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**Dispositions to 'Race' and Racism on the Internet:
Online Reactions to a "Racist" Comment against Tiger
Woods**

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Abstract

This article examines the rhetorical turns used to reveal dispositions to 'race' and racism by bloggers in response to an article written about an alleged racist incident in international golf. While on stage at an awards ceremony in Shanghai, Tiger Woods' ex-caddie Steve Williams was asked to explain his emotional reaction to a golfer's tournament win. He told a room packed with leading golfers and tour officials, *I wanted to shove it up that black arsehole*. This paper examines the blog responses to the subsequent Associated Press article and cites how rhetorical devices are used to minimize concerns of racism and to further trivialize claims of racialised harm. The use of semantics, ambivalence, humour, mockery and practices of ignorance are identified as manifestations of online racism. Through the easy communication of dominant racialised values across real and virtual spaces notions of cyberspace as the last frontier of social equality are contested.

Dispositions to 'Race' and Racism on the Internet: Online Reactions to a "Racist" Comment against Tiger Woods

Introduction

While on stage at an awards ceremony in Shanghai on Friday, Williams was asked to explain his emotional reaction to a golfer's tournament win earlier this year - given that the caddie used to work for the former number one Woods. He told a room packed with leading golfers and tour officials, *I wanted to shove it up that black arsehole.* (Huffington Post: Sheriff 2011)

Before Barack Obama entered the White House the notion of 'post race' had entered the lexicon of those excited by the World Wide Web and cyberspace. Cyberspace is often viewed as a utopian or an ideal socially neutral space where 'race' gender age religion and other social factors will be washed out on a level playing field. Further, Nakamura (2002: xi) concurs that even 'transcending racism' was opined as a likely outcome of the advent of the Internet. She goes on to suggest that because we are not all equal in the world off-line we are also unequal virtually on-line, so it becomes just as important to focus our critical lens on how race is played out in cyberspace as we have focused our critical gaze more traditionally off-line. She goes onto argue that,

We continue to scrutinize the deployment of race online as well as the ways that Internet use can figure as a racialized practice if we are to realize the medium's potential as a vector for social change. There is no ignoring that the Internet can and does enable new and insidious forms of racism.

(Nakamura 2002: 30)

Even with an African American president the significance of 'race' in the US where Woods and Williams ply a lot of their trade is still one of the most serious and pressing issues. WEB Dubois' warning that the colour line could be the most significant issue of the twentieth century has continued into the twenty first and occupies the minds of politicians, academics, activists and everyday folk in a consistent negotiation of power and resistance. In the words of Cornel West (2001) *Race Matters* and the words of Williams at the golf award ceremony could

not be seen as an innocent comment in a world where blackness, 'race' and racism are replete with a negative history, ideologies and politics (Winant 2001). Leung (2005) succinctly stated that blackness, especially in the way Williams used it in reference to Woods, refers to those who have been subjugated, discriminated against, and been subject in some countries to apartheid, slavery and economic exploitation. It is commonly held that the term 'black' is often used as a term to unite those who have suffered racism and discrimination as a result of their colour, culture or minoritised background or status. *In popular language 'race' is usually synonymous with 'colour'* (Malik 1996: 2). Though there are debates about how inclusive this term is for some social groups its political, rather than descriptive, unifying qualities have emerged as a form of identification, empowerment and point of unifying resistance. Blackness as description is rarely used in a derogatory way; its denigratory power comes from its history and cultural context. Blackness, as invoked by Steve Williams is inextricably linked to 'race' and the necessary racial politics that follow, regardless of intent or motive. The impact and outcomes of such communications are therefore dependent upon the context and the clarity of the message.

Williams' words in Shanghai has many of the recurring themes of what Vera and Feagin (2004: 68) would describe as a racist event. Of the seven themes outlined by Vera and Feagin at least six can be identified as the incident plays out to a conclusion: 1) there is a white perpetrator 2) the target is a black victim 3) the scenario includes broader process that demonstrate institutional and structural responses in the case of the PGA, and the media 4) and the subsequent responses online that make up ritualized racialised acts of attributing and denigrating blackness. 5) a practice of covering up difficult racialised issues leads to individuals and institutions acquiescing to racism in their midst. 6) the long term impact of this event reinforces perceptions of racial stratification and racial hierarchies in golf, a sport that has a history of explicit institutional racism

