making to raising and distributing funds. My findings highlight ways that digital technologies are never separable from their social contexts, often re-entrenching the very inequalities organizers set out to address. Challenging such inequalities requires examining further the social norms and processes that produce these racial exclusions, while rethinking

the tools and infrastructures necessary for effective antiracist, anticapitalist projects.

Footnotes

References

1 The racial identity of the owner itself was contested, with some on Twitter pointing out that he may not be white, although he did not weigh in to clarify.

2 These differences were further spatialized by programs such as Open Streets, which brought foot traffic to more upscale avenues and eateries, leaving behind business owners with fewer resources on noisier, busier streets clogged with automotive traffic. See Priya Krisha, "Different Blocks, Different Outdoor Dining Scenes, One Deep Economic Divide," *Bon Appetit*, January 21, 2021.

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9 These findings aren't surprising; in previous research on digital public spaces during the pandemic, Dr. Mona Sloane and I found that seniors participated more online when they were provided equipment or taught how to connect on their mobile phones, such as calling into Zoom meetings. See Mona Sloane and Jordan Kraemer, *Terra Incognita NYC* (New York: New York University and New_Public, 2021).

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