After Williams made his statement an article syndicated around the world in September 2011 by the Associated Press' (AP) Sports Columnist John Leicester provides the contextual background for the current study (Leicester 2011). The subject matter of that piece was based on the incident that took place in Shanghai during which Steve Williams is alleged to have made a racial slur against Tiger Woods. In his article, entitled *By Not Acting, Golf Flunks Own Racism Test* Leicester argues that failure to take action against Steve Williams for his racially motivated utterances makes a mockery of the golf administration's grandiose claims that the sport promotes zero tolerance to racism. In addition, the article also attacks the many senior golf personalities who witnessed this incident but still refrained from speaking out to reprimand Williams for his actions. John Leicester concludes quite sensationally that golf's rhetoric of zero tolerance to racism has now been put to the test by this racist incident and decisively found to be wanting. This brief background provides the focus for this study.

Leicester's observations surrounded the institutional response of the Professional Golf Association (PGA). The joint statement of the PGA Tour Commissioner Tim Finchem and European Tour Chief Executive George O'Grady

to the incident drew much criticism from those disappointed at the sport's response to William's words. The two men said they spoke for the PGA when they said it,

...feels strongly there is no place for any form of racism in ours or any other sport. We consider the remarks of Steve Williams, as reported, entirely unacceptable in whatever context[...]. We are aware that he has apologized fully and we trust we will not hear remarks ever again. Based on this, we consider the matter closed, and we will have no further comment.

(Ferguson 2011)

Within hours of the Associated Press article appearing online over seventy blog responses, predominantly based in the United States, were received in reaction to the article. The responses were diverse in terms of their stand on the racialisation of the alleged incident, the article itself and its author, perspectives on racism in general, personalised assessments of both Tiger and Williams, and blog response to blog. As expected, the online respondents were identifiable only through their arbitrary user names and did not provide any further sociobiographic attributes that could help to identify them more adequately; such as real names, gender, occupation, age, place of residence, level of education, ethnicity, and so on. Notwithstanding this unavoidable limitation, this study set out to organize, describe, and analyse the patterns of dispositions and politics that the respondents portrayed towards racism in sport through their comments as the only unit of analysis.

This paper explores how 'race' and racism are manifest and played out online in what has been argued to be an egalitarian, post race space. It considers how those online may feel less accountable to social norms and mores as when they are offline, while ambiguous identities and cyber processes blur notions of authenticity and acceptability in racialised debates. Hall (1998) holds the position that modernist ideas of traditional processes of building arguments and opinion with others, rehearsing ideas, and developing consensus subject to publisher veto are less relevant on the Internet. As a consequence the potential for extremism, bigotry, and the perpetuation of racialised ideologies are more likely to be openly expressed. Like most social arenas the Internet is a site of struggle rather than a utopian, 'race' and racism free sanctuary (Leung 2005). Whine's (1997) view of the Internet is one of a paradox that establishes sufficient conditions for racism to thrive. The relative lack of oversight on the Internet makes him concerned that there is likely to be a steady increase in the amount of racist activity conducted, and material available. In Back's (2001) work on extreme Right groups he suggests that the notion of whiteness and the language that perpetuates it can propagate the notion of lineage, while the Internet facilitates the perception of racial separation. Both Whine (1997) and Back (2001) agree that an unregulated Internet presents ideal conditions for enabling and facilitating racists who can share ideas and information at will and very quickly. So just as new technologies like the Internet can facilitate oppositional resources to empower and challenge racism then so can its alternative be envisioned through those new technologies that have been

mobilized to propagate such views. The AP article and the subsequent blog responses can be viewed as a nexus in which racial politics are constructed, defended, reiterated and resisted making cyberspace *a point of negotiation between resistance and power* (Leung 2005: 13).

Researching 'Race' Online

The Internet has a number of different protocols such as social networking, Tweeting, blogging, gaming, social and community networks, websites, email, search engines that operate in similar but different ways and therefore require a different type of methodology in each case. There are few studies of the Internet, 'race' and racism broadly and yet the influence of the Internet on our lives is such that it is a missed opportunity for many social researchers. Silver (2000) argues that social factors such as 'race', gender and age have been given little attention in the cyber culture literature. He suggests that web entrepreneurs have shown more interest than academics due to the desire to understand the demographics of markets and therefore generate intelligence to pitch new products (Foxton 2012)¹. Nakamura (2002) describes this as the online raced body being "outed" by commercial forces. Silver suggests that the few signifiers of identity that people use on the Internet generally ignore 'race' whereas gender is at least implicit (if not 100% reliable) from a name or even pseudonym. Other social factors are also regularly absent such as age, sexual orientation and so on yet in a debate about racism the lack of biographical data especially in relation to ethnicity makes the assumptions and assessment of text and the meaning behind those texts precarious. Difficulties arise when conclusions are drawn about statements on the Internet that themselves reinforce racial stereotypes and discourses. For example an insightful critical and emotional challenge to racial slurs on the Internet by anonymous individuals cannot be reduced to the episteme of those black and or minoritised groups in society as this essentialism has no place in the politics of antiracism. Off-line interactions reveal many signifiers of social characteristics and biographies to help researchers contextualise responses that often remain unsaid or ambiguous online in chat rooms blogs and even tweets. Given all of the fallacies, anomalies and paradoxes of 'race' illuminated by eminent scholars its common construction is one of the physical.

Byron Burkhalter (1999:60) states that,

In both academic studies and in common understanding the connection between the body and racial identity is strong, from the 16th century race is being used to denote common descent (and was seen as carried by blood) in the 19th century genes replaced blood but still race was contained in the body. This connection still holds.

Race is the independent variable according to Burkhalter (1999: 60). Physical identification is imperative to piecing together the logic and rationality of

¹ Recent accusations of racial profiling towards Google support such positions.

arguments on 'race'. Signification of experience and understanding is read into debates and statements that online anonymous views generally do not volunteer. Verbal and physical cues are often unacknowledged as *convincers*, free floating signifiers or verifying factors in arguments where claims to knowledge on social issues are asserted. In a diverse range of analyses theorizing the nature of societies today as classed, status or gendered, race is still a physical phenomenon around which these ideas are constructed and in which meaning is signified (Burkhalter 1999). Even without the embodied personality, Kang (2003: 39) takes this analysis further by arguing that 'race' is socially constructed and reified online through a form of 'racial mechanics'. Online, three elements interact as individuals *map* (rules used to classify people into categories: physical or discursive signals) others into preconceived *racial categories* (through which basic concepts of race are understood) that stimulate *racial meanings* (cognitive beliefs about and affective reactions to the categories) for the user. This racial schema operates well at the level of understanding how 'race' is constructed as the paradoxical 'presence' of 'race' in the thinking and behaviours of individuals leads to racialised signals about themselves and others.

Some of the ideas on identities and representation from cultural studies on the media are also useful in an analysis of this kind especially due to the convergence of television and computer technologies to the point where both are being bought in one unit. So for many, being online and TV viewing cannot be demarcated because they are occurring at the same time as Smart TVs and technologies like Apple TV/Mac Minis, and the natural extension of TVs as computer monitors makes the exclusive analysis of TV and the Internet a false proposition. Leung (2005:18) argues that the use of more traditional cultural analyses enables the continuing critique of social space,

As a site of resistance, of self-constructed representations of ethnicity, and it being a site of ethnic objectification, where the 'white gaze' prevails.

It is also useful to differentiate between key qualities of TV and Internet consumption through the use of a 'push' 'pull' analogy (Leung 2005). Television is categorised as a push medium due to the communal, shared but minimal interactivity element of this consumption, from a relatively limited number of regulated channels. Minimum interactivity because the communication is generally one-way. The Internet as a 'pull' media is necessarily individualized/isolated and interactive. In many cases computer users, alone, interact with uncurated/unregulated text, beyond a few peer review processes where users can report offensive material. The Internet, and in particular blog responses, can be as intellectually informed, humorous, reflective or unbiased as its users wish. The context in which users interact with the Internet is such that without a physical social milieu in close proximity it may seem less necessary to be politic and reflexive therefore it can facilitate unguarded and impulsive responses. Some of the blog responses from the AP article could be viewed as such examples that may have been subject to more consideration and self-censorship offline.

Issues with Online Data -

A preliminary look at the bloggers who portrayed their perspectives on racism appear to be predominantly white as far as could be reasonably determined. However this leads to an additional methodological word of caution. In drawing such conclusions there is the danger that researchers of 'race' may fall into the same traps that they wish to disrupt themselves; they should not draw upon the reductionist tenets they wish to challenge. Even when a comment is carefully and insightfully crafted, without the author's corroborated offline identity or verification there remains an unnerving unease about the content. The background and experience of the speaker remains in doubt when this happens and so their words lose some of their gravitas and authority at least in the first instance.

The disembodiedness of identities in cyberspace is impractical for serious conversations or ongoing relationships. The notion of trust is rapidly tested, as readers are more likely to leave and join conversations abruptly and without notice than they would offline. As a result the potential for discussions to be derailed or 'hijacked' is always possible without those invested in the conversation knowing. In online communities Donath (1999) holds that to understand and explain interactions it is important to know the identity of the sender. Disembodiment and absence mark the confusion in interactions where identities are unknown *The body is synonymous with identity* says Donath (1999: 29). Hence Donath's (1999) warning to those reading cyberspace that many identities can be generated by a single instigator or progenitor hence requiring a need for caveats in research where 'true' embodied identities are not reliably defined.

Analysis of the identity of the respondents in this blog drew on Goffman's (1959: 14) idea of 'expressions given' and 'expressions given off'. The former are the deliberately stated messages signifying how one would like to be perceived while the latter are more subtle and sometimes unintentional messages communicated via nuance or act. For Example the blogger 'Brotherap' 'gives' a profile image of a black male but 'gives off' other signifiers by using a pseudonym reference it would suggest stemming from James Brown's iconic Brother Rapp from the 1996 Foundations of Funk album that includes Cold Sweat, I Got You (I Feel Good) and Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud. Though Goffman does warn that expressions given off can be communicated deceitfully or even feigned; a popular saying of the Internet is that on the Internet *nobody knows you're a dog* as identities can be chosen at will. Nakamura's (2002) research of avatar choices reflected a penchant for the Other or the exotic by living a 'different truth'. Nakamura describes this as cybertourism as identities are donned without any consequences offline. Similarly, researchers cannot fall into the reductionist, essentialist traps that others operationalise through the use of stereotypes hence the actual text is significant in coming to reasonable conclusions about Brother Rapp. Donath (1999) is sensible in stating that it is hard to maintain a persona or social characteristics that are not yours/or your experiences without being found out, especially by those with real experience of being from specific social backgrounds. Key considerations in this study involved how to recognize authenticity in terms of identities, sincerity, and insight, based upon the text

through information given, and given off, without adopting the myopic uncritical approaches prevalent online.

Strategic Denial: Trivialisation and Minimisation

A propensity to trivialize the potential of racialised harm in Williams' words became clear in the blog responses to the AP article. There were also rhetorical devices used to minimize the significance and impact of racism in this case. Trivialization and minimization emerged through semantical turns, sarcasm, and pedantic arguments as the complexities of 'race' and racial politics were simplified to render them impotent and benign. The tendency to trivialize or rationalize the incident took a wide range of patterns but the overriding motive was to challenge and undermine the racial characterization of the incident by emphasizing its insignificance and therefore encouraging others to do the same. Trivialization is closely connected to the phenomenon of denial and resistance and some comments were both trivializing and in denial of racism simultaneously (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Feagin 2010). The key distinction is that trivialization politics resist the idea that racism occurred by moving to undermine, mock, or ignore its significance or consequences. Denial, on the other hand, refers to the view that claims racism did not occur, or that what occurred was merely the lesser evil of a 'racial slur'; and then proceeds to prevail upon people to rethink their own claims and understandings of racism. A large segment of the proponents of trivialization also utilised a simplistic rhetoric to insist that blackness and whiteness are neutral non-political descriptors in order to undermine the claim that the incident was manifestly racist. As in the case of denial, trivialization was also materialised through the use of anti-political correctness rhetoric as a tool to divert and even subvert the substantive discourse focusing on the claims of racial discrimination embedded within the article. Consider these examples of trivialization:

[Don] *the comment was vulgar, but not racist. He called him black and last time I looked "black" was not a racist term* (see Table 1). This comment presents multiple readings as it employs a semantical argument spliced with sarcasm to decentre blackness and its deployment by Williams. It combines the politics of denial, and trivialization, while holding to a simplistic argument that could appeal to some as 'commonsense' and therefore worthy of serious consideration. Another blogger [Ted] weighs in as follows: *...what's racist about it? If Williams said...WHITE @#\$%, would that be racist??* Like [Don]'s, this comment is also complex and multipronged in its politics. He deploys rhetorical questions to spin the argument that the word 'black' cannot be racist, admonishes the journalist for being ignorant, and dismisses the claims of racial discrimination to achieve an emphatic withering conclusion. For Feagin (2010) this attempt at humour would suggest the deployment of an anti-black racial frame through the invocation of the possibility of an anti-white racial frame. However, there remains a lack of resonance in such faux indignation as the power of the Williams statement has severe ramifications through an established anti-black ideology that is not present in an anti-white frame. This device employed by [Don] also invalidates the asymmetrical impacts of racism on black and white recipients. Among others, the same kind of trivializing politics and rhetoric is

portrayed by [Jerry] who wonders: *I must have missed something. Is Tiger's @\$hole actually not black? Is it white?* Still, some of the comments in this category seem to combine trivialization with mockery and satire. For instance, Dave maintained that there is *so much uproar over so little. Tiger is an @#\$% and was called out on it*; whereas another respondent, [McBold] mocked the incident saying *Waaaaaaaaa, the mean man hurted ma' black feelins'!* Here the trope of a stereotypical, immature, yet ignorant black patois is invoked in this consciously inflammatory comment. This comment would not look out of place on one of the five websites that Weaver (2011) examined for racist jokes. The comment is powerful because of its willingness to reinstate and represent the racialised vernacular while also suggesting that only a childlike individual could be hurt by such a statement. Neither is this any child either, it is specifically a black child therefore trivializing the uproar further and simultaneously demeaning anyone who might have taken offense.

As already observed in the phenomenon of denial of racism, proponents of trivialization are also historically located within a position of privilege and therefore their politics have a propensity to ignore or undermine racist experiences. Mills (2007) has famously described this as an aspect of the practice of 'white ignorance' where the interests of whiteness are maintained through a complex array of devices and turns...one of which is the practice of ignoring major social issues. In the blog responses this was manifest in discussions reduced to the fundamental differences based on phenotypic properties such as the colour of skin. The central thrust of these apolitical approaches represents an unproblematic project to de-politicise blackness (and whiteness) and 'race'. Attempts to lessen the impact of the comments by Williams were demonstrated by commentators seeing blackness as purely descriptive of skin colour and therefore a trivial neutral social characteristic; much like height or weight. Striking examples of such comments were found in attempts to destabilize claims of racism based purely on the simplistic notion that the 'black' in 'black arsehole' was purely descriptive rather than making reference to Woods' racialised social and cultural location and the politics of 'race'. To these commentators, Tiger's 'blackness' is deployed as a matter-of-fact rather than as a racially loaded reference.

Other more socially aware bloggers' use of the terms 'black' or 'white' was equated directly to 'race', racism or racial discrimination, often without the need for qualification. For example, [David S] maintained that *if he wouldn't have said 'black' it would have been okay*. Another respondent called [Skweeze] raises similar concerns when he observes that *there are all sorts of things this guy could have said about Tiger without referring to his colour or his race... the guy was wrong and the remark was very racist*. Both [David S] and [Skweeze]'s politics, which may be correct in this specific context, is that the muting of the term 'black' in discussions or references involving black people can still result in uncivil but racially neutral interactions and reduce perceptions of racial discrimination. This indeed was the starting point for many of the discussions in this debate.

Table 1 - 'Black' means black

In sum, many of the blogs in this study take an overly simplistic view of the significance of 'race' and racism seemingly based on intuitive versions of the concepts, adopting perspectives that minimize the presence, significance and impacts of racisms. The complexity and subtlety of the ways 'blackness' and 'whiteness' are used in wider society are ignored in this trail of responses to

<i>The comment was vulgar, but not racist. He called him black and last time I looked "black" was not a racist term</i>	[Don]
<i>So, by saying Tiger Woods has a black @\$% Steve Williams is a racist? This guy can kiss my racially ambiguous @\$%</i>	[Confab]
<i>Bull feathers.. what's racist about it? If Williams said... WHITE @\$%, would that be racist?? It's all crap.</i>	[Ted]
<i>I'm pretty sure that the president of the ACLU and the president of the NAACP would both agree that Tiger's a_ is black. It doesn't seem racist at all to me, just a tad rude.</i>	[Craig]
<i>I must have missed something. Is Tiger's @\$%hole actually not black? Is it white? lol.</i>	[Jerry T]
<i>When did calling a black man "black" become racism?</i>	[David]
<i>Honestly, the word "black" was used only for identity, not for racism.</i>	[Hot Nuke]
<i>You're kidding right? Saying "I was trying to shove it up his black arse" is racism? Worthy of punishment?</i>	[Iggypopulist]

effectively reduce them to benign descriptive terms. Here the blog responses demonstrate the power of the Internet to raise and defend racialised issues and relations in an open and relatively uncontested fashion. The fundamental premise of bloggers who embraced apolitical views is that by supporting their defence of Williams (and therefore themselves) to have only described Tiger Woods in terms of his skin colour a clear rationale for not seeing any negative racialised slur is presented.

When Racism Isn't

Though there are many sociological descriptions of racism that cover individual, institutional and structural processes and practices it is important to stress that there are variegated forms of racism and therefore definitions. Anthias and Yuval Davis (1993: 2) refer to 'racisms' to reflect this complex concept as noun, adjective and verb. They state that racisms need to be understood as racialised...

Modes of exclusion, inferiorization, subordination and exploitation that present specific and different characters in different social and historical contexts.

A strand of semantic rhetoric was deployed by some respondents aimed at trying to establish a significant and exclusive distinction between 'racism' and a 'racial slur' and hence to problematize and cloud the correct characterization of Steve Williams' alleged racist remarks. Proponents of this semantic fallacy appeared satisfied to concede that the remark could be 'rude', 'distasteful' and a 'racial' slur; but many firmly insisted the remark was not an act of racism. In many ways the act of being called a racist is worse than the behaviour. The commentators captured this semantic shift and exploited it as a tool for denying the occurrence of racism and problematizing its characterization. The underlying rationale for some seemed to be that a 'racial slur' is less harmful and can therefore be more

easily conceded than 'racism'. In entrenching this line of argument, the commentators also repeatedly criticised the media and the Associated Press for their perceived ignorance and narrow political correctness. [Hotnuke] argues *No, Mr. Leicester, now we know the vast majority of those in sports media don't know the definition of a RACIAL SLUR. You're a pathetic idiot.* [Ultra-Humanite] and [Hilltopper] were also keen to agree with [Hotnuke] as they argued that,

Uhhh while his comments were distasteful and clearly he is a jerk, I'm not sure where this racist angle comes from. Perhaps people should actually understand the words they throw around in columns they write. Just because you have an opinion, doesn't mean it can't be wrong [Ultra-Humanite].

[Hilltopper] was also happy to personalise the response to the AP journalist when remarking,

Another writer with a fifth grade ability. Find a decent writer if you are going to cite racism in golf. Williams remark wasn't racist you idiot! [Hilltopper]

One respondent [SupplyChain99] went further to provide a definition of racism to emphasize the core arguments of this claim:

Definition of racism: a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race. By definition, his comments were not racist. Rude, dumb and hateful? Yes! Racist?

[SupplyChain99]'s pedantic assertion that this one, uncontextualised definition of racism encapsulates all types is reflective of broader commonsense views that racism is easily defined and perhaps made overly complex by those who purport to be systematically affected by it. However, he does not explain why Williams' comments are *rude, dumb* or, quite dramatically *hateful*. One could say this is an admission of racism through the backdoor but again without speaking its name. Though [SupplyChain99] does not engage a more complex view of racism he 'gives off' more information about himself and his own experience and understanding of racism than anything else. Such a narrow view of racism is not likely to be held by one who has experienced racism or has critical insight to these issues. In sum, the structural nature of racism is such that defending Williams' motives are not the point here because as Bonilla-Silva (2006) argues *you can't have racism without racists*. Williams may not have done something like this in the past nor have done it since but it could be argued that what should be of concern here is the racial slur and its subsequent impact.

Interestingly [Southmetroatl], who appeared to be a black American, also weighed in with arguments that concede that a racial slur occurred in this instance, denied any outright racist wrongdoing...before then accusing Steve Williams of possibly being a racist(!).

Williams made a comment that most any person on the planet would have made, provided they know the English language and American vulgarities...I've traveled the world over and in every country I've been, the "N" word is known throughout, and the natives know how to use it. When they used it toward me, I gave them pure American defensive flavor as ugly as they know we can be. This is a tough world and regardless of color we'd better know how to handle ourselves in every situation...The comment was a racial slur but not an act of racism...though it might indicate this big-mouth might be racist. That's his business. [Mr. Southmetroatl]

[Mr. Southmetroatl] attempts to inject a semantic distinction between 'racism' and 'racial slur', not to trivialize the significance of the issue but perhaps to lessen the premeditated conscious knowledge of the act perpetrated by Williams in Shanghai and the subsequent PGA response. Note that he does not try to minimize the potential of Williams' racist disposition, he is purely unclear of the direct relationship between racial slurs and racism. However, as someone who has had to defend himself against the 'N' word at home and abroad he appears to suggest that he is certainly not speaking from a position of privilege nor is he employing the politics of trivialization. [Mr. Southmetroatl] found it necessary to 'give' some biographical information about himself to qualify the authority of his testimony. As in the off line world the same problems of ethnic identities and identification remain part of a dynamic struggle between the structure of online media and the agency of individual interactants. Young (2001) argues that far from the utopian vision of erasing 'race' the internet has become a source of frustration for many black and minoritised people who have protested at the default whiteness of cyberspace. E-'raced' users have had the double problem of feeling the need to state their racialised identities in interactions while risking being accused of bringing 'race' into everything. Nakamura (2002) asserts that,

Though it is true that users' physical bodies are hidden from other users, race has a way of asserting its presence.
(Nakamura 2002: 31)

[Mr. Southmetroatl] adopts a pragmatic realist standpoint; explaining that racial abuses are inevitable and commonplace occurrences and challenges black people to toughen up and deal with the everyday reality of it. However, this life lesson takes a different strategic political tone to those bloggers who off-handedly announced that those offended by Williams' comments and the response of the golf authorities should *just get over it*.

OK...But... Get Over It!

The second pattern of denial entails the unilateral appeal by some bloggers for readers to rise above this minor incident and move on with the more important affairs of their lives [see Table 2]. Those who adopted this reasoning either denied any racist wrongdoing outright, or implicitly conceded racism occurred but advocate that people should just 'get over it'. [Edward] claimed as follows:

If someone stood up there and said the same thing about my "skinny white

@#\$\$%" (and if he where black) I'd laugh that little thing off right then and there. This crap just fuels hatred between the races. [Edward]

Here, not only is Edward choosing to deny the salience of racial subordination on black people by suggesting that verbal assaults can be laughed away he is also suggesting that those who invoke the idea of racism in this case are themselves racist. This minimization of racism process is one that Bonilla Silva argues is a central frame of colour-blind racism where black and minoritised ethnic groups are accused of using 'race' to their own ends. The 'race card' is an ugly term sometimes used at these junctures². [Detroit's Finest] also argues:

"how is it racist? Tiger is black right? So him saying he was trying to shove it up tigers black arse is racist? My assistant is black and she says they can kiss my black butt all the time. That is not a slur.

[Detroit's Finest] chooses to ignore the racial and semantic dynamics in this case. The obfuscation of issues here is one that is a privilege of one who has learned to evade exploring the significance of such nuances and proceeds to maintain his acceptance of this practice of ignorance. In addition to reinforcing a black-white binary and racial difference, these comments portray a discourse of the privileged and can be interpreted within the broader context of the social location enjoyed by whiteness and the privilege of not suffering past racism. In fact, just like [Don] earlier, it is also connected to his apparent awareness that such a reference to his "white arse" is either extremely unlikely to occur or would nevertheless be harmless to him. Put differently, this commentator has no direct way of knowing, nor wishes to understand, what a black or minoritised person would feel in a similar situation.

Not having suffered victimhood with regard to racism therefore would make it relatively easier for some to trivialize or deny racism and to construct it as an unimportant phenomenon and therefore to urge people to simply ignore it. [Sipp], for example, remorselessly tells people to *give it a rest... It is over, done, finished*. Another commentator [Bad Service] goes further and proclaims *Enough already with all this Race card stuff. Everyone has issues. Whites are now the minority so get over it people!!* [Aaron], a respondent well entrenched in this thinking, rubs in the denial rhetoric using a version of what Bonilla-Silva would describe as the 'abstract liberalism' that contributes to colour-blindness:

I am all for equality, but it is a joke listening to these righteous phonies...Get a life and quit squabbling over every small comment or anything resembling a joke, We need a tougher society [Aaron]

Table 2 - Get Over It!

<i>I'm sick of your silly news reporting...Get a Life!!!!</i>	[Gary]
<i>I am all for equality, but it is a joke listening to these righteous</i>	[Aaron]

² The recent suggestion that racism on the pitch should end with a handshake at the end of the game by Sepp Blatter (FIFA Chief Executive) is another such instance.

<i>phonies...Get a life and quit squabbling over every small comment or anything resembling a joke, We need a tougher society</i>	
<i>Steve Williams and Tiger Woods are not going to lose sleep over the "stupid remark" and life is going to go on. In a day or two, no one is going to give a crap but the media who will need something to talk about.</i>	[Johnm]
<i>Enough already with all this Race card stuff. Everyone has issues. Whites are now the minority so get over it people!!</i>	[Bad Service]
<i>So? Who cares? Two jerks who made a lot of money and now they don't like each other. Hope they both just fade away.</i>	[Marcus Aurelius]
<i>Give it a rest.... It is over, done, finished</i>	[Sipp]
<i>It's all crap...and the guy that wrote this story is an idiot... get a life and move on.</i>	[Ted]
<i>waaaaaaaaa, the mean man hurted ma' black feelins! Get over it, whiners!</i>	[McBold]

Conclusion

The contention that the Internet is the last frontier of social equality is presented with a sizeable challenge here. 'Race' and racism are seen to be constructed and challenged without anxiety during the course of the online exchanges following Steve Williams' comments in Shanghai. The tenor of the discussion reinforce the salience of 'race' in online *and* off-line society emphasized by how 'race' was unproblematically constructed and discussed in this online space. The everyday nature of this debate belies the suggestion that cyberspace is the last colour-blind race neutral, level playing field. In many ways this view ignores the notion that those black and minoritised groups that have been regularly subject to racialisation and racism come to the Internet, *already marginalized, fragmented and imbricated within systems of signification that frame them in multiple and often contradictory ways* (Nakamura 2002: xvi).

Feagin (2010) suggests that a lot of racism occurs in the spaces where white people feel that the subjects of their racist behaviour are not likely to be. Feagin calls this the 'backstage'. One example is Steve Williams' behaviour at the private caddies' evening, given the demographics of golfers, this could be described as one such occasion. Another one is the online space inhabited by the seventy three blog responses to John Leicester's Associated Press article for Yahoo! The pressures to adhere to the norms of politeness and sociability are often skewed in such situations where perceptions of similarity and 'insiderness' facilitate a relaxing of social norms; outsiders are more likely to make such situations 'uncomfortable'. The implicit whiteness of the Internet also facilitates a different kind of backstage arena for many willing to act upon a racially biased ideology. Through the seeming privacy of the Internet, its individualistic communications process and the relative anonymity of the interactants, cyberspace becomes a 'safe space' for normally borderline and more abhorrent views.

The strategic denial of the implicit racism of Williams' comments by himself, the bloggers, and the inadequate institutional response from the Professional Golf Association is symbolic of the easy communication of dominant racialised values

across real and virtual spaces. Turns to trivialization and minimization, through semantics, ambivalence, humour, mockery and practices of ignorance leaves no doubt that cyberspace is clearly racialised though sociology's understanding of these racial dynamics remains under-developed. Though not the focus of this study a point for critical examination must be that as a site of struggle the Internet must be seen as a vehicle for racisms to be propagated though the corollary of this is that it must also be seen as a point of resistance. The strength of denial of racism or even racialisation in this case is clear. The nature of the multifarious rhetorical turns to achieve these standpoints in the blog responses to the AP article reflects patterns of behaviour that maintain racialised relations. These patterns, underpinned by a mixture of racial ideologies and the learned ignorance that perpetuate them lead to cyberspace remaining a contested space. The notion of a post-race utopia leaves many skeptical hence I concur with Nakamura's (2002) call for researchers to maintain a critical gaze on 'race' and how it plays out on the Internet.

